

First Ladies of America



When Martha Jefferson died, Thomas Jefferson recorded his great loss in his account book: "My dear wife died this day at 11:45 a.m." Mrs. Jefferson was 33 years old. Overwhelmed by grief, Jefferson remained secluded in his room at Monticello for three weeks, often pacing the floor until he was exhausted. For many days that followed, he shunned company and spent hours alone riding horseback through the Virginia countryside. The Jeffersons were devoted to each other during their 10-year marriage, and he remained a widower the rest of his life.

When Jefferson courted his future wife, she was Martha Wayles Skelton, a young widow with a 3-year-old boy, living at her father's Virginia plantation where she had grown up. Her son died a few months before she and Jefferson married. With auburn hair and hazel eyes, she was described as beautiful, as well as being accomplished and well educated for her times. She loved to read, sing and play the spinet and harpsichord; she rode well, danced gracefully, and held her own in spirited conversation. After they married, Jefferson took her home to Monticello, where they lived in a one-room cottage until the main house was built. Historical records show that as mistress of Monticello, Mrs. Jefferson managed her household with care and was very capable in her domestic role.

During the Jeffersons' marriage, the Revolutionary War began and ended, and Jefferson's political activities sometimes separated them. In 1776, Mrs. Jefferson was at Monticello when her husband was a Virginia delegate to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia, at which time he wrote the Declaration of Independence.

While Virginia's First Lady, Mrs. Jefferson publicly supported the efforts of a women's society in raising funds for General Washington's Continental Army, and she joined prominent women in Virginia in donating necessary supplies for the troops.

In 1781, Mrs. Jefferson was at Monticello with her children when British forces invaded Virginia. They fled to Bedford County, which was more isolated from the fighting. The Jeffersons' 16-month-old daughter, Lucy Elizabeth, died a few weeks later. Jefferson resigned as governor, came home to Monticello, and promised Mrs.

Jefferson he would not leave her again. Keeping his word, he subsequently refused to go to Europe on a diplomatic mission. Lord Cornwallis surrendered his army at Yorktown, Va., on Oct. 19, 1781, ending the Revolutionary War.

The end of the war should have been the beginning of a new life for the Jeffersons, but Mrs. Jefferson's health failed. In May of 1782, she gave birth to her seventh child and never fully recovered, dying four months later.

By the time Jefferson entered the White House as president in 1801, Martha Jefferson had been gone nearly 20 years. Protocol, however, established that wives of White House guests could not attend official functions unless a woman received them, so the duties of White House hostess primarily fell to Dolley Madison, wife of Secretary of State James Madison. Additionally, Jefferson also called on his daughters, Martha ("Patsy") and Maria ("Polly") to fill in when they could.

Thomas Jefferson's Administration 1801-1809

Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson

Born: October 19, 1748, in Charles City County, Virginia

Education: Unknown

Marriage: 1766 to Bathurst Skelton; 1772 to Thomas Jefferson

Children: John Skelton (1767-1771); Martha "Patsy" (1772-1836);

Jane Randolph (1774-1775); unnamed son (1777); Maria "Polly" (1778-1804);

Lucy Elizabeth (1780-1781); Lucy Elizabeth (1782-1785)

Died: September 6, 1782, at Monticello Plantation, Virginia

Portrait miniature of a young Martha "Patsy" Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson's eldest daughter, who sometimes served as White House hostess during her father's presidency.

