

First Ladies of America



Historians say that no first lady enjoyed her time in the White House more than Julia Grant. Climbing into the carriage when it was time to leave, she wept. Her days in the White House with her husband and children, following the trauma of the Civil War, had been the happiest of her life.

Julia Dent grew up on her father's plantation with all the comforts of wealth. At 18, she fell in love with Ulysses S. Grant, a young army lieutenant of no financial means. Grant's military postings delayed their wedding, but when he returned from the Mexican War, they married.

Mrs. Grant accompanied her husband whenever his military assignments changed, but after the couple endured a two-year separation, he came home and resigned his commission.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Grant returned to the military, first taking command of a regiment of rowdy volunteers. Four years later, he commanded President Abraham Lincoln's Army of the Potomac and served as General-in-Chief of all Union forces. In four more years, Grant was elected president, and Julia Grant was preparing to assume her duties as first lady.

Moving into the White House in 1869, Mrs. Grant's first priority was to make it a comfortable home for her family. The mansion was cleaned thoroughly, new furniture ordered, and smoking forbidden, except for the President's cigars. She then addressed her social duties as first lady and made the White House the center of Washington society.

Dinners became splendid affairs noted for their beauty and Mrs. Grant's gracious hospitality. In addition to entertaining formally, Mrs. Grant held Tuesday afternoon receptions that were open to "any and all" in Washington. When asked if "colored people" were to be admitted during her receptions, the first lady made her position clear to the White House staff: "Admit all."

The most glamorous social event orchestrated by the first lady was the 1874 wedding of the Grants' daughter, Nellie. The wedding was covered extensively in the newspapers, with one paper featuring a 12-page wedding insert that sold out as fast as copies could be printed. By this time, the Grants were used to the intense media coverage of their family; in an era when more people were literate and more newspapers available, the public's appetite for information about first families would only grow.

While Julia Grant thrived in her role as the White House hostess, she played much less of a political role in her husband's administration. President Grant did not discuss politics with her, and he did not consult her when he decided not to seek a third term, knowing his decision would upset his wife.

After leaving the White House, Mrs. Grant wrote her memoirs, a first for a former first lady. The combination of her vivacious personality and a new journalistic phase in which reporters focused more on Washington marked a turning point for future first ladies; from then on, they were increasingly recognized and criticized, and the role would evolve until they eventually emerged as national leaders.

**Ulysses S.
Grant
Administration,
1869-1877**

Julia Boggs Dent Grant

Born: January 26, 1826, at St. Louis County, Missouri

Education: Miss Mauro's Boarding School, St. Louis

Marriage: 1848 to Ulysses S. Grant

Children: Frederick Dent Grant (1850-1929); Ellen "Nellie" Wrenshall Grant (1855-1922); Jesse Root Grant, (1858-1934)

Died: December 14, 1902, in Washington, D.C.

