



INTRODUCTION

The Constitution provides guidance for the responsibilities of the president, but what about the first lady? No founding document exists that explains the duties of the first lady. Instead, generations of women have shaped how the modern Office of the First Lady formed, and the roles of the president's spouse. Learn the usage of the title First Lady and explore the ways various first ladies throughout history used this position to effect changes at the White House and across the country.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY



Image 1

The role and title of First Lady did not emerge fully formed. In fact, the first mention of Martha Washington as a “first lady” did not occur until forty years after her death. There are a handful of historic records from the early nineteenth century that mention the term, but there is no definitive moment that the title “First Lady” came into existence. In the 1880s, the wife of President Grover Cleveland and popular White House resident, Frances Folsom Cleveland, became identified as “The First Lady of the Land,” and this title continued with Caroline Harrison, the spouse of President Benjamin Harrison (**Images 1 & 2**).

By the turn of the twentieth century, that term had grown in usage to describe other former presidential wives and White House hostesses. The title of “First Lady of the Land” gradually shortened to “First Lady” around the time of Lou Hoover (**Image 3**). Following her, Eleanor Roosevelt came to the White House and popularized the title “First Lady” that is used today (**Image 4**).

The role and position of the first ladies evolved much like the title of First Lady, not all at once, but over time. Although not a White House resident, the first of the presidential wives, Martha Washington, set a precedent by serving as social hostess during her husband's two terms (**Image 5**). After the completion of the White House in 1800, many of the nineteenth-century wives or female

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family members of presidents took on this same hostess role in the Executive Mansion. Presidential spouses of the time also took charge of domestic life in the White House but remained largely outside the public sphere.

In the early twentieth century, Edith Kermit Roosevelt began to formalize the social aspects of the presidential spouse's role (**Image 6**). In 1901, she moved into the White House with her husband, Theodore Roosevelt. The White House could not handle the large family's needs, and renovations were required. As part of the process, a new receiving area for public visitors was built on the east side of the main house, eventually becoming the modern East Wing (**Image 7**). Mrs. Roosevelt hosted many social gatherings, such as garden parties (**Image 8**). To assist with these events, the White House hired Isabella Hagner, known as "Belle," to be a salaried executive clerk for Mrs. Roosevelt. Hagner essentially became the first White House Social Secretary, although that title and role did not officially exist at the time. Today, this recognized position operates under the formal Office of the First Lady in the East Wing.

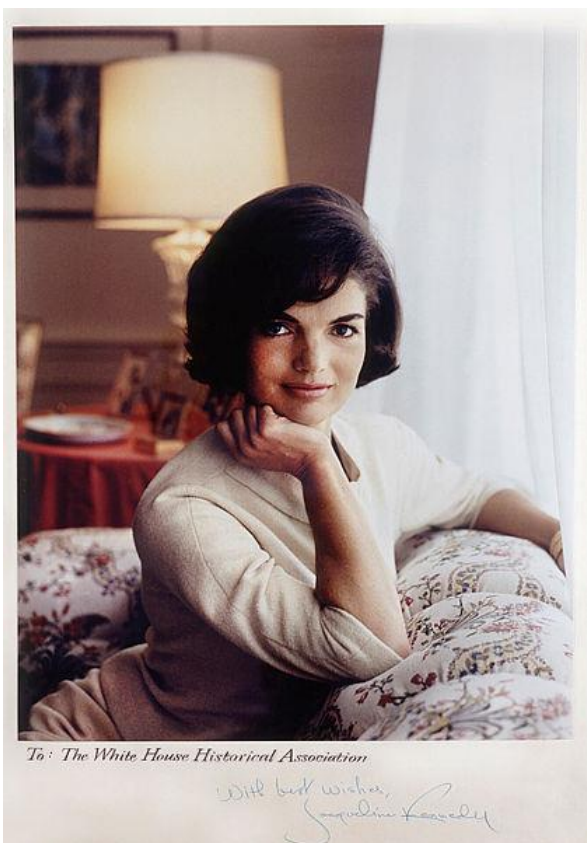
Moving beyond social functions, Eleanor Roosevelt expanded the role of president's spouse into the modern First Lady. Her husband, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, was in office twelve years, the longest serving president in American history. For over a decade, Eleanor Roosevelt acted under the title "First Lady," despite her general resistance to the formal title and the position's lack of official recognition. She held women-only press conferences, promoted her husband's New Deal policies, and wrote newspaper columns about civil rights, social inequalities, and education reform (**Images 9 & 10**). Eleanor Roosevelt advanced opportunities for women and supported African American organizations. She set a new benchmark for the first ladies who followed.



