**Biography: Eleanor Roosevelt's Life**

*Eleanor holds up the Universal Declaration on Human Rights*

Although Eleanor Roosevelt came to symbolize the independent and politically active woman of the 20th century, her views early in life reflected those of most women of her time and class. "I took it for granted that men were superior creatures and knew more about politics than women did, and while I realized that if my husband was a suffragistI probably must be, too, I cannot claim to have been a feminist in those early days." For most of her early life, Eleanor was dependent on and deferential to the wills and demands of those around her. But history and personal events combined to propel Eleanor from the rigid confines of Victorian femininity to the center stage of twentieth century political activism.

Eleanor Roosevelt was born in 1884 into a well-established and wealthy New York family. The daughter of society belle Anna Hall and the charming and affluent Elliott Roosevelt, Eleanor was expected to fit a particular mold, to as she put it, "conform to a conventional pattern." Responding to her mother's disappointment at not having a beautiful and graceful daughter, Eleanor developed "an inordinate desire for affection and praise" in response to her "plain looks and lack of manners." To her father, who never found fault with her looks, Eleanor was completely devoted. When her mother died of diphtheria in 1892, Eleanor looked forward to living with her father from whom she had long been separated because of her parents' marital problems. Elliott's death two years later of acute alcoholism left his daughter with a permanent longing for affection. Eleanor remained shy and deferential, always wanting to please, well into her adult years.

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*Eleanor during her youth*

In 1899 her grandmother, with whom Eleanor had been living, sent her to Allenswood, a girls' boarding school in England. It was there that Eleanor, under the tutelage of the progressive Madame Marie Souvestre, began to gain some assertiveness. Souvestre chose Eleanor as her personal traveling companion in Europe and introduced her young pupil to the lifestyle of an independent woman.

Eleanor returned to New York in 1902, apprehensive about making her society debut as a young, fashionable woman of society. Her insecurity about her physical appearance and social graces were only worsened by this experience. Feeling "deeply ashamed" by her lack of suitors, Eleanor remembers being near "nervous collapse" during this socially demanding time. Three years later she married her fifth cousin, [Franklin Delano Roosevelt](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/eleanor-fdr/), a suitable match for a woman of her class. But Franklin's overly-protective mother soon began to extend her control over her new daughter-in-law. "I was beginning to be an entirely dependent person," Eleanor said, "someone always to decide everything for me." Even after Eleanor had borne six children, her mother-in-law still largely dominated over her family life. Her lack of knowledge on political matters showed through while at an afternoon tea in Scotland on her honeymoon. She was asked the difference between America's national and state governments. She responded that she "never realized that there were any differences to explain."

Yet women of Eleanor's class, maintaining a tradition of social responsibility, had already organized themselves into associations like the National Consumers' League and the Women's Trade Union League. The women were part of a general movement during the [Progressive era](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/eleanor-progressive/) to "purify" the corrupt world of men. Dealing with the effects of urbanization and industrialization, female reformers used their associations to eradicate the ills of society. One of their chief accomplishments was the institution of settlement houses which catered specifically to the needs of the immigrants living in tenement slums. Considering it a social duty, Eleanor joined such organizations. While a member of the Junior League of New York in 1903, she taught calisthenics and dancing to immigrants at the Rivington Street House.

Yet [suffrage](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/eleanor-suffrage/) in 1920 granted already active women the opportunity to expand their reforms even further into the public sphere. Concerning the vote, Eleanor stated, "I became a much more ardent citizen and feminist than anyone about me in the intermediate years would have dreamed possible. I had learned that if you wanted to institute any kind of reform you could get far more attention if you had a vote than if you lacked one." As the wife of a rising political official, she was in a prime position to take advantage.

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Eleanor became much more politically involved in the postwar era. In 1921 Franklin was paralyzed by a [polio](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/polio/) attack. From then on, he greatly relied on Eleanor's mobility. He taught her to investigate and observe social conditions closely on her various trips throughout the U.S. so that they could discuss them in detail on her return. Although this interdependency made their political relationship stronger, their personal relationship had been scarred by his affair with Lucy Mercer, Eleanor's social secretary. Feeling betrayed and lonely, Eleanor responded to Franklin's infidelity by demanding that he end the affair, and she took the opportunity to launch out on a life of increased activity. She became closer to a group of individualistic, assertive women friends who traveled in various political and reform circles.

Among them were Marion Dickerman, Nancy Cook, Lorena Hickok, and [Frances Perkins](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/bonus-video/triangle-downey/) -- all women whose independent careers made a profound impression upon Eleanor and in many ways, made up for the lack of emotional fulfillment in her marriage. To [Louis Howe](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/eleanor-howe/), her husband's political adviser, Eleanor credits her "political education." He informed her of the issues surrounding her husband's various campaigns and positions, coached her on making speeches and appearing in public, and encouraged her interest in liberal reforms.

The [Great Depression](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/dustbowl-great-depression/) placed the social reforms in which Eleanor was interested foremost on the public and political stage. Under Franklin Roosevelt's [New Deal](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/dustbowl-new-deal/), government came to have more of a responsibility to and regulatory function in society. Despite a growing hostility toward women in the workplace during the Depression years -- the financial strains of the time contributing to a general regression to traditional gender roles -- Eleanor's position as first lady enabled her to gain publicity for marginal groups. She used her role to hold press conferences especially for female reporters and was instrumental in furthering women's issues within the Democratic party. She actively supported anti-lynching campaigns and fought for fair housing for minorities. For the labor movement, she investigated working conditions and supported the right to organize. These issues and others provided the content for her ["My Day" columns](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/eleanor-my-day/), which she wrote daily from 1936 to 1962. The columns were published nationally and allowed Eleanor to reach millions of Americans.

Yet despite a life of frenzied activity, Eleanor always thrived on her partnership and her friendship with Franklin. His death in 1945 greatly saddened her. She lost a husband, a friend, and one of her most admired political leaders. Just as hurtful was the betrayal she felt at realizing that Franklin was with Lucy Mercer, the woman he had vowed never to see again, when he died. It was Eleanor's daughter, Anna, who had arranged her father's last meeting with Lucy.

After a brief period of seclusion, Eleanor resumed her public activities. Her life in the postwar years was tremendously active and it was during that time that she became a real stateswoman.[President Harry Truman](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/truman/index.html) chose her to head the [United Nations Human Rights Commission](http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/udhr/members_eroos.shtml) in 1945. Three years later she was instrumental in drafting the Declaration of Human Rights. She was a key figure in the Democratic party for the rest of her life. In 1952 and 1956 she supported Adlai Stevenson's campaigns for president, and in 1960 she was a significant presence at the Democratic convention. And as always, she continued to write her "My Day" column.

The novice political spouse who once said, "It was a wife's duty to be interested in whatever interested her husband…" had traveled a long and sometimes lonely road. "I could not, at any age, really be contented to take my place in a warm corner by the fireside and simply look on," she wrote in her final years. This vitality lasted until tuberculosis took her life in 1962.