

# Lyndon B. Johnson

National Historical Park  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



## Lady Bird Johnson



*I slept, and dreamed that life was beauty.  
I awoke and found that life was duty.*

-- From Mrs. Johnson's embroidered bedroom pillows.

Lady Bird Johnson has lived her life with a quiet determination to experience all that this world has to offer. Her endless curiosity and commitment to duty has led her to expand the boundaries of the many roles she has played in life. Whether as a daughter, student, wife, mother, political partner, business person, first lady or environmental activist, she has been a subtle, but powerful influence on the people around her and a subtle, but significant influence on American society.

### Daughter

Claudia Alta Taylor was born to Minnie and Thomas Taylor of Karnack, Texas on December 22, 1912. Claudia's nursemaid described her "as pretty as a lady bird," an appropriate nickname for a child of nature. After her mother's death in 1918, the five-year-old Lady Bird Taylor began her life long love affair with nature. Hers was a lonesome



childhood, but not a lonely one. Since her two older brothers were away at school she found companionship with her Aunt Effie and in the woods around her home. Her father, whom she adored, gave her nearly complete freedom to roam the small town. This made her self-reliant, but the lack of social interaction made her shy and unsure of herself in public.

### Student

By 1930, Lady Bird Taylor was majoring in history at the University of Texas in Austin. She "stretched [her] perspective of the life of man on this physical planet," by studying everything that she found interesting: chemistry, history, geology, and philosophy. Earning a Bachelor's degree in 1933, she remained another year at the university in order to complete a degree in journalism because in her mind, "newspaper people went more places and met more interesting people, and had more exciting things happen to them." The young woman was eager to take on every challenge the world sent her way.



Frank Muto

### Wife

Lady Bird Taylor's dreams to go places, meet people and have excitement in her life came true, but not because of a career in journalism. In 1934, while visiting a friend in Austin, Taylor was introduced to Lyndon Baines Johnson, then secretary to congressman Richard

Kleberg. It took Johnson only two months to convince Taylor that they should be married and on November 17, 1934, the two were wed in San Antonio, Texas. When Johnson decided to run for congress in 1937, Mrs. Johnson preferred to remain in the background, but she didn't stay there for long. During World War II, Representative Johnson left Washington, D.C.,

for active duty in the Navy and for six months Mrs. Johnson ran his congressional office. Timid at first, her self-confidence grew as she discovered she had a talent for organization and getting things done. As head of Johnson's congressional office Mrs. Johnson overcame her shyness and met the daunting challenge of running an office and running it well.

### Business Woman

In 1943 Mrs. Johnson wanted a new challenge and after doing much research, she decided to buy a radio station in Austin using part of her inheritance. The new venture would be a reliable source of income should her husband someday not be re-elected to office. The failing radio station KTBC was transformed into a profitable enterprise by her hard work, organization, and understanding of business. She personally scrubbed the floors of the dirty



Austin Statesman

building and combed through ledgers to find where money was being lost. Within six months of purchase, the station showed a profit because Mrs. Johnson increased the listening audience by changing the format and securing a license to broadcast twenty-four hours a day. The business expanded to include television stations in Austin, Corpus Christi and Waco. Mrs. Johnson had proved once again that she could succeed at whatever task she set out to accomplish.

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## Mother

The communications business was not the only venture to grow for the Johnsons during the 1940s. Their family expanded with the birth of Lynda Bird in 1944 and Luci Baines in 1947. Like most working mothers, it was a difficult task to balance all her duties. She juggled her time being a helpmate and wife to Johnson in Washington, D.C., running a business in Texas, and raising two children. The girls were brought up to be independent and self-sufficient in much the same manner Mrs. Johnson had been. Having a father that was in politics meant that Lynda and Luci would be in the public eye and would have all their actions scrutinized. They were, however, expected to handle the pressure with the same grace that their mother possessed.



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## Political Partner

Despite all her success, Mrs. Johnson was uneasy speaking in front of crowds, but in keeping with her determination to conquer all challenges laid before her, she took speech lessons to gain confidence in front of crowd. During her husband's race for the senate in 1948, Mrs. Johnson became an indispensable part of the campaign. She was one of the first wives to campaign on her own and make

speeches on her husband's behalf. She was the most visible woman in Johnson's Vice Presidential campaign and was an asset even after the elections. Lyndon Johnson could be difficult, demanding and at times abrasive with everyone around him, including Mrs. Johnson. "Ours was a compelling love," Mrs. Johnson said. "Lyndon bullied me, coaxed me, at times even ridiculed

me, but he made me more than I would have been. I offered him some peace and quiet, maybe a little judgement." She offered him all those things and a good deal more. She was by his side in good times and in bad. He depended on her judgement and encouragement. They were partners that needed each other's strengths to make up for their individual weaknesses.

*"Ours was a compelling love"*



## First Lady

Mrs. Johnson's strength would be tested in November of 1963. President Kennedy's assassination meant her husband was now president and she was the first lady. It was a unique outcome for a woman who had hoped in 1934 that her fiancé would not go in to politics. "I am suddenly on stage," she said at the time, "for a part I never rehearsed." She may have never rehearsed, but after almost thirty years of political life she had done her homework and was ready for the unexpected challenge.

Mrs. Johnson expanded the role of first lady in a way that had not been attempted since Eleanor Roosevelt. The first lady has no official job description, but Mrs. Johnson knew she garnered media attention simply by being married to the president. Using the unexpected publicity to her advantage she became the face to many of her husband's Great Society programs, showing the public what the programs, like Head Start were all about rather than simply talking about them.

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## Environmental Activist

To support the President's conservation programs Mrs. Johnson visited National Parks to draw attention to the benefits and opportunities these protected areas offered. Under the heading of "Beautification," she advocated her own ideas of how nature enhanced the quality of a person's life. In 1965 she formed the Committee for a More Beautiful Capitol to improve the National Mall for tourists and clean up neighborhoods for the local community. Mrs. Johnson's environmental activism led her to

help create the Highway Beautification Act, the first major



legislative campaign initiated by a first lady. President Johnson signed the bill into law in 1965.

Retirement to their Stonewall, Texas ranch in 1969 brought an end to the Johnson's political life, but not to Mrs. Johnson's commitment to the environment. She spearheaded a project to clean up the Colorado River in Austin, and continued the work she and her husband had begun in creating the National and State Parks in Stonewall. As a seventieth birthday present to herself she created the Wildflower Research Center to promote and preserve native flora, including her beloved wildflowers, for generations to come.

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## Mrs. Johnson's Legacy

Mrs. Johnson's legacy is alive and well and her subtle influence will be felt for years to come. Today Americans are the heirs of Mrs. Johnson's dedication to nature and beauty. If you have ever been surprised by an unexpected field of bluebonnets or paintbrushes waving alongside the highway, then you have been touched by one of Mrs.

Johnson's many gifts to the nation. Her growing family of grandchildren and great grandchildren continue to benefit from her sage advice and enthusiasm for life. In her many roles, from political wife to environmental proponent, Lady Bird Johnson has devoted herself to making a difference. Her family and indeed American society was fortunate that a shy East Texas girl grew into the first lady of the land. Her gracious charm, endless curiosity, and quiet

determination continue to fascinate and delight her family and fellow citizens.

