Although most first ladies of the United States were well known during their time in office, history has largely forgotten them and their many contributions to both the presidency and the nation. A closer consideration of the first ladies offers insights into an important facet of U.S. history and reveals the lives of a group of gifted and intriguing women. This book’s goal is to provide the reader with a concise yet thorough profile of those individuals.

The book is organized chronologically according to the time of service of each first lady, beginning with Martha Washington. The main body of the book contains biographies of each presidential spouse who served in the White House during her husband’s presidency.

Technically, the term “first lady” refers to the wife of a president; however, this definition is not as clear-cut as it would initially appear. Another consideration in defining a first lady pertains to those women who functioned as official hostesses for bachelor or widower presidents. Without a spouse available to serve as first lady, presidents typically turned to a daughter or niece. These hostesses are also profiled in the main body of the text in chronological order of service.

Five wives of men who would later become president died before their husbands’ inaugurations: Martha Jefferson, Rachel Jackson, Hannah Van Buren, Ellen Arthur, and Alice Roosevelt. With the exception of Alice Roosevelt (who had been married only a few years at the time of her death), these women had a major part in their husbands’ political careers. Their biographies appear in Appendixes 5 through 8.

The appendixes also include compilations of interesting facts on the first ladies. Comprehensive indexes follow.
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—Robert P. Watson
FIRST LADIES
OF THE UNITED STATES