

Revisiting the First Ladies' Homes

The oft-overlooked lives of America's first ladies are on display in house museums across the country

By Robin T. Reid
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Photo Gallery



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Eleanor Roosevelt used Val-Kill, located in New York, as a retreat, office and “laboratory” for social change.

Courtesy of NPS WD Urbin

Preserving the memory of the nation's first female president is a task that Farron and William Smith take seriously. Last fall, the couple opened a museum in Wyethville, Virginia, dedicated to Edith Bolling Wilson, who some historians claim ran the U.S. government while her husband, Woodrow Wilson, recovered from a massive stroke during his second term. The Smiths own the two-story brick building in this small southwest Virginia city, where Mrs. Wilson was born more than 100 years ago.

"We decided that once our kids were educated, we'd devote our time to making the museum," Farron Smith says. "We've spent a lot of money on it; we could have re-educated our children again. But we just feel a real responsibility to preserve this for future generations."

In doing so, the Smiths have joined forces with a clutch of other torchbearers for former first ladies. Their birthplaces, childhood homes and post-White House residences have been turned into museums and memorials across the country. The National Park Service operates some of them, while others are community efforts.

The Mamie Doud Eisenhower birthplace in Boone, Iowa, is a fine example of the latter. The wooden cottage had a succession of owners since Mrs. Eisenhower's birth in 1896 and decades later faced demolition. A group formed to save the house, and a neighbor then offered to tear down a house on a lot across the street to make way for Doud residence. In 1975, the birthplace was moved to its new location and the museum opened five years later.

"We have a struggle," explains Charles Irwin, executive director of the Boone County Historical Society, which oversees the museum. "We've had declining attendance over the years, because we're getting further away from the Eisenhower era."

Two other factors affect the plight of first ladies museums: money and status.

"For so long, there was a certain devaluation of women in general, and wives in particular," said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies' Library – housed in the family home of 25th first lady Ida Saxton McKinley – in Canton, Ohio. "Sometimes it is merely practicality; the family may have needed money and sold the house or tore it down to sell for the property value. In the cases of those who came from politically powerful, socially prominent or wealthy families into which presidents married, some of these sites have been preserved...[T]he importance of the Todd family [Abraham Lincoln's in-laws] in Kentucky and Republican history[meant] that house was preserved."

Sometimes neither money nor prestige is enough. Take the case of Hammersmith Farm in Newport, R.I., where Jacqueline Bouvier spent her childhood summers and held the reception for her wedding to John F. Kennedy. In 1977, the family sold the estate to a private GROUP called Camelot Gardens, which opened it as a museum. "It felt as if the family had just stepped outside," Anthony recalls. "Unfortunately, the state government didn't decide to buy it and it became too expensive to maintain. It was sold to a private owner and all the furnishings auctioned off."

The existing museums are cautiously optimistic that the keen interest in new First Lady, Michelle Obama, drums up business for them. Anthony says the library has been flooded with queries from the media since Mrs. Obama spoke at the Democratic Convention last summer.

And about 200 miles southwest of the library, the number of visitors to the Lucy Hayes Heritage Center in Chillicothe, Ohio, was up to 149 for the month of April; the small frame house where the 19th president's wife was born typically never gets more than 500 visitors throughout the year.

"People often crack that had these women not been married to these men, we'd never know of them," Anthony said. "But the other side of that truth is that had many of these men not married the women they did, we'd never have heard of these men."

First Ladies' homes – and sites of homes - open to the public:

- Abigail Adams' birthplace, 180 Norton St., Weymouth, Mass., 781-335-4205 (open seasonally)
<http://abigailadamsbirthplace.org/>

- Dolley Madison – Dolley Todd House (shared with first husband, John), Fourth and Walnut streets, Philadelphia, Pa., 215-965-2305 (scheduled tours only)
www.nps.gov/inde/todd-house.htm
- Emily Donelson, Andrew Jackson's niece and de facto first lady, Tulip Grove, Lebanon Pike, Nashville, Tenn., 615-889-2941 (special tours only)
www.thehermitage.com/
- Mary Todd Lincoln childhood home – 578 W. Main St., Lexington, Ky., 859-233-9999
www.mtlhouse.org/
- Julia Dent Grant childhood home – White Haven Plantation, 7400 Grant Road, St. Louis, Mo., 314-842-3298
www.nps.gov/ulsg/index.htm
- Lucy Webb Hayes birthplace – 90 W. Sixth St., Chillicothe, Ohio, 740-775-5829
www.lucyhayes.org
- Ida Saxton McKinley family home – 331 S. Market St., Canton, Ohio, 330-452-0876 (also part of the National First Ladies' Library)
www.firstladies.org/SaxtonMcKinleyHouse.aspx
- Edith Bolling Wilson birthplace – 145 E. Main St., Wytheville, Va., 276-223-3484
www.edithbollingwilson.org
- Eleanor Roosevelt home – Val-Kill Cottage, Hyde Park, N.Y., 800-FDR-VISIT
www.nps.gov/elro/index.htm
- Bess Truman home – 219 N. Delaware St., Independence, Mo., 816-254-9929 (closed for renovations until spring 2010)
www.nps.gov/hstr/index.htm
- Mamie Doud Eisenhower birthplace – 709 Carroll St., Boone, Iowa, 515-432-1907
<http://mamiesbirthplace.homestead.com>
- Pat Ryan Nixon – Pat Nixon Park, South Street and Ely Avenue, Cerritos, Calif.