


# First Lady of the United States

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[First Lady](#) of the [United States](#)



Incumbent

[Michelle Obama](#)

since January 20, 2009

<a href="#">Style</a>	Mrs. Obama
<a href="#">Residence</a>	<a href="#">White House</a>
Inaugural holder	<a href="#">Martha Washington</a>
Formation	April 30, 1789
Website	<a href="#">First Ladies</a>

The [First Lady](#) of the [United States](#) ([FLOTUS](#))<sup>[1]</sup> is the hostess of the [White House](#). Because this position is traditionally filled by the wife of the [President of the United States](#), the title is most often applied to the wife of a sitting president. The current First Lady is [Michelle Obama](#). After her husband [Barack Obama](#) was re-elected on November 6, 2012, she is scheduled to serve until January 20, 2017.

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## [\[edit\]](#) Current

The current First Lady is [Michelle Obama](#), wife of President [Barack Obama](#). At present, there are five living former first ladies: [Rosalynn Carter](#), wife of [Jimmy Carter](#); [Nancy Reagan](#), widow of [Ronald Reagan](#); [Barbara Bush](#), wife of [George H. W. Bush](#); current Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), wife of [Bill Clinton](#); and [Laura Bush](#), wife of [George W. Bush](#).

## [\[edit\]](#) Origins of the title



[Dolley Madison](#) was the first President's wife to be referred to as "First Lady" at her funeral in 1849.

The use of the title [First Lady](#) to describe the spouse or hostess of an executive began in the United States. In the early days of the republic, there was not a generally accepted title for the wife of the president. Many early first ladies expressed their own preference for how they were addressed, including the use of such titles as "Lady", "Mrs. President", and "Mrs. Presidentress"; [Martha Washington](#) was often referred to as "Lady Washington."

First Ladies (from left to right) [Rosalynn Carter](#), [Hillary Clinton](#), [Barbara Bush](#) and [Laura Bush](#) at the dedication of the [William J. Clinton Presidential Center and Park](#) in 2004.

According to legend, [Dolley Madison](#) was referred to as "First Lady" in 1849 at her funeral in a eulogy delivered by President [Zachary Taylor](#). However, no written record of this eulogy exists.<sup>[\[2\]](#)</sup> Sometime after 1849, the title began being used in Washington, D.C., social circles. The earliest known written evidence of the title is from the November 3, 1863, diary entry of [William Howard Russell](#), in which he referred to gossip about "the First Lady in the Land," referring to [Mary Todd Lincoln](#). The title first gained nationwide



recognition in 1877, when newspaper journalist [Mary C. Ames](#) referred to [Lucy Webb Hayes](#) as "the First Lady of the Land" while reporting on the inauguration of [Rutherford B. Hayes](#). The frequent reporting on Lucy Hayes' activities helped spread use of the title outside Washington. A popular 1911 comedic play by playwright Charles Nirdlinger, titled *The First Lady in the Land*, popularized the title further. By the 1930s it was in wide use. Use of the title later spread from the United States to other nations.

The wife of the vice president of the United States is sometimes referred to as the [second lady of the United States](#), but this title is much less common.

Several women who were not presidents' wives have served as First Lady, as when the president was a bachelor or widower, or when the wife of the president was unable to fulfill the duties of the First Lady herself. In these cases, the position has been filled by a female relative or friend of the president, such as [Martha Jefferson Randolph](#) during [Jefferson's presidency](#), [Emily Donelson](#) and [Sarah Yorke Jackson](#) during [Jackson's](#), [Mary Elizabeth \(Taylor\) Bliss](#) during [Taylor's](#), [Mary Harrison McKee](#) during [Harrison's](#) presidency, upon her mother's death, and [Harriet Lane](#) during [Buchanan's](#).

