

First Ladies of America



Few first ladies have been as misrepresented in history as Eliza Johnson. For over a century, she was dismissed as a sickly woman who lived as a recluse in the White House.

Contemporary research, however, shows that Mrs. Johnson, who suffered from tuberculosis, played an active if limited social role in the White House and steadfastly assisted President Johnson during the difficult days of his impeachment.

Mrs. Johnson was the first of the very few first ladies born into poverty. Her father was a cobbler and an innkeeper in Greeneville, Tenn. Her mother insisted she go to school, and some evidence suggests she continued to attend Rhea Academy after she married.

The love of learning remained with her throughout her life, and she made certain her daughters, just as her sons, were well educated.

Andrew Johnson had also grown up in poverty. He had no formal education, having been apprenticed to a tailor at age 10. The Johnsons met when he came to Greeneville looking for work. Six months later, when Johnson opened a tailor shop, they married. He was 18, and she was 16, the youngest-married of all the first ladies.

In some accounts, Mrs. Johnson reportedly taught her young husband to read, write, and speak well in public; in others, she is credited with building upon his education and refining his rhetorical skills. Whatever her role, Johnson credited his wife with making him a well-educated man.

Throughout his career, she clipped newspaper articles she thought he should read. When her husband was sworn in as vice president in March 1865, Mrs. Johnson, now ill with tuberculosis, did not attend. President Lincoln's assassination the following month filled her with great fear for her husband's life. She arrived at the White House four months after President Johnson took the Oath of Office.

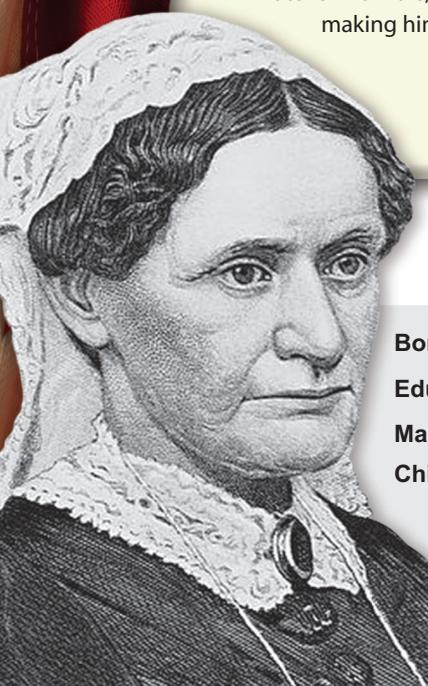
Because of her precarious health, Mrs. Johnson asked her daughters to assist with her duties as first lady. Mrs. Johnson supervised, entertained at formal White House dinners, and received heads of state, but she did not make public appearances.

During her tenure as first lady, Mrs. Johnson ordered that African-American servants in the White House receive financial aid and medical care, and she publicly raised funds in a campaign to build a large orphanage in South Carolina for children left without parents during the Civil War.

Several members of the Johnsons' immediate family, including five grandchildren, lived with them in the White House. Mrs. Johnson's sitting room became the center of family life. She frequently spent time with the President, especially when he was angry or upset by the day's events. She exerted some influence on Johnson's decisions, followed the impeachment proceedings carefully, and felt great relief when he was not convicted.

Mrs. Johnson occupied the White House during the tumultuous time when the country was recovering from years of civil war and bloodshed. She met her obligations graciously, in spite of debilitating illness. To Mrs. Johnson, returning to her home in Greeneville at the conclusion of her tenure as first lady was a blessing.

Andrew Johnson Administration, 1865-1869



Eliza McCordle Johnson

Born: October 4, 1810, in Leesburg, Tennessee

Education: Thea Academy, Greeneville, Tennessee

Marriage: 1827 to Andrew Johnson

Children: Martha (1828-1901); Charles (1830-63); Mary (1832-83); Robert (1834-69); Andrew, Jr. (1852-69)

Died: January 15, 1876, in Greenville, Tennessee