

Margaret Mackall Smith Taylor, First Lady

1788-1852

Margaret Smith was the wife of Zachary Taylor, a First Lady whose husband was born in Orange County and who was a cousin by marriage to the Madisons (reference "The Taylor-Madison Connection").

A summary from the White House website:

"Margaret Mackall Smith 'Peggy' Taylor served as First Lady from 1849 to 1850 as the wife of the 12th President, Zachary Taylor. Due to ill health, she left, however, much of the official hostess duties to her daughter, Betty Taylor.

"After the election of 1848, a passenger on a Mississippi riverboat struck up a conversation with easy-mannered Gen. Zachary Taylor, not knowing his identity. The passenger remarked that he didn't think the general qualified for the Presidency--was the stranger 'a Taylor man'? 'Not much of one,' came the reply. The general went on to say that he hadn't voted for Taylor, partly because his wife was opposed to sending 'Old Zack' to Washington, 'where she would be obliged to go with him!' It was a truthful answer.

"Moreover, the story goes that Margaret Taylor had taken a vow during the Mexican War: If her husband returned safely, she would never go into society again. In fact she never did, though prepared for it by genteel upbringing.

" 'Peggy' Smith was born in Calvert County, Maryland, daughter of Ann Mackall and Walter Smith, a major in the Revolutionary War according to family tradition. In 1809, visiting a sister in Kentucky, she met young Lieutenant Taylor. They were married the following June, and for a while the young wife stayed on the farm given them as a wedding present by Zachary's father. She bore her first baby there, but cheerfully followed her husband from one remote garrison to another along the western frontier of civilization. An admiring civilian official cited her as one of the 'delicate females...reared in tenderness' who had to educate 'worthy and most interesting' children at a fort in Indian country.

"Two small girls died in 1820 of what Taylor called 'a violent bilious fever,' which left their mother's health impaired; three girls and a boy grew up. Knowing the hardships of a military wife, Taylor opposed his daughters' marrying career soldiers--but each eventually married into the Army.

"The second daughter, Knox, married Lt. Jefferson Davis in gentle defiance of her parents. In a loving letter home, she imagined her mother skimming milk in the cellar or going out to feed the chickens. Within three months of her wedding, Knox died of malaria. Taylor was not reconciled to Davis until they fought together in Mexico; in Washington the second Mrs. Davis became a good friend of Mrs. Taylor's, often calling on her at the White House.

“Though Peggy Taylor welcomed friends and kinfolk in her upstairs sitting room, presided at the family table, met special groups at her husband’s side, and worshiped regularly at St. John’s Episcopal Church, she took no part in formal social functions. She relegated all the duties of official hostess to her youngest daughter, Mary Elizabeth, then 25 and recent bride of Lt. Col. William W.S. Bliss, adjutant and secretary to the President. Betty Bliss filled her role admirably. One observer thought that her manner blended ‘the artlessness of a rustic belle and the grace of a duchess.’”¹

Note: The biographies of the First Ladies on WhiteHouse.gov are from “The First Ladies of the United States of America,” by Allida Black and were copyrighted in 2009 by the White House Historical Association.

A more detailed account from National First Ladies’ Library:



Margaret “Peggy” Mackall Smith Taylor

Photo from “Presiding Ladies of the White House, 1903” by Lila G.A. Woodfall and courtesy of National First Ladies’ Library

The youngest of seven, First Lady Margaret Mackall “Peggy” Smith Taylor was born on September 21, 1788 in Calvert County, Maryland. Her father, a tobacco planter, was Major Walter Smith, also born in Calvert County. He was a major in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. Margaret’s mother was Ann Hance Mackall, also born in Calvert County. Margaret married after 1772 as her father, whose will was dated and probated in 1772, stated that she was single at the time. Both her parents lived and died in Calvert County.

