

Eleanor Roosevelt Facts

Born

Born October 11, 1884

Died

Died November 7, 1962

Spouse

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: 32nd President of the United States

In Office

March 4, 1933 – April 12, 1945

Accomplishments

Writer, Activist, First Lady

Children

Anna Eleanor
James
Elliott
Franklin
John

Eleanor Roosevelt summary: Eleanor Roosevelt was a writer, activist, and wife of 32nd United States President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Using her intellect and influence, she redefined what it meant to be a female member of the upper echelons of society, First Lady of New York, First Lady of the United States, and ultimately she expanded the role of women in society.

Anna Eleanor Roosevelt was born October 11, 1884, to Elliot Roosevelt, brother of future president Theodore Roosevelt, and Anna Rebecca Hall, a debutant known for her height and beauty. Eleanor, as she was known, was the oldest of three children—brother Elliot was born in 1889, brother Gracie "Hall" was born in 1891. Her father was independently wealthy and never held a salaried position, though he was listed as a partner in a real estate firm, had a brief stint in mine development, and was a big game hunter. He was also an alcoholic and was institutionalized for treatment several times during Eleanor's childhood. She was a shy, serious child, made to feel very self-conscious of her looks.

Eleanor Roosevelt's Education

Eleanor began her education at the age of 7 by being privately tutored in her New York home. She was placed in a convent school in Italy briefly during a family trip to Europe in 1890—her mother and brother Elliot lived in Italy while her father was in an asylum in France being treated for alcoholism. The family returned to the United States in 1891, but her parents remained estranged. In addition, some time between 1889 and 1891, Elliot had an affair with a servant, Katy Mann, and fathered another son, Elliot Roosevelt Mann. Theodore Roosevelt handled the paternity claim in 1891, agreeing to provide support for Katy and Elliot out of court.

In 1892, Anna contracted diphtheria and died on December 7 at the age of 29. Knowing her husband was unstable, Anna had asked her mother, Mary Hall, to care for the children. Grandmother Hall's large home in Manhattan was somber, in spite of the full house—two unmarried aunts and two uncles also lived there, along with the servants. Grandmother Hall felt she had been too lax of a mother with her own children and determined not to make the same mistake with Eleanor and her brothers. In 1893, both of Eleanor's brothers got scarlet fever and four-year-old Elliot died. Eleanor's father died on August 14, 1894, from a seizure that was the result of a suicide attempt; Grandmother Hall did not allow Eleanor and her brother Hall to attend the funeral.

Eleanor turned to books for solace and escape from these staggering personal losses and the stifled upbringing in her Grandmother Hall's house. In the following years, Eleanor continued to receive her grandmother's idea of a proper upbringing—she still studied with the tutor her mother had hired, took classes in French and music, and practiced dancing—all skills of wealthy society women. Summers were spent at her grandmother's Hudson River Valley country house in Tivoli, New York. She had little contact with her father's family but did occasionally visit her Uncle Theodore Roosevelt's family, who also lived in Manhattan and had a summer house in the Hudson Valley.

In 1899, Grandmother Hall enrolled 14-year-old Eleanor at Allenswood Girl's Academy in Wimbledon Common, London, England, a finishing school that she would attend for three years. Allenswood was run by Marie Souvestre, the daughter of philosopher Émile Souvestre. As an educator of children from prominent European and American families, Souvestre was unusual in her determination to expand the minds of her students and help them become intellectually independent. She took Eleanor under her wing, became her friend, mentor, and traveling companion. At Allenswood, Eleanor learned French, German, Italian, English literature, composition, music, drawing, painting, and dance. Souvestre directed her independent study of history, geography, and philosophy, imparting a rigorous intellectual method based in analysis and independent thought. Souvestre also championed the working class, showing Eleanor impoverished areas during their travels and defending working class rights.

The Courtship of Eleanor and Franklin Delano Roosevelt

In September 1901, Eleanor's uncle Theodore became President of the United States after the assassination of William McKinley. In the summer of 1902, Grandmother Hall insisted Eleanor

return to the United States for her social debut. Eleanor spent the summer and fall attending society events leading up to that debut. On a train to Tivoli, she ran into Franklin Delano Roosevelt, her father's godson, and his mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, her father's cousin, who were on their way to their summer house in Hyde Park, New York. Eleanor and Franklin saw each other several more times that fall—Franklin was attending Harvard University and would sometimes have lunch or tea with Eleanor when he was in New York.

On December 14, 1902, Eleanor was presented to society at a debutante ball at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City. She was tall and awkward, felt entirely out of place, and went home early. December 31, 1902, Eleanor attended a party at the White House given by her Uncle Theodore—Franklin also attended, sitting near her at the theater the guests went to on New Year's Day. Throughout 1903, Eleanor attended dinners, parties, and dances, some with Franklin, who was attending Columbia Law School in New York, having graduated from Harvard in the spring of 1903. Their friendship grew and in October 1903, he proposed. Although Eleanor accepted, Franklin's mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, asked them to keep the engagement private; if they felt the same about each other after a year, they could announce it. The couple reluctantly agreed and Eleanor began spending more time with Sara, getting to know her.

