

# First Ladies of America



A child of the South whose ancestors arrived in Virginia in the 1600s, Ellen Lewis Herndon was destined to become a national figure, first as the daughter of a decorated naval hero who went down with his ship and then as a first lady who did not live to see her husband assume the presidency.

Only 42, Mrs. Arthur died of pneumonia in 1880 before her husband became president in 1881 upon the assassination of President James Garfield.

Although she never lived in the White House, Ellen Arthur was a definite presence during her husband's administration. He hung her portrait in his private quarters, and fresh flowers were placed below it each day.

In her memory, he commissioned a stained glass window at St. John's Church on Lafayette Square opposite the White House. Illuminated at night by lights inside the church, the window could be seen from the mansion; the presidential suite was moved so that President Arthur could see the church window from his bedroom.

Despite mounting pressure to name someone to fulfill the social duties of a first lady, President Arthur resisted. After 16 months, he finally asked his sister, Mary "Molly" McElroy, to serve in the position.

The President's status as a widower became a topic of frequent speculation. Questions were raised as to when he might remarry and give the country a first lady, but he remained unmarried for the remainder of his life.

Ellen Herndon and Chester Alan Arthur met in 1857 while she was vacationing with her wealthy, socially

prominent mother in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. He proposed the following year.

A noted singer with a beautiful contralto voice, Mrs. Arthur pursued her musical interests after they married, while her husband managed his mother-in-law's sizable investments and built a career in law and New York state politics.

The Arthurs seemed an unlikely match, a Southern woman born to privilege and the Yankee son of an Irish immigrant. When the Civil War began, Mrs. Arthur was careful not to voice sympathy for the South in public, knowing it would harm her husband's career, but privately she was deeply distressed, especially about family members fighting for the Confederacy.

## Chester A. Arthur Administration, 1881-1885

In the years following the Civil War, Mrs. Arthur supported her husband's political ambitions, and her social connections among the elite families of New York helped to further his career.

Arthur was in Albany on political business when he received word early on a Sunday morning that his wife was gravely ill. He returned home before she died. Six months after Mrs. Arthur's death, her husband became the Republican candidate for Vice President. Of his nomination, he said simply, "Honors to me now are not what they once were."

During his presidency, Chester Arthur's devotion to his wife and her memory remained unshaken. He died less than six years after she did, and both are buried at the Arthur family plot in Albany, N.Y.

## Ellen Lewis Herndon Arthur

**Born:** August 30, 1837, in Culpepper County, Virginia

**Education:** Unknown; may have attended school as a child in Washington D.C.

**Marriage:** 1859 to Chester Alan Arthur

**Children:** William Lewis, (1860-1863); Chester Alan (1864-1937);  
Ellen "Nellie" (1871-1915)

**Died:** January 12, 1880, in New York, New York

