

# Martha Washington: The First Lady

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Martha Dandridge's first husband died after seven years of marriage and four children. A year and a half later at age 27, the pretty, personable and very rich widow married her second husband, George Washington -- on January 6, 1759. Soon thereafter, Colonel Washington, then 26, wrote that he now had "an agreeable [sic] Consort for Life and hope to find more happiness in retirement than I ever experienced a wide and bustling World."

Martha, probably the richest widow in Virginia, brought to the marriage her first husband's estate -- including 300 slaves and 17,500 acres. She became as much of a patriot as her husband, whom she often called "Pappa" and sometimes "my Old Man." Before her husband departed for the Continental Congress in September 1774, she told one of his fellow Virginia delegates: "I hope you will stand firm -- I know George will."

Washington, whose birthday is tomorrow, was conflicted about the prospect of commanding the Continental Army in 1775. "I should enjoy more real happiness and felicity in one month with you, at home, than I have the most distant prospect of reaping abroad," Washington wrote her after his appointment. He claimed, however, that "it was utterly out of my power to refuse this appointment without exposing my Character to such censures as would have reflected dishonour upon myself, and given pain to my friends -- this I am sure could not, and ought not to be pleasing to you."

In December 1775, Martha moved to Massachusetts to stay with her general. One Bay State woman who met Mrs. Washington wrote that she was "Received with that politeness and Respect shown in a first interview among the well bred and with the Ease and Cordiality of Friendship of a much Earlier date."

Martha's friendly demeanor and easy temperament contrasted with the stern character often associated with her husband. "Lady Washington" joined her husband in every winter encampment until peace was concluded in late 1783. Then, the Washington's retired to their beloved Mount Vernon, where so many visitors stopped by to visit that it was a virtual bed and breakfast.

Reluctantly, in 1790 Washington agreed to become the nation's first president. When George was sworn in as president, Martha did not find her new role congenial. The Washington's strove to establish a proper etiquette for hospitality -- which Martha found a strait jacket for her warm personality. Only a few months into Washington's term, she wrote a relative: "I live a very dull life here and know nothing that passes in town -- I never go to any public place -- indeed 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 -- and as I can not do as I like. I am obstinate and stay at home a great deal." When she and the nation's capital moved to Philadelphia, she acknowledged her life as "splendid misery." Rather than "first lady," she said she might "more properly" be called "the chief state prisoner."

Nevertheless, the First Lady made a favorable impression on a very discriminating judge of character -- Second Lady Abigail Adams, who once had admonished her husband to "Remember the Ladies." The wife of Vice President John Adams wrote: "No Lady can be more deservedly beloved & esteemed than she is, and we have lived in habits of intimacy and Friendship." In another letter, the opinionated Abigail told her husband: "I honor her for a prudence which I know I do not possess. I could not keep silence as She does."

To her delight, in 1797 Martha permanently departed the temporary capital in Philadelphia for her home at Mount Vernon. She wrote a friend: "The General and I feel like children just released from school or from a hard taskmaster, and we believe that nothing can tempt us to leave the sacred roof-tree again...We are so penurious with our enjoyment that we are loath to share it with anyone but dear friends, yet almost every day some stranger claims a portion of it, and we cannot refuse."

Meanwhile, Martha's health deteriorated and she was devastated by the death of her husband in December 1799. His ideas about slavery were more advanced than hers. His will liberated all his slaves -- he could do nothing about the slaves that Martha owned from her first marriage -- including a woman who was her own half-sister.

Abigail Adams understood the precedent Martha nevertheless had set as First Lady: "I shall think myself the most fortunate among women if I can glide on for four Years with as spotless a Reputation, beloved and esteemed by all as that Good and amiable Lady has done. My endeavors shall not be wanting."

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