## [\[edit\]](#) Role of the First Lady

Burns identifies four successive main themes of the First Ladyship: as public woman (1900–1929); as political celebrity (1932–1961); as political activist (1964–1977); and as political interloper (1980–2001).<sup>[3]</sup>



First Ladies [Nancy Reagan](#), [Barbara Bush](#) (standing, left to right), [Lady Bird Johnson](#), [Pat Nixon](#), [Rosalynn Carter](#), and [Betty Ford](#) (seated, left to right) at the dedication of the [Ronald Reagan Presidential Library](#), November 1991

The position of the First Lady is not an elected one, carries no official duties, and receives no salary. Nonetheless, first ladies have held a highly visible position in U.S. government.<sup>[4]</sup> The role of the First Lady has evolved over the centuries. She is, first and foremost, the hostess of the

White House.<sup>[4]</sup> She organizes and attends official ceremonies and functions of state either along with, or in place of, the president.

Both [Martha Washington](#) and [Abigail Adams](#) gained fame from the [Revolutionary War](#) and were treated as if they were "ladies" of the British royal court.<sup>[4]</sup> [Dolley Madison](#) popularized the First Ladyship by

engaging in efforts to assist orphans and women, by dressing in elegant fashions and attracting newspaper coverage, and by risking her life to save iconic treasures during the [War of 1812](#). Madison set the standard for the ladyship and her actions were the model for nearly every First Lady until [Eleanor Roosevelt](#) in the 1930s.<sup>[4]</sup> Plagued by a [paralytic illness](#), President Franklin D. Roosevelt was not free to travel around the country, so Mrs. Roosevelt assumed this role. She authored a weekly newspaper column and hosted a radio show.<sup>[4]</sup> [Jacqueline Kennedy](#) led an effort to redecorate and restore the White House while she was First Lady.<sup>[4]</sup>

Over the course of the 20th century it became increasingly common for first ladies to select specific causes to promote, usually ones that are not politically divisive. It is common for the First Lady to hire a staff to support these activities. [Lady Bird Johnson](#) pioneered environmental protection and beautification; [Pat Nixon](#) encouraged volunteerism and traveled extensively abroad; [Betty Ford](#) supported women's rights; [Rosalynn Carter](#) aided those with mental disabilities; [Nancy Reagan](#) founded the [Just Say No](#) drug awareness campaign; [Barbara Bush](#) promoted literacy; [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) sought to reform the healthcare system in the U.S.; and [Laura Bush](#) supported women's rights groups and encouraged childhood literacy.<sup>[4]</sup> [Michelle Obama](#) has become identified with tackling childhood obesity.<sup>[5]</sup>

Clinton was, for a time, given a formal job in the administration. She became a [U.S. Senator](#) from New York in 2001 and is currently the [Secretary of State](#) in the Obama administration. Many first ladies, including Jacqueline Kennedy, Nancy Reagan, and Michelle Obama have been significant fashion trendsetters.<sup>[4]</sup> There is a strong tradition against the First Lady holding outside employment while serving as White House hostess.<sup>[6]</sup> However, some first ladies have exercised a degree of political influence by virtue of being an important adviser to the president.<sup>[4]</sup> During Hillary Clinton's campaign for election to the U.S. Senate, the couple's daughter [Chelsea](#) took over much of the First Lady's role.

## **[[edit](#)] Office of the First Lady**



First Ladies (from left to right) [Nancy Reagan](#), [Lady Bird Johnson](#), [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), [Rosalynn Carter](#), [Betty Ford](#), and [Barbara Bush](#) at the "National Garden Gala, A Tribute to America's First Ladies", May 11, 1994. [Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis](#), absent due to illness, died a week after this photograph was taken. For more details on this topic, see [Office of the First Lady of the United States](#).

The Office of the First Lady of the United States is accountable to the First Lady for her to carry out her duties as hostess of the White House, and is also in charge of all social and ceremonial events of the White House. The First Lady has her own staff that includes a chief of staff, press secretary, [White House Social Secretary](#), [Chief Floral Designer](#), etc. The Office of the First Lady is an entity of the White House Office,

a branch of the [Executive Office of the President](#).<sup>[7]</sup> As such, Hillary Clinton's abdication of the office in favor of the couple's daughter, in advance of the former's installation as a United States Senator, avoided conflict under the [Ineligibility Clause](#) of the [United States Constitution](#).

