

First Ladies of America



Growing up as the daughter of the wealthiest man in a small town, Florence Kling Harding was born in Marion, Ohio, in 1860. Unlike many refined women of wealth, she developed an independence that was rather rare for young ladies of her era.

When she was 19, Mrs. Harding eloped with 21-year-old Henry DeWolfe, an alcoholic who soon abandoned her and their son. Granted a divorce in 1886, Mrs. Harding refused to return home to live with her wealthy parents. Instead, she rented a one-bedroom apartment and raised her son with money she earned from teaching private piano lessons.

Florence Kling was a 30-year-old divorcee when she met and fell in love with Warren Harding, a Marion-based newspaper owner five years her junior. The couple married in 1891, but it was an unhappy marriage from the start. Harding often neglected his wife and sought refuge from her forceful personality in the camaraderie of his friends and other women.

Mrs. Harding was a determined and intelligent woman who was not content to serve in the capacity of accessory to her husband. She took over the management of his newspaper, the Marion Star, and in doing so, helped the newspaper thrive while simultaneously helping her husband evolve into an influential public figure.

Campaigning tirelessly for his election to the presidency, her deep involvement in the political process was unprecedented up until that time for a woman. Shrewd and politically astute, Mrs. Harding urged her husband to pay special attention to the female voters, who, for the first time were voting in a presidential election where their right to vote was backed by the law.

When Mrs. Harding entered the White House at the age of 60, it was the fulfillment of a long-sought dream, and she transitioned into her new role with abundant energy and willpower. She opened both the mansion and White House grounds to the public, both of which had been closed during former President Woodrow Wilson's illness. She remained visible and vocal, giving public speeches, conducting press interviews and actively supporting feminist causes.

She was also devoted to the wounded soldiers of World War I and made a regular practice of visiting them at a local hospital. During her visits, she read to them, brought food and gifts, wrote letters for the disabled veterans, and when she felt it necessary, intervened with the government on their behalf.

Warren G. Harding Administration, 1921-1923

Despite her legitimate and worthy contributions as first lady, Mrs. Harding never achieved national popularity in the manner of some first ladies. She was criticized for being overly ambitious and coarse, and her husband's failure as a president did nothing to improve her image.

Following President Harding's unexpected death in San Francisco in 1923, Mrs. Harding demonstrated remarkable strength as she accompanied his body on the long train back to the nation's capital, enduring both the state funeral and his eventual burial in Marion. She died a little over a year after her husband and is buried near him at The Harding Memorial in Marion, Ohio.

Florence Kling DeWolfe Harding

Born: Aug. 15, 1860, in Marion, Ohio

Education: The Union School, Marion, Ohio; Cincinnati Conservatory of Music

Marriage: 1880 to Henry DeWolfe, 1891 to Warren G. Harding

Children: Marshall Eugene DeWolfe, (1880-1915)

Died: Nov. 21, 1924, in Marion, Ohio