¹ Black, Allida. “Margaret Mackall Smith Taylor.” *The White House*, Google, Accessed July 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/first-families/margaret-mackall-smith-taylor/>

Margaret's paternal great-great grandfather, Captain Richard Smith, was born in England and emigrated to the American colonies in 1649 with his brother Watler. Richard settled in Calvert County and was appointed attorney-general of Maryland by Oliver Cromwell in 1655. Peggy's maternal great-grandfather was an indentured servant from Scotland who bought his freedom by 1668. He remained illiterate throughout his life.



One of the Mackall family plantations in Calvert County, Maryland.

Photo is from the Library of Congress and courtesy of National First Ladies' Library.

Nothing is known of Margaret's early life except that she "was born and raised in a large brick plantation house (destroyed by fire in the early 20th century) to a wealthy and prosperous tobacco plantation family....She was known to be a childhood acquaintance of Nelly Custis, the granddaughter of Martha Washington, who was raised on the Virginia plantation Mount Vernon, thus suggesting that Peggy Mackall socialized with other prominent Virginia and Maryland tobacco-plantation families. She almost certainly was familiar with Georgetown, then a major international tobacco port in present-day Washington, D.C., relatively close to her home."² As the daughter of a wealthy planter, it has been assumed that she received a traditional education for one of her family's standing--sewing, embroidery, music, dancing, management of servants and probably training in grammar and basic mathematics.

"Peggy was only 10 years old when her mother died, and her own sisters were said to be considerably older. She was thus often at the nearby estate of her maternal grandparents, "God's Graces." Her mother and aunts had been celebrated in the colony of Maryland as the "the eight beautiful daughters of General Mackall" and through their marriages and their children, Peggy was related to the most politically powerful families in the state. Her aunt Priscilla married into a prominent family, to Robert Bowie, who was three times Governor of Maryland. Two other aunts - Susanna and Mary - married members of the Maryland Convention of 1774, to Thomas Gantt, Jr. and Edward Reynolds, respectively. Yet another, Barbara, married General Wilkerson.

²Author unknown. "First Lady Biography: Margaret Taylor." *National First Ladies' Library*, Google, Accessed July 8, 2021, <http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=13>

“With the death of her father in 1804 when she was 16 years old, Peggy moved to Louisville, Kentucky to live with her next oldest sibling, her sister Mary Anne, who was married to Samuel Chew--whose own family was also a prominent one in Maryland. Five years later in Louisville, she was introduced to Zachary Taylor by Dr. Alexander Duke, an old Smith family friend, also originally of Calvert County, Maryland.”³

Margaret was twenty-one years old when she married Zachary Taylor, a lieutenant in the U.S. Army. Zachary was born November 24, 1784 at Montebello, Orange County, Virginia, and he died on July 9, 1850 at the White House in Washington, D.C. Peggy and Zachary were married on June 21, 1810 at the double-log home of her sister and brother-in-law, Mary Anne and Samuel Chew. “Members of Taylor’s extended family owned this Louisville home which he and Peggy returned to while not assigned to military outposts.”⁴



Photo is from the Library of Congress and is courtesy of National First Ladies’ Library.

Peggy and Zachary had five daughters and one son: Sarah Knox Taylor (who married Jefferson Davis), Anne Margaret Mackrall Taylor, Octavia Pannel Taylor, Margaret Smith Taylor, Mrs. Elizabeth “Betty” Taylor, and Richard “Dick” Taylor.

Military Life: “For almost forty years, Peggy Taylor had an itinerant life, traveling around the frontier regions of the United States with her husband, directed by his U.S. Army assignments. [Reference article: “Zachary Taylor’s Military Career”.] Zachary Taylor rose to Major

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

(1812-1814), Colonel during the Black Hawk War in 1832, Brigadier General during the Seminole War, (1836-1837), and Major General of the Mexican War, (1845-1847). Peggy would live in forts, tents, log cabins, from the Florida Everglades to the northern garrisons at Fort Crawford [in present-day Wisconsin] to Jefferson Barracks in Missouri.

