46 Facts About the First Ladies - mental_floss on YouTube (Ep.211)

List Show
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Hi I'm John Green, welcome to my salon. This is Mental Floss on YouTube, and did you know that Martha Washington joined George in Mount Vernon's winter encampment? Like starting in 1775, George was there for six years running, so Martha would spend her winters with him, even billed her travel expenses to Congress-that would have been a scandal these days.

Anyway, that's the first of many facts about first ladies I'm gonna share with you today as we celebrate America's birthday!

(Libertage)

Happy July fourth everybody, except for non-Americans, for whom it's just, you know, July fourth.

Anyway, let's go!

(Intro)

Abigail Adams used the White House's East Room to hang laundry. Bess Truman, on the other hand, hated the dry cleaning in D.C. so much that she sent her laundry all the way to Kansas City to be washed.

Martha Jefferson was not technically a first lady, because she died 18 years before Thomas was elected. He never remarried, so his daughter, also named Martha Jefferson helpfully, and Dolley Madison occasionally acted as first lady.

Speaking of Dolley, by the way, she loved turbans and allegedly spent a thousand dollars a year on them.

James Monroe's daughter, Eliza, took over first lady duties for her sick mom, Elizabeth, and Eliza's BFF was Hortense de Beauharnais, Napoleon Bonaparte's stepdaughter.

Napoleon, as you can well imagine, was a great stepdad.

Louisa Adams wrote an autobiography titled Adventures of a Nobody, and that's exactly how she felt about being part of the Adams family. I mean the Adams family with one "D", I don't know how she would have felt about being part of the two "D" Addams family.

Anyway, she wrote "Had I stepped onto Noah's Ark I do not think I could have been so utterly astonished." Well, you know, then again, Russell Crowe did that and he's, like, famously down to earth.

On to the next four first ladies, all of whom were possibly cursed. Rachel Jackson died months before her husband took office.

Hannah Van Buren died before she ever stepped foot in the White House.

Anna Harrison was sick when her husband took office and planned to join him at the White House later. One
month after his inauguration, she was packing for D.C. and learned that he had died.

And Letitia Tyler died of a stroke. She was, in fact, the first first lady to die in the White House.

But moving on the happier things, John Tyler's second wife and second first lady, Julia Tyler, introduced the polka to Washington.

Speaking of polka, Sarah Polk was known as "Sahara Sarah" for her ban on hard liquor. Meredith, that was clearly a pun. What did I say about puns?

Margaret Taylor vowed to give up society's pleasures if her husband returned safely from the Mexican War. He did, and so her daughter took on the role of first lady.

Abigail Fillmore started the White House library and even got two thousand dollars from Congress to do so. This, of course, was back when Congress did things.

And before Franklin Pierce was elected, his wife, Jane, prayed every night that he would lose the presidential election. In retrospect, that might have been good, not only for Jane, but also for, you know, America.

James Buchanan's niece, Harriet Lane, served as first lady and she loved American Indian art and worked with law makers to improve education and medical care on America-Indian reservations.

And that brings us to Mary Todd Lincoln, who was a shopaholic and racked up quite a lot of debt at department stores. In an attempt to pay it off, she once tried to sell her used clothes at a store in Manhattan. She made absolutely no money and ended up going further into debt because then she owed the shopkeeper money.

Eliza Johnson brought cows to the White House. They could be found grazing on the front lawn.

The Grants were invited to join the Lincolns at Ford's Theatre on the night that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated but Julia Grant was suspicious of the man who delivered their invitation, so she convinced her husband that they should go to New York to visit their children instead.

When Lucy Hayes was first lady, Washington kids were banned from rolling Easter eggs on the Capital Grounds so she let them use the White House lawn instead and a tradition was born.

President James Garfield was almost assassinated by Charles Guiteau a few weeks before Guiteau actually assassinated him. Guiteau explained at his later trial "Mrs. Garfield looked so thin, and she clung so tenderly to the president's arm that I did not have the heart to fire on him." Well, except then, later of course, he did.

Ellen Arthur, following an historied tradition of American first ladies, died before her husband took office, but before that, she was a well known soprano singer and even performed with the all-male Mendelssohn glee club.

As I've mentioned before on this show, Grover Cleveland knew his wife, Frances, when she was a baby and he was, like twenty eight. In fact, he bought her first baby carriage. They married when she was twenty one and he forty nine.

Caroline Harrison got the White House's first Christmas tree.

While Ida McKinley was ill and bedridden, she knitted and crocheted. She actually crocheted over thirty five hundred slippers for charity. They came in two colors; confederate gray and union blue.

Edith Roosevelt, despite not being a drinker herself, was against prohibition and always had cocktails served at her parties. Real American heroes!

FDR, by the way, the better Roosevelt, but not the Roosevelt on Mount Rushmore.

