

First Ladies of America



The loving relationship between President William McKinley and his wife, Ida Saxton McKinley, is in some ways comparable to a Shakespearean tragedy. Pierced in the abdomen by an assassin's bullet, President McKinley's dying thoughts were only of his wife when he muttered: "My wife – be careful how you tell her! Oh, be careful!" Upon his death, Mrs. McKinley could only whisper: "He is gone, and life to me is dark now."

By all accounts Ida Saxton had once been a vigorous and spirited young woman, but deteriorating health in the early years of her marriage and personal tragedy robbed her of the happy life she had once looked forward to.

Born in Canton, Ohio, on June 8, 1847, Mrs. McKinley grew up in wealth and privilege. One of her grandfathers had founded the town's major newspaper and her father was a banker.

After college and an eight-month tour of Europe with her sister, she returned home and worked in her father's bank, a move he arranged due to his belief that women should understand and control their own personal finances.

By the time she met and married William McKinley on Jan. 25, 1871, Mrs. McKinley was a confident, refined and independent 23-year-old. In time, however, everything changed.

Over the course of four years, Mrs. McKinley lost her mother and two infant daughters in quick succession. She grew deeply depressed, and her health took a turn for the worse when she began experiencing seizures, a condition most historians believe to have been epilepsy. By the time the McKinleys entered the White House in 1897, Mrs. McKinley's activities were so severely restricted that she depended on her husband for nearly everything.

As president, McKinley worked hard to meet both the needs of the nation and his wife, who never officially relinquished her duties despite her precarious health. She insisted on greeting White House visitors and she often sat in on meetings and private political discussions in order to be near her husband.

During state dinners, in a departure from protocol, she sat next to him so that he could attend her if a seizure struck. When this happened, the president covered his wife's face with a handkerchief, and when it was over, the couple resumed conversation as if nothing had happened.

While some in Washington political circles criticized President McKinley for the constant attention he gave his wife, others admired his patient devotion.

William McKinley Administration, 1897-1901

Surprisingly, Mrs. McKinley demonstrated the most strength and stamina after her husband was shot in Buffalo, N.Y., at the Pan-American Exposition. She had not been with him as he stood in the receiving line greeting admirers, and she was at his bedside after the shooting and composed herself in order to accompany his body to Canton for burial. She also managed to oversee the construction of his mausoleum and planned for the dedication of his monument.

Still, Mrs. McKinley's health never significantly improved. She died less than six years after her husband, and is buried next to him in Canton.

Ida Saxton McKinley

Born: June 8, 1847 in Canton, Ohio

Education: Miss Sanford's School, Cleveland, Ohio; Brooke Academy, Media, Pennsylvania

Marriage: 1871 to William McKinley, Jr.

Children: Katherine (1871-1875); Ida (1873)

Died: May 26, 1907 in Canton, Ohio

