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## First Lady Biography: Michelle Obama



### MICHELLE LAVAUGHN ROBINSON OBAMA

**Birth:**

Chicago, Illinois  
17 January, 1964

*\*Michelle Obama is the third First Lady born in Chicago, Illinois, after Betty Ford (1918) and Hillary Clinton (1947).*

*Although Nancy Reagan identifies herself as a Chicagoan she was born in Flushing, Queens, New York and spent her childhood in Bethesda, Maryland. Nancy Reagan did spend her adolescent and teenage years in Chicago where she was adopted by her stepfather to whom her mother had remarried.*

*Mary Lincoln also identified herself as a Chicagoan in the first years of her widowhood, having assumed residency in Chicago, first in rented quarters and then in purchasing a home there. She was born in Kentucky and spent her young adult years in Springfield, Illinois.*

**Father:**

Fraser Robinson III, born 1 August 1935, Chicago, Illinois; City of Chicago Waterworks, pump worker and Democratic Party precinct captain (volunteer); died 6 March 1991

**Mother:**

Marian Shields Robinson, born July 1937, Chicago, Illinois; married to Fraser Robinson, 1960 in Chicago; a stay-at-home mother while her children were young, Mrs. Robinson later worked as secretary in the offices of Spiegel Catalogue until the 2008 presidential election

*\*Marian Robinson is only the third First Lady's mother to take up official residence in the White House, following Madge Wallace and Minnie Doud, the mothers of Bess Truman and Mamie Eisenhower, respectively. However, Juliana Gardiner and Emma Folsom, the mothers of Julia Tyler and Frances Cleveland, respectively, also made lengthy stays which might be considered residency.*

#### **Ancestry:**

African. Although Michelle Obama's genealogy has not yet been extensively researched, it is known that at least one of her paternal great-great-grandfathers, James Robinson had been enslaved in Georgetown, South Carolina. In one speech while President Obama was campaigning, he indicated that there is also descent in his wife's family from a European-American ancestor.

#### **Birth Order and Siblings:**

second child, one brother; Craig Robinson, born April 1962, currently head basketball coach of the Oregon State Beavers

#### **Physical Appearance:**

Brown hair, brown eyes, 5 feet, 11 inches tall

*\*Michelle Obama stands at the same height as Eleanor Roosevelt, making them both equally the tallest First Ladies*

#### **Religious Affiliation:**

United Church of Christ

#### **Education:**

*Bryn Mawr Elementary School (renamed Bouchet Academy), Chicago, Illinois, 1970-1977.* Michelle Robinson was such an excellent student that she was able to skip the second grade. In 1975, while enrolled in the sixth grade, she was chosen for a "gifted student" program which permitted her the chance to take advanced biology and French classes at Kennedy-King Community College.

*Whitney Young Magnet High School, Chicago, Illinois, 1977-1981.* Based on her academic excellence, Michelle Robinson was given the chance to attend the first "magnet" high school in Chicago, which afforded students a greater depth and breadth of study with a focus on college preparedness. As a student here, Michelle Robinson was enrolled in advanced-placement classes, was invited and joined the National Honor Society, and served as Student Council Treasurer.

*Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, 1981-1985,* bachelor's degree in Sociology, with a minor degree in African-American Studies. She worked with both the Third World Center and belonged to the Organization of Black Unity, an African-American student group. She graduated cum laude.

*Harvard Law School, Juris doctor degree, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985-1988.* While in attendance, Michelle Robinson joined the Black Law Students Association, which often brought speaks to campus, addressing legal issues and career guidance.

#### **Occupation before Marriage:**

As a young girl, Michelle Robinson has household chores for which she was responsible and shared with her brother.

*Carl A. Fields Center for Equality and Understanding (formerly, Third World Center), Princeton, New Jersey, 1981-1985.* While at Princeton University, Michelle Robinson enrolled in a work-study program, helping to earn part of her tuition. She worked at the center, creating an after-school reading program for the children of the manual workers of the university.

*Harvard Legal Aid Bureau, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985-1988.* While in law school, Michelle Robinson worked to help local residents unable to afford legal advice and representation, on issues ranging from divorce, custody and tenant rights.

*Associate Attorney, Sidley & Austin, 1988-1991.* Upon graduating from Harvard Law School, Michelle Robinson accepted a job as an associate attorney in the Chicago offices

of the law firm Sidley & Austin, where she specialized in intellectual property rights and marketing, representing clients that included AT&T and Union Carbide.

*Assistant to the Mayor, City of Chicago, 1991-1992.* Although her work as an attorney enabled Michelle Obama to meet the substantial monetary debt resulting from her college and law school educations, the death of both her father and a friend provoked a focus on her priorities and values, leading her to determine to build a career in community service. She took a position in this line of professional work as an assistant in the office of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, where she was employed for a year before moving to another position within the city government. Drawing on her business experience from the law firm, she was charged with serving as a liaison between the city and fledgling businesses, seeking to help encourage Chicago economic development.

