

First Ladies: Observations by Alan Lowe and Diana Carlin (part one)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 31, 2026)

Carolyn Krause wrote this four-part series on the First Ladies, which is being presented in the Historically Speaking column related to the July 4 celebration of the 250th birthday of the United States of America—the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

On Mar. 3, 2026, Alan Lowe hosted a panel discussion in Oak Ridge on some of the famous wives of American presidents. The women he hosted – one on stage with him and two on Zoom on a big screen – are authors of the 2024 book “Remember the First Ladies: The Legacies of America’s History-Making Women.” The three authors are Diana B. Carlin (on stage), Anita B. McBride and Nancy Kegan Smith (the latter two were on Zoom).

Lowe has been executive director of the American Science and Energy (AMSE) Museum in Oak Ridge since 2019. The panel discussion was hosted on the stage at AMSE, where Lowe announced that the First Ladies book can be purchased at the AMSE shop. It was the second of four presentations this year by Our American Roots, a series produced by the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club and Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning.

Lowe, who is also executive director of the Atomic History Campus at K-25 in Oak Ridge and CEO of the Oak Ridge Discovery Foundation, previously served at several presidential libraries around the nation. Since 2020 he has started three podcasts.

He became host and producer on the web of his live interviews mostly with authors by phone for the AMSE Science Cast (a segment of which can be heard on WUOT every Saturday at about 9:30 a.m.), the American POTUS (which is a podcast about the presidency) and the American FLOTUS (which is a podcast about the First Ladies of White House fame). You can hear these podcasts by visiting <https://AMSE.Cast.libsyn.com/>, <https://americanpotus.org> and <https://americanflotus.org>.

Lowe said that he started the American FLOTUS podcast two years ago at the suggestion of his friend Nancy Kegan Smith, who called him to announce the formation of the First Ladies Association for Research and Education, or FLARE. So far, the jointly produced podcast has 10 episodes.

Enjoy the quotes and comments by each of the women experts on history-making First Ladies, as well as founders of FLARE, during the panel discussion in Oak Ridge last March, which is Women’s History Month. This article is focused on the comments by Diana Carlin in response to Lowe’s questions and observations. The second article will feature the comments of Anita B. McBride, the third of Nancy Kegan Smith, and the fourth of all three authors and Lowe.

“Tonight, we’re going to look at some of the societal impacts of a selection of First Ladies, mostly from the 20th and 21st centuries,” said Alan Lowe, the panel moderator. “We will look specifically at how they have impacted civil and human rights, health care, the environment and global events.

“The more modern of First Ladies stood on the shoulders of those in the past who figured out how to use the East Wing office to make a difference.”

Lowe asked his first questions of the woman on stage with him at AMSE: Diana Carlin, president of FLARE, professor emerita of communication at Saint Louis University and a retired faculty member and administrator at the University of Kansas.

But first he mentioned First Ladies in the 18th and 19th century. “Even though she likened being a First Lady to being a prisoner of state, like her husband George, Martha Washington was a precedent setter, as she crafted this new role during his service from 1789 to 1797.”

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"Dolly Madison, our third First Lady as wife of President James Madison ('the father of the U.S. Constitution,' 1809-1817), took those beginnings and became a force on the cultural and political life of Washington, through intensive bipartisan connections and entertaining. She became a national icon and is still one today.

"Two important Julias followed in the 19th century – Julia Tyler (wife of President John Tyler, who served from 1841 to 1845) and Julia Grant (wife of President Ulysses Grant, who served from 1869 to 1877). They both furthered the First Lady's social and cultural roles. They also advised their husbands, lobbied for his policies and interacted with congressmen and members of the press.

Another favorite of mine is Sarah Polk, wife of President James Polk of Tennessee, who served from 1845 to 1849. She was involved with her husband as an intelligent, politically astute advisor.

"As we approach the modern era, you will see the First Ladies' roles expanding or contracting a bit, based on the individual involved and the times. I think the big difference between the earlier years and today is that, as influential as they could be in the past, there was no significant structure always to support consistent engagement.

