

A Valentine's Day Supplement to The McClintock Letter

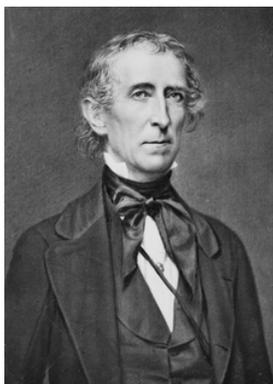
Stop the Presses! The President is in Love!

By William Joseph Reynolds

With the round-the-clock news in our modern world, we are used to seeing breaking news from the White House. It goes without saying, the news emanating from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue plays a role in our history. Imagine, if you would a breaking headline that read that the president, be he a widower or bachelor, was suddenly "in love."

Three times, during our nation's history, editors have stopped the presses to report such events.

The month of February is marked not only by the observance of Presidents' Day, but also Valentine's Day. I thought it would be appropriate to recall the times when Cupid's arrows struck the White House occupant.



In the early 1840s, John Tyler had already made history by becoming the first incumbent vice-president to succeed to the presidency upon the death of a president. Tyler, a former Democrat turned Independent had been placed on the Whig ticket headed by General William Henry Harrison, the hero of the Battle of Tippecanoe, to broaden their support. The ticket of *Tippecanoe and Tyler, too!* was swept into office in a landslide victory for the Whigs. A month after the inauguration, however, President Harrison died.

John Tyler rankled more than a few tail feathers in official Washington when he assumed the full duties of the presidency. Critics angrily denounced him as the Acting President. Within six months of his assuming office, all but one of the cabinet holdovers had resigned. Relationships between the executive and legislative branches worsened, and by 1842, Tyler was officially expelled from the Whig Party.

But the "President Without a Party" also had troubling issues to deal with in his personal life. In September of 1842, his wife of 29 years, Letitia Christian Tyler, died at age 51. She had been in frail health for several years due to a series of strokes. She was the first First Lady to die in the White House; her funeral was held in the East Room. Tyler was devastated by the death of his wife, but was comforted in his grief by the love of his seven children.

On February 28, 1844, Tyler hosted a party for the diplomatic corps aboard the *USS Princeton* on the Potomac River. In mid cruise, one of the ship's guns exploded, killing six passengers including Secretary of State Abel Upshur and New York State Senator David Gardiner. As panic gripped the fleeing passengers, the 53 year old widower president rescued Gardiner's 23 year old daughter Julia, and took her safely to shore. The grief stricken Long Island native fainted in the president's arms when told of her father's death.



Four months later, with the able assistance of former first lady Dolley Madison serving as matchmaker, John Tyler and Julia Gardiner were quietly married on June 26, 1844, on Gardiner's Island on Long Island Sound, New York. Julia, at the age of 24, became the youngest First Lady.

Julia stood 5 feet 3 inches tall, with dark black hair, usually parted in the middle. She had gray eyes, beautiful shoulders and a good figure. She was flirtatious, prone to be indiscreet, and very daring for her day. Impulsive and reckless at times, Julia enjoyed being at center stage.

A product of a wealthy background, Julia had been educated in the finest of private schools in New York. She studied French, arithmetic, literature, history and composition, and by age 15, she was seeking potential suitors for an advantageous marriage. To say that she, at times, served as a trial for her strict parents would be an understatement. At age 19, she had allowed the use of her image for an advertisement for a dry goods store under the title of *The Rose of Long Island*. Seeking to curtail their daughter's flamboyant behavior, the elder Gardiners took Julia on a tour of Europe, where she was presented to King Louis Philippe and Queen Marie Amelia of France. The sights and sounds of the royal palace made lasting impressions on young Julia, and would be remembered during her time at the White House. It was Julia Tyler who first instituted the practice of having *Hail to the Chief* played for the President at state occasions.

Julia Tyler served as the nation's First Lady for a little over eight months, but she nonetheless made quite an impact. She often appeared queen-like during her formal receptions; she brought a certain style and opulence to a rather dull and staid White House. She would often dress in white, black lace or royal purple. Her hair would be adorned by a headpiece made of jet black beads, later changed to diamonds. She was often seen in public with the greyhound given to her by her husband as a wedding gift.

