

First Ladies of America



Poor health made it largely impossible for Letitia Tyler to take an active role in President John Tyler's administration, but when she became the first wife of a president to die while her husband was in office; many mourners who had never seen or met her lamented her loss and heralded her as a good friend.

The daughter of a Virginia tidewater planter, Letitia Christian met her future husband while she was in her late teens. John Tyler was fresh out of college, and studying law under his father, the governor of Virginia. Despite his respectable background, Letitia's family was not enthusiastic about the marriage but eventually gave their approval to the union.

Rising from the Virginia legislature to become a U.S. Congressman, Virginia governor and then U.S. Senator, Tyler built his career and national reputation while Mrs. Tyler raised the couple's children and managed their Virginia plantation. A financially shrewd woman, Mrs. Tyler made the plantation profitable and expanded the couple's land holdings.

With her busy domestic life, Mrs. Tyler rarely had time to be a political partner to Tyler. However, after Vice President Tyler assumed the presidency upon the death of William Henry Harrison, it was ill health that prevented her involvement in his career.

Having suffered a paralytic stroke several years earlier, Mrs. Tyler began life as first lady mostly hidden away on the second floor of the mansion, where she read, knitted, and advised her husband and children.

Her daughter-in-law, Priscilla Cooper Tyler, enthusiastically embraced the social duties of White House hostess in her place. Mrs. Tyler did not withdraw from White House activities completely. She

received visitors informally, and made one official public appearance when her daughter was married.

In September 1842, however, the nation and her family mourned Mrs. Tyler's death when she suffered a second stroke.

Less than two years later, President Tyler married a woman 30 years his junior and younger than some of his own daughters. Julia Gardiner was the daughter of a prominent New York state senator. After her formal education, she went on a grand tour of Europe. When she returned to the states, she entered Washington's social scene where she met and received a marriage proposal from the widowed President Tyler. The couple quietly wed on June 26, 1844.

John Tyler's Administration 1841-1845

As first lady, the new Mrs. Tyler was beautiful and charming, and she approached her role as if presiding in the European courts she had visited. She rode about town in a carriage pulled by six white Arabian horses and was often accompanied by an Italian greyhound. At White House receptions she was attended by 12 maids, all dressed alike.

Mrs. Tyler had a serious, political side, however, and she was known to exert great influence on President Tyler. She was instrumental in drumming up political support for the annexation of Texas, and when Tyler signed the Texas Annexation Bill, he presented his wife with the gold signature pen, which she wore on a necklace.

Mrs. Tyler was only 25 years old when she left the White House, and she and the former president went on to have seven children of their own. She died in 1889 and is buried beside Tyler at Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, Virginia.

Letitia Christian Tyler

Born: Nov. 12, 1790, in New Kent, Va.

Education: Unknown

Marriage: 1813 to John Tyler

Children: Mary (1815-48); Robert (1816-77); John Jr. (1819-96); Letitia (1821-1907); Elizabeth (1823-50); Anne Contesse (1825); Alice (1827-54); Tazewell (1830-74)

Died: September 10, 1842, in Washington D.C.

Julia Gardiner Tyler

Born: May 4, 1820 in Long Island N.Y.

Education: Madame N.D. Chagary's Institute for Young Ladies, New York

Marriage: 1844 to John Tyler

Children: David Gardiner (1846-1927); John Alexander (1848-83); Julia (1849-71); Lachlan (1851-1802); Lyon Gardiner (1853-1935); Robert Fitzwalter (1856-1927); Pearl (1860-1947)

Died: July 10, 1889, in Richmond, Va.

