

# Ladies who became FIRST

## First Ladies of John Tyler – the Tenth (and final installment) in a Series by Randall Priest

This is a story of one President and two ‘First Ladies’ and one ‘stand-in’: Letitia Christian Tyler, Priscilla Cooper Tyler and Julia Gardiner Tyler.

**Letitia Christian Tyler [Figure 1]** was born in 1790 at Cedar Grove plantation in New Kent County, VA, to Col. Robert Christian, a prosperous planter, and Mary Brown Christian. She was shy, quiet, pious, utterly selfless and devoted to family. She met John Tyler [Figure 2] in 1808 when he was a law student. After a five-year courtship, they were married on John’s 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday when she was 22 at her family’s home. Their 29-year marriage seemed to be a happy one.

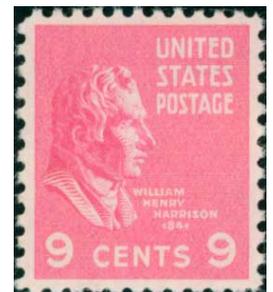
**Figure 1**

Letitia and John had seven children who lived to maturity. During their marriage, Letitia avoided



the limelight, preferring to take care of the domestic responsibilities of the household, including her time at the White House. She suffered a paralytic stroke in 1839 which left her an invalid. However, her mind was bright and sharp and she was able to manage her home and the required entertaining with verbal instruction from her bedroom suite.

Thirty days after the inauguration of William Harrison [Figure 3] to the presidency, he died and Vice President John Tyler assumed the office of President. Letitia turned to her daughter-in-law, Priscilla Cooper Tyler (married to Robert Tyler), to perform the hostess duties. Letitia suffered a



**Figure 3**

second stroke and died on September 10, 1842, at the age of 51. She was

interred at Cedar Grove plantation. Letitia was the first sitting president’s wife to die while he was in office, as well as the youngest First Lady to die.

**Priscilla Cooper Tyler** (the ‘stand-in’) was born Elizabeth Priscilla Cooper to the famous tragedian actor Thomas Apthorpe Cooper and New York socialite Mary Fairlee Cooper. She was lively, extroverted, attractive, and a sparkling conversationalist.



**Figure 2**

Priscilla began to work as an actress at the age of 17, a profession that was considered scandalous at that time. While playing in a production of Othello in Richmond, VA, she met Robert Tyler, the eldest son of John Tyler, when he came backstage to congratulate her on her performance.



**Figure 4**

‘Letty’ Tyler Semple.

Despite their social differences, the couple wed in Bristol, PA, on September 12, 1839, and they moved to Williamsburg, VA, to live with Robert’s family. Priscilla described her mother-in-law as being “the most entirely unselfish person you can imagine... Notwithstanding her very delicate health, mother attends to and regulates all the household affairs and all so quietly that you can’t tell when she does it.”

As stated above, Priscilla handled the social obligations of the First Lady during the first three years of John Tyler’s presidency. She accompanied President Tyler as part of his official party on a presidential tour in 1843. This was the first time a female family member was part of an official party. When Priscilla was not in attendance, the First Lady’s official duties were handled by Tyler’s daughter, Letitia

**Julia Gardiner Tyler [Figure 4]** was John Tyler's second wife. She was born in May, 1820, at Gardiner's Island, Long Island, New York, at David Gardiner, a lawyer and real estate manager, and Juliana McLachlan Gardiner, one of the wealthiest women in New York due to her real estate inheritance.

Julia was quite precocious. In 1839 at the age of 19, she secretly arranged to pose for an engraving advertising the Bogert & Mecamly Emporium in which she appeared on the arm of a gentleman, who was not a relative. This shocked polite society and the family left on a 'grand tour' of Europe in the hope of 'improving her social graces.' The family returned from Europe in 1841 in time for the 1841-1842 winter social season in Washington, D.C., and Julia became the 'darling of the capital.' Friendships with John Tyler's sons Robert and John III brought the Gardiners into the family social circle. Julia's beauty and practiced charm attracted the most eminent men of the city, including the new widower, President John Tyler. In fact, President Tyler's affectionate attention was quite overt. He proposed marriage on February 22, 1843; however, Julia declined. Tyler proposed and Julia declined several times over the next several months.

During the following winter season, David Gardiner, along with Julia and her sister Margaret, joined a Presidential excursion on the new steam frigate *Princeton*. There was an explosion of the naval cannon on board and David Gardiner was among those killed. Julia spoke in later years of how the John Tyler's quiet strength helped sustain her after the death of her adored father. John again proposed and this time Julia consented. Because of her father's recent death, the couple agreed to marry with a minimum of celebration. The president slipped into New York City for the wedding with only his son John III in attendance. In fact, he didn't share his plans with the rest of his children and this caused some difficulties for Julia in the future, especially with John's daughters. The newlyweds spent some time at Tyler's new plantation home, Sherwood Forest, in Charles City County, VA, before turning to Washington, D.C.

Julia took over the First Lady duties for the last eight months of Tyler's presidency. She was the second youngest presidential wife (at 24) to serve as First Lady, and had the shortest tenure. Julia loved the spotlight and made every effort to turn the White House into her own 'royal court.' In her short tenure, Julia:

- Was the first known First Lady to have publicly danced during her White House tenure.
- Was the first known First Lady to have overtly sought newspaper coverage of her social events and to keep her name in the press as part of her 'celebrity.'
- Was the first known First Lady to seek attention as First Lady as she believed it to be a public role worthy of national notice.
- Initiated the practice of playing *Hail to the Chief* when the President entered the room (per anecdotal information).
- Changed the public presidential ceremony so that the President was not in the center of the room, but was against a wall and away from the entrance. This kept people from coming up behind him and was directly related to his security and safety.
- Strenuously supported the President's proposed annexation of Texas and was given the pen Tyler used to sign the joint resolution.

John Tyler did not run for another term as President. The Tylers retired to Sherwood Forest where they had seven children, five boys and two girls. Julia is the only First Lady married to a sitting President whose children were all born after her tenure as First Lady.

Even though born and raised in the North, Julia followed her husband's lead in supporting secession of the South. John Tyler died in 1862, and Julia lived at Sherwood Forest, Jamaica, and Staten Island. Julia died in 1889 at Sherwood Forest after suffering a stroke and was buried at her husband's side at Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, VA.

Reference: Postal Commemorative Society // First Ladies of the White House by Nancy J. Skarmearns  
The Presidents of the U.S. of A. by Frank Freidel // [www.whitehouse.gov/1600/first-ladies](http://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/first-ladies)