



## **Eleanor Roosevelt**

**1884-1962**

**American First Lady of the United States, 1933-1945**

**U.S. Delegate to the United Nations**

**Helped Create the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

**“First Lady to the World”**

**ELEANOR ROOSEVELT WAS BORN** on October 11, 1884, in New York City. Her full name was Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, and her parents were Anna and Elliott Roosevelt. They were prominent members of New York society. Anna was from a powerful, wealthy family. Elliott was the younger brother of Theodore Roosevelt, who was President from 1901 to 1909. Eleanor had two younger brothers, Elliott and Hall.

**ELEANOR ROOSEVELT GREW UP** as a very shy, insecure young girl. Her mother, who was beautiful, was rather cold toward her plain daughter. Her father was often ill, and he became an alcoholic.

Eleanor's mother died of diphtheria when she was eight. Just a few months later, Eleanor's brothers came down with scarlet fever. Elliott died, and Eleanor and her brother Hall were sent to live with their grandmother. Two years later, her father died.

Eleanor spent the next six years living with her grandmother in Tivoli, New York. It was an unhappy time for her. She often felt lonely and isolated.

**SCHOOL:** Eleanor studied at home with tutors until an aunt suggested she go away to school in England. So, at 15, Eleanor moved to London to attend Allenswood, a private school for girls.

It was a wonderful experience for her. She learned much under the care of the school's head, Marie Souvestre. Eleanor later said that her teacher gave her confidence, and was her first mentor. Eleanor did well in school, made many friends, and played field hockey on the school team.

**RETURNING TO NEW YORK SOCIETY:** When Eleanor returned to New York in 1902, she didn't go to college. She was from an upper-class family of wealth and privilege. At that time, many girls of her background didn't go to college. Instead, they became part of "society." They had "coming out" parties and spent much of their time socializing.

Eleanor called those kinds of social activities "utter agony." She preferred to help out at the Rivington Street Settlement House. There, she helped teach children from poor families. She also



*Eleanor Roosevelt at age 14, 1898.*

became involved in investigating “sweatshops.” Those were factories where men, women, and children worked in dangerous conditions, for meager wages. Eleanor loved working to improve the lives of others. It was rewarding and deeply meaningful to her.

### **FRANKLIN DELANO**

**ROOSEVELT:** Around this time, Eleanor became reacquainted with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. They were distant cousins—fifth cousins once removed.

They fell in love and married

on March 17, 1905. Their wedding was quite famous. Her uncle, President Teddy Roosevelt, walked her down the aisle.

**A GROWING FAMILY:** Over the next 10 years, the Roosevelts had six children. Their first child, Anna, was born in 1906. Their son James was born in 1907, and Franklin in 1909. Sadly, Franklin died when he was a baby. Elliott was born in 1910, and another son, whom they also named Franklin, was born in 1914. The Roosevelt’s final child, John, was born in 1916.

Those years were busy for the young mother. “For ten years, I was always just getting over having a baby or about to have one,” she wrote later. For many of those years, she lived next door to her mother-in-law, Sara Roosevelt. She was a very powerful presence in the lives of Franklin and Eleanor.

**FRANKLIN'S EARLY POLITICAL CAREER:** In 1911, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected to the New York state senate. It was the beginning of a political career that would take him to the White House.

The family moved to the state capitol, Albany. There, Eleanor made new friends and raised her children. When Franklin was named Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1913, the family moved to Washington, D.C

In 1920, Franklin ran for Vice President on the Democratic ticket. He and his running mate, James Cox, lost. Roosevelt wasn't ready to give up politics. But just one year after losing the Vice Presidential race, he faced the greatest crisis of his life.

**POLIO:** In 1921, when he was 39 years old, Franklin came down with polio. Polio is a disease that can cause crippling, paralysis, and death. Roosevelt's legs became paralyzed. He could not move his legs and was never able to walk again without leg braces and canes.

Franklin fought the disease with courage and determination. He swam and did exercises to regain his strength. Eleanor nursed him through his illness and helped him regain his confidence. She remembered his bravery. "I think probably the thing that took most courage in his life was his mastery of polio. I never heard him complain. He just accepted it as one of those things that was given you as discipline in life."

According to those close to him, having polio changed Franklin's outlook. Living with his own disability, he began to feel a greater compassion for those who were poor and in need.



*Eleanor and Franklin, with Anna and James, 1908.*

**ELEANOR ROOSEVELT'S RISING POLITICAL VOICE:** During the 1920s, Eleanor took a greater role in her husband's political career. She became an advisor to him, and became involved in politics herself. She became a leader in the Democratic Party, the National Consumers League, and the Women's Trade Union League.

She also headed the Civic League's City Planning Department. In that job, she worked to improve housing, transportation, child labor laws, and employment.

Despite his disability, Franklin's political career flourished. In 1924 he gave a rousing speech at the Democratic convention for Presidential candidate Alfred Smith. Eleanor served as Smith's

contact with women voters. Smith didn't win, but he remembered both Roosevelts' political abilities.

**GOVERNOR OF NEW YORK:** In 1928 Alfred Smith encouraged Franklin Roosevelt to run for Governor of New York. He won the election and served as Governor for two terms.

**THE GREAT DEPRESSION:** During Roosevelt's years as Governor, the era known as the "Great Depression" began. It was a time from 1929 to 1939 when up to one-quarter of Americans were out of work. People who had jobs lost them. Those who wanted jobs couldn't find them. Banks closed all over the country. People who had their life savings in banks lost all their money. It was a terrible, frightening time for the entire nation.

Herbert Hoover was President when the Depression began. He did not believe that the federal government should provide large relief programs. Many people in the country disagreed with him. Roosevelt believed that the federal government should provide aid in extremely difficult economic times. He decided to run for President to promote his ideas.

