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.

Abigail Adams' epergne.
Smithsonian National Museum of American History

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.

Jacqueline Kennedy wearing an A-Line Oleg Cassini dress. Bettman/CORBIS

After two decades and many dinners, the White House needed new china. The cost of Nancy Reagan's (with the border in her favorite color, red) caused a furor, though it was actually paid for by a generous donor.

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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."

Dolley Madison's silk brocade evening gown, 1840, altered 1880.

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Oyster Plate. Lucy Hayes (First Lady, 1877-1889) wanted a truly American service utilizing paintings of indigenous flora and fauna. The resulting design, as shown on this oyster and game plate, is unique among the more formal selections of White House china.

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A rare gathering of six First Ladies in 1991. From left to right: Claudia "Lady Bird" Johnson, Pat Nixon, Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, Roslyn Carter, and Betty Ford. George Bush Presidential Library

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.

Advocates of Social Causes

Ida McKinley

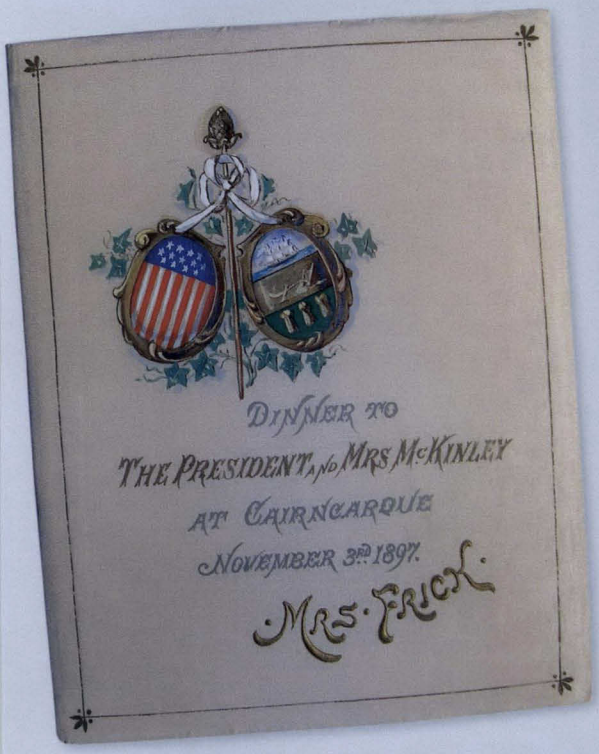
First Lady Ida McKinley Celebrates in Pittsburgh

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.

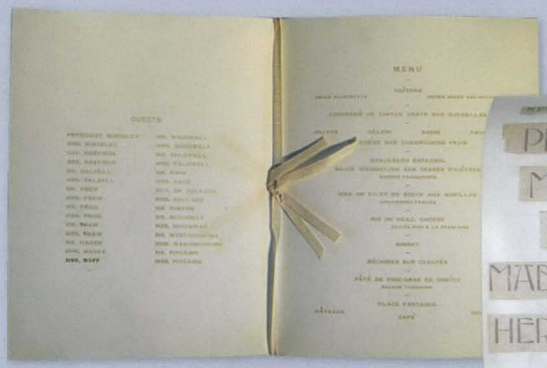
August 28, 1899, saw First Lady Ida in Pittsburgh to welcome home the 10th Regiment Infantry, National Guard of Pennsylvania from the Philippines where they had been fighting as part of the Spanish-American War. The 10th Regiment was very popular nationwide because they had traveled farther than any 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.

History of the 10th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry: Its Forbearers and Successors. (Allentown: Miers Lithographic Service, 1968). Lucy Scull Scrapbook, History Center Library & Archives. *The Pittsburg Post*, 4 Nov. 1897: 1. *The Pittsburg Times*, 3 Nov. 1897: 1.