#### **Marriage:**

28 years old, married 3 October, 1992 to Barack Obama, 31 years old, (born 4 August, 1961, Honolulu, Hawaii, lawyer and community organizer) at Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago, Illinois.

Michelle Robinson first met Barack Obama when he came to work as a summer associate in June of 1989 at Sidley & Austin, where she was already working as an attorney. When he returned to Cambridge, Massachusetts to complete Harvard Law School (graduated 1990), they continue to correspond and date. They became engaged in 1991. Their first home was an apartment in the Hyde Park section of Chicago. Barack Obama taught at the University of Chicago law school and worked at a small civil rights law firm.

#### **Children:**

Two daughters; Malia Ann (born 4 July, 1998) and Natasha "Sasha" (born 7 June, 2001). Both girls are students at Sidwell Friends in Washington, D.C.

*\*Michelle Obama is the first First Lady to have given birth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

#### **Occupation after Marriage:**

*Assistant Commissioner of Planning and Development, in the office of the Mayor of Chicago, (1992-1993).* Michelle Obama was working in this position at the time of her marriage.

*Executive Director of Public Allies Chicago, (1993-1996)* Michelle Obama was the founding director of the Chicago branch of this organization, which seeks to identify potential community leaders among young people from all backgrounds, levels of education and professional experiences and then to train them to assume leadership of both established and fledgling organizations which serve various constituencies in their communities or region. As the founder of the Chicago branch of the organization, which soon became part of the Clinton Administration's AmeriCorps, Michelle Obama was a highly successful fundraiser and executive, helping launch Public Allies successfully.

*Associate Dean of Student Services at the University of Chicago, (1996-2002),* Michelle Obama worked during her pregnancy and after the birth of her two daughters. From her job at Public Allies she went into the employ of the University of Chicago. In her first job there, she increased rates of voluntarism between the student body and the local neighborhood bordering the university.

*Executive Director for community affairs at the University of Chicago Hospitals (2002-2005) and Executive Vice President for community and external affairs (2005-2008)* For the next three years she worked as the and then as its in these two latter roles, she created a network of interchange between the medical staff and the local community, increasing voluntarism in each sector with individuals from the other sector, with doctors and other medical professionals lending their aid and services to area clinics, and also reviewing how the hospital's research might better serve the medical issues and problems uniquely faced by local residents.

Initially leery of her husband's ambition to enter politics because of its instability, she campaigned for him during his failed 2000 race for U.S. Congress and his successful one for the U.S. Senate in 2004. Michelle Obama continued to work full-time and raise her daughters in Chicago while her husband worked as a Senator in Washington and returned home on weekends and recesses. Michelle Obama served on several boards, including TreeHouse Foods, and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

#### **Presidential Campaign and Inauguration:**

Through the latter months of 2007 leading up to the state primaries and caucuses of the 2008 presidential campaign, Michelle Obama continued to work, reducing her hours at the University of Chicago Medical Center while increasing the days she spent speaking to groups throughout the country. She initially limited her absences from home to day trips and then eventually to trips involving one-overnight away from home per week, in order to maintain her responsibilities as mother to her two young daughters. In October 2007, she participated in the first forum ever held which gathered nearly all the spouses of both Democratic and Republican candidates running for the presidency, at the Women's Conference in Long Beach, California, hosted by California's First Lady Maria Shriver.

As the primaries ensued during the winter and spring of 2008, Michelle Obama took an increasingly active role, speaking to voters in different states about her husband but also drawing experiences from her own life that spoke directly to the goals of her husband's potential presidency, finding a personal link to her audiences. Spontaneous remarks she made at Wisconsin campaign event in February 2008, about being proud of her country "for the first time" were interpreted negatively by some Republican media commentators and Cindy McCain, wife of the Republican candidate. Five months later, however, incumbent First Lady Laura Bush defended Mrs. Obama, stating, "I think she probably meant I'm 'more proud,' you know, is what she really meant. I mean, I know that, and that's one of the things you learn and that's one of the really difficult parts both of running for president and for being the spouse of the president, and that is, everything you say is looked at and in many cases misconstrued." The incident had no significant affect on the election.

Michelle Obama also delivered a stirring speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, which won overwhelming praise from the media and public, as reflected in polls. Although she offered her opinion at times on the campaign strategy, she emphasized that she was not a policy advisor. When Barack Obama was elected president in November of 2008, he thanked his wife for her sacrifices to his career and his reliance on her support. Through the campaign, he frequently referred to her as "the rock" which grounded him and their family.

Tremendous media attention and public interest increased on Michelle Obama's clothing as the weeks from Election Day approached Inauguration Day, with sometimes hyperbolic predictions of how she would seek to set a new national style.

More importantly would be the symbolism of her statements about making clothing purchases from popular stores of items at reasonable prices; this conveyed the new First Lady's sense of conscientiousness about, and empathy for the increasing number of American citizens who found their home ownership threatened with bank foreclosures, loss of job or job security, decreased or lost health care and retirement benefits, and plummeting retirement savings.

During the swearing-in ceremony of her husband, Michelle Obama held the historic and fragