

THE  
*First Ladies*  
OF THE  
UNITED STATES  
OF AMERICA

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BY ALLIDA BLACK

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FOREWORD  
BY MICHELLE OBAMA



THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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### **First Ladies of the United States of America 12th Edition**

PHOTOGRAPHY Steve Adams, Joseph H. Bailey, Sean Baldwin, J. Bruce Baumann, Victor R. Boswell Jr., David S. Boyer, Sisse Brimberg, Nelson Brown, Larry D. Kinney, Erik Kvalsvik, Bates W. Littlehales, George F. Mobley, Robert S. Oakes, Martin Rogers, James E. Russell, Joseph Scherschel, David Valdez, Volkmar Wentzel

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Printed in the U.S.A.

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ISBN 978-1-931917-05-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008943810  
Printed in the U.S.A.

Editions one through nine were produced by the National Geographic Society as a public service

Staff for the First Edition:  
Editorial Director: Mary Ann Harrell; Researchers: Susan C. Burns, Jennifer Urquhart; Picture Editor: Geraldine Linder; Art Director: Ursula Perrin Vosseler

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## MARTHA DANDRIDGE WASHINGTON

I think I am more like a state prisoner than anything else, there is certain bounds set for me which I must not depart from . . .” So in one of her few surviving letters, Martha Washington confided to a niece that she did not entirely enjoy her role as first of first ladies. She once conceded that “many younger and gayer women would be extremely pleased” in her place; she would “much rather be at home.”

But when George Washington took his oath of office in New York City on April 30, 1789, and assumed the new duties of president of the United States, his wife brought to their position a tact and discretion developed over 58 years of life in Tidewater Virginia society.

Oldest daughter of John and Frances Dandridge, she was born June 2, 1731, on a plantation near Williamsburg. Typical for a girl in an 18th-century family, her education was almost negligible except in domestic and social skills, but she learned all the arts of a well ordered household and how to keep a family contented.

As a girl of 18—about five feet tall, dark-haired, gentle of manner—she married the wealthy Daniel Parke Custis. Two babies died; two were hardly past infancy when her husband died in 1757.

From the day Martha married George Washington in 1759, her great concern was the comfort and happiness of her husband and her children. When his career led him to the battlegrounds of the Revolutionary War and finally to the presidency, she followed him bravely. Her love of private life equaled her husband’s; but, as she wrote to her friend Mercy Otis

Warren, “I cannot blame him for having acted according to his ideas of duty in obeying the voice of his country.” As for herself, “I am still determined to be cheerful and to be happy, in whatever situation I may be; for I have also learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our dispositions, and not upon our circumstances.”

At the President’s House in temporary capitals, New York and Philadelphia, the Washingtons chose to entertain in formal style, deliberately emphasizing the new republic’s wish to be accepted as the equal of the established governments of Europe. Still, Martha’s warm hospitality made her guests feel welcome and put strangers at ease. She took little satisfaction in “formal compliments and empty ceremonies,” and declared that “I am fond only of what comes from the heart.” Abigail Adams, who sat at her right during parties and receptions, praised her as “one of those unassuming characters which create Love & Esteem.”

In 1797 the Washingtons said farewell to public life and returned to their beloved Mount Vernon, to live surrounded by kinfolk, friends, and a constant stream of guests eager to pay their respects to the celebrated couple. Martha’s daughter Patsy had died at 17, her son Jack at 26, but Jack’s children figured in the household. After George Washington died in 1799, Martha assured a final privacy by burning their letters; she died of a “severe fever” on May 22, 1802. Both lie buried at Mount Vernon, where Washington himself had planned an unpretentious tomb for them.



“Lady Washington,” some admiring Americans called her; in a modest reference to her domestic skill, Martha Washington (1731–1802) described herself as an “old-fashioned Virginia housekeeper.” “A most becoming pleasantness sits upon her countenance,” wrote Abigail Adams in 1789.

## DOLLEY PAYNE MADISON

For half a century she was the most important woman in the social circles of America. To this day she remains one of the best known and best loved ladies of the White House—though often referred to, mistakenly, as Dorothy or Dorothea.

She always called herself Dolley; and by that name the New Garden Monthly Meeting of the Society of Friends, in Piedmont, North Carolina, recorded her birth to John and Mary Coles Payne, settlers from Virginia. In 1769 John Payne took his family back to his home colony, and in 1783 he moved them to Philadelphia, city of the Quakers. Dolley grew up in the strict discipline of the Society, but nothing muted her happy personality and her warm heart.

John Todd Jr. a lawyer, exchanged marriage vows with Dolley in 1790. Just three years later he died in a yellow fever epidemic, leaving his wife with a small son.

By this time Philadelphia had become the capital city. With her charm and her laughing blue eyes, fair skin, and black curls, the young widow attracted distinguished attention. Before long Dolley was reporting to her best friend that “the great little Madison has asked . . . to see me this evening.”

