THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

The First Ladies: Forged Paths, Shared Bonds
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November 19, 2026 (Washington, D.C.) – This issue of the *White House History Quarterly* revisits a favorite topic of *Quarterly* readership, the first ladies of the United States, women who each in their own way have supported the presidency and worked to make the world, as well as the White House itself, a better place. The featured articles provide insight into a role with high expectations, but no official job description. The articles in this issue reveal that while many first ladies shared goals and passions, all adapted the role to the circumstances of their lives and their times. Each incumbent made her own way, sometimes in surprising ways, and some women we learn, were surprised to be in the role at all.



The title "first lady" has long been held by women who were living at the time of their husbands' presidencies, but nearly a dozen daughters, sisters, nieces, friends, and in-laws have taken on the responsibilities of White House hostess to support widower and bachelor presidents or to stand in for ailing presidents' wives. With her article, "Accidental First Ladies," author **Rebecca Boggs Roberts** profiles each of the nonwife hostesses revealing that while some embraced and excelled in the "public and essential" role, others were less well suited.

One of the most intriguing of the first ladies, Dolley Madison, appears throughout this issue, as a poet, knitter, one time "accidental," and as a recipient of a franking privilege. Only forty years old in 1810 when she became first lady, she lived into the age of photography and posed for early photographers. Author **Clifford Krainik** provides a selection of the photographic portraits made during her 70s, highlighting a daguerreotype made by John Plumbe Jr. in 1846 and featured on the cover.

With his article "Discovering Sixteen First Poets," author **Michael Crowland** reveals that there is always more to learn about the creative talents of the presidents' wives. Author **Debra Scala Giokas** explains that for many, creativity was expressed through needlecraft. First knitters from Martha Washington to Michelle Obama enjoyed making practical gifts for family, friends, and those in needed. Ida McKinley is said to have crocheted 4,000 slippers, and Barbara Bush needlepointed Christmas stockings and even made a large-scale needlepoint rug that was displayed at the White House.

Author **Anita B. McBride** remembers that First Lady Laura Bush came to the White House expecting to focus on literacy, but following 9/11, she also became devoted to improving the lives of Afghan women. The unexpected cause took her to Afghanistan four times and led to her becoming the first first lady to deliver a presidential radio address. With "Madame Ambassador" **Annette B. Dunlap** recounts that humanitarian causes and international diplomatic efforts that took First Lady Pat Nixon to Peru and Africa. **Mary Stockwell** reminds us that when President Woodrow Wilson suffered a debilitating stroke, Edith Wilson adapted her role as first lady to include responsibilities that would be filled by the president's chief of staff today.

Author **Jessie Kratz** searches the National Archives and finds a congressional declaration to allow Dolley Madison a franking privilege. Reminding us that widowed first ladies once had no guaranteed income and that surprisingly, Dolley Madison, the heroine who saved the portrait of George Washington from flames, once needed help to buy postage.

Many first ladies have labored to ensure the White House is cared for and ready to welcome guests. **Lauren McGwin** reveals that First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy prioritized the restoration of the interior rooms but by 1963, she was planning a new State China Service as well.

In the presidential site feature, author **Scott H. Harris** takes readers to Medora, South Dakota to the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library, which opened in July 2026. He finds natural beauty, history, and state of the art technology combined in the extraordinary facility. **Stewart D. McLaurin,** president of the White House Historical Association, closes the issue with "Reflections," highlighting the nonpartisan nonprofit's historic mission and initiatives across presidencies.

To request a review copy of *White House History Quarterly #83* or to interview the contributors, contact press@whha.org.

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About White House History Press

The White House Historical Association published its first book, *The White House: An Historic Guide*, in 1962. It was the wish of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy that such a book be written, and she participated actively in the editing. For more than sixty years, the Association's White House History Press has continued to produce award-winning books on a wide range of subjects related to the history of the President's House, its museum-quality collections, and those who have lived and worked there over the years. White House History Press seeks to fulfill the Association's educational mission with titles that preserve and disseminate knowledge on the subject of White House history in the broadest sense, and which unearth and present untold stories, pose and answer questions, and serve as a springboard for subsequent and significant scholarly and educational endeavors. More than 150 titles have been published with more than 80 currently in print. The list includes titles designed to appeal to history buffs and art lovers, connoisseurs and lifelong learners, scholars and tourists, adults and children. As an educational press devoted to history, the Press focuses on nonfiction. From general interest to highly specialized, the title list includes architecture, gardens, art, furnishings, biography, memoir, cookbooks, and reference.

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