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# Making the Grade



## First Ladies and Education

FALL-  
WINTER

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2007

## A Brief History of Women as Teachers in America

Prior to the American Revolution, the common thought was that daughters needed to learn only what was important for their duties as wives and mothers. However, as the young nation developed, there was a shortage of available males due to war and other labor demands. Consequently females were included as students, and eventually accepted as elementary school teachers.

By the mid-nineteenth century, teaching was considered a natural extension of a woman's caretaking nature. Teaching was also one of the few respectable jobs a woman could have, and while the salary was around half of what men received, the job afforded women independence before marriage. Still, society dictated that a woman's main goal in life was to marry successfully and educate her children in the home.



### First Ladies and Teaching

The First Ladies featured in this part of the exhibit were all school teachers in the 1800s. They were remarkable because they had parents who had the means and the desire to educate them. Lucretia Garfield and Caroline Harrison were fortunate enough to attend college. While only Abigail Fillmore continued to teach after marriage, they all devoted their energies to educating their children.

## Abigail Powers Fillmore (1798-1853)



*Abigail Fillmore*

Abigail Powers Fillmore began teaching school at the age of sixteen. Not only was she a well-respected teacher, she was also a passionate and enthusiastic lifetime learner.

In addition to teaching, the young Abigail Powers helped establish a circulating library near her home, a prototype to the public library of today. Nineteen-year-old Abigail Powers was already an established schoolteacher in Sempronius, New York, when eighteen-year-old Millard Fillmore (1800 - 1874) became her student. Abigail encouraged Millard to pursue his ambition of a law career.



*Millard Fillmore*

In 1824, Abigail's uncle, Herman Powers, asked Abigail to come to Lisle, New York, to tutor his three daughters. This led to Abigail successfully opening a select school for girls. After her marriage in 1826, Abigail kept her teaching position. By doing so, Abigail Fillmore has the distinction of being the first First Lady to continue her career after marriage.

When Millard Fillmore became the thirteenth president of the United States, he found no books in the Executive Mansion. Knowing that Abigail would also be dismayed when she arrived, he asked Congress for an appropriation to purchase books and the furnishings to form a library. After much deliberation, \$2,250 was appropriated by Congress for the first White House Library. Abigail chose the oval parlor on the second floor of the Executive Mansion to become the library in what is today known as the Yellow Oval Room.

*Yellow Oval Room  
in the  
White House*



## Lucretia Rudolph Garfield (1832-1918)

The parents of Lucretia Rudolph Garfield, Zebulon and Arabella Rudolph, were religious and conservative, but their views on education were quite radical for the day. They believed in a higher education for both their sons and daughters. Lucretia, as the eldest child, left her home in Garrettsville, Ohio at age fifteen to attend the Geauga Seminary in Chester, Ohio. In the meantime, her father and other elders of the Disciples of Christ were beginning their own nondenominational college in Hiram, Ohio called the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute. "The Eclectic," known today as Hiram College, was one of the first colleges to admit men and women. Lucretia enrolled in its first term in 1850 with the intent of becoming a teacher.



*Lucretia Garfield*

Lucretia broadened her studies and her social life while at the Eclectic. She organized the "Ladies' Literary Society" for women to orate and debate, sang in the glee club, and wrote essays and drew sketches for the school magazine, *The Eclectic Star*. Her future husband, James A. Garfield (1831-1881), began attending classes at the Eclectic in 1851. Lucretia took her first teaching job in Chagrin Falls, Ohio in 1853. It was during this time that James Garfield wrote his first letter to her. This was the beginning of a long, written correspondence, and the two were a couple by the time she returned to Hiram.



*Young Lucretia*

While James Garfield pursued additional education at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, Lucretia accepted a teaching position in Ravenna, Ohio where she taught French, arithmetic, algebra, and reading. She later moved to a position at the Brownell Street Public School in Cleveland, Ohio. She took advantage of the "big city" by attending plays and taking music, drawing and painting classes. With her upcoming marriage in the fall of 1858, Lucretia's teaching career came to an end as she returned to Hiram to prepare for her wedding.



