

First Ladies: Observations by Three Authors and Alan Lowe (part four)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 21, 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 fourth article will feature the comments of the three women participants and Alan Lowe on topics such as the impacts of First Ladies on healthcare, the environment and international issues.

Several First Ladies had important impacts on health and healthcare, the environment and international issues. Alan Lowe, panel moderator, asked for comments on these achievements.

Anita McBride had mentioned Michelle Obama’s emphasis on the importance of eating nutritious food and exercising in her initiative, ‘Let’s Move About Childhood Obesity.’

Diana Carlin talked about the impacts on healthcare of Betty Ford, Rosalyn Carter and Nancy Reagan.

“Betty Ford stands out as one of those trailblazing First Ladies with respect to healthcare,” Carlin said. “Through the force of their intelligence and personality, she and other First Ladies made a big difference.”

Betty enhanced most people’s understanding of women’s health problems and treatments when she openly talked about her battles with breast cancer and later alcohol addiction. When she had decided to have surgery to remove her breasts, “at the time, you could not say the words breast and cancer on television and radio or write about them,” Carlin said. “Mentioning these words in public was taboo.” In the mid-1970s, large national screening had just begun making mammograms more common.

“Realizing that if her life had changed in 24 hours, a lot of other women out there were having the same traumatic experience. She decided to go public with her diagnosis and to announce her decision to have a mastectomy.”

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Her announcement motivated many women to get screened for breast cancer, according to many letters Carlin read at the Ford Library. "I read letters from women who said, 'You saved my life' and from children who wrote, 'You saved my mother's life.' Some of these letters brought me to tears.

"Thousands of women got a mammogram and found they had breast cancer. Then they got a mastectomy. There was a lot of misunderstanding about what a mastectomy would do to affect one's life."

The image of Betty leaving the hospital after she had her mastectomy alleviated people's fears. Because her husband, Gerald Ford, played football at the University of Michigan, the Washington Redskins gave her a football when she was in the hospital.

As she was leaving the hospital, Carlin said, a news photographer sent out an "iconic picture of her throwing the football to her husband. And she did that to show she still could use her arm like she had used it before the operation. Photos are powerful."

After she left the White House, she suffered from a pinched nerve, Carlin said, noting that because she went public with her new health condition, she received numerous letters from doctors and individuals with pinched nerves telling her what to do for the pain. She ended up taking prescription pain pills that she mistakenly mixed with alcohol some of the time.

Because of her resulting alcohol addiction, her family intervened to get her help. Her successful recovery led to her starting what became the Hazelden Betty Ford Center (a merger in 2014 between the Hazelden Foundation and the Betty Ford Center, founded in 1982 in California by Betty Ford) to help others suffering from addiction. "The Betty Ford Center probably saved an incredible number of lives," Carlin said.

Betty became good friends with Rosalyn Carter, wife of President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981). "In fact, Rosalyn Carter gave one of the eulogies for Betty after she died," Carlin added. The two presidents, Ford and Carter, also became good friends.

From the time she was first lady of Georgia, Rosalyn was an advocate for the protection of health and treatment of mental health issues in both the United States and worldwide. She promoted the importance of vaccines to prevent serious illnesses.

When Rosalyn became First Lady in 1977, she made a public issue of the need to spend more money addressing mental health issues. She was not allowed to head a mental health commission, which drafted legislation, because of nepotism issues, but she served as its honorary head. She attended hearings and testified before Congress in support of legislation addressing mental health issues. Her testimony may have inspired Congress to pass legislation on mental health.

Anita McBride spoke about the two ways that Nancy Reagan, wife of President Ronald Reagan (1981-89), contributed to educating people on healthcare issues through her televised messages. She struggled with breast cancer and had the courage to go public with her decision to have a radical mastectomy, which drew some criticism.

Because the Reagans had lived in Hollywood and had friends whose children had abused drugs, she spoke publicly about drug addiction and stated that she saw it as a "significant health challenge in our country," McBride said. She added that Nancy popularized the moniker "Just say no!" that she recommended people say when offered illegal drugs. She was criticized for this advice, which she first heard from a girl being treated in a drug program.

In 1994, when Hillary was working on health care, Rosalyn Carter joined her on Capitol Hill. Together they testified that the new healthcare legislation Hillary helped write should also call for insurance companies to cover treatments of mental illness and alcohol and drug abuse. Hillary's attempt to get the legislation passed was rejected because of the argument that she was not an elected official.

