

# First Ladies of America



After Andrew Jackson won the presidency in December 1828, his wife Rachel selected a white gown and white slippers to wear to his inauguration. On Christmas Eve day, she was instead buried in them at the Hermitage, the Jacksons' home in Nashville, Tenn. Seeming to have recovered from a heart attack that fall, Mrs. Jackson died suddenly on Dec. 22.

From the end of her life until the end of his own, a bitter Andrew Jackson blamed his political opponents for his wife's death. Trying to deny Jackson the White House, they had attacked Rachel Jackson relentlessly, accusing her of adultery and savaging her character. A woman from a respected family who had grown deeply religious, Mrs. Jackson had suffered a great deal in the months before her death. After her funeral, attended by 10,000 people from throughout the country—rich and poor, white and black—Andrew Jackson left for Washington alone.

Mrs. Jackson was a woman of the frontier, trekking from Virginia to Tennessee with her family in a party of 600 settlers when she was 12 years old. The migration was led by her father, John Donelson. A soldier in the Revolutionary War and a member of the Virginia Assembly, Donelson co-founded Nashville, and for generations Donelsons led the city in business and civic affairs and in politics.

At 17, Rachel Donelson married Lewis Robards, a landowner and speculator from Kentucky whom she later discovered to be abusive. They separated after several years, and believing Robards had secured a divorce, Rachel married

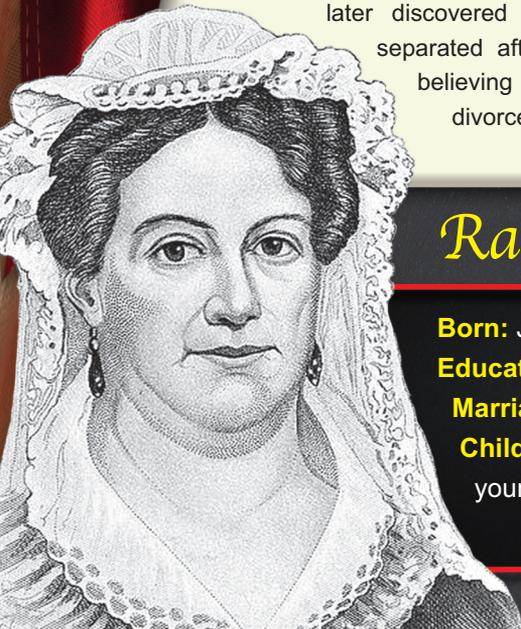
Andrew Jackson, a new attorney beginning his practice. However, after later learning that Robards had not divorced her until two years after her marriage to Jackson, the couple realized that she was guilty of adultery under the law. They immediately remarried to fix the legalities of their situation, but it was an issue that plagued them for the remainder of their days.

Throughout their marriage, Mrs. Jackson supported her husband's military and political careers, but she spent most of her time at the Hermitage. She accompanied him on some political trips, and she was in Washington with him in 1824 when he lost the presidential election by the vote of the House of Representatives.

## Andrew Jackson's Administration 1829-1837

When her husband won the election in 1828, Mrs. Jackson asked her niece, Emily Donelson, to live with them in the White House and assist with the first lady's social responsibilities. After Mrs. Jackson's death, Mrs. Donelson served President Jackson at his request by assuming the role of White House hostess. Only 21 when she moved into the White House, Mrs. Donelson was well educated and familiar with Washington society.

As President Jackson's acting first lady, Mrs. Donelson managed the domestic staff, supervised Jackson's slaves brought to the White House, made out menus and guest lists, and entertained guests. She also looked after the president's health. Following Donelson's death a few years later from tuberculosis, the president's daughter-in-law, Sarah Yorke Jackson, continued to act as his first lady for the rest of his term.



## Rachel Donelson Robards Jackson

**Born:** June 15, 1767, in Halifax County, Virginia

**Education:** No formal education

**Marriage:** 1785 to Lewis Robards; 1791 to Andrew Jackson

**Children:** Two adopted sons: Andrew Jackson Donelson, son of her younger brother, adopted 1809; Lyncoya, a Creek Indian boy, adopted 1813

**Died:** December 22, 1828, in Nashville, Tennessee