

WHO WAS THE FIRST AMERICAN FIRST LADY?

by **Melvin Morris**

Martha Washington (1st President George Washington's wife) was not the First American "First Lady!" She was rather called "Lady Washington." Abigail Adams (2nd President John Adams' wife), Martha Jefferson (3rd President Thomas Jefferson's wife), Dolley Madison (4th President James Madison's wife), and Elizabeth Monroe (President James Monroe's wife) were also not the First American "First Lady!" They and the wives of the other Presidents were referred to as just "Lady" or "Mrs. President" or "Mrs. Presidentess" or other titles for which they expressed their own preference – at least until 1877.

The term "First Lady" was coined by journalist Mary Clemmer Ames – see figure 1 - (from my home-town of Utica, in upstate New York) in an 1877 magazine describing the Inauguration of President Rutherford B. Hayes. His wife, Lucy Webb Hayes, (see fig. 2) was a quite popular "First Lady" and the frequent reporting of her activities helped spread its use. A popular 1911 comedic play by Charles Nirdlinger titled "The First Lady in the Land" popularized the title still further. So did the growing activities of the "First Ladies."

The "First Lady" is not an elected position, carries no official duties, and brings no salary. Nonetheless, she attends many official ceremonies and functions of state either with or in place of the President. There is a strict taboo against the "First Lady" holding outside employment while occupying the Office. She, however, frequently participates in humanitarian and charitable work.

During the 20th Century, many of the "First Ladies" have taken an active role in campaigning for both the President and members of his political party. Hillary Rodham Clinton (see fig. 3) took her role one step further when she was, for a time, given a formal job in her husband's Bill Clinton's administration to develop reforms to the health care system. At the end of her husband's terms in Office, she was able to use her fame as "First Lady" to help her get elected to the U.S. Senate from New York and now to seriously run for the Presidency – both new 'firsts' for a "First Lady."

Thus, the First Lady of the United States is the unofficial title of the hostess of the White House – at least since 1877 when President Rutherford B. Hayes wife, Lucy Webb Hayes, was dubbed with the title by journalist Mary Clemmer Ames. Because this position is traditionally filled by the President's wife, it is frequently thought to apply only to the wife of a sitting President. However, several women served as First Lady who weren't the President's wife.

No scandal was involved! This occurred when the President was a bachelor (James Buchanan) or a widower (Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, etc.) or when the wife of the President was unable to fulfill the duties of the "First Lady" herself. In those cases, the position has been filled by a female relative or friend of the President. Thus, while most Presidents have had only one "First Lady," some have had two or even three!