*Brownell Street Public School*

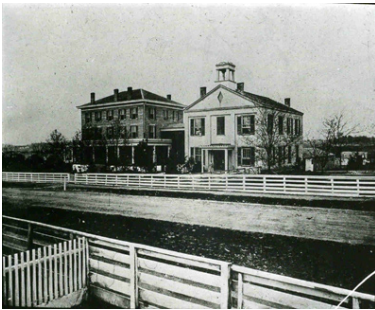
## Caroline Scott Harrison (1832-1892)



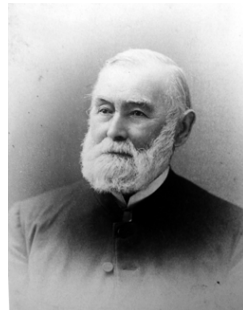
*Caroline Scott*

Caroline Scott grew up in Ohio college towns. The young “Carrie” was a vivacious girl who showed early talent in music and art. In 1845, the Scott family moved to Pleasant Hill, Ohio where Dr. John Witherspoon Scott, an early advocate for women’s education, helped establish the Ohio Female College. He also served on the faculty of the nearby Farmers’ College. Benjamin Harrison (1833 -1901) enrolled in the Farmers’ College in 1847. The serious, solemn Benjamin was attracted to the expressive and playful fifteen year old Carrie Scott, and the two fell

in love.



*Oxford Female Institute*



*John Witherspoon Scott*

In 1849, Dr. Scott took the position of president of the newly formed Oxford Female Institute. While attending classes there, Caroline also gave piano and drawing lessons. Benjamin Harrison transferred to Miami University in 1850, and he and Caroline became engaged. Harrison graduated in 1852, and accepted an unpaid law apprenticeship in Cincinnati. Caroline took a teaching position at a girls’ school. Ben and Carrie married in October of 1853.

During her tenure as First Lady, Mrs. Harrison held weekly French classes for cabinet members’ wives and daughters and persuaded the German artist, Paul Putzki, to move to Washington to teach watercolor and china painting. She also agreed to help raise funds for a medical school at Johns Hopkins University on the condition that women be given the same opportunities to pursue a medical degree as men. Her death while First Lady in 1892 was not only a personal loss to her family but also a setback for women of the United States since she was an advocate for women’s education.



*Artwork of Caroline Harrison and Paul Putzki*



*Caroline Harrison artwork with poem*

## First Ladies and Educational Causes

It has become traditional for First Ladies to espouse their own special causes that have covered a wide variety of topics. As wives, mothers, and concerned individuals, many First Ladies have supported and continue to champion educational causes.

### Grace Goodhue Coolidge (1879-1957)

Growing up in Burlington, Vermont, Grace Goodhue knew a neighboring family that would hold great influence on her future. The Yale family lived on the same street as Grace and her parents. The Yales had three children, and the oldest, June Yale, was Grace's "ideal."<sup>1</sup> June Yale was a teacher at the Clarke School for the Deaf in Northampton, Massachusetts. June's aunt, Dr. Caroline A. Yale, was the principal of the Clarke School. Through the Yales' influence, Grace personally saw the difficulties these children had in the hearing world and her goal became to teach deaf children how to speak. For the rest of her life she was a dedicated champion for the Clarke School for the Deaf.



*Grace Goodhue*

After graduation from the University of Vermont in 1902, Grace wrote to Dr.



*Caroline Yale*

Caroline Yale seeking a training position as a teacher for the deaf. She was accepted. She began her three year teaching deaf children lip reading – which was a challenging task, but she found it rewarding. She met Calvin Coolidge (1872 -1933) while living on the Clarke School campus in 1904. When they married on October 4, 1905, Grace gave up her teaching career, but not her interest in the Clarke School. It became one of her major humanitarian causes. As First Lady, she and President Coolidge lent their names to an endowment fund for the Clarke School that raised two million dollars.