(Later, Hillary was elected a U.S. senator from New York, where she was considered especially effective. In 2016 she was the first woman to be nominated for president of the United States. Before this panel discussion, Hillary's recipe for chocolate-chip cookies was voted 12-11 by cookie-tasting Oak Ridgers to be the best of the cookie recipes of several other First Ladies!)

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Lowe mentioned that Lady Bird Johnson may have been the most influential of the First Ladies with respect to the environment. She learned to love nature as she grew up in a rural part of East Texas. McBride said the project she chose as First Lady was to advocate for the need to protect the environment.

Much to her dismay, Lady Bird was told by the male staff to call her project "Beautification." She formed the First Lady's Committee for a More Beautiful Nation's Capital and focused on beautifying the public areas in and outside Washington, D.C. She had tulips planted along the George Washington Parkway, which still blossom there along with other flowers each spring,

"She championed behind the scenes and publicly lobbied for the Highway Beautification Act of 1964, which was passed and became known as the Lady Bird Johnson Beautification Act," said McBride. "She also focused on urban renewal and inner-city schools, making those beautiful, too."

In the late 1960s beautification clubs were started all over the United States, both in schools and in other clubs. "Lady Bird gave major speeches on beautification and its importance," McBride said. "Professor Willis Gould, the father of First Lady Studies, wrote a book on her entitled 'Lady Bird Johnson and the Environment.' The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, Texas, was established in her honor."

Lowe asked the authors for insights about the "global influence and impacts of First Ladies." Nancy Kegan Smith spoke about Edith Roosevelt, wife of President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909). She said that in 1905, the well-known and highly respected President Roosevelt was asked to mediate an end to the Russo-Japanese War.

"Edith assisted with the negotiations behind the scenes in one of the most direct acts of diplomacy by a first lady," Smith said. "The president needed intelligence on what the Russians were doing from a British diplomat and a friend in St. Petersburg, Russia, who could technically not communicate directly with Teddy."

"Edith, who was called extremely savvy, was able to get both to relay to her letters of important information. We feel strongly that Edith was very influential in helping President Roosevelt win the Nobel Peace Prize for ending the Russo-Japanese War."

Smith also commented on the diplomatic abilities of Jackie Kennedy, who was beautiful and charming, wore fashionable clothes and spoke French fluently. She was able to "ease the tension" in the relationship between her husband, President John F. Kennedy (1961-1963) and Charles de Gaulle, France's president, and Nikita Khrushchev, leader of the Soviet Union and its Communist Party.

Carlin spoke about the diplomatic impact of Pat Nixon in her travels to almost 70 countries, many of them by herself. She made sure that promised U.S. aid was delivered to Peru after it suffered a massive earthquake. "Pat was all dressed in a suit and heels, climbing over rubble with the Peruvian first lady following her. Pat talked to the people affected by the disaster. The impressed president of Peru gave her the highest award a non-citizen could receive, improving U.S. relations with Peru."

She addressed two foreign parliaments in Africa on behalf of her husband, Carlin said. In February 1972, Richard and Pat Nixon visited China, a major highlight of Nixon's presidency.

"All of his meetings with the leader of China were closed to the press, so Americans watching the nightly news on TV saw China only through Pat Nixon's eyes on her visits to different places," Carlin noted. "At a state dinner, she sat by the Chinese leader, Zhou Enlai, and said about the panda cigarette she was smoking, 'I really like these.' 'The cigarette?' he asked. 'No, I love pandas.' So, he gave the United States its first two pandas, which were sent to the National Zoo in Washington, D.C." Pat is credited with practicing panda diplomacy.

After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 under President George W. Bush, Laura Bush became a champion for the Afghan women who had been denied an education, healthcare and an opportunity to work under the Taliban. During the 20-year war that ended in 2021, Afghan girls and women were educated, their healthcare was improved and many women

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started their own businesses and participated in “rebuilding of their country through economic empowerment,” according to Carlin, adding that Laura visited 77 countries.

Of course, Hillary Clinton is famous for advocating strongly for human and women’s rights internationally as both First Lady in the 1990s and secretary of state during the Obama administration starting in 2009.

Smith spoke about the little-known, overlooked First Lady, Caroline Harrison, wife of President William Henry Harrison, who died in office after only about a month from Mar. 4, 1841, to Apr. 4, 1841. Smith had written about her for In Pursuit, a new national civic education project for which former presidents, first ladies, chief justices, historians, journalists, and other experts have been writing short, specific essays on the leadership lessons to be learned from U.S. presidents and a select number of first ladies.

In a short time, Caroline became the first First Lady to give a public speech as the first president-general of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) she helped form. She publicly championed federal support for the arts. She successfully lobbied Congress for money for White House restoration and drew up plans.

She led a group of women in raising funds to start the Johns Hopkins Medical School on the condition that women would be admitted to the new school. “So, Johns Hopkins was the first medical school to admit women,” Smith said.

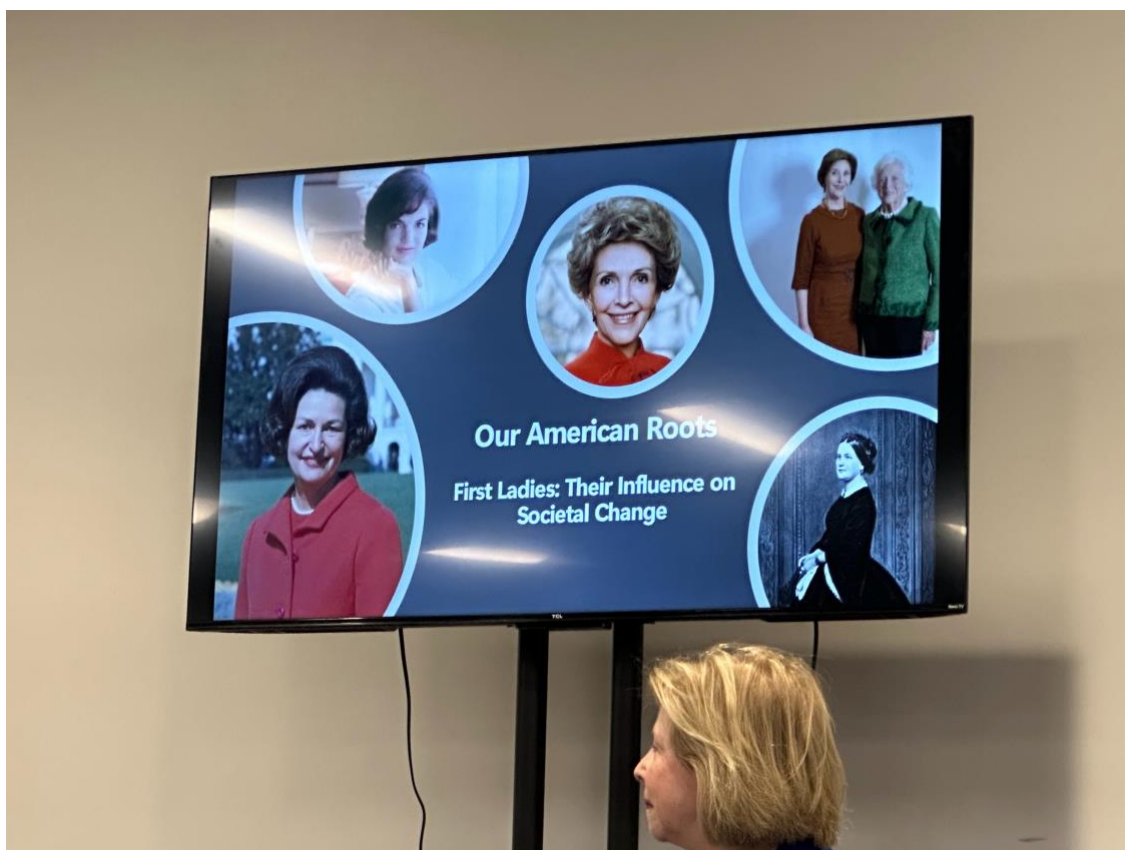
Caroline solved the White House’s rat problem by bringing in ferrets and following a man with a rifle through the attic where he shot many rats. Her visit to the attic allowed her to go through boxes in which she found many china pieces from previous administrations. Caroline Harrison retrieved the pieces and started the famous White House China Collection!



The program used Zoom for two of the three panelists Linda McBride and Nancy Kegan Smith. Diana Carlan was there in person with Alan Lowe (Courtesy of Ray Smith)

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There were several first ladies featured in the discussion (Courtesy of Ray Smith)

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Alan Lowe led the panel discussion (Courtesy of Ray Smith)