

First Ladies of America



It probably never occurred to many first ladies that they might one day live in the White House, but Nellie Taft was not among them. She experienced one of the most exciting moments of her life when she was invited to stay at the White House as a guest of the first family. After this experience, Mrs. Taft vowed that she would one day return to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue as first lady. When she did, she left her mark as a socially progressive, independent and influential president's wife.

Born into a privileged family in Cincinnati, Ohio, Mrs. Taft was one of 11 children. Her father's work in law and politics provided a comfortable life for the family, and most of the Herron children graduated from college. Mrs. Taft loved art and music, and she loved to write and to teach. After marrying William Howard Taft in 1886, she taught kindergarten. Establishing free kindergartens throughout America was a cause she would later champion as first lady.

In the view of many historians, Mrs. Taft was a more talented politician than her husband. Her understanding of the social and political forces of the day as well as her skill in political strategy and public relations played an indispensable role in his being nominated and elected president.

During her early years as first lady, Mrs. Taft retained a high public profile. She was the first wife of a president to ride in an inaugural parade after the swearing-in ceremony, insisting on accompanying Taft when she learned President Roosevelt intended to break with tradition by not riding with his successor back to the White House.

Once in the executive mansion, Mrs. Taft continued to make headlines. A foe of racial discrimination, she replaced the mansion's ushers, all of whom were white, and chose African Americans to fill the positions. Since being a White House usher was a prestigious job from which African Americans had been barred, her action made a strong statement about racial equality and fairness in the workplace.

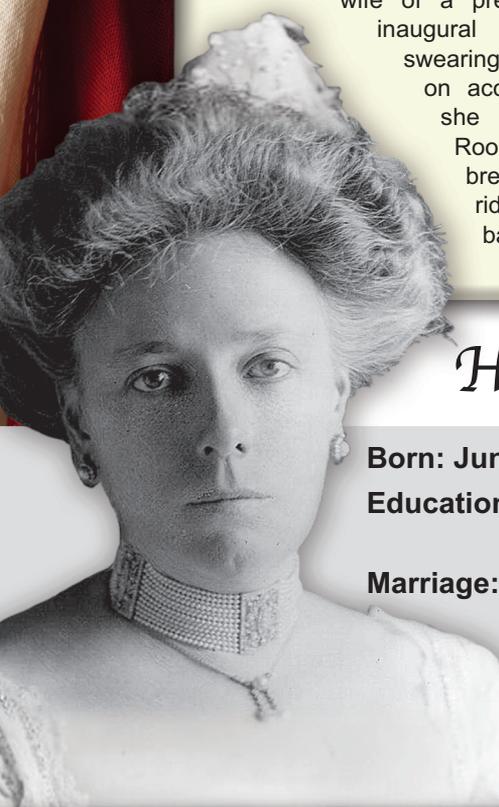
Continuing to challenge traditions she found unfair or outmoded, she opened the doors of the executive mansion to groups that previously had been excluded from social events. She also made automobiles the

White House mode of transportation, and she created a stir when she served alcohol at social events. The Women's Christian Temperance Union lobbied against alcohol in the White House, but Mrs. Taft refused to give up her champagne punch bowl.

In 1909, Mrs. Taft suffered a stroke that forced her to relearn how to speak. The Tafts' daughter, Helen, moved into the White House in 1910 and acted as her mother's social aide until the end of the Taft presidency.

Independent, politically savvy and socially progressive, Mrs. Taft sometimes created controversy in traditional, early 20th century America, but her tenure as first lady reflects an open heart and concern for others that has not been forgotten by history. She is especially remembered each spring when the thousands of Japanese cherry trees she helped establish along Washington's Tidal Basin are in bloom.

William H. Taft Administration, 1909-1913



Helen Louise "Nellie" Herron Taft

Born: June 2, 1861, in Cincinnati, Ohio

Education: Miss Nourse School, Cincinnati; Miami of Ohio University; Cincinnati College of Music

Marriage: 1886 to William Howard Taft

Children: Robert Taft (1889-1953); Helen Taft (1891-1987); Charles Taft (1897-1983)

Died: May 22, 1943, in Washington, D.C.