Roosevelt won the Democratic nomination for President in 1932. He promised to bring relief to "the forgotten man." In his speech accepting the nomination, he said, "I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people."

**PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES:** Roosevelt beat Hoover in a landslide victory in 1932. As he took office, Roosevelt knew the country was in despair. In his inaugural address, he reassured the American people. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," he said.



*Eleanor Roosevelt visits a WPA African-American nursery school in Des Moines, Iowa, 1936.*

Throughout his Presidency, Roosevelt inspired Americans with his confidence. Eleanor said, “I have never known a man who gave one a greater sense of security. I never heard him say there was a problem that he thought it was impossible for human beings to solve.”

**ELEANOR ROOSEVELT’S WHITE HOUSE YEARS:** Eleanor Roosevelt was unlike any First Lady the country had ever seen. She transformed the role, becoming very involved with the country’s problems during her husband’s presidency. She visited poor areas all over the

U.S. She listened to her fellow Americans and gave the people hope.

President Roosevelt could not travel easily, because of his disability. Eleanor Roosevelt told the people of the country that she was her husband’s “eyes and ears.” In one year alone, she traveled 40,000 miles to see the economic conditions of the people firsthand. She answered more than 300,000 letters from those she called “forgotten Americans.” She wrote a monthly column in the *Pictorial Review* outlining what she was hearing and seeing.

**“MY DAY”:** In 1935, Eleanor Roosevelt began a daily column called “My Day.” It was hugely successful and appeared in newspapers all over the country. In her columns, she wrote about the problems

facing the nation, and how the government was responding.

She also wrote hundreds of articles for magazines, appeared on the radio, and gave lectures around the country. She became one of the most popular and respected women in the country. Some people disagreed with her and her political views. They felt she overstepped her role as First Lady. But most Americans loved the First Lady for her courage and compassion. And that compassion extended to all Americans, white and black, rich and poor, male and female.

In 1933, Eleanor Roosevelt became the first First Lady to give a press conference. And, because women reporters had been banned from Presidential press conferences, she made it open to women only.

**MARIAN ANDERSON:** In 1939, the D.A.R. (Daughters of the American Revolution), refused to allow the celebrated African-American singer **Marian Anderson** to perform at Constitution Hall, because she was black. Eleanor Roosevelt, a member of the D.A.R. was outraged. She quit the organization.

Harold Ickes, then Interior Secretary, arranged to have Anderson perform at the Lincoln Memorial. It was one of the most memorable concerts ever heard in the nation's capitol.

**WORLD WAR II:** On December 7, 1941, Japanese planes bombed the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, in Honolulu, Hawaii. President Roosevelt immediately asked Congress to declare war. He called it a "day that will live in infamy." Congress approved the President's request, and the U.S. joined the Allies to fight the Axis powers.

Over the next four years, from 1941 to 1945, the U.S. and the





*Eleanor Roosevelt visiting wounded soldiers, 1944.*

Allies fought the Germans and Italians in Europe and Africa. In the Pacific, they fought the Japanese. Millions of American troops and millions of dollars in American-made weapons and supplies went to fight the war.

Once again, Eleanor Roosevelt traveled on behalf of her husband, speaking to Americans. Many American soldiers lost their lives in the war. At home, she offered comfort and concern to citizens dealing with frightening news about the war. Eleanor carried a poem with her to remind her of the sacrifices many were making on behalf of the country. It said, “Dear Lord, lest I continue in my complacent ways, help me to remember that somewhere someone died for me today and help me to remember to ask am I worth dying for.”

**THE DEATH OF PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT:** By 1945, President Roosevelt was very ill with heart disease and high blood pressure.

He died of a stroke on April 12, 1945. Vice President Harry Truman became President. He valued Eleanor Roosevelt, and wanted her to continue to help the nation.

At first Eleanor told everyone “the story is over,” and planned to retire from public life. But soon she was busier than ever. She continued to write her column, lecture, and also published books. She served on the board of the NAACP, and headed up the President’s Commission on the Status of Women. She became involved in the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy to promote peace and control nuclear weapons.

**DELEGATE TO THE UNITED NATIONS:** In 1945, President Truman asked Eleanor to become the U.S. delegate to the United Nations. She accepted. Entering a new phase of her life, she committed herself to bettering the lives of people around the world.

**THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS:** At the U.N., Roosevelt was head of the Human Rights Commission. As part of her duties, she helped write the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document outlines the U. N’s commitment to preserving the rights of the people of all nations. It says, in part: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

When the Universal Declaration was read to the U.N., Eleanor Roosevelt received a standing ovation. She regarded the document as her greatest achievement.

**LATER YEARS:** Eleanor Roosevelt served at the U.N. until 1956. She continued to write, lecture, and travel on behalf of her beliefs. Ill with anemia, tuberculosis, and heart failure, she died on November



*Eleanor Roosevelt with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.*

7, 1962, in New York City. She was praised around the world for her efforts on behalf of social justice for all.

**ELEANOR ROOSEVELT’S HOME AND FAMILY:** Eleanor Roosevelt married Franklin Roosevelt in 1905. They had five children, Anna, James, Elliott, Franklin, and John. In her later life, she enjoyed spending time at her home in upstate New York, Val-Kil. It is now a national park.

**HER LEGACY:** Eleanor Roosevelt became known as the “First Lady of the World” for her tireless work to secure dignity, equality, and justice for all people. She considered her most important legacy to be the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Writing on behalf of the document, she said this:

“Where, after all, do universal rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

### **WORLD WIDE WEB SITES**

<http://www.fdr.library.marist.edu>

<http://www.greatwomen.org/>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eleanor/>

<http://www.udhr.org/history/biographies/>

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/first-ladies/eleanorroosevelt/>