

First Ladies of America



Perhaps nothing determined the course of Sarah Polk's adult life as much as remaining childless throughout her marriage to James K. Polk. Living at a time when a woman, especially a Southern woman, was defined by her role as wife and mother and mistress of her house, Mrs. Polk forged a different identity. She became her husband's political partner. Mrs. Polk devoted all her energy to his career and became an indispensable and influential presence in his political life, both before and after he won the presidency.

After their marriage, the Polks lived in a small cottage on his parents' estate. When he was elected to Congress, they moved to Washington and lived in a boardinghouse. Unlike other political wives, Mrs. Polk had time to befriend his Congressional associates, form alliances in the government, and help her husband navigate the political terrain.

Intelligent and knowledgeable, Mrs. Polk became well liked and respected in the Capitol. Her family's personal friendship with Andrew Jackson bolstered Polk's own relationship with the president and further advanced his career. In 1835, Polk became Speaker of the House of Representatives for two terms. Ten years later, he would be elected president, and Mrs. Polk would live in the White House as first lady.

Mrs. Polk's personal history had prepared her well for the role she played in her husband's life. Her father was a wealthy planter, merchant and slave holder in Tennessee, and his daughter was accustomed to living among members of the upper class.

While a teenager, Mrs. Polk

attended one of the few college-level schools in the country for young women.

The role she played in her husband's career, and in his presidency, was extensive. She managed his political campaigns, always served as his personal secretary, and sent him detailed political reports and advice when he was away. As first lady, she controlled access to the president, which was resented by those she did not always admit to his office, including Polk's vice president.

A devout Presbyterian, Mrs. Polk had no moral objection to slavery, but she did have a strong objection to working on Sunday; no official guests were received in the White House on Sunday and no official work was done. Music, dancing, liquor, and beer were also banned. White House guests were offered wine at dinner, but the president and the first lady did not imbibe. The first lady did allow one exception in regard to music; the Marine Band was allowed to play a new tune that came to be known as "Hail to the Chief." Dinner with the Polks was a sedate affair, highlighted by fine food and conversation. The first lady was regarded by many as presiding over a dignified White House.

In 1849, the Polks returned to Tennessee, looking forward to living at "Polk Place," their new home in Nashville. Three months later, however, President Polk died of cholera. Sarah Polk wore black the remainder of her life and rarely left home, except to attend church. She died in Nashville, still a widow, in 1891.

**James K. Polk
Administration
1845-1849**

Sarah Childress Polk

Born: September 4, 1803, in Murfreesboro, Tennessee

Education: Abercrombie's Boarding School, Nashville, Tennessee; Moravian Female Academy, Salem, North Carolina

Marriage: January 1, 1824, to James K. Polk

Children: None

Died: August 14, 1891, in Nashville, Tennessee