"Especially then in the second half of the 20th century, First Ladies became more empowered and more established to be a consistent part of our governmental structure, and to have the types of societal impacts here and around the world that our panelists will talk about."

"And of course, over that time evolved a much-needed adjustment in our views of the rights and roles of women. The more modern First Ladies both benefited from and contributed to the new perspective on women's rights."

Lowe asked Carlin to speak on Jane Pierce, wife of President Franklin Pierce (1853 to 1857), and the misunderstood Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of President Abraham Lincoln (1861-1865). He is especially famous because he led the nation through the American Civil War and issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared freedom for enslaved people in the Confederate states.

According to Carlin, Jane and Franklin Pierce, "entered the White House about six weeks after their only living child died in front of them in a train accident. She went into mourning."

Two years after the inauguration, she became an activist who was outspoken in her advocacy for the abolition of slavery. As an abolitionist, she listened to the debates on the Kansas-Nebraska Act on Capitol Hill. She urged her husband not to sign the legislation, saying "if you sign this, there will be bloodshed over what happens in these states," Carlin said. "And she was absolutely right."

A few months later, during her husband's term, the New England leaders of the Free State Movement seeking to make Kansas a free state were imprisoned for sedition and sentenced to hanging. Jane financially supported a school for women who were freed from enslavement. Jane's aunt who supported the Kansas Free State movement asked her to intervene with the president, and she did, resulting in the abolitionists being freed. One went on to become the state's first governor. Some of her husband's cabinet members, including Jefferson Davis, were not happy about her actions.

Carlin then spoke about Mary Todd Lincoln, who grew up in Kentucky (Lowe's home state). "She came from a slave-holding family," Carlin said. "During the Civil War, she was misunderstood. Both sides did not trust her and considered her a traitor. She lost brothers and half-brothers in the war who were fighting on both sides."

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Carlin noted that Mary Todd Lincoln had a Black seamstress who told her about the plight of many freed men and women in the Washington, D.C. area. The First Lady's response was to "contribute her own funds to support them."

Mary supported her husband's decision to write and sign the Emancipation Proclamation, Carlin said, noting that Mary had declared that Abe Lincoln's signing of this landmark document to free the enslaved Americans was "one of the things he did that made her most proud."

Carlin pointed out that both Jane Pierce and Mary Todd Lincoln "were in situations where it wasn't easy to be outspoken, but they chose to speak out on issues they cared about."

A First Lady known for her support of women's rights was Betty Ford, wife of Gerald Ford, president of the United States from 1974 to 1977, after President Richard Nixon (1969 to 1974) resigned during the aftermath of the Watergate scandal.

Both Pat Nixon and Betty Ford publicly supported the Equal Rights Amendment proposed by Congress on Mar. 22, 1972. Betty spoke out strongly on the need to pass the amendment in 1975, which was the International Year of the Woman. As a result, there were many more letters to the White House supporting the amendment than opposing it.

Betty was accused of using taxpayer dollars to call state legislators, Carlin said. "She had a private phone line put in that she paid for by herself so she could make the calls."

The amendment states that "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." The ERA has never been officially ratified as the 28th amendment to the U.S. Constitution because it lacked approval from 38 states by the 1982 deadline. Only 35 states voted to ratify it by 1982.

Next: Anita McBride and Alan Lowe share stories about a few more First Ladies.



Alan Lowe speaks on the First Ladies from the AMSE stage before interviewing Diana Carlin, a co-author of the 2024 book "Remember the First Ladies: The Legacies of America's History-Making Women."
(Courtesy of Ray Smith)

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Alan Lowe shares the AMSE stage with Diana Carlin while Nancy Kegan Smith and Anita McBride wait their turn on Zoom to weigh in on some of the most interesting, accomplished First Ladies. (Courtesy of Ray Smith)



Diana Carlin (Courtesy of Ray Smith)

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I was pleased to give Diana a tour of Oak Ridge history (Courtesy of Ray Smith)

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Kris Light shows Diana her snowflake photos and jewelry as this shop has become a standard stopping place for my history tours after lunch at the Soup Kitchen (Courtesy of Ray Smith)