

First Ladies of America



Abigail Fillmore grew up in poverty, but she was more than prepared to be First Lady when President Zachary Taylor died and her husband, Vice President Millard Fillmore, took the Oath of Office.

The daughter of a minister and the youngest of seven children, Abigail Powers was 2 years old when her father died, leaving her mother almost destitute. She attended a one-room school in Sempronius, N.Y., and also studied at home with her mother.

At 16, Mrs. Fillmore began teaching part time at the village school; three years later, she was the full-time teacher and also taught classes at New Hope Academy nearby.

In 1819, she met Millard Fillmore when he enrolled as a young adult at New Hope to further his education. Fillmore was an avid student who essentially had educated himself by reading. They corresponded for three years while Fillmore studied law and was admitted to the New York Bar.

They married in 1826, and Mrs. Fillmore continued to teach until motherhood intervened. She was the first first lady to have earned a salary as a married woman, and she encouraged her daughter, Abbie, to pursue a profession.

While her husband practiced law in Buffalo, NY, and pursued his political career, Mrs. Fillmore continued her education, learning to play the piano and studying French and horticulture. She also began collecting books for a family library.

Mrs. Fillmore developed an interest in politics when her husband was elected to the House of Representatives, and they moved to Washington. She attended sessions of Congress, followed the

progress of bills before the House, and enjoyed political debate. When her husband became president, she was his counselor and adviser. Fillmore once said he never took an important step without discussing it with her.

As first lady, Mrs. Fillmore invited to the White House celebrated singer Jenny Lind and writers Washington Irving and Charles Dickens, who were her favorite guests.

She received official visitors on Tuesday, hosted formal dinners on Thursday, welcomed the public at Friday night receptions, and entertained privately on Saturday night. She also attended official public ceremonies with the President. An unofficial duty

Mrs. Fillmore gladly embraced was helping those in need who wrote to her. Among her papers are many personal notes of gratitude.

Mrs. Fillmore is often credited with originating the White House library. She helped establish libraries in Sempronius and Buffalo before becoming first lady and the Fillmores' personal library grew to over 4,000 volumes.

The American public felt more acquainted with Mrs. Fillmore than with previous first ladies. The technology of the day made it possible for people to see photographs of her, and her name appeared in the newspapers. Because she was a public figure, her death from pneumonia only 24 days after leaving the White House was reported extensively. Congress adjourned in mourning, many obituaries were published in praise of the recent first lady, and Mrs. Fillmore was laid to rest in Buffalo, N.Y.

Millard Fillmore Administration 1850-1853

Abigail Powers Fillmore

Born: March 13, 1798, in Saratoga County, N.Y.

Education: One-room school in Sempronius, Cayuga County, N.Y.

Marriage: 1826 to Millard Fillmore

Children: Millard Powers Fillmore, (1828-1889); Mary Abigail Fillmore, (1832-1854)

Died: March 30, 1853, in Washington, D.C.