Her whirlwind tenure as First Lady came to a close in March of 1845. Over 3,000 people attended her farewell ball on February 18th, an evening filled with lavish dining and dancing as the Tylers officially bade farewell to Washington.

John and Julia retired to their home Sherwood Forest, outside Williamsburg, Virginia. Over the next fifteen years, Julia would present the former Chief Executive with seven children. As the nation teetered on the brink of Civil War, John Tyler unsuccessfully brokered negotiations between the North and South. Once the Southern states succeeded, and the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, the former President professed his loyalty to his home state of Virginia and the Southern cause by standing for election to the newly established Confederate legislature. But, before he could take his seat, he died in January 1862, at age 71.

Union forces captured Sherwood Forest and Julia was forced to flee to her native state of New York. Although never a wealthy widow, she was able to have her children educated in Canada and Germany. The financial panic in 1873 caused Julia great financial difficulties, so much so that she sold her Long Island estate and returned to Sherwood Forest.

Mrs. Tyler was received as an honored guest at the White House on several occasions during her later years, most notably, when she presented her official portrait to the nation, which was the first portrait of a First Lady to hang in the White House.

In 1881, nearly twenty years after her husband's death, she won her battle to receive a pension as a president's widow. She initially received \$1,200 a year, which was later raised to \$5,000 a year.

Julia spent her final years in Richmond, Virginia, where in 1872, she converted to the Roman Catholic faith. Julia Tyler died in 1889 at age 69.



When bachelor Grover Cleveland became President, his unmarried sister, Rose Elizabeth Cleveland, assumed the role of official White House hostess. Rose Cleveland was more interested in scholarly pursuits than in entertaining cabinet wives and foreign dignitaries, thus she performed her duties only as a favor to her brother and loathed the social burden of the new position. She managed her boredom during receptions by silently conjugating Greek verbs. Much to her relief, Rose Cleveland would not serve as hostess for long.

In fact, by 1886 Americans expected to welcome a new First Lady to the White House. It seemed that Grover Cleveland was quite taken with his former law partner's widow, Emma Folsom. Rose Cleveland had entertained both Emma and her daughter Frances at the White House, and the President's visits with the Folsoms were common knowledge. When the announcement came that the 49 year old President had married a Folsom, no one was surprised; most were shocked, however, to find that he had married not Emma Folsom, but rather her 21 year old daughter, Frances.

Frances Folsom Cleveland was the first woman to marry an incumbent president in the White House. The ceremony, arranged by Rose Cleveland, was simple and small and took place in the Blue Room. "Frankie" was young and beautiful, and the romance of a White House wedding thrilled many Americans, who likened it to royal nuptials. Reporters not only sought details of the event but also followed the newlyweds during their honeymoon.

After the wedding, the press turned Frances into a national celebrity. Journalists were not the only ones interested in the new First Lady. Thousands of Americans deluged Frances with fan letters, so much that she hired a social secretary to deal with the onslaught. Thousands more risked injury as they fought to catch a glimpse of her in public. The fuss bewildered the President, who was intent on wanting her to be a sensible, domestic wife. Indeed, he asserted that he should be pleased, "... not to hear her spoken of as the First Lady of the Land or the mistress of the White House. I want her to be happy...but I should feel very much affected if she lets any other notions into her head."

Frances was a college graduate who played the piano, spoke French and German fluently, read Latin and she dabbled in photography. Although she did not adopt any special project as First Lady, she focused attention on the Washington Home for Friendless Colored Girls by encouraging other white women to support the institution. She also promoted the Colored Christmas Club, a charity providing food, gifts and entertainment to poor children of Washington. Although she supported the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and refrained from drinking, Frances did not ban spirits from the White House, as an earlier predecessor (Lucy Hayes) had done. In addition, while avoiding the issue of women's suffrage, she promoted women's education as a means of achieving equality.