A drawing of Mrs. Ida McKinley from a photograph taken in her room at the White House. This sketch appeared in several of the newspapers in Pittsburgh when she visited with the President in 1897. History Center collection

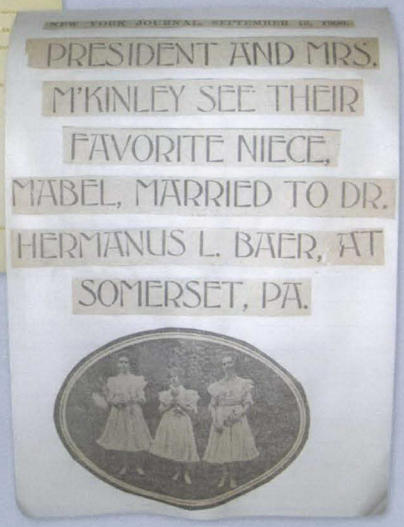


Menu placed at Mrs. Henry Clay Frick's seat on November 3, 1897, for the dinner held at Cairncarque to honor the President and Mrs. McKinley's visit to Pittsburgh. The menu is hand painted silk with the coats of arms of the United States and Pennsylvania on the front cover. The inside back cover is signed by Tiffany's. History Center collection



Inside of Mrs. Frick's menu. To the left are the 30 guests in attendance including Governor and Mrs. Hastings, Mr. & Mrs. Westinghouse, and Mr. & Mrs. Thaw. The menu for the evening is seen on the right side written in French, except for "brown bread and butter." The rest of the menu includes mushroom puffs, filet of beef, sweetbreads, goose liver canapés, crabmeat, and several desserts.

History Center collection



A page from the Lucy Scull scrapbook shows a newspaper headline from the *New York Journal* and photograph of the bridesmaids. Miss Scull was a bridesmaid in the McKinley–Baer wedding in 1900. She saved all of the newspaper articles dealing with the wedding. Other items in the scrapbook include dried flowers, fabric, and a letter from the White House declining a dinner invitation. History Center collection

Eleanor Roosevelt

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.

Bailey, Kristin Szylvian. "Defense Housing in Greater Pittsburgh: 1945 – 1955" *Pittsburgh History* 73 (1990), 17. Hoagland, Alison K. *Norvelt and Penn-Craft, Pennsylvania : subsistence-homestead communities of the 1930s* (Washington, D.C.: Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service, U.S. Dept. of Interior, 1991).

Eleanor Roosevelt greeting *Pittsburgh Courier* staffer George Brown, 1944.

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh: Gift of the estate of Charles "Teenie" Harris

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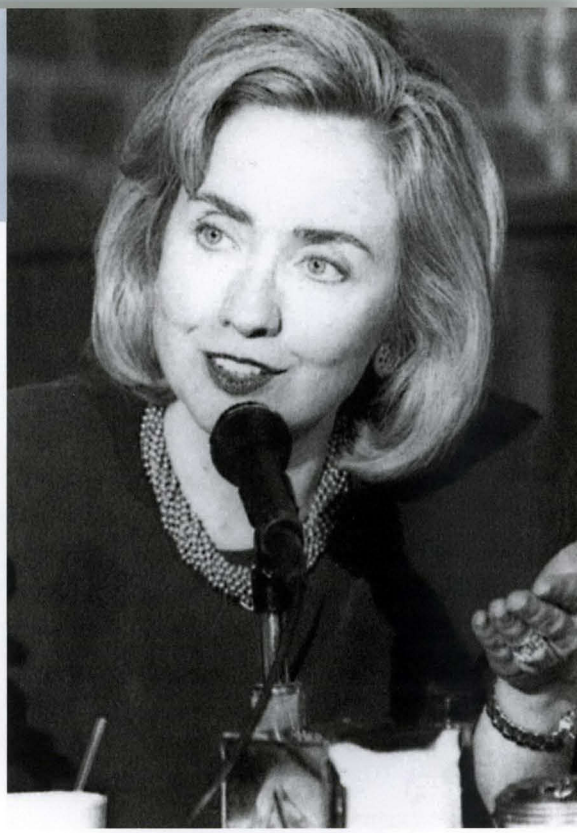
Recent Visits

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 consoled 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.

Visiting Pittsburgh



Hillary Clinton talks to members of the public while eating at Primanti Bros. in the Strip District. Among the topics discussed were affordable after-school activities, the Family Medical Leave Act, the government loan program, juvenile crime, how to make college education affordable, and health care.

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Laura Bush greeting children during her visit to Providence Family Support Center on the North Side on March 7, 2005.

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

"First Lady who counts," *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, 21 Nov 1989.

McFeatters, Ann. "Laura Bush discards her low profile to console the nation about Tragedy," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 19 Sep. 2001.

O'Toole, James. "Bushes push 'right choices' in visit to North Side," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 8 March 2005.

Pro, Johnna A. "The first lady comes to town," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 8 June 1996.

Steigerwald, Bill. "Hands-on Hillary makes an impression," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 8 June 1996.