## [[edit](#)] Exhibitions and collections

Established in 1912, the First Ladies Collection has been one of the most popular attractions at the [Smithsonian Institution](#). The original exhibition opened in 1914 and was one of the first at the Smithsonian to prominently feature women. Originally focused largely on fashion, the exhibition now delves deeper into the contributions of first ladies to the presidency and American society. In 2008, “First Ladies at the Smithsonian” opened at the [National Museum of American History](#) as part of its reopening year celebration. That exhibition served as a bridge to the museum’s plans for an expanded exhibition on first ladies’ history that opened on November 19, 2011. "The First Ladies" explores the unofficial but important position of first lady and the ways that different women have shaped the role to make their own contributions to the presidential administrations and the nation. The exhibition features 26 dresses and more than 160 other objects, ranging from those of [Martha Washington](#) to [Michelle Obama](#), and includes [White House china](#), personal possessions and other objects from the Smithsonian’s unique collection of first ladies’ materials.<sup>[8]</sup>

## First ladies of the United States

*For a complete list of the first ladies, see [List of First Ladies of the United States](#)*

## See also

- [First Lady](#)—Use of the title outside the United States.
- [Second Lady of the United States](#)—the spouse of the Vice President of the United States
- [First Ladies National Historic Site](#)—in [Canton, Ohio](#)
- [List of First Ladies of the United States](#)
- [List of current United States first spouses](#)

## References

- ↑ [FLOTUS definition from MacMillan online "Open Dictionary"](#), Retrieved January 4, 2012.
- ↑ ["First Lady Biography: Dolley Madison"](#). National First Ladies' Library.  
http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=4.
- ↑ Lisa M. Burns, *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of Presidential Wives* (2008)
- ↑  [a](#) [b](#) [c](#) [d](#) [e](#) [f](#) [g](#) [h](#) [i](#) Anthony, Carl Sferrazza (September 26, 2008). ["The Role of the First Lady"](#). America.gov. http://www.america.gov/st/elections08-english/2008/September/20080926162204naneerg0.8945886.html. Retrieved May 4, 2009.



5. <sup>^</sup> ["Michelle Obama"](http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/first-ladies/michelleobama). The White House. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/first-ladies/michelleobama>. Retrieved May 4, 2010.
6. <sup>^</sup> Caroli, Betty Boyd (2003). *First Ladies from Martha Washington to Laura Bush*. Oxford University Press. pp. 200.
7. <sup>^</sup> ["Executive Office of the President"](http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/). The White House. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/>.
8. <sup>^</sup> ["The First Ladies"](http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/small_exhibition.cfm?key=1267&exkey=863&pagekey=864&CFID=9611372&CFTOKEN=75585282). National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. [http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/small\\_exhibition.cfm?key=1267&exkey=863&pagekey=864&CFID=9611372&CFTOKEN=75585282](http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/small_exhibition.cfm?key=1267&exkey=863&pagekey=864&CFID=9611372&CFTOKEN=75585282). Retrieved April 4, 2012.

## Further reading

- Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents Wives and Their Power 1789–1961* (1992) [excerpt and text search](#)
- Böck, Magdalena. *The Role Of First Ladies: A Comparison Between the US and Europe* (2009)
- Burns, Lisa M. *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of Presidential Wives* (2008) 205 pp. [ISBN 978-0-87580-391-3](#)
- Pastan, Amy. *First Ladies* (2008), heavily illustrated
- Roberts, John B. *Rating The First Ladies: The Women Who Influenced the Presidency* (2nd ed. 2004) [excerpt and text search](#)
- Troy, Gil. *Affairs of State* (1997), by leading scholar
- Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies: An Intimate Group Portrait of White House Wives* (1996) [excerpt and text search](#)

## External links

- [Alphabetical List of First Ladies of the United States](#)
- ["Office of the First Lady"](http://www.whitehouse.gov/firstlady/). <http://www.whitehouse.gov/firstlady/>. Retrieved February 2, 2009.
- ["First Lady's Gallery"](http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/firstladies/). *The White House*. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/firstladies/>. Retrieved February 2, 2009.
- ["The National First Ladies' Library"](http://www.firstladies.org/). <http://www.firstladies.org/>. Retrieved February 2, 2009.
- [The First Ladies at the Smithsonian](#) An online exhibition from the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

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[First Ladies of the United States](#)

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