“There is evidence that she began her marriage and made her intentions to always be with her husband, regardless of the deprivation, while she was in excellent health. One of Margaret Taylor's early trips to rejoin her husband was by horseback after visiting her mother's family, from Calvert County, Maryland to Kentucky. In 1820, however, while at Bayou Sara, Louisiana, she lost two of her five daughters, three-year old Octavia, and one-year old Margaret. Peggy Taylor also fell deathly ill and the scant descriptions of her in her husband's correspondence to family members from that point on often refer to her ‘delicate’ health.”⁵

While stationed on the frontier, Peggy insisted on sending her children to be raised with relatives in the civilized town of Louisville, Kentucky, where they were born and when they could receive the finest education available. “Anne went to a women's academy in Lexington, Kentucky, Sarah to Louisville and Cincinnati, Betty to Philadelphia and Dick to Yale in New Haven, Connecticut. She did not want to expose them to the disease and other hardships more readily encountered in the frontier forts and camps where she continued to live with her husband.

“Settled for four years at Fort Crawford (1832-1836) [in Wisconsin], Peggy lived with her husband and four children in a two-story wood frame house. In the basement at the home, she made dairy products for her family and other residents of the fort, and also had an impressive wine cellar of fine vintage, served to various officials and guests who came to meet with Taylor there. On the property, she raised chickens and planted a flourishing vegetable garden....”⁶

“On 17 June, 1835, Sarah Taylor married Lieutenant Jefferson Davis at the Louisville, Kentucky home of her father's sister...The marriage was in no way an elopement, although not sanctioned by the father. Letters to Peggy, however, indicate that Sarah had the direction of her mother, who was disappointed not to be at the ceremony. The young couple moved to the groom's property on his brother's plantation. On a visit to his sister [at] Locust Grove plantation...Sarah Taylor Davis and Jefferson Davis both contracted malaria. He survived, but Sarah Taylor Davis died... near Bayou Sara, Louisiana where Peggy Taylor's two other children had died fifteen years earlier...[General] Taylor, previously on friendly terms with Davis, refused to acknowledge him for many years....”⁷

“[After] hostilities with Seminoles in Florida had ceased [1858], Peggy Taylor made her way to Tampa where she served as a nurse in the army hospital, tending to the sick and wounded. When her husband left the fort to lead other maneuvers, Peggy stayed [behind] at the fort and kept him apprised of military matters and other activities within the fort community. He relied on her reports and from them informed others of life at Fort Brooke.”⁸

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

In 1838, Peggy Taylor was able to have a break from army life when her husband was promoted and given his leave. They went to Louisville to visit some members of their family who they had not seen in several years. They then proceeded to Washington, D.C. where it was highly likely that Taylor, if not also Peggy, made their first visit to the White House to consult with President Martin Van Buren. From the capital, they went to Philadelphia where they were finally reunited with their daughter Betty, whom they also had not seen for several years.

“Finally, they returned to Louisville. Despite her many personal losses, this period began what was to be a relatively brief time of peace for Peggy Taylor, especially with the company of her daughter Betty. Two years later, Taylor was posted to Baton Rouge. Here she decided to turn down the commodious quarters that were provided for her as the wife of the post commander and decided instead to restore a dilapidated four-room square cottage with a wide veranda surrounding it. A relatively old building remaining from the Spanish commandant there, it sat overlooking the Mississippi River and was shaded by moss trees. It became the first permanent home that she shared with her husband.”⁹



The "Spanish Cottage" in Baton Rouge of Zachary and Margaret Taylor

Photo is courtesy of National First Ladies' Library.

“Although she would make two brief forays to join Taylor while he was stationed at Fort Gibson and Fort Smith in Arkansas, she now preferred living at her Baton Rouge cottage, even if separated from her husband. She also planted a thriving and healthy vegetable garden, began a dairy to provide fresh butter and milk, and taught other military wives to do likewise.

