

# Martha Washington

1731–1802



**WHY SHE MADE HISTORY** Martha Dandridge Custis Washington, wife of George Washington, was the first First Lady of the United States.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Martha Washington's early life may have influenced her feelings about being a first lady.*

As wife of the first president, Martha Washington set the style for all first ladies who would come after her. The elegance and grace with which she entertained guests of the presidential mansion started a tradition that continues today.

Born on a plantation near Williamsburg, Virginia, Martha Dandridge was the eldest of eight siblings. At 18, she married Daniel Park Custis, a wealthy planter several years her senior. Together they had four children, but two died in infancy. After a brief illness, Custis died in 1757, making Martha one of the richest women in Virginia. She was left alone to raise two small children, and run an estate that covered more than 17,000 acres.

Martha later met a Virginia Militia colonel named George Washington. They married in 1759, and Martha and her two children moved into Washington's Mount Vernon estate.

Between 1775 and 1780, Martha Washington often accompanied her husband to battlegrounds during the Revolutionary War. She joined her husband at his headquarters and camps during the war, spending winters at Valley Forge and Morristown, New Jersey.



## VOCABULARY

**electoral college** group selected from each state to cast votes in presidential elections

In 1789, the **electoral college** unanimously selected George Washington to be the first president of the United States, making Martha Washington America's first first lady. The White House had not yet been built, so the first family moved to a house in New York.

Called "Lady Washington," Martha held the position with dignity and grace, but did not enjoy being first lady. In addition to running the house, Martha Washington was in charge of planning and hosting formal dinners, receptions, and parties. She wrote that she felt like a "state prisoner" in the role. But she worked hard in her position, and visiting dignitaries were impressed with the elegance of the presidential household and hospitality.

After serving a second term, George and Martha Washington moved back to Mount Vernon. George Washington died in 1799. Martha continued living at Mount Vernon until her death in 1802. Before she died, she freed the slaves on the family plantation and burned all the letters that she and her husband had written each other over the years.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Recall one detail from the passage above that you found interesting about Martha Washington.

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2. **Draw Conclusions** Why do you think Martha Washington did not like being a first lady?

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### ACTIVITY

3. Imagine that you have been asked to interview Martha Washington. On a separate sheet of paper, make a list of three or four questions that you would like to ask Martha Washington about her life.

# Abigail Adams

1744—1818



**WHY SHE MADE HISTORY** Abigail Adams was an early supporter of women's rights. She wrote many letters to her husband, President John Adams, which described what society was like during that time.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Abigail Adams's desire to communicate with her husband recorded history at the same time.*

As the wife of one president and mother of another, Abigail Adams witnessed American history in the making. But she also carved out her own niche as a writer and as one of the first people to advocate women's rights.

Abigail Adams was born in 1744 in Weymouth, Massachusetts. Poor health kept her from receiving a proper education, but Abigail Adams was intelligent and interested in learning. She read many of the books in her family's private library, and even taught herself French.

In 1764, Abigail married John Adams. During the 1770s, he spent a lot of time away from home, participating in the fight for independence. Abigail Adams, who stayed home to raise their four children and run the family farm, began writing many letters to her husband. She also wrote to other leaders of the Revolution, including Thomas Jefferson. Abigail was well versed in literature, history, and political philosophy. Her letters influenced these leaders, as well as expressed her ideas and feelings about life in the newly born nation.

While her husband was attending the Continental Congress of 1776, Abigail Adams wrote, "I desire



## VOCABULARY

**suffrage** the right to vote

you would remember the ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors [were].” During this time, women had very few rights. Nationwide women’s **suffrage** would not occur until 1920.

John Adams, who was the first vice president, became president in 1797. He and Abigail and their children became the first presidential family to live in the White House in 1800. Her intelligence and personality earned Abigail Adams a reputation as one of the most distinguished and significant first ladies in American history. John Quincy Adams, John and Abigail’s eldest son, returned to the White House when he was elected president in 1824.

Many of the letters Abigail Adams wrote to her husband and others were later published by her grandson. Her writing provides a window into life, society, and politics during the founding of the nation. The letters illustrate what it was like to be a woman, a wife, and a mother in 18th century America. They reveal her interest in politics, her intelligence, and her avid patriotism.

### **WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. What did Abigail Adams write about in her many letters?

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2. **Make Inferences** Why do you think these letters are important today?

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### **ACTIVITY**

3. Think about what you have read about Abigail Adams, and the letters she wrote. Write a personal letter to Abigail Adams. Use this as an opportunity to ask a question, or share a current event.