After Helen "Nellie" Taft took a trip to Japan, she requested for the famous Washington cherry trees to be planted.

Before she met Woodrow, Ellen Wilson was studying art in New York with plans to become a commercial artist. Woodrow Wilson's next wife, Edith, was a direct descendant of Pocahontas.

Before he was president, Warren G. Harding owned a newspaper, The Marion Star, and Florence was its business manager for twelve years.

Grace Coolidge loved the Boston Red Sox and was once invited to sit in the dugout with the team.

During the boxer rebellion, Lou Hoover had the job of transporting supplies to the front line via bicycle. In fact, she was once reported dead and read her own obituary in a Beijing newspaper.

Now, I don't want to pick favorites or anything, but Eleanor Roosevelt gets two facts because, you know, she's the best.

1. She was the only first lady to hold a press conference and only female reporters were allowed to attend. And,

2. Eleanor Roosevelt once snuck out of a White House event with Amelia Earhart. They commandeered an airplane and flew around Baltimore. Eleanor soon got her learner's permit and Amelia was going to teach her how to fly but then, you know.

I, of course, take all my flying lessons from Mickey.

Bess Truman was somewhat less willing to talk to reporters than Eleanor Roosevelt. She once agreed, but questions had to be submitted in writing. Here are some of her answers:
Would she want to be president? No.

Would she ever want Margaret, her daughter, to be First Lady? No.

If she had a son, would she try to bring him up to be president? No.

Did any of the demands of her role as First Lady ever give her stage fright? No comment.

What would you like to do and have your husband do when he is no longer President? Return to Independence.

Wow! I wonder if she enjoyed living in the White House.

Mamie Eisenhower loved the color pink so much that a shade of pink was developed for her. It was called First Lady Pink or Mamie Pink.

Both Miss Piggy's car and our flamingo, by the way... Mamie Pink.

In 1960, when JFK was campaigning in Wisconsin, his wife, Jackie, got on an intercom at a local supermarket and announced "Just keep on with your shopping, while I tell you about my husband, John F. Kennedy." She was just like Bess Truman. Hey Bess, you want to get on the intercom and talk
to-? No.

Lady Bird Johnson was very shy, so when she learned that she was going to be valedictorian of her high school, she let her grades drop on purpose because she didn't want to have to make a graduation speech.

Pat Nixon's real name was Thelma Catherine but she was born on Saint Patrick's Day so her dad started calling her Pat. Lucky she wasn't born on Arbor Day. Plus, when you're born on Arbor Day, it just steals all of the thunder. No one wants to talk about how it's your birthday, all they want to talk about is trees.

On Gerald Ford's last day in office, Betty tap danced on the Cabinet Room conference table. Man, first lady must be a great job!

Time magazine once called Rosalynn Carter, quote "the second most powerful person in the United States." She sat in on Cabinet meetings and was very important to Jimmy Carter's administration.

Nancy Reagan believed strongly in astrology and frequently talked to an astrologer about Ronald's decisions. According to Donald Reagan, "Virtually every major move and decision the Reagans made during my time as White House Chief of Staff was cleared in advance with a woman in San Francisco who drew up horoscopes to make certain that the planets were in a favorable alignment for the enterprise."

In the middle of George H. W. Bush's inaugural parade, Barbara saw weatherman Willard Scott and gave him a hug while he was live on the air.

Hillary Clinton worked at a cannery in Valdez, Alaska during college. She later had an arguably more important job. She was on the legal team to impeach Richard Nixon.

And Laura Bush promised to marry George W. Bush under one condition: she would never have to make a campaign speech. Unfortunately, she forgot to include a second condition: that she would never have to go to one of his art shows.

And finally, I return to my salon to tell you a story about Michelle Obama. She loves the Dick Van Dyke Show and has mentioned it on multiple occasions. When Van Dyke learned this, he sent her a note that said "Thank you for making me famous all over again." Another fun fact, her secret service code name...Renaissance.

Thanks for watching Mental Floss here on YouTube which is made with the help of all these nice people.

Every week we endeavor to answer one of your mind blowing questions. This week's question comes from carps333 who asks "Where does the word 'dud' come from?"

Well, carp, the short answer is we don't know but that never suffices, we're going to tell you the long answer. So, in the fifteenth century, "dud" meant "item of clothing". It then evolved in meaning to "tattered clothing" or "rags". It still means clothes, at least in some circles, as in "Check out these sweet duds!" Anyway, by the seventeenth century, scarecrows who were dressed in castoff clothing were called "dud men", then at some point in the nineteenth century it just came to mean "anything useless or ineffective", and it was during World War One that unexploded artillery shells came to be called "duds".

Anyway, if you have a mind blowing question you'd like answered, please leave it below in comments. We'll answer as many as we can. Thank you again for watching and as we say in my hometown: "Don't forget to be awesome."