

First Ladies of America



Pat Nixon became first lady during a time when the identity and role of women in society was undergoing dramatic change. While seeing herself as just an average American woman, she couldn't ignore the changes taking place around the country.

To that end, she became the first incumbent first lady to endorse the Equal Rights Amendment, the first to disclose publicly her pro-choice view on abortion while lobbying her husband, President Richard M. Nixon, to name a woman to the U.S. Supreme Court, and the first to appear publicly in slacks, a look at the time that was derided as being masculine.

Still, Mrs. Nixon valued the traditionally feminine role of homemaker, wife and mother, and she was frequently regarded as the epitome of tradition when compared to the emerging popularity of the "liberated woman."

Throughout the 1950s, she was named Outstanding Homemaker of the Year, Mother of the Year and Nation's Ideal Housewife. On one occasion, she admitted that she had pressed all of her husband's suits one evening simply because she'd felt like doing so.

Mrs. Nixon lost both of her parents while in her early teens. She worked her way through college and accepted a high school teaching position. On June 21, 1940, she married Richard Nixon, a fellow thespian she had met while both performed in a production staged by a local theater group.

When her husband was elected to the vice-presidency in the Eisenhower administration, Mrs. Nixon undertook many missions of goodwill with him and gained favorable media coverage. Later, she assisted her husband in his failed 1960 presidential bid and then his successful presidential campaign of 1968.

As first lady, Mrs. Nixon assumed a low profile inside the executive mansion, although she delivered a very personal touch. She was one of the only first ladies to personally greet tourists visiting the White House, once famously hugging a visibly nervous elderly couple from Missouri.

Additionally, her renovations made 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue more accessible to disadvantaged Americans, including those who were blind, disabled or deaf.

Until Hillary Clinton, Mrs. Nixon was the most world-traveled first lady, receiving the unusual diplomatic status of "Personal Representative of the President." In addition to her historical trips to both China and the Soviet Union with her husband, Mrs. Nixon traveled alone to Africa as a goodwill ambassador, meeting with government officials in Liberia, Ghana and the Ivory Coast. In June 1970, Mrs. Nixon personally flew to Peru to deliver desperately needed food, clothing and medical supplies following a devastating earthquake.

Mrs. Nixon had many admirable qualities and worked beyond the first lady's role as White House hostess with much dedication and devotion. But her hard work was eventually overshadowed by the turmoil of the Vietnam War and, a few years later, the Watergate crisis that forced her husband's resignation from the presidency.

After leaving the White House, Mrs. Nixon made only three public appearances as a former first lady. She died in 1993 and is buried beside her husband at the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace in Yorba Linda, Calif.

**Richard
Nixon
Administration,
1969-1974**

Thelma Catherine "Pat" Ryan Nixon

Born: March 16, 1912, in Ely, Nevada

Education: Excelsior High School, Norwalk, California; Woodbury College, Orange County, California; Fuller Junior College, Fullerton, California; Columbia University, New York; University of Southern California

Marriage: 1940 to Richard Milhous Nixon

Children: Tricia Nixon Cox, born in 1946, and Julie Nixon Eisenhower, born in 1948

Died: June 22, 1993

Brought to you by this newspaper, the Missouri Press Association and The Joplin Globe. Written and researched by Katy Schrader. Design by Jeremy Patton. Photo courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

