



The First Ladies

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Author's Note

Writing a slim volume about some of the old First Ladies presents a challenge on several fronts. Some explanation to the reader is in order.

First: Economy. *THE FIRST LADIES* is not intended to be a litany of almanac facts. All the pertinent details of birth, death, marriage, and related information are readily available about these women either in related volumes, encyclopedias or at online sites. The challenge is thus twofold: a) to make each of these fine (and usually neglected) women come to life in a thousand words or so, and b) to avoid the redundancies of their lives in general, for instance the birth or death of children. Most of our old First Ladies lost children in an age when pregnancy and childbirth were serious medical conditions and infant mortality was high. While those episodes were unquestionably milestones in their individual lives, the effect on the reader would become a list of repetitions.

In order to keep the reader interested, huge and important historic events may be glossed over in a brief sentence, i.e. "after the Civil War." Sometimes including certain important episodes tends to lead down a channel from which it can be difficult to extricate oneself – in the prescribed thousand words. Sometimes it is just more feasible to avoid it entirely, such as the details of the Jackson marriage or Mary Lincoln's later years or the formidable resume of Eleanor Roosevelt's accomplishments. Many excellent sources provide in-depth consideration.

The whole idea then is to focus on that part of each First Lady's personality or life segment or accomplishment or whatever made her unique among her sister Ladies. It is truly a challenge to surgically cut without killing the patient.

Secondly: Why end with Mamie Eisenhower?

This is a personal choice. I decided long ago to limit my scholarship with the Eisenhowers. They were the last presidential couple born in the 19th century, which makes it as good a place as any to put a period at the end of a sentence.

More importantly, it becomes increasingly obvious as time goes on, that Ike and Mamie were the end of an era. With the 1960s came an explosion of instant communication, television, transportation and an all-consuming in-your-face media. The rules changed. The expectations changed. The role of a pleasant-looking housewife who could be a graceful hostess or acceptor of bouquets became irrelevant. Now a First Lady had to be attractive. If she wasn't blessed with the face and figure of Jacqueline Kennedy, she would have handlers assigned to diet her, facial her, rearrange her hair and wardrobe, and make her an "image." She was expected to be educated, politically savvy and well-schooled in high-level diplomacy. She was expected to lend her name, her time and prestige to some non-controversial social or cultural or civic issues on her own, such as ecology or education. And finally, she was expected to be everywhere, doing everything, every day, dressed and coiffed to perfection, with a smile on her face. The eyes of the world were upon her. She could no longer be a private person, and she had better measure up. She could never get sick, tired, irritable, angry, sad or, heaven forbid, bored. No more free rides for a First Lady. These new "qualifications" are not about to change.

Furthermore, many of the post-Mamie First Ladies have written their own books, and dozens have been written about them. Some are praising; some are downright vicious. No aspect of their lives is off-limits to prying eyes. Truth does not even have to be in the mix. We probably know more than enough about every detail, and I, personally, do not wish to dredge for sludge. Our First Ladies are entitled to whatever shreds of privacy and decency remain.

Thus more than a century of very nice "old gals" have been summarily rejected as non-entities, a disparaging and often untrue connotation. Some excellent scholars have begun to research deeply into the contributions of some of those neglected Presidential wives in an effort to revitalize the perceived role of women in an age when they were vital only to propagate the race and make men more comfortable. In other words, women were mothers first, then adornments worn on the arm of their prosperous husbands. *THE FIRST LADIES*, with its condensed chapters, is not meant to be compared to these academic achievements. This is not a dissertation. It is an hors d'oeuvre.

Thirdly: Their "legacies," which I have included for each one in a short paragraph.

These are not legacies of tangible accomplishment. How can crocheting a bedspread for the Lincoln bedroom (as Grace Coolidge did) compare with the seemingly endless list of Eleanor Roosevelt's

substantial activities? Pitting these “old gals” against our modern First Ladies only serves to trivialize them and make them seem even more inconsequential.

They were definitely *not* inconsequential. They were paragons for their times and must be considered in that context. They were what every man wanted his wife to be like; what every parent wanted their daughters to be like; and what every little girl wanted to be like when she grew up. That, in itself, is *very* consequential.

The “legacies,” therefore, are those of character or personality that are worthy of emulation. They are not mere banalities. Some may be qualities that many of them share, but I have tried to assign them to that particular Lady who best personified the trait. For instance, all First Ladies were dignified, but in assigning “dignity” to Louisa Adams, the wife of John Quincy Adams, it seemed to be her towering strength, helping her to forebear chronic health problems, a stifling marriage, family tragedies, and minimal opportunities for personal achievement. Despite everything, she never lost her equanimity or poise. Every one of our old First Ladies had something to offer, if only to her husband. In many cases, an audience of one was enough.

And finally, my overwhelming aim in *THE FIRST LADIES* is to make these mini-lives of our old First Ladies readable, readable, and then readable. If someone is inspired to dig deeper I have accomplished my purpose, and I am content.

-FSF

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MARTHA WASHINGTON

1731-1802



The Domestic Lady W.

First Lady: 1789-1797

It has been said that the best political decision George Washington ever made was to marry the Widow Custis. He was a Virginia Militia Colonel seeking a career change. Efforts for a commission in the regular British Army having been consistently thwarted, Washington determined to focus his attentions on the estate he had inherited from his half-brother. In order to make his Mt. Vernon plantation the envy of Fairfax County, he needed an appropriate consort. And it was time. He was twenty-six.