*Grace Coolidge with Clarke School children*



*Grace Coolidge*

Calvin Coolidge served on the board of the Clarke School for the Deaf from 1920 until his death in 1933. Grace joined the board afterwards, and in 1935 she was elected Chairman of the Board serving in this position for seventeen years before becoming a trustee. When the Clarke School began its Centennial Development Program, she served as National Chairman and Treasurer. Helen Keller, Spencer Tracy and Herbert Hoover, Jr. were among those that served at her personal request. The Clarke School for the Deaf/Center for Oral Education continues to lead in the field of oral deaf education.

## **Lady Bird Johnson (1912 – )**

Lady Bird Johnson grew up in Karnack, Texas, the daughter of Thomas and Minnie Taylor. In 1917, when Lady Bird was five years old, Minnie died of complications from a fall. But Lady Bird was fortunate to have her father's influence and her Aunt Effie Taylor's encouragement to back her ambitions. Lady Bird graduated at the age of fifteen at the top of her class in 1928. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1933, but continued her education to receive a degree in journalism and a teaching certificate in 1934 from the University of Texas in Austin. She was



*Lady Bird Johnson*

working as a reporter at the *Daily Texan* when she met Lyndon B. Johnson (1908 -1973). After their marriage on November 17, 1934, they moved to Washington, DC where Lady Bird's political education began.

After finishing President Kennedy's term, Lyndon Johnson was elected president in 1964, and he declared War on Poverty to Congress. Lady Bird wanted to help support her husband's cause, so when Sargent

Shriver from the Office of Economic Opportunity met with her to give her details on a new program called Operation Head Start, she was intrigued. She agreed to meet with the Advisory Council on the War on Poverty about the proposal, and Shriver asked her to sponsor Project Head Start as honorary Chairman. She agreed with one stipulation: she



*Lady Bird holding Head Start banner*

didn't want to be just honorary Chairman – “If I take it on, I want to work at it.”<sup>2</sup> National studies showed that many children from inner cities and poor rural areas lacked basic social skills. The initial program was for 100,000 children who would be entering the first grade that year. The course lasted only eight weeks, but during that time the child received a free meal each day and a



*Lady Bird reads to children*

medical examination that included inoculations, dental care, and sight, hearing and speech tests. Teachers focused on improving the child's communication skills. Project Head Start announced plans that same summer to expand the program to 375,000 children from the ages of three to five years old in over two thousand



communities throughout the nation. From then on Lady Bird made a point of visiting Head Start classrooms and daycare centers wherever she traveled throughout the country. One of the long-lasting programs of the War on Poverty, Project Head Start celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 2005. Over 23 million children have received services since that time.

## Nancy Davis Reagan (1921 – )



*Nancy Reagan*

There were several reasons First Lady Nancy Reagan chose drug prevention as her cause: she had grown up going to hospitals with her step-father, Dr. Loyal Davis, as a young girl; she had worked as a nurse's aide while in college; and as First Lady of California she had visited hospitals and attended drug rehabilitation meetings with recovering teenage drug addicts and found their stories both moving and disturbing. When she became First Lady of the United States in 1981, statistics from the National Institute on Drug Abuse showed drug use was on the rise. In addition, drug abuse was particularly high

in children ages 12 to 17. She decided her goal would be to educate children and their parents on the adverse effects of drug abuse. From a spontaneous remark Mrs. Reagan made to a child who asked her what to say if offered drugs – “Just Say No!” – her anti-drug campaign was born.

Nancy Reagan committed herself to her drug awareness cause, reading and writing thousands of letters to children who wrote to her of their drug problems. She co-hosted a special episode focusing on the national drug problem on *Good Morning America* and narrated a PBS documentary, “The Chemical People.” By 1985 there were over 5,000 “Just Say No” after school clubs founded in the United States and abroad. She also founded the Nancy Reagan Drug Abuse Fund and worked with such groups as the Girl Scouts (a “Drug Free” merit badge was created) and Kiwanis Clubs, which launched a promotion of



*Nancy Reagan on horseback holding “Just Say No” sign*

over 2,000 billboards with Mrs. Reagan's image and the "Just Say No" phrase.

After a second presidential election victory in 1985, Mrs. Reagan took her drug prevention campaign to the international level, inviting first ladies from countries around the world to attend a conference on drug abuse in Washington, DC and Atlanta, Georgia. A crowning moment came when the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 was signed into law on October 27 by President Ronald Reagan (1911-2004).



