

# First Ladies of America



In her two terms as first lady, Elizabeth Monroe was not a popular figure and she never won the affections of the public. Reclusive and aloof, Mrs. Monroe is believed by today's historians to have suffered from epilepsy – a condition that would have limited her physical capabilities as first lady – but the public also sensed that there was another problem with her: she was a snob.

The daughter of a wealthy British officer and merchant, Elizabeth Kortright was born and raised in New York City. Her mother died when she was 9, and she was raised by her paternal grandmother. With raven black hair and violet eyes, the young Elizabeth was considered one of the most beautiful and accomplished debutante's of New York society; so beautiful that when she began a romance with U.S. Congressman James Monroe, her friends said she could have done better than the "not particularly attractive Virginia congressman."

## James Monroe's Administration 1817-1825

Elizabeth Kortright became Mrs. Monroe in February of 1786, beginning a 44-year marriage during which she followed her husband while he built a stellar career. Serving as a lawyer, national politician, diplomat and ultimately president of the United States, James Monroe's two separate appointments as minister to France had a great influence on Mrs. Monroe becoming a Francophile, a trait she was later criticized for in America.

Despite her enjoyment of her Paris years, Mrs. Monroe discovered as America's first lady that her European sophistication was neither appreciated nor admired.

Mrs. Monroe first raised eyebrows by disappearing after President Monroe's inauguration, when guests expected to see her at the official reception following the ceremony. She also announced that she would not continue Mrs. Madison's tradition of making or receiving social calls. This offended foreign dignitaries and congressmen's wives, who looked forward to the visits and considered Mrs. Monroe's lack of interest an insult.

At first, the public speculated that lack of space might be the issue. The White House was still undergoing renovations from the 1814 fire, and the Monroes held formal presidential functions at their own home. However, observers began to suspect it was an attitude issue when Mrs. Monroe withdrew her support from a local orphans' asylum, and refused to invite anyone in the political community to her daughter's wedding, ordering gifts be returned with a no-thank-you note.

While Mrs. Monroe's health may have had much to do with her reclusiveness – she once fell into a burning fireplace after a seizure – historians also believe she was fiercely independent and out of touch with the public's expectations. When she unveiled the newly renovated White House on New Year's Day 1818, the French décor was criticized as being too excessive and aristocratic for American tastes.

Mrs. Monroe was able to overcome some of the public's objections to her by President Monroe's second term, but she was never fully embraced by the public, nor did she embrace her own role as first lady. She died in 1830 at the Monroes' Oak Hill estate in Virginia.

## Elizabeth Kortright Monroe

**Born:** June 30, 1768, in New York, New York

**Education:** Unknown

**Marriage:** 1786 to James Monroe

**Children:** Eliza (1786-1840); James Spence (1799-1801);  
Maria Hester (1803-1850)

**Died:** Sept. 23, 1830, in Loudon County, Virginia