In the White House, Frances was an attentive wife and a gracious hostess. She negotiated a careful balance between the privacy her husband desired and the publicity Americans craved. She greeted and shook hands with thousands at official presentations, she instituted noon receptions to accommodate as many guests as possible, and received visitors on Saturdays so that working women could meet her. She impressed diplomats with her fluent French, thrilled Washington society with her lively social calendar, and patronized the arts. Yet she and her husband often left the White House after the social season, in fact, they took up residence two miles from the White House at an estate that was off limits to the press.

Although the Clevelands tried to minimize press coverage, they could do little about the rampant use of the First Lady's name and likeness in advertisements. Frankie ads abounded and advertisers rarely asked permission from the First Lady before they affixed her image to their products. The exploitation was so egregious that Congress considered a bill to curtail such practices, but it never came to fruition.

Frances generally avoided the political dimension of her husband's administration. Her only real contact with that side of the Cleveland presidency came during election season, when she remained a constant presence. While she was wildly popular, her fame hurt as well as helped her husband. Rumors that the President physically beat Frances dominated Cleveland's 1888 campaign against Benjamin Harrison. The innuendo so outraged the First Lady that she issued a public statement (the first First Lady to do so), where she vigorously denounced the lies. Although she may have dispelled such rumors, Grover Cleveland could not overcome Benjamin Harrison, and the Clevelands packed their bags to leave the White House. But Frances was confident in their eventual return to the presidential mansion, admonishing the staff and servants to "take good care of the place, for we are coming back just four years from today."

Frances and Grover Cleveland did, indeed, return to the White House in 1893 after winning the 1892 presidential election. The couple's eldest child, Ruth, was born in 1891, and six months after returning as First Lady, Frances Cleveland gave birth to the only child of a president ever to be born in the White House, their daughter Esther. And if the American public had been thrilled with a 21 year old White House bride, they were now ecstatic about the Cleveland's new little family. A third daughter, Marion, joined the family in 1895, and by then the public interest in the children bordered on the obsessive. Tourists tried to play with the little girls and even tried to snip locks of their hair.

Meanwhile, Frances had to keep another aspect of the presidency private. When her husband developed mouth cancer, he enlisted her help in covering for him. They did not want to panic the American public or the financial markets as the country was undergoing the effects of a depression in 1893. She complied and vacationed at their summer home in an effort to allay concerns about the president's health even as the President underwent surgery aboard a private yacht on Long Island Sound. When the second term neared completion and with the nation's financial woes cutting dramatically into the President's popularity, the Clevelands were happy to leave the White House in 1897.

Frances Cleveland set an important precedent by focusing attention on the role of First Lady. Although she did not seek publicity, she enjoyed a personal popularity that brought greater attention to and appreciation for the role. From now on, whether she liked it or not, the First Lady was news, not because of what she had or had not done, but simply because of who she was.

Mrs. Cleveland had returned to the White House in March 1893 pregnant with the couple's second child, and now as she prepared to leave, Frances was pregnant again, with the couple's fourth child. Their first son Richard was born later that year. The family was not complete, six years later, came the birth of the couple's fifth child, Francis Grover, in 1903. As in many families, tragedy came in early January 1904 when 12 year old Ruth, the darling of the nation a decade earlier, died suddenly of diphtheria. [Ruth is seen at the far-left in this photo of the President's four children.]

Grover Cleveland died in 1908 at age 71. Five years after her husband's death, Frances became the first of only two presidential widows to remarry. She married a professor of archaeology at Princeton, Thomas Jex Preston.



Frances Cleveland passed away in her sleep in 1947 at the age of 83. Historians revere her as one of our most popular First Ladies.