Image 9



Subsequent first ladies strove to enhance the influence that Eleanor Roosevelt had created for



To: The White House Historical Association

With best wishes,
Jacqueline Kennedy

Image 11

presidential spouses. First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy helped increase the cultural and historic appreciation at the White House (**Image 11**). Determined to conserve the evolving history of the White House and make it a living museum, she initiated a three-part program to restore the historical integrity of the mansion's public rooms, acquire a collection of fine and decorative arts, and establish a private nonprofit organization, the White House Historical Association, to research and publish books and educational materials interpreting the White House and its history. She also formed the Fine Arts Committee for the White House to advise purchases for the residence. Kennedy's efforts necessitated the hiring of a designated Press Secretary for the First Lady,

Pamela Turnure (**Image 12**). Jacqueline Kennedy's youth and vibrancy further extended the power of the

First Lady.

While first ladies since Edith Roosevelt utilized the availability of White House staff, they did not operate from a specific office until the late 1970s, when First Lady Rosalynn Carter organized the workspace now known as the Office of the First Lady (**Image 13**). This office contained four areas of focus: (1) projects and community liaison, (2) press and research, (3) schedule and advance, and (4) social and personal. Mrs. Carter also added a Chief of Staff position to oversee the entire operations

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from the offices in the East Wing. Rosalynn Carter focused her attention on the performing arts, like Jacqueline Kennedy, and also took a strong interest in promoting mental health programs.

Like Carter, recent first ladies have taken up a variety of social causes and projects while living at the White House. For example, Barbara Bush championed literacy programs and worked to alleviate homelessness and AIDS (**Image 14**). Along with support for social issues, the American public looks to modern first ladies as trendsetters in fashion, including Nancy Reagan (**Image 15**) and Michelle Obama (**Image 16**). The spouses of the presidents are not elected to serve, but they cannot avoid the reality of being married to the leader of the nation. The First Lady position, while unpaid and not mandated, has grown through the leadership of many women over the centuries into the influential role it holds today.






IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Frances Folsom Cleveland	1886	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Grover%20Cleveland/1148.tif.info
2	Caroline Lavinia Scott Harrison	Ca. 1880	Adolphe Yvon	Gift of Gerald and Edwin and Barbara Jean Czulewicz, Blair House, U.S. Department of State		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Benjamin%20Harrison/9924.tif.info
3	Lou Henry Hoover at Monroe Desk	1932	Harris & Ewing	Stock Montage, Harris & Ewing Collection		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Herbert%20Hoover/1112146.tif.info
4	Eleanor Roosevelt	1942	Unknown	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/1112157.tif.info
5	Lady Washington's Reception	1861	Alexander Hay Ritchie	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/3928.tif.info





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6	Edith Roosevelt Reading to Archie and Quentin in the Renovated Green Room	1902	Frances Benjamin Johnston	The White House		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Theodore%20Roosevelt/631.tif.info
7	White House – East Entrance	Ca. 1906	Handy Studios	White House Collection		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/9278.jpg.info
8	Garden Party	1905	Underwood & Underwood	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1112738.tif.info
9	Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary Pickford, and Winifred Reed Rally to Fight Polio	1940	Harris & Ewing	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/1112184.tif.info
10	Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Aides at the White House	1941	Jackie Martin	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/9803.tif.info
11	First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy	Ca. 1963	Mark Shaw	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/1433.tif.info

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12	Pamela Turnure with Caroline Kennedy's Tom Kitten	1961	Abbie Rowe	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/5423.tif.info
13	Rosalynn Carter at the Podium in the East Room	Ca. 1977-1981	Unknown	Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum/NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Jimmy%20Carter/1120.tif.info
14	Barbara Pierce Bush	Unknown	Carol T. Powers	George Bush Presidential Library and Museum/NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20H%20W%20Bush/990.tif.info
15	Ronald and Nancy Reagan Escort President and Mrs. Miguel de la Madrid	1984	Unknown	Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum/NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Ronald%20Reagan/9382.tif.info
16	Michelle Obama and Caroline Kennedy	2011	Lawrence Jackson	Official White House Photo		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Barrack%20Obama/9677.tif.info

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Archives: Correspondence between Rosalynn Carter and Hillary Rodham Clinton, including letters regarding Habitat for Humanity. [Click here.](#)



SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Use this CRP as a supplement to discussions about the history of women’s rights movements in the United States. Reflect as a class or through a short writing assignment on how the evolution of the role of first ladies corresponds or differs from the wider story of women in United States history. Provide historic examples.
- Eleanor Roosevelt was instrumental in defining the modern role and title of First Lady. From 1936 to 1962, she wrote a syndicated column entitled “My Day.” Read selected samples of her columns on the White House Historical Association’s website. [Click here](#). Create a class discussion about First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. How do her columns reflect her era? Do any of her words still resonate today?
 - [“My Day”- Causes related columns](#)
 - [“My Day”- Family life related columns](#)
 - [“My Day”- Household related columns](#)
- Spouses of presidents are not elected, but many modern first ladies use their platform to bring awareness of social issues or create change during their time in the White House. Pose this scenario to students: If your spouse were elected president, what would be your goal or social issue platform? Have students create an action plan describing how they would achieve their goals within one term (4 years) or two terms (8 years).
- Research legislation that has resulted from a first lady’s active role promoting a social cause.