Although Representative James Madison of Virginia was 17 years her senior, and Episcopalian in background, they were married in September 1794. The marriage, though childless, was notably happy; “our hearts understand each other,” she assured him. He could even be patient with Dolley’s son, Payne, who mishandled his own affairs—and, eventually, mismanaged Madison’s estate.

Discarding the somber Quaker dress after her second marriage, Dolley chose the finest of fashions. Margaret Bayard Smith, chronicler of early Washington social life, wrote: “She looked a Queen. . . . It would be *absolutely impossible* for any one to behave with more perfect propriety than she did.”

Blessed with a desire to please and a willingness to be pleased, Dolley made her home the center of society when Madison began, in 1801, his eight years as Jefferson’s secretary of state. She assisted at the White House when the president asked her help in receiving ladies, and presided at the first inaugural ball in Washington when her husband became chief executive in 1809.

Dolley’s social graces made her famous. Her political acumen, prized by her husband, is less renowned, though her gracious tact smoothed many a quarrel. Hostile statesmen, difficult envoys from Spain or Tunisia, warrior chiefs from the west, flustered youngsters—she always welcomed everyone. Forced to flee from the White House by a British army during the War of 1812, she returned to find the mansion in ruins. Undaunted by temporary quarters, she entertained as skillfully as ever.

At their plantation Montpelier in Virginia, the Madisons lived in pleasant retirement until he died in 1836. She returned to the capital in the autumn of 1837, and friends found tactful ways to supplement her diminished income. She remained in Washington until her death in 1849, honored and loved by all. The delightful personality of this unusual woman is a cherished part of her country’s history.



Already a hostess of outstanding success, Dolley Madison (1768–1849) sat for this portrait by Gilbert Stuart in 1804. As wife of the secretary of state, she began her long career of official hospitality; she sustained it for eight years as first lady. Her manners, said a contemporary, “would disarm envy itself.” Widowed, impoverished, and old, she never lost her charm or dignity; she enjoyed the deepening respect of her friends and country to the last.

ELIZABETH KORTRIGHT MONROE



Invariably elegant, Elizabeth Monroe (1768–1830) chose an ermine scarf to complement her black velvet Empire-style gown for this portrait attributed to John Vanderlyn. Although she had traveled with her husband on diplomatic missions, delicate health limited her activities—and enjoyment—in her eight years as first lady.

Romance glints from the little that is known of Elizabeth Kortright's early life. She was born in New York in 1768, daughter of an old New York family. Her father, Lawrence, had served the Crown by privateering during the French and Indian War and made a fortune. He took no active part in the War of Independence; and James Monroe wrote to his friend Thomas Jefferson in Paris in 1786 that he had married the daughter of a gentleman "injured in his fortunes" by the Revolution.

Strange choice, perhaps, for a patriot veteran with political ambitions and little money of his own; but Elizabeth was beautiful, and love was decisive. They were married in February 1786, when the bride was not yet 18.

The young couple planned to live in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where Monroe began his practice of law. His political career, however, kept them on the move as the family increased by two daughters and a son who died in infancy.

In 1794, Elizabeth Monroe accompanied her husband to France when President Washington appointed him United States minister. Arriving in Paris in the midst of the French Revolution, she took a dramatic part in saving Lafayette's wife, imprisoned and expecting death on the guillotine. With only her servants in her carriage, the American minister's wife went to the prison and asked to see Madame Lafayette. Soon after this hint of American interest, the prisoner was set free. The Monroes became very popular in France, where the diplomat's lady received the affectionate name of *la belle Américaine*.

For 17 years Monroe, his wife at his side, alternated between foreign missions and service as governor or legislator of Virginia. They made the plantation of Oak Hill their home after he inherited it from an uncle, and appeared on the Washington scene in 1811 when he became Madison's secretary of state.

Elizabeth Monroe was an accomplished hostess when her husband took the presidential oath in 1817. Through much of the administration, however, she was in poor health and curtailed her activities. Wives of the diplomatic corps and other dignitaries took it amiss when she decided to pay no calls—an arduous social duty in a city of widely scattered dwellings and unpaved streets.

Moreover, she and her daughter Eliza changed White House customs to create the formal atmosphere of European courts. Even the White House wedding of her daughter Maria was private, in the "New York style" rather than the expansive Virginia social style made popular by Dolley Madison. A guest of the Monroes' last levee, on New Year's Day in 1825, described the first lady as "regal-looking" and noted details of interest: "Her dress was superb black velvet; neck and arms bare and beautifully formed; her hair in puffs and dressed high on the head and ornamented with white ostrich plumes; around her neck an elegant pearl necklace. Though no longer young, she is still a very handsome woman."

In retirement at Oak Hill, Elizabeth Monroe died on September 23, 1830; and family tradition says that her husband burned the letters of their life together.