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First Ladies: Sarah Childress Polk

Lead: The wife of the tenth President of the United States was the ideal political spouse: devoted, principled, and ambitious.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: In 1823 James Knox Polk was stuck in what he considered a dead end job as a clerk employed by the Tennessee legislature. He asked Andrew Jackson, just beginning his first run for the Presidency, what advice he would give for success in politics. Jackson told him, "stop this

philandering...settle down as a sober married man." "Which lady shall I choose?" asked Polk. "The one who will never give you no trouble," replied Jackson, "you know her well." "You mean Sarah Childress?" Polk asked, thought a minute, went out and asked her to marry him. He never regretted the choice.

Sarah was the daughter of a well-to-do merchant and planter from Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Joel Childress made sure his daughter received an excellent education. He sent her back east to school at a Moravian Academy for Females in Salem, North Carolina. In addition to the fine schooling, unusual for a woman of the day, she got religion and

developed into a devout and austere Presbyterian. Sarah Childress was ambitious, she accepted the proposal of young James Polk on the condition that he would run for the state House of Representatives. After hesitating, he made the plunge and won. They were married in 1824 and by the next year had moved up to the U.S. House of Representatives and to the national political stage.

In 1844 Polk won the nomination of the Whig Party and the Presidency. While he was in the White House Sarah did all she could to carry through his program to expand the United States out to the Pacific Coast. She served as his informal private secretary and shared his absolute

confidence. She was a Sabbatarian and discouraged business in the Executive mansion on Sundays. People quickly learned to avoid the White House on that day or they would be invited to attend church with the President and his formidable First Lady.

After leaving office in 1849 President Polk's health collapsed and he died at fifty-five. Sarah Polk never re-married and spent the balance of her 88 years in devoted service to his memory.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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