

First Ladies of America



Being born into a life of privilege and bearing an illustrious family name did not shield Eleanor Roosevelt from a difficult childhood.

Orphaned at age 9, Mrs. Roosevelt grew up in the home of her maternal grandmother. Her childhood was marked by a lack of affection, and she became shy and self-conscious about her appearance and lack of social graces.

At 14, she was sent to boarding school for three years in London. At her grandmother's insistence, she returned to the United States and reluctantly made her debut in New York society, which proved to be stressful and humiliating when suitors failed to appear. Alone and uncommitted socially, she committed herself instead to civic duty.

Volunteering first at a settlement house on New York City's lower East Side and then as an investigator for the Consumer's League, Mrs. Roosevelt spent her days with the poor, mostly immigrants, who lived in tenements and toiled long hours for little pay in sweatshops. She wrote open letters and press releases to raise public awareness.

Through her work, she saw life, often shocking, as it existed beyond her privileged social class. As a result, Mrs. Roosevelt developed the dedication to social justice and improvement that would one day define her as First Lady of the United States.

When she was 17, Mrs. Roosevelt encountered Franklin D. Roosevelt on a train trip while he was a student at Harvard. Fifth cousins, they were acquainted but had played no significant role in each other's lives. The couple endured 40 years of intense

public controversy, private anguish, personal happiness and national crisis.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's election to the New York State Senate in 1910 marked the beginning of his career in politics and the beginning of Mrs. Roosevelt's political education. As he later steered the country through the Great Depression and World War II as president, Mrs. Roosevelt assumed the responsibilities expected of a first lady, but she became politically active in her own right, especially after the ratification of the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote.

Mrs. Roosevelt worked independently as a speaker, writer, lobbyist and guest lecturer. She was a radio show commentator and served on numerous boards and national committees to engage women, women's organizations and the general public in social reform.

Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration, 1933-1945

She founded a school to educate girls, and built a furniture factory to create jobs for the unemployed. Traveling the country to promote her husband's New Deal policies and rebuild the public confidence lost during hard times, Mrs. Roosevelt averaged 40,000 miles a year.

When her husband's mobility was severely limited after he contracted polio in 1921, Mrs. Roosevelt became known as the eyes and ears that helped him accomplish work he could not do alone.

Following her husband's death in 1945, Mrs. Roosevelt left her role as first lady but stayed politically active, serving in the United Nations as chairman of the Commission on Human Rights upon appointment by President Harry S. Truman. When Mrs. Roosevelt died in 1962, she was easily the most active, visible and influential first lady America had ever known.



Anna Eleanor Roosevelt

Born: Oct. 11, 1884, in New York City

Education: Allenswood Girls Academy, London, England

Marriage: 1905 to Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Children: Anna Eleanor Roosevelt (1906-1975); James Roosevelt (1907-1991);

Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. (1909); Elliot Roosevelt (1910-1990);

Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. (1914-1988); John Roosevelt (1916-1981).

Died: Nov. 7, 1962, in New York City