That fall, Eleanor also joined the Consumers League, an organization that lobbied for labor laws. She was asked to check on the working conditions of children, many of whom worked at their tenement homes. She was also a member of the Junior League and was assigned to teach calisthenics and dancing at a settlement house, early community centers that allowed educated, wealthy people to provide social services and education to the urban poor.

The Marriage of Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt

In November 1904 Eleanor and Franklin announced their engagement. On March 17, 1905, they were married in New York City. President Theodore Roosevelt, inaugurated on March 4, 1905, walked Eleanor down the aisle and gave her away. The couple moved into a home selected and decorated by Sara Delano Roosevelt, who also selected the staff for the house. Sara held the purse strings and dominated the first years of the marriage—in 1908, she gave the young family a townhouse in New York adjacent to her own, with doors connecting to her townhouse on every floor.

Eleanor spent the next ten years focused on her growing family and supporting her husband in his career. She had six children, five who lived to adulthood—Anna Eleanor (May 3, 1906), James (December 23, 1907), Elliot (September 23, 1910), Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr. (August 17, 1914), and John Aspinwall (March 13, 1916). Her fourth child, also named Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr., was born on March 3, 1909, but died of influenza on November 7 that same year.

In 1907, Franklin passed the New York state bar exam and left Columbia without a degree—he began practicing law with a prominent firm in New York City. In 1910, he entered politics and in 1911 was elected to the state senate as a Democrat from a predominantly Republican district. Of the family's move to Albany, New York, Eleanor said, "For the first time I was going to live on

my own. I wanted to be independent. I was beginning to realize that something within me craved to be an individual."

Franklin's campaign against the Tammany Hall block in the senate opened Eleanor's eyes to politics and government. He supported Woodrow Wilson in the 1912 presidential election and was rewarded with an appointment as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1913. Eleanor managed the transition from New York to Washington, positioning herself and her husband in Washington society. With the United States entry into World War I, she became active in the American Red Cross, volunteered in Navy hospitals, and began to take on a more public political role.

In 1918, Eleanor discovered that Franklin had been having an affair with her social secretary, Lucy Mercer, who would become, at the very least, his life-long friend—although she married in 1920, she spent time with Franklin throughout the remainder of his life. Eleanor offered Franklin a divorce, but her mother-in-law insisted that they stay together. Eleanor then insisted that Franklin end the affair or she would divorce him. Although they remained married, the intimacy was gone and their relationship became more of a political partnership.

Eleanor in Franklin's Political Campaigns

In June 1920, Franklin received the nomination for Vice-President on the Democratic ticket with Governor James M. Cox of Ohio. Eleanor threw herself into the campaign despite her grandmother's and mother-in-law's insistence that her place was not in the public eye. She worked closely with Franklin's advisor and press liaison, Louis Howe, helping to make daily political decisions in the campaign.

When Republican Warren G. Harding won the election, the Roosevelts returned to New York City, where Franklin practiced law and Eleanor joined organizations in which she felt she could make a real difference, rather than just lend her name to a cause: the Women's City Club, the National Consumers League, the Women's Division of the Democratic State Committee, and the New York chapters of the League of Women Voters and the Women's Trade Union League. Her practical approach, urging the organizations she worked with to set realistic goals and prioritize and delegate tasks, won her clout and a measure of respect in New York politics.

During a family vacation at their summer home on Campobello Island in New Brunswick, Canada, in the summer of 1921, Franklin contracted polio and never recovered the full use of his legs. For the next three years, he and Eleanor searched for a cure or therapy that would help him recover. In 1924, he traveled to Warm Springs, Georgia, where he found some relief in the hot springs.

During this same time, Eleanor continued to become more active in New York political circles. She cultivated a public persona and life all her own, including writing articles for magazines and taking part in radio shows. She became the Democratic Women's Committee vice-president and finance chairman and, in 1924, joined the board of the bi-partisan Women's City Club. She also helped establish the non-profit Val-Kill Industries in 1926 in Hyde Park, New York, which was designed to teach local farmers skills to create colonial furniture reproductions to supplement their income. In 1927, she became part owner of and began teaching at the Todhunter School, a

finishing and college preparatory school in New York City for upper-class girls. Like her mentor Marie Souvestre, Eleanor blended a rigorous curriculum with exercises designed to help the girls think for themselves and become aware of the problems facing others.

In 1928, Franklin ran in and won the New York Governor's race. Eleanor pared down her activities outside of Albany, but maintained a measure of independent public and political life by spending three days a week at the family's home in New York City, supporting the Val-Kill factory and teaching classes at Todhunter. The 1932 presidential campaign and Franklin's ambition to become president came as no surprise to Eleanor—he had been working toward the Democratic nomination since being reelected Governor of New York—but her future role and the likely necessity to pare down her own public and political life weighed on her. When he won the election, he asked Eleanor to resign from her positions with the Democratic National Committee, the Todhunter School, the League of Women Voters, the Non-Partisan Legislative Committee and the Women's Trade Union League. She also curtailed her participation on commercial radio and said she would not discuss politics in her magazine articles.

