

First Ladies of America



Jane Pierce never sought or desired to be first lady. The observation by one attendant at a reception that Mrs. Pierce looked “the very picture of melancholy” was an apt description for her entire tenure in the executive mansion.

Mrs. Pierce was the daughter of a New England Congregationalist minister who, although highly regarded, was considered by some of his parishioners too Puritan. Born in Hampton, N.H., in 1806, she relocated with her mother and siblings to Amherst, Mass., to live among relatives after her father died.

Mrs. Pierce did not receive a formal education, but she was tutored at home and showed a talent for playing the piano, leading one instructor to believe she should pursue a musical career. Instead, the shy, reserved young woman married Franklin Pierce, a graduate of the Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, where her father had once served as president.

From the beginning of their relationship, Mrs. Pierce despised politics and hated the Democratic Party, an unfortunate situation that remained a thorny issue throughout the couple’s marriage. Pierce was a Democrat, but his wife thought that she could reform him. She was unsuccessful, and as her husband climbed the ladder of American politics, Mrs. Pierce resigned herself to being a political wife. But she never embraced the role.

Like many women of the 19th century, Mrs. Pierce lived through the tragic experience of losing a child. She lost all three of her sons in less than 20 years and never fully recovered from the blows. Her first child died as an infant, and her second child died when he was 4. Mrs. Pierce doted on her third son, Benjamin, but he was killed two months before Pierce was inaugurated in a train accident.

In shock and deeply grieving, Mrs. Pierce did not attend her husband’s inauguration and the Inaugural Ball was canceled. After draping the public rooms in black and donning her own mourning attire, Mrs. Pierce retreated to her room in the family quarters, where she could grieve in private and write long letters to Benjamin. No visitors were admitted except for a pair of spiritualist mediums who convinced Mrs. Pierce that they could communicate with her dead son.

With the exception of a few strained attempts to appear at formal dinners early on, Mrs. Pierce secluded herself for the first half of her husband’s administration. In the second half, she became interested in the cause of abolition, occasionally emerging from her self-imposed exile to watch congressional debates and even offer political advice to her husband.

Franklin Pierce Administration 1853-1857

But while Mrs. Pierce had finally found an issue that she was passionate about, she and the president found themselves at odds. Over her clearly expressed opinion and in an attempt to avoid a national civil war, President Pierce signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act giving new territories the authority to determine whether or not they would allow slavery.

Sinking under the weight of their personal and professional trials, the Pierces left Washington in 1857 shortly after the president’s term ended. Mrs. Pierce’s health was failing, and she died in 1863 after a battle with tuberculosis. Her husband followed her to the grave in 1869. They are buried side by side in Concord, N.H. in the Old North Cemetery.

Jane Means Appleton Pierce

Born: March 12, 1806, in Hampton, N.H.

Education: Tutored at home

Marriage: 1834 to Franklin Pierce

Children: Franklin Pierce, Jr. (1836); Frank Robert (1839-43); Benjamin (1841-53)

Died: December 2, 1868, in Andover, Mass.

