

# First Ladies of America



The title "First Lady" referring to the wife of the president was not created until several decades after Martha Washington's death, but Mrs. Washington was in all respects America's original first lady.

Admired by the general public, she was deeply revered by veterans of the Revolutionary War. They called her "Lady Washington," an expression of respect and affection. Soldiers remembered how Mrs. Washington served them and General Washington during the worst days of the conflict. She frequently stayed with her husband at his headquarters and looked after him and his troops. At Valley Forge throughout the terrible winter of 1778, Mrs. Washington cared for the ill, comforted the dying, sewed coats and socks for the freezing men, and rallied local women to provide food and clothing for them.

Mrs. Washington was warm and gracious, but she didn't enjoy being famous. Since she was the first presidential wife, her official responsibilities were not dictated or influenced by tradition. But instead by the president's secretary, who established strict rules of protocol. Having her official life so rigidly defined was difficult for Mrs. Washington, but throughout her husband's presidency, she exemplified the unselfish service that would inspire future first ladies.

Barely 5 feet tall, Mrs. Washington was born into a wealthy, socially elite Virginia family and inherited great wealth upon the death of her first husband, Daniel Custis. She was skillfully supervising the nearly 18,000-acre plantation he

left her and caring for her children when she met George Washington, a gentleman planter who commanded the Virginia regiment during the French and Indian War.

When George Washington became president, Mrs. Washington was aware that the United States, its first president, and the president's wife were being watched closely as the new country got underway. The Washingtons agreed she should entertain in a formal style to enhance America's stature in the world. Mrs. Washington held formal dinners on Thursdays and public receptions on Fridays.

When President Washington refused to run for election a third time, Mrs. Washington was relieved and happy to go home to Mount Vernon. Once there, she seldom left. There is no record of her ever crossing the Potomac to visit the newly constructed city named after her husband, the nation's permanent capital, Washington, D.C.

After George Washington died of a throat infection in December 1799, Mrs. Washington predicted that "I shall soon follow him." She burned their private letters to protect their memories from prying eyes. She destroyed all but two, which she had placed in a desk drawer when her chore was interrupted. Before she was able to retrieve them, she died on May 22, 1802.

Upon her death, Mrs. Washington was recognized as an American symbol of virtue, and an obituary that appeared in the Alexandria Advertiser and Commercial Appeal heralded her as "the worthy partner of the worthiest of men." She and the former president are buried together at Mount Vernon.

## George Washington's Administration 1789-1797

## Martha Dandridge Custis Washington

**Born:** June 2, 1731 in New Kent County, Virginia

**Education:** Tutored in reading, writing, and mathematics

**Marriage:** 1750 to Daniel Parke Custis; 1759 to Colonel George Washington

**Children:** Daniel Parke Custis (1751-1754); Frances Parke Custis (1753-1757); John Parke "Jackey" Custis (1754-1781); Martha Parke "Patsy Custis" (1759-1773)

**Died:** May 22, 1802 at Mount Vernon estate in Virginia