*Nancy Reagan with first ladies from Jamaica and Japan*

After Nancy Reagan left Washington, she founded the Nancy Reagan Foundation in Los Angeles. This foundation had a five year plan to give grant money raised through private funds and events such as the Nancy Reagan Tennis Tournament to school programs and youth organizations. At the 1994 milestone, the Nancy Reagan Foundation merged with the non-profit BEST Foundation for a Drug-Free Tomorrow. "Nancy Reagan's Afterschool Program", which offered materials to different age levels from day-care to junior high school, was developed. Today, Mrs. Reagan serves as an emeritus director of the BEST Foundation. The current curriculum is called Project ALERT, a two-year middle-school program for substance abuse prevention.

## **Barbara Pierce Bush (1925 – )**

Barbara Pierce Bush grew up in Rye, New York as an avid reader. She met George Bush (1924 - ) at a Christmas dance in 1941, and they became engaged in 1943 just before George entered the navy. Barbara entered Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, but her heart and mind were preoccupied with her fiancé in combat. Though she left school to plan for a December 19<sup>th</sup> wedding,



*Barbara Bush reads to children*

the wedding was delayed after George's plane was shot down and he was declared missing in action. He returned safely home on Christmas Eve and they married January 6, 1945. After World War II ended, Barbara began her career as a devoted wife and mother. One of her favorite activities with her children was

to read stories to them. Teachers discovered her son Neil had dyslexia. Barbara hired tutors, helped him with practice tapes, and bought large print books to assist Neil with this problem.

Illiteracy and the social and economical problems it can cause children and adults became the cause that Mrs. Bush embraced. As First Lady she hosted a Sunday evening radio program in 1990 called, "Mrs. Bush's Story Time." She read children's book selections with the help of such favorites as Mickey Mouse, Big Bird and Bugs Bunny. She watched proudly as President Bush signed the National Literacy Act of 1991. She authored two children's books, both penned from the viewpoint of her beloved dogs, *C. Fred's Story* in 1983 and *Millie's Book* in 1989. All royalties from these books support literacy causes.



*National Literacy Act of 1991 is signed*



*Barbara Bush, The National Literacy Honors*

Barbara Bush launched The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy on March 6, 1989. She serves as Honorary Chairman and President of the foundation. The mission of the foundation is to create literacy as a value in every American family and to support the development of family literacy programs by awarding grants, and encouraging parents to read to their children. The foundation has launched several statewide programs: The Maine Family Literacy Initiative, The First Lady's Family Literacy Initiative for Texas, and The Governor's Family Literacy Initiative for Florida. "A Celebration of Reading" is the foundation's largest fundraiser.

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The First Ladies featured in the exhibit, *Making the Grade: First Ladies and Education* took advantage of the opportunities that education and educational causes afforded them. Their stories celebrate the accomplishments of women throughout history while championing the right to and the benefits of education for all.



## **Making the Grade: First Ladies and Education**

*October 3, 2006 - March 30, 2007*

This exhibition is made possible through collaboration with the following institutions with our sincere thanks:

The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, Washington, DC  
The BEST Foundation for a Drug-Free Tomorrow, Los Angeles, CA  
The Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation, Inc., Plymouth Notch, VT  
The Clarke School for the Deaf Center for Oral Education, Northampton, MA  
George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, College Station, TX  
Head Start Information and Publication Center, Washington, DC  
Massillon Museum, Massillon, OH  
Miami University Archives, Oxford, OH  
President Benjamin Harrison Home, Indianapolis, IN  
Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA  
SUNY Oswego, Penfield Library, Special Collections, Oswego, NY  
Vermont Historical Society, Barre, VT  
Young America's Foundation, The Reagan Ranch, Santa Barbara, CA

Tours: Tuesday - Saturday at 9:30 & 10:30 a.m.  
and 12:30, 1:30 & 2:30 p.m.,  
plus Sundays in June, July & August at  
12:30, 1:30 & 2:30 p.m.

Reservations required for groups of 6 or more only,  
recommended for all others.

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