Martha Dandridge Custis was the daughter of well-to-do Virginia gentry, on a social and economic par with the Washingtons. Her academic education was modest. She could read, write, and do sufficient arithmetic to manage the household accounts. At seventeen, she married into the wealthy Custis family and was widowed at twenty-six, left with two small children (four and two), and one huge estate (more than 20,000 fertile acres, 200 slaves, and the scarcest commodity among land-poor planters, a substantial amount of cash. Remarriage being her best option, she required a mate with sufficient property of his own, since she was understandably wary of fortune hunters. She also required someone who would be a kind step-father and honest manager for her children's sizeable inheritance.

Both of them made fortunate choices for a happy and successful marriage.

Martha was the consummate colonial mistress and hostess, reasonably cultured, but superbly skilled at household management. It would fall to her to supervise the numerous slaves and cottage industries that accounted for a successful plantation. She sewed beautifully, danced the minuet gracefully, was said to set the finest table in Northern Virginia. Her kitchen and recipe collection was the envy of her neighbors. She boasted a medical box with all the proper herbs and remedies the 18th century could provide, and took pride and pleasure in caring for others.

The Custis wealth helped to assure Washington a seat in the House of Burgesses, a responsibility he accepted with the usual 18th century noblesse oblige. Within ten years of their marriage, Washington had increased his own holdings to include acreage as far west as the Ohio Valley. Mt. Vernon had been renovated and enlarged. Most importantly, he had established and engaged more than a dozen tenant farmers and craftsmen to provide mills, shipbuilding facilities, a fishing fleet, spinners and weavers for his ever-growing conglomerate of industries. The Washingtons had become extremely wealthy, thanks to his shrewd business instincts, but they seldom dined alone. Their home was a mecca for friends and neighbors, relations on both sides, and weary travelers. No one was turned away. Their hospitality was known throughout the colony.

At the onset of the American Revolution, both George and Martha were forty-three, considered well into middle-age. War in the 18th century, was primarily a seasonal affair: Spring, summer and fall. In the winter, armies usually went into winter quarters. (Of course there were some exceptions.) But the approaching winter was when Martha Washington traveled from Mt. Vernon with her medicine box and knitting needles to meet her husband wherever he was encamped. She had never before ventured beyond Virginia borders. The exacting General, who would always be hard-pressed to maintain his ragtag army, heartily welcomed Mrs. W. and whatever supplies she could bring, which was a godsend. She immediately took charge. She saw to the General's personal comfort, supervised the officers' kitchens, organized other officers' wives to sew, knit, scrape lint for bandages and make themselves useful. Above all, she had her medicine box for tending the sick and wounded. Come spring, she went home and the war continued.

It would be seven years before Private Citizen and Mrs. Washington could be together again in their beloved Virginia home. Their idyll would not last long. Politics would take center stage in the new nation, and Washington was considered the indispensable man with a new title: President. There had never been anything like it before.

How would he and *Lady* Washington behave in this new office? It was virgin territory. Every known political paradigm was based on royalty or quasi-royalty, and had been for nearly two thousand years. There was no precedent for a republic on the scale of the tiny United States on a vast continent of America. How would they chart the course for generations to come?

Lady W. (some honorific was needed and aristocratic titles were verboten) was nearly sixty, and not about to change her ways – certainly not willingly. She continued to dress in the same simple fashions she had worn for decades, determined to remain refined and dignified. But she had a serious predicament. Her elevation in social stature as the premier woman in the country prevented her traditional Virginia hospitality. She could not appear aloof and remote, since it would smack of monarchical tendencies. But neither could she be warm and welcoming, as was her own nature. It would suggest an unbecoming familiarity for a head of state. After a lifetime of full houses and of exchanging frequent visits with friends and family, the new protocol made her feel isolated. Some middle ground had to be met. But could it be met?

She was happy, of course, to open the Presidential home in New York and later Philadelphia (rented in both cases) for entertaining. Political dinners for President Washington were usually stag affairs. Martha would plan and supervise, but she did not attend. Instead, she instituted regular drawing room levees, trying to tiptoe that fine line required for a “republican” court. People were contemptuous of royal trappings, but they definitely wanted some glitz. Martha was decorous, but not glitzy. Obviously she could not please everyone. The criticism in society, in the political world, and in the press annoyed her. Having tirelessly devoted themselves to the welfare of their country, valuing honorable conduct above all else, both Washingtons were notably thin-skinned and sensitive to public reproach for their behavior, which they believed to be estimable at all times. Martha resented being “watched” by the Colonial paparazzi and criticized at every turn. Where did she go? What did she wear? Who did she speak to? Which carriage did she use? Why did she sit on a slightly raised platform at her receptions? What did all this mean? It rankled no end, so she chose to go out as seldom as possible, pining for the time she could return to Mt. Vernon and their own vine and fig tree.

It was a difficult line to walk, and both Washingtons were more than happy to finally relinquish the power, the glory and the comments. For the first time in twenty years, they could sit down to dinner by themselves.

Postscript to Martha: Despite the petty colonial-style gossip, Martha Washington has gone down in history similarly to her illustrious husband: Above reproach, and remembered for establishing a nearly impossible position.

Martha's Legacy:

Everything Martha Washington would do between 1789-1797 would set a precedent and **TONE** for future First Ladies determined by her modest gentility coupled with years of executive skills at plantation-house management. The exquisitely fine line walked between a dreaded monarchy a la England and the rabble of democracy a la France would find no finer example than that of Lady Washington. The elegance was simple. Her natural friendliness seeped through the proscribed department. The tone she set was completely new. And it was decidedly American.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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