“In 1845, Taylor was called to command the Army and secure U.S. positions near the Rio Grande in what would become known as the Mexican War. For their first time in their marriage, Peggy Taylor decided not to join him at the front. Despite the distraction provided by visits from

⁹ *Ibid.*

her daughter Ann, now married to U.S. Army surgeon Robert Wood (who served with Taylor), Peggy lived in terror that her husband would be killed during his most famous and final command.

“Legend claims that she prayed to God for his safe return and vowed that she would give up all pretenses to re-entering fashionable society in Louisville or anywhere else. The story is highly likely, for during this period of her life, Peggy became deeply religious. At the Baton Rouge command, she took a room in the garrison and turned it into a quiet chapel.

“On occasion, she was able to influence a minister who lived some distance [away] to conduct Sunday services there. Realizing that there was no permanent Protestant church of any kind in the region, Peggy Taylor used her considerable status as the wife of the great Mexican War general, now legendary as ‘Old Rough and Ready,’ to rally area citizens in helping to establish the Episcopalian parish and church of St. James. All that said, Peggy Taylor was at the side of her husband when the city of New Orleans celebrated him with parades and tributes as the great hero of the Mexican War.”¹⁰



According to family legend, this image was one Zachary Taylor carried with him of his wife.

Photo is from Heritage Auctions and courtesy of National First Ladies' Library.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The Campaign and Inauguration: “[Contrary] to what some chroniclers have asserted, Peggy Taylor was in attendance at the 1849 Inauguration ceremony of her husband, surrounded by her tightly-knit and supportive family circle. She turned down an invitation from the outgoing presidential couple, the Polks, to join her husband, family members and other Whig supporters at a White House dinner the night before the ceremony. She also did not appear at the two Inaugural Balls, remaining instead in her Willard Hotel suite with her grandchildren as she had done during the Polk White House dinner the previous evening.”¹¹

First Lady (March 4, 1849 - July 9, 1850): “Peggy Taylor's husband, two daughters, two sons-in-law, and four grandchildren were the primary focus of her brief tenure as a president's wife living in the White House. There seems to have been some sort of estrangement between her son Dick and the President, and the young man was not encouraged to visit the White House, making only one brief attempt to do so. Instead, he remained in Louisiana, overseeing the family's cotton investments. [Peggy's] daughter Ann and grandchildren John, Bob, Sarah and Anna, lived in nearby Baltimore and visited the White House often. Her daughter Betty had wed Colonel William Wallace Bliss, General Taylor's aide, and lived in the mansion [White House] with her parents....”¹²

“To what degree, if any, [Mrs.] Taylor influenced the President on matters is unknown. Although it is unlikely that she took any interest in public affairs, it was clear that President Taylor highly respected her. At an 1849 White House dinner, Varina Davis (the second wife of Jefferson Davis with whom the Taylors had by then reconciled) records that Taylor told her husband, ‘You know my wife was as much of a soldier as I was.’

“Peggy was especially close with her first cousin, Mary Bowie, who had married the prominent attorney and U.S. Senator from Maryland, Reverdy Johnson, also of the Whig Party. Family lore contends that it was upon the persistent influence of Peggy Taylor that her husband appointed Johnson as Attorney General, thus making his wife's kin part of his official family.

“... By the spring of 1850, it was noted that Peggy and her daughter began to show a marked preference for Whig Senator Daniel Webster, who visited frequently and that she joined a conscious effort on the part of the Administration to recognize and entertain those Whig leaders who had first pushed for Taylor's candidacy and felt initially ignored or treated with ingratitude.

“For almost her first full year as First Lady, Peggy focused her attention on the maintenance of the executive household--ordering food for family meals and most likely public entertaining as well, overseeing the slaves and servants duties, supervising the gardens, the dairy and the kitchen. Most of all, she took charge of the well-being of Zachary Taylor as she always had, looking after his diet, health and apparently an increasingly appropriate wardrobe, he having earned a reputation as something of a sloppy dresser.

“The one element of her role as First Lady that Peggy refused to engage herself in was presiding over any public functions as hostess. That was a task she gladly passed to her

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

popular and young daughter, known to the general public and the press by the nickname 'Miss Betty.'

