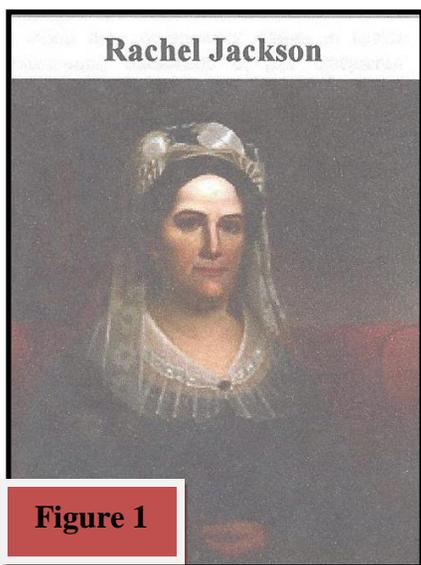


# Ladies who became FIRST

## Rachel Donelson – the Fourth in a Series by Randall Priest



Rachel Donelson Robards Jackson [Figure 1] was born in June, 1767, to Colonel John Donelson and Rachel Stockley Donelson at their home about ten miles from Chatham, Virginia in Pittsylvania County, near the Banister River. She was the 11<sup>th</sup> of 12 children. When Rachel was 12 years old her family moved to Tennessee where Colonel Donelson co-founded what was to become the city of Nashville.

When Rachel was about 19 years old she was attracting much attention from suitors. She was described as having “lustrous black eyes, dark glossy hair, full red lips, brunette complexion, though of brilliant coloring, and a sweet oval face rippling with smiles and dimples.” Her first marriage, at age 20, was to Captain Lewis Robards of Harrodsburg, Kentucky, a landowner and speculator. The marriage was not a happy affair, and after 3 years, in 1790, the two separated.

When Andrew Jackson [Figure 2 & 6] migrated to Nashville, Tennessee, in 1788, he boarded with Rachel Stockley Donelson, the mother of Rachel Robards. Rachel and Andrew began seeing each other, and in 1791, they went to Natchez, Mississippi, and were married. This was after they saw a notice in the paper that said that Lewis Robards had obtained a divorce from Rachel. Soon it was learned that the notice was fake. Robards filed for divorce in 1794 using adultery as the reason. Rachel and Andrew ‘remarried’ in December of that year.



As is the ‘normal’ way presidential election campaigns are run, the other side is always looking for some ‘dirt.’ During the campaign of 1828 supporters of John Quincy Adams [Figure 3], Jackson’s opponent accused Jackson’s wife of being a bigamist, among other things. However, despite the accusations, Jackson won by a landslide.

Looking forward to the inaugural ceremonies coming up in March of 1829, Rachel purchased a beautiful white dress for the inauguration. In late December of 1828 Rachel was not feeling well. She complained of pain in her shoulder, arm and chest. On December 22, 1828, she died suddenly, probably of a heart attack. She was buried in the dress purchased for the inauguration in the garden at The Hermitage, the Jackson plantation.

The Jacksons never had any children of their own; however, they adopted two boys, a child of Rachel’s brother Severn who they named Andrew Jackson, Jr. and an American Indian child found by Jackson on a battlefield with his dead mother who was named Lyncoya. They were also legal guardians of other nephews and nieces of Rachel’s, one of whom was Andrew Jackson Donelson, who eventually married his cousin Emily, one of Rachel’s favorite nieces.

When Jackson was elected President he planned to have young Donelson as his private secretary, with Emily [Figure 4] as company for Rachel, as well as her assistant in hostess duties. After losing his beloved wife, he asked Emily to take over as his main hostess

Figure 3

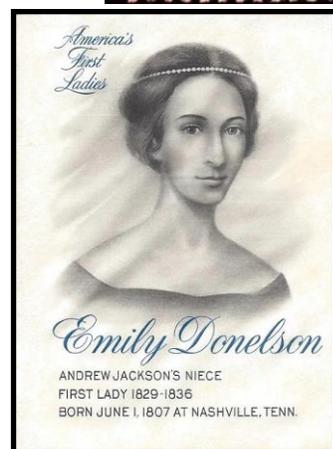


Figure 4

and assume the duties of 'First Lady.' Therefore, at age 21, Emily Donelson took over all the responsibilities of White House hostess. She did this with the aid of her niece, Mary Ann Easton. If you are thinking that a 21 year old could not take on the job of hostess of the White House, you will be happy to learn that Emily was very successful. Not only did she prove her ability, Washington society agreed.



Figure 5

Once again scandal would show its head. The new wife of John Henry Eaton, Jackson's Secretary of War, Peggy Eaton, was snubbed and not allowed to join Washington society. Rumors alleged that the couple had been involved in an extramarital affair while Peggy was married to her first husband who then committed suicide when he discovered the affair. This scandal soon entered the White House and became known as 'the petticoat affair.' President Jackson viewed the treatment of Peggy Eaton as unwarranted and unfair and drew comparison to the treatment of his wife. He began pressuring his subordinates to accept the Eatons; however, Emily sided with the group snubbing the couple and was especially cold towards Peggy.

In the summer of 1830 Emily and Andrew Jackson traveled to The Hermitage [Figure 5 & 6] for a vacation, but the rift between the President and Emily had grown so great that Emily refused to stay at The Hermitage. Rather, Emily stayed with her mother. Even though Emily eventually returned to Washington, D.C., and continued her duties, her health became an issue.



Figure 6

In 1834, Sarah Yorke Jackson [Figure 7], President Jackson's daughter-in-law, assisted with the hostess duties and became acting 'First Lady' with the death of Emily in December of 1836 at age 29 due to tuberculosis. Sarah and her husband, Andrew Jackson, Jr., had been running The Hermitage and had moved in with President Jackson following a fire

which partially destroyed the main house at the plantation. While serving as hostess to the President, Sarah also oversaw the reconstruction of house at The Hermitage. Upon Jackson's retirement from politics, she continued running his household.

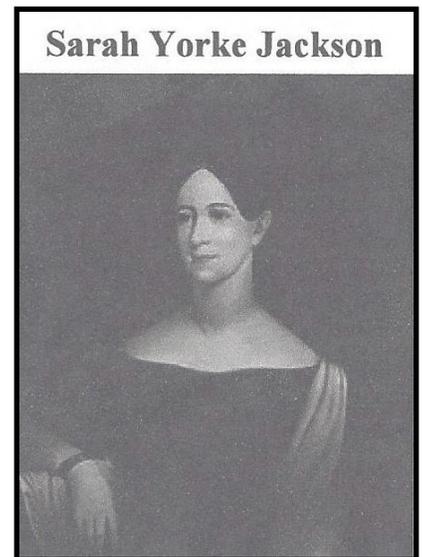


Figure 7

All in all, this shows us that the Jackson Presidency was very much a 'family' affair.

Reference:

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