

Lucy Webb Hayes

1831–1889



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Lucy Webb Hayes was the wife of Rutherford B. Hayes, the nineteenth president of the United States. She set a new standard for first ladies.



As you read the biography below, think about how Lucy Webb Hayes differed from previous first ladies. What example did she set for future first ladies?



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In the presidential election of 1876, Democrats and Republicans went head to head. Important electoral votes were contested and the outcome of the election was not clear. Ultimately, Congress established a commission to determine which candidate should get each vote. With majority control, Republicans on the commission gave the votes to Rutherford B. Hayes. Over the course of the next four years, Hayes' wife Lucy would set a new standard for first ladies in the White House.

Lucy Webb was born in 1831 in Chillicothe, Ohio. When she was two, her father died during a cholera epidemic in Kentucky, where he had gone to free some slaves he had recently inherited. At the age of 18, Lucy graduated from Wesleyan Female College in Cincinnati, Ohio. The school was one of the first colleges in the country to give degrees to women.

In 1850 Rutherford B. Hayes was working as a lawyer in Cincinnati. That summer, Lucy and Hayes were both members of a wedding party. Hayes began to visit Lucy's home and later wrote in his diary that "Her low sweet voice is very winning . . . a heart as true as steel . . . Intellect she has too . . . By George! I am in love with her!" The couple was engaged the following summer.

Once married, Lucy cared for her five children and became active in her husband's political career. She convinced her husband to take a strong stand against slavery. When he decided to volunteer for the Union army, Lucy supported the decision. During the war, Lucy visited her husband's camp to care for the wounded and comfort the dying.

Hayes' record as a military leader led to his election to Congress and three terms as governor of Ohio. When Lucy entered the White House with her husband, she already had experience in public life. She had attended her husband's congressional debates. She had visited schools, hospitals, and prisons. And she had worked to fund an orphanage for veterans'

Reconstruction**Biography**

children. Hayes valued his wife's contributions. He told her that "My life with you has been so happy—so successful—so beyond reasonable anticipations that I think of you with a loving gratitude that I do not know how to express."

As the wife of the nineteenth president, Lucy was praised for her simplicity and good sense. Reporters noted that she was striking and self-confident, the first president's wife to have graduated from college. Lucy continued her charitable work. In the month of January 1880 alone, Lucy and her husband gave \$990 to help the poor in Washington. Lucy took an interest in the completion of a monument to George Washington and encouraged her husband to finish the project. She also became the first to invite children to roll Easter eggs on the White House lawn, a tradition that continues today. The public referred to Lucy as their first lady, a title that had rarely been used until that time.

During her final months in the White House, Lucy was praised as "the most widely known and popular president's wife the country has known." An admirer said she represented "the new woman era." When Hayes' term ended and the couple returned to their home in Ohio, Lucy continued to serve as president of her church's Woman's Home Missionary Society, helping poor women. She suffered a stroke and died in her home in 1889.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Identify** Why was Lucy Hayes praised as a first lady?

2. **Predict** How do you think Lucy Hayes influenced the activities of future first ladies?

ACTIVITY

What made Lucy Hayes such an exceptional first lady? Write a newspaper article about Lucy Hayes that might have appeared during the time her husband was president. Read more about her life to add details if necessary.