

First Ladies of America



Showing a dignified, even solemn countenance, the portraits of Caroline "Carrie" Harrison belie her spirit and personality. Warm, sentimental and artistic by nature, she was fun loving, easily amused and quick to forgive.

The daughter of parents who were both educators, she taught school in Kentucky for a year before returning home at age 21 to marry Benjamin Harrison, the grandson of President William Henry Harrison.

As her husband's law career advanced and he became increasingly more focused on politics, Mrs. Harrison cared for their children, often alone, and missed his presence in their family's life. Tension developed in the marriage.

Ironically perhaps, it was Harrison's extended absence during the Civil War that brought them back together. When Harrison returned home safely after commanding Union forces in some of the worst fighting of the war, their relationship deepened, and Mrs. Harrison joined him in his political life.

During his presidential campaign of 1888, her warm personality made her a popular figure; she often spoke personally with members of the press covering the campaign.

Becoming First Lady in 1889, Mrs. Harrison was shocked and disheartened by the condition of the White House and set about to change it. Finding it filthy and filled with clutter, she cleaned all the rooms, refinished the floors, and decorated with new wallpaper.

Making additional improvements, she modernized the kitchen, installed electric lights, and added a bathroom. Under her care, the flowers in the White House conservatories flourished.

Continuing to put her house in order, she also cataloged the White House china, designed a cabinet to hold the historical collection, and added to it by designing her own china for the White House.

Mrs. Harrison also changed the atmosphere inside the mansion. She put up the first White House Christmas tree, and for the first time since 1845, a first lady's guests were invited to dance.

Mrs. Harrison's interests were not all domestic. The first President General of the Daughters of the American Revolution, she kept the organization intact during its founding, and she worked to advance the rights of American women.

When asked to support the construction of a new wing at Johns Hopkins Hospital, she agreed — but not until hospital officials agreed to admit women to their medical school.

She encouraged consumers to buy American goods, planted a tree where Stanford University would one day stand, christened the U.S.S. Philadelphia, and gave the first speech by a first lady ever to be recorded.

Mrs. Harrison did not live to complete her tenure as first lady. Ill with tuberculosis, she spent the summer of 1892 in the Adirondack Mountains to regain her health, but her condition worsened. Realizing she would not improve, she went home to be with her husband and family and died in the White House.

As the wife of a one-term president who was often ignored in American history, Caroline Harrison is often overlooked, as well. Still, she was a remarkably talented and innovative woman who brought warmth, grace, vision and character to her role as America's 23rd first lady.

**Benjamin
Harrison
Administration,
1889-1893**

Caroline Lavinia Scott Harrison

Born: October 1, 1832 in Oxford, Ohio

Education: Oxford Female Institute, Oxford, Ohio

Marriage: 1853 to Benjamin Harrison

Children: Russell Benjamin Harrison, (1854-1936); Mary Scott Harrison (1858-1930)

Died: October 25, 1892, in the White House

