

# First Ladies of America



Peggy Smith, the daughter of a wealthy Maryland tobacco planter, married Lt. Zachary Taylor when she was 21 years old. For the next 40 years, as he rose from the rank of lieutenant to major general, she would follow him from one military post to another on the frontier, living in forts, log cabins and tents from the Florida Everglades to the Mississippi River. Only once did they have a real home.

The Taylors were both from the South, and both had fathers who fought in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. Peggy Smith had grown up on her father's plantation, related by blood and marriage to the most prominent and powerful families in Maryland.

As the country's most famous general and hero of the Mexican War, "Old Rough and Ready" Zachary Taylor was nominated for president in 1848. His wife, however, prayed that he would lose the election. After years of personal deprivation and service to the country, she had looked forward to his retiring from the military and their spending the remainder of their life together in peace and comfort. When he won, she attended his inauguration but she did not attend the two Inaugural Balls.

During her brief time as first lady, Mrs. Taylor occupied herself primarily with domestic duties. She supervised the servants and slaves, ordered the food for the White House kitchen and managed the garden and the dairy. Each morning she attended service at St. John's Episcopal Church across Lafayette Square.

From time to time, she appeared in the public rooms of the mansion in her official role as first lady. Other times she was present at various White House gatherings, but was unrecognized.

On March 4, 1850, wearing a formal gown, Mrs. Taylor attended the public White House reception to celebrate the one-year anniversary of President Taylor's inauguration. Four months later, the President attended a Fourth of July celebration, where it is believed he contracted cholera or typhoid fever. Five days later, he died.

As he neared death, Mrs. Taylor became hysterical and refused to believe his condition was fatal, holding out hope because he had survived so many times in battle and had lived in primitive conditions throughout his military career. After he died, she asked three times to see his face one more time. Mrs. Taylor was too bereft to attend his funeral. She remained upstairs in the White House, sobbing as she heard the funeral drums and dirges.

Mrs. Taylor made no public appearances or remarks as a former first lady, and her private activities, except for her presence at her son's wedding in 1851, are lost to history. The Taylor family's personal correspondence was destroyed when Union troops burned Mrs. Taylor's house during the Civil War.

Mrs. Taylor did not survive her husband for long. She died in 1852 after a long life of sacrifice and hard work.

## Zachary Taylor's Administration 1849-1850

## Margaret "Peggy" Mackall Smith Taylor

**Born:** September 21, 1788, in Calvert County, Maryland

**Education:** Educated at home on the Smith plantation in Calvert County, Maryland

**Marriage:** 1810 to Lt. Zachory Taylor

**Children:** Ann Margaret Mackall Taylor (1811-1875); Sarah Knox Taylor (1813-1835); Octavia Pannel Taylor (1816-1820); Margaret Smith Taylor (1819-1820); Mary Elizabeth "Betty" Taylor (1824-1909); Richard Taylor (1826-1879)

**Died:** August 14, 1852, in East Pascagoula, Mississippi