In early August 1914 the sounds of gunfire throughout Europe heralded the start of the First World War. Calls for American neutrality during the escalating global conflict weighed heavily on the shoulders of the then-occupant of the executive mansion. Woodrow Wilson had spent his entire adult life in academia as a professor of history and had risen to the presidency of Princeton University. From there, he entered politics, winning election to the governorship of New Jersey in 1910. Two years later, thanks largely to a split in the Republican Party, he was elected

President. "What is a school teacher like me doing with a world war?" Wilson sighed, as he sat at the bedside of his beloved wife, Ellen. The two had been married for 29 years and had raised three daughters, but now a kidney ailment was depriving Wilson of his life's companion, at a time when he needed her love and support the most. President Wilson was inconsolable in his grief. His closest aides worried about him and wondered if he could carry on his official duties.



A little more than a year after Ellen Wilson's death came surprising news from Washington that the President was engaged to be married. His bride-to-be, Edith Bolling Galt, was an attractive 43 year old widow of a Washington, DC, jeweler, who could trace her ancestry back to the Indian princess Pocahontas. Again, the circle of the president's closest advisors worried about their leader. "How could he marry again, so soon after his first wife's death?" They argued, and thought it political suicide for 1916 was an election year. The President refused to listen to the growing chorus of protests from those close to him, and in December 1915 he married Edith in a simple ceremony in the bride's Washington, DC, home.



America's possible involvement in the war was a major campaign issue in 1916. Running on a campaign slogan *He kept us out of war*, Wilson defied his political friends and foes, by narrowly winning a second term in the White House. But, just a month after starting his second term, Wilson had no alternative but to ask Congress for a declaration of war.

From the onset of her marriage to the President, Edith Wilson's primary role as First Lady was as her husband's companion and confidante. The President conducted much of his work from a private office in the family quarters of the White House and this arrangement allowed Edith to remain at her husband's side at all times. When America entered the war, the President even shared a secret wartime code with her. When the President worked from the Oval Office, Edith would often sit there listening quietly as he conducted meetings with political leaders and foreign dignitaries.

During the war, Edith was made privy to classified information. Publicly, the First Lady led fundraising efforts by selling the wool sheared from sheep that grazed on the White House lawn, and she volunteered at the Red Cross canteen at Union Station. She instituted certain days of the week when meat, wheat and gasoline were not used, to conserve these resources for the war effort. After the Armistice of November 1918 was signed, ending the war, Edith Wilson became the first First Lady to travel to Europe during her husband's presidency, as her husband led the US delegation that drafted the Treaty of Versailles.

One of the most dramatic chapters in presidential history unfolded in October 1919 when, during a cross country railroad tour to promote America's entry into the League of Nations, the President suffered a debilitating stroke. Mrs. Wilson kept the true seriousness of the president's condition from Congress and the public. Acting upon doctor's suggestions, Mrs. Wilson became the sole contact between the president and his cabinet, requiring that they send to her all pressing matters, memos, correspondence, questions and requests. After deciding that Wilson not step down and that the Vice-President should not even assume temporary responsibility, Mrs. Wilson began what she termed her 'stewardship.' This arrangement would last for the remaining seventeen months of her husband's presidency.

The president was able to recover slightly, but a cruel and crushing blow came when the Republican led Congress defeated the bill that would have allowed the United States to join the League of Nations.

The president who led our country during the war to end all wars, left office as a frail, partially crippled man, but by his side was his constant companion and biggest supporter, his wife, Edith. Mr. Wilson died at his home near 24th & S Streets, in Washington, DC, three years later.

Edith Wilson outlived her husband by nearly 38 years, but she never ceased to be an advocate of her husband's ideals and his vision for a League of Nations. In December 1941, she sat by the side of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt as her husband, Franklin D. Roosevelt, asked Congress for a declaration of war, bringing America into a second global conflict. Edith Wilson's final public appearance came at John F. Kennedy's 1961 inauguration. She died, later that year, at age 89, ironically on the 105th anniversary of her husband's birth.

The White House is, as Harry Truman once described it, a great white jail. It is a lonely place, despite its symbolism as the pinnacle of power. As we have seen, these three presidents, each under unique circumstances, were able to transcend the bonds of the office and reach out to someone who proved to be their life partners in the great political drama we call the American Presidency. How fortunate they each were to be able to open up their hearts and have their love returned by such special women at such a pivotal time in not only their lives, but also in the life of our country.