

THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Timelines – First Ladies

1790s

MARTHA WASHINGTON .

"I think I am more like a state prisoner than anything else, there is certain bounds set for me which I must not depart from..." So did Martha Washington confide that she did not entirely enjoy her role as first of first ladies. She said that though "many younger and gayer women would be extremely pleased," she would "much rather be at home."

But when George Washington assumed the new duties of president of the United States on April 30, 1789, his wife brought to their position a tact and discretion developed over 58 years of life in Tidewater Virginia society. Martha Dandridge was born June 2, 1731, on a plantation near Williamsburg. Typical for a girl in an 18th-century family, her education was negligible except in domestic and social skills, but she learned the arts of a well-ordered household. At age 18, she married the wealthy Daniel Parke Custis. Two babies died, and two others were barely past infancy when Daniel Custis died in 1757.

From the day Martha married George Washington in 1759, her great concern was the comfort and happiness of her new husband and her surviving children. She and George had no children of their own. Her love of private life equaled her husband's, but when his career led him to the battlegrounds of the Revolutionary War and finally to the presidency, she followed him bravely.

At the President's House in the temporary capitals of first New York then Philadelphia, Martha's warm hospitality made her guests feel at ease. She took little satisfaction in "formal compliments and empty ceremonies," and declared that "I am fond only of what comes from the heart." Abigail Adams, who sat at her right during parties and receptions, praised her as "one of those unassuming characters which create Love & Esteem."

In 1797 the Washingtons said farewell to public life and returned to their beloved Mount Vernon to live surrounded by kinfolk, friends, and a constant stream of guests eager to pay their respects to the celebrated couple. Martha's only daughter Patsy had died at 17, her only son Jack at 26, but Jack's children figured in the household. After George Washington died in 1799, Martha assured a final privacy by burning their letters; she died of a "severe fever" on May 22, 1802.

Both lie buried at Mount Vernon, where Washington himself had planned an unpretentious tomb for them.

ABIGAIL ADAMS .

Inheriting New England's strongest traditions, Abigail Smith was born on November 11, 1744 at Weymouth, Massachusetts. On her mother's side she was descended from the Quincys, a family of great prestige in the colony.

Like other women of the time, Abigail lacked formal education, but curiosity spurred her keen intelligence, and she read avidly the books at hand. Reading created a bond between her and the young John Adams and they were married in 1764. It was a marriage of the mind and of the heart, enduring for more than half a century.

In ten years she bore three sons and two daughters. Abigail looked after family and home when John went traveling to serve the country they loved. Her letters - pungent, witty, and vivid, spelled just as she spoke - detail her life in times of revolution. They tell the story of a woman who struggled with wartime shortages and inflation, ran the farm with a minimum of help and taught four children when formal education was interrupted. They tell of her loneliness without her "dearest Friend."

In 1784, she joined him at his diplomatic post in Paris. After 1785, she filled the role of wife of the first United States minister to Great Britain. They returned to Massachusetts in 1788, to the handsome home they had just acquired at Braintree, later called Quincy.

As wife of the first vice president, Abigail became a good friend to Martha Washington and a valued help in official entertaining, drawing on her experience of courts and society abroad. After 1791, however, poor health forced her to spend as much time as possible in Quincy. Illness found her resolute. She once declared, she would "not forget the blessings which sweeten life."

When John Adams was elected President, she continued a formal pattern of entertaining--even in the primitive conditions she found at the new capital in November 1800. The city was wilderness, the President's House far from complete, but for her three months in Washington she duly held official dinners and receptions.

The Adamses retired to Quincy in 1801, and for 17 Years enjoyed the companionship that public life had long denied them. Abigail Adams died in 1818, and is buried beside her husband in United First Parish Church. She leaves her country a most remarkable record as patriot and first lady, wife of one president and mother of another.