THE FIRST LADIES ARE COMING TO PITTSBURGH

By Kathleen Wendell, Museum Division Deputy Director and Julia Pietsch, volunteer
From silver gowns to gold china, wonderful artifacts make First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image a fascinating and informative exhibit. There are dresses such as Dolley Madison’s 1840s silk brocade gown, Eleanor Roosevelt’s mink jacket, and Abigail Adams’ yellow embroidered shoes. Official china and table services include an outstanding gilt epergne from Louisa Adams and Mary Todd Lincoln’s monogrammed sterling tea and coffee service. Campaign and political memorabilia span a “Hillary for U.S. Senate” pin to a whimsical Pat Nixon paper doll.
Developed by the Smithsonian Institution’s Traveling Exhibit Service in coordination with the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., *First Ladies* helps us understand the important roles these women have played in the history of our country. The exhibit will be at the History Center through February 28, 2007.

**The First Lady’s Role**

What role should the “perfect First Lady” play? Should she remain in her husband’s shadow, supporting him politically and acting as social hostess, as did Martha Washington? Or, like Abigail Adams, our second President’s wife, should she actively discuss politics and even suggest her own agenda? “Remember the ladies,” Abigail wrote to John in March 1776. “Do not put such unlimited power in the hands of the husbands.” Sarah Polk, in 1850, determined that she would define her role as First Lady and said she would “neither keep house nor make butter.”

The first section of the exhibit, *Inventing the Role*, explores these individual approaches. Martha, who brought wealth and social status to her marriage, instituted weekly “drawing rooms” to bring together various visitors both local and from abroad. This was an astute way of integrating social contacts with political supporters and enabled a fledgling country to integrate more democratically. Abigail, more politically involved, offered her opinions to John in her many letters. She discussed various political goings-on and he generally respected her opinions. For her efforts, she was derisively called “Mrs. President” by her husband’s critics, who felt she was too involved in the new country’s politics.
The Nation’s Hostess

The First Lady is the country’s hostess at White House social occasions, greeting world leaders and cultural notables. Her personal style in decorating and dress is watched closely and often followed. This was epitomized by Jacqueline Kennedy, whose preference for simple design in clothing was quickly copied. In the 18th century, Dolley Madison was also a trendsetter, popularizing a new fashion when she wore turbans that matched her gowns.

Certainly “What’s for dinner?” takes on a new meaning when exploring the menus the First Ladies selected, not to mention the fabulous china services. Why so much china? It breaks! Constant state dinners take their toll, so service for 200 guests is now standard, which might mean 12 pieces for each place setting, totaling 2,400 pieces plus serving items—from soup to nuts. The Wilsons were the first to select an American-made service; before then, only services from China, England, and France were deemed worthy enough for the White House. A New York newspaper complimented the Wilsons’ Lenox selection, stating it was “designed by an American artist, made at an American pottery, and decorated by American workmen.”
Advocates of Social Causes

Perhaps the best-loved role for a First Lady is when she promotes a cause or charity. The exhibit details many of the projects created and supported by these influential advocates. What First Lady comes to mind when mentioning these causes—"Just Say No" to drug abuse; support reading and libraries; eliminate substandard housing; create a national health care plan; and beautify the natural environment? Nancy Reagan, Laura Bush, Roslyn Carter, Hillary Clinton, and Claudia “Lady Bird” Johnson respectively championed these and many other concerns. Another First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, is well-known for promoting rights for the poor, especially improved housing.

What do we really know about these women—are their public images true pictures? Imagine “coming down” after being First Lady for four or even eight years. This may be where we really begin to see the woman behind the role. Many continued to support their chosen issues. Eleanor Roosevelt was appointed as a delegate to the United Nations where she helped to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an important standard still used today. Betty Ford, who struggled with addictions, founded the Betty Ford Center for drug and alcohol rehabilitation and encouraged many to seek help. One recent First Lady apparently enjoyed the White House enough that she became a Senator and has considered returning—as President.

This exhibit is kind to the role and to these incredible women. After all, the First Lady is truly a symbol and, as a nation, we want to see her as representative of what’s good. Visitors will enjoy the fabulous artifacts and engaging images, and will come away knowing much more about the important impact many of these women have had throughout history.
First Lady Ida McKinley Celebrates in Pittsburgh

Mrs. Ida McKinley visited Western Pennsylvania three times while she was First Lady, and each time it was to celebrate. The first visit, November 3, 1897, was for the Founders’ Day celebrations at the Carnegie Institute at which President McKinley gave a speech. Following the ceremony, a dinner was served by the Robert Pitcairn family at their home Cairncarque. In honor of the President and First Lady, the Pitcairn family made sure everything was elegant. There were Tiffany menus beside each place, solid gold table service, ropes of roses leading to each woman’s seat, and a specially commissioned lace table cloth. Following the extravagant dinner, the guests were taken to the Music Hall in Pittsburgh for the first concert of the season.

August 28, 1899, saw First Lady Ida in Pittsburgh to welcome home the 10th Regiment Infantry, National Guard of Pennsylvania from the Philippines where they had been fighting as part of the Spanish-American War. The 10th Regiment was very popular nationwide because they had traveled farther than any other unit in American military history and were the first troops under fire in the Philippines. Mrs. McKinley’s final visit to Western Pennsylvania on September 12, 1900, was for her niece Mabel’s wedding to Dr. Hermanus L. Baer in Somerset.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt Wins the Hearts of Western Pennsylvania

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt initially came to the Pittsburgh area on May 21, 1937, to tour Norvelt, a small town named for her. Originally known as Westmoreland Homesteads, the town, approximately 30 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, was one among a hundred built throughout the country to help unemployed persons recapture their self-reliance. Eleanor Roosevelt had fought for, and won, indoor plumbing, running water, refrigerators, and washing machines for the incoming residents. She wanted them to live in housing that would make them proud and want to work for a better living.

The town name uses the last syllables of Eleanor Roosevelt. The day of her tour, Eleanor was whisked around the town and visited four houses, the school, the co-operative farm, dairy barn, chicken range, store, and factory. Before she left, Mrs. Roosevelt commented, “[The community] is very well planned and the homes are well constructed. The homes are a great deal better than many I have seen.” This, like her earlier efforts, won the hearts of Norvelt forever.

By the end of 1944, the First Lady had been to Western Pennsylvania three more times. She came on September 4, 1941, again in support of housing, to present the key to the first completed apartment of Riverview Homes, built by the federal government for defense workers. The last two times Eleanor visited were to tour the city in early 1944.


First Ladies Regional Donors

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Recent Visits
Since 1989, three First Ladies have visited Western Pennsylvania four times. First was Barbara Bush on November 20, 1989, who spent the morning reading to children at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh Homewood branch. Later in the day, Mrs. Bush went to the opening of the Miniature White House exhibit at Kaufmann’s Department Store.

First Lady Hillary Clinton visited Pittsburgh on June 7, 1996, to tour Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild and Bidwell Training Center, and have a discussion at Primanti Bros. in the Strip District.

First Lady Laura Bush visited Western Pennsylvania twice. The first time, she comforted the families of United Flight 93 victims on September 17, 2001, in Stoneycreek. On her second visit, March 7, 2005, she came with her husband, President George W. Bush, to pay tribute to volunteerism and push right choices for young people.