"On a daily basis, Peggy left the White House and attended morning services at St. John's Episcopal Church across Lafayette Square....Special guests, important Whig Party leaders, relatives and old friends from Maryland and Virginia were brought upstairs to be received by the First Lady in her private sitting room in the family quarters. She was well-versed enough in her husband's policies to always take 'every opportunity to drop a good word in company that might help her husband,' according to Varina Davis, and it was recorded that she was the only woman guest at a private dinner hosted by Vice President Millard Fillmore for political figures in his residential hotel suite. She was at the President's side to welcome a Baptist Sunday school group in the East Room on July 4, 1849 and at a ceremony where she accepted honorary lifetime membership in the American Sunday School Union in November of that year. She was also among the women members of the Taylor family to appear at the large public reception in the White House on March 4, 1850 to mark the one-year anniversary of Taylor's Inauguration...."¹³

"Despite the fact that she was not entirely cloistered on the second floor of the [White House] and did attend numerous public events in the state rooms, she was nevertheless rarely recognized or acknowledged by the general public. Standing among a larger group of visiting women relatives who clustered near the President, the presence of the First Lady could often go unnoticed while permitting her the pleasure of seeing how reverently the public responded to her beloved husband. Nevertheless, false rumors began to circulate among the capital society leaders that Mrs. Taylor was something of a crude recluse from the frontier who smoked a corn cob pipe and was kept hidden by her mortified family in the attic. Ironically, any sort of smoke made her 'actively ill,' her grandson recalled.

"In many respects, it was Peggy Taylor's daughter, Mary Elizabeth "Betty" Taylor Bliss (1824-1909) who assumed responsibility for the family's primary interaction with the general public. She married her father's aide, Colonel William Wallace Bliss on 5 December 1846. He was the son of Captain John Bliss of the U.S. Army and his wife Olive Limonds, both of Connecticut.

"Betty was with her mother, husband, sister and brother-in-law at the bedside of the President when, after a sudden gastric illness of five days, he died on July 9, 1850. Peggy could not accept the reality of his demise....She became hysterical and repeated that he had survived worse threats to his life on the battlefield and in the primitive forts where they had lived.

"Peggy begged him not to leave her and upon his death insisted that the ice preserving his body be removed on three occasions just so she could look upon his face one more time. She was unable to attend his funeral in the East Room. Instead, according to Varina Davis, she listened to the funeral dirges and drum marches lying upstairs on her bed, shaking and sobbing...."¹⁴

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Life After the White House: “Peggy Taylor left the White House with her daughter Ann Wood and her family, and lived with them for three months in Baltimore, more composed than she had been in her husband's final days. She then proceeded with her two daughters to New Orleans, where they met up with her son Dick for the legal division of Taylor's estate. Peggy lived a more comfortable life as a widow than she had for her four decades on the frontier, her husband leaving an ample estate...Although she was voted the franking privilege by Congress as a presidential widow, Peggy made no public appearances or remarks in retirement. She initially returned to live with the Blisses in Kentucky but found the constant expressions of sympathy for the late president that her presence always provoked to be too oppressive.

“She then moved to live with her son Dick. In 1849 he had begun an extensive sugar plantation operation in St. Charles Parish, Louisiana and she may have joined him for his inspection trips there on occasion.

“Peggy's only known public appearance as a widow was at his wedding in 1851 to Myrthé Bringierde Lacadière. She also had the chance to enjoy the company of his first child, a daughter. One source claims that she taught Sunday school as a widow, but there is no further documentation provided. All of the Taylor family's personal correspondence was stored at her last home which was burned by Union troops during the Civil War.”¹⁵

Sixty-three years old, the former First Lady died suddenly during a visit with her daughter Betty who [then] lived in East Pascagoula, Mississippi, on August 14, 1852. She was buried by the side of her husband in the Zachary Taylor National Cemetery in Louisville.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*