Eleanor Roosevelt Redefines the Role of First Lady

In spite of this, Eleanor began carving out a role as a new kind of First Lady, a role that would satisfy her own need to be independent and active in public and political life. To avoid being relegated to an endless social schedule, she offered to become Franklin's administrative assistant, sorting his mail and acting as a listening post, as the Vice President John Garner's wife had done. Franklin rejected the proposal, so instead, in an interview she gave on March 4, 1933—inauguration day—she set an agenda all her own: she would focus on reducing the White House budget by 25%, simplify the social calendar, and be the president's eyes and ears. Two days later, she held her own press conference—the first and only First Lady to do so—and announced she would have a "get together" with female reporters once a week. She greeted guests at the White House herself, refused Secret Service protection, and converted the Lincoln bedroom into her study.

Throughout Franklin's first 100 days, she used her influence in the Democratic National Committee to urge the administration to appoint women to influential positions in New Deal programs. Rather than jump behind New Deal programs, she waited to see how they were implemented and made suggestions for improvements and alternatives and pushed hard to have oversights addressed, such as the plight of unemployed women and youth. Throughout her husband's presidency, she traveled extensively, visiting relief projects, observing working and living conditions, and providing Franklin and the administration with her findings.

In August 1933 her first monthly column for *Woman's Home Companion* was published. Titled "I Want You to Write to Me," Eleanor invited the readers to write her with "the particular problems which puzzle or sadden you, but I also want you to write me about what has brought joy into your life, and how you are adjusting yourself to the new conditions in this amazing changing world." By January 1934, she had received 300,000 letters and opened a valuable discussion forum that helped propel her husband's New Deal agenda. In 1936, Eleanor began writing *My Day*, a syndicated newspaper column much like her monthly column for the

Woman's Home Companion. She wrote *My Day* six days a week until her death in 1962, missing only four days after Franklin's death in 1945.

Through the 1930s, Eleanor became increasingly interested in civil rights. Although Franklin would not allow her to attend the 1934 and 1935 NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) annual conventions, she did join the Washington, D.C., chapter of the organization, becoming the first white D.C. resident to do so. She eventually became a board member. She actively supported anti-lynching legislation in 1934 and 1935, unlike her husband who was afraid of alienating Southern voters, which he thought would cost him reelection in 1936. When the Daughters of the American Revolution would not allow African American contralto Marion Anderson to give a concert in Constitution Hall in February 1939, Eleanor used her newspaper column to publically announce her resignation from the organization and her reasons for doing so as a means of protest.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and World War II

With the approach of World War II, Eleanor expanded her sphere of influence, doing what she could to help European refugees, including Jews trying to escape Nazi-occupied Europe, and worked with many groups, including the Emergency Rescue Committee and the U.S. Committee for the Care of European Children. She tried to address individual cases on her own, but U.S. immigration laws hampered her efforts. She unsuccessfully lobbied Congress to change the laws.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entered World War II, Eleanor made sure that Franklin did not lose focus on the New Deal and social initiatives begun during the 1930s, because the country was still facing an economic emergency in addition to the new military challenge—a stance that would divide the Roosevelt administration by the 1944 election, Franklin's fourth. Part of the administration—notably Franklin's campaign manager, Robert Hannegan—appeared too focused on winning the election at the cost of issues Eleanor considered important, and she was far less involved in this campaign than in the previous three.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's Death

On April 12, 1945, while on vacation at Warm Springs, Georgia, Franklin suffered a massive stroke and died a few hours later. Eleanor was hurt to discover that Lucy (Mercer) Rutherford had been with Franklin at the time of his death. However, she had also built a life independent of her marriage and soon resumed her activities. Within a week of Franklin's death, she had coordinated the funeral and her move from the White House back to New York, handling 12 years' worth of possessions and papers.

She received many offers and suggestions about what she should do next, and ultimately accepted Harry Truman's appointment to the United States delegation to the United Nations in December 1945. She helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, in her initial assignment to the Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee, helped address the repatriation of displaced people. She became chairman of the Human Rights Commission and during her

seven years as a delegate, traveled the world extensively investigating social, political, and economic conditions.

In 1953, she resigned her UN position so that incoming President Dwight D. Eisenhower could make his own appointment. She volunteered with the American Association for the UN and was an American representative to the World Federation of the UN Associations. She was in great demand as a lecturer and speaker and continued to write many articles and books. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy reappointed her to the UN and later to the National Advisory Committee of the Peace Corps and chair of the President's Commission on the Status of Women.

Although she was ill with aplastic anemia and tuberculosis during the last two years of her life, she refused to slow down, maintaining a busy speaking and writing schedule, advocating for human rights, civil rights, and women's rights. She died November 7, 1962, in New York City and is buried next to her husband on the family estate in Hyde Park, New York.