

The First, First Lady



Although Martha Washington often described these public responsibilities as burdensome and preferred the quieter life she had known before the presidency, she nevertheless fulfilled the role with dedication. Through her leadership and example, she established many of the traditions that would shape the position of First Lady for generations to come.

During George Washington's presidency from 1789 to 1797, Martha Washington helped define what it meant to be the nation's First Lady—though the title itself did not yet officially exist. Blending republican simplicity with elements of European-style hospitality, she became the leading hostess of the young republic in the capitals of New York and later Philadelphia.

Martha Washington played an important role in shaping the social life of the new federal government. She hosted weekly Friday evening "drawing room" receptions, often called levees, where both men and women could meet with government officials and visiting dignitaries. These gatherings, along with the formal dinners she organized, provided opportunities for political leaders and diplomats to interact in a more relaxed social setting, helping to build relationships in the early years of the nation.

Beyond her duties as hostess, Martha Washington offered steady support to the President. She provided a welcoming and stable presence in the presidential household and helped manage the many social obligations that came with the office. Visitors often met her during receptions, where she served as an approachable bridge between the public and the President.

Martha Washington also helped set lasting precedents for the presidency. By balancing modest republican ideals with dignified entertaining, she contributed to shaping the image of the new government at home and abroad. At the same time, she oversaw the daily management of the presidential household, ensuring the smooth operation of the Executive Mansion in the temporary capitals as well as their home at Mount Vernon.