

# First Ladies of America



Although she never made it to the White House as first lady, Anna Harrison was the type of woman who most likely would have influenced her husband's presidency in a significant way. Well-educated and intelligent, her years on the frontier as an army wife and mother proved that she had the stamina and fortitude to serve in such a role. However, her chance to be first lady was gone before it began.

Mrs. Harrison was born in 1775, a year when the American colonies were being torn apart by war and hardship. After the death of her mother, legend has it that her father, a Continental Army officer, disguised himself as a British redcoat in order to carry his 4-year-old daughter across enemy lines into New York to stay with grandparents.

As a teen, Mrs. Harrison moved with her father and stepmother to the Ohio frontier, settling on a 500,000-acre estate near Cincinnati. While visiting relatives in Kentucky, she met her future husband, a dashing military lieutenant William Henry Harrison. She was instantly smitten. Her father, however, disapproved of the match, primarily because he wasn't sure Harrison could properly support his daughter, but also because he wasn't certain the difficult life of an army wife was in her best interest. Despite his disapproval, the couple secretly married while her father was away on business.

True to her father's prediction, Mrs. Harrison's life was not easy after her marriage. While her husband pursued his army career — and later a national political career — she followed him from

one post to the next while raising their family. The lack of schooling on the frontier also meant that Mrs. Harrison had the additional responsibility of educating their 10 children. Reading magazines and newspapers eased her isolation, and during visits from Harrison's colleagues, she thrived on engaging in political discourse.

In 1840, when the Whigs approached Harrison to run for president, his wife pleaded with him to decline. He was almost 70 years old and not in the best health, and she had hoped that he would live his last years in quiet retirement. After his victory, however, she found herself contemplating life as first lady.

## William Henry Harrison's Administration 1841

In an unusual series of events, the Harrisons' tenure in the White House barely got off the ground. Ill and unable to travel, Mrs. Harrison did not attend her husband's inauguration. Mrs. Harrison was preparing to leave Ohio for the capital a few weeks later when she received the news that her husband had died from complications due to pneumonia. It was the shortest term in U.S. presidential history, and out of concern for Mrs. Harrison, President John Tyler signed into law the first widow's pension, a grant of \$25,000.

Mrs. Harrison survived her husband by two decades and outlived all of her children but one. She did not, however, live to see her grandson, Benjamin Harrison, win the presidency. She was buried beside her husband at the site of their home in North Bend, Ohio.

## Anna Tuthill Symmes Harrison

**Born:** July 25, 1775, in Sussex County, New Jersey

**Education:** Clinton Academy, East Hampton, New York; Isabella Marshal Graham Boarding School, New York City

**Marriage:** 1795 to William Henry Harrison

**Children:** Elizabeth Bassett (1796-1846); John Cleves (1798-1830); Lucy Singleton (1800-1826); William Henry II (1802-1838); John Scott (1804-1878); Benjamin (1806-1840); Mary (1809-1842); Carter Bassett (1811-1839); Anna Tuthill (1813-1845); James Frindlay (1814-1817)

**Death:** February 25, 1864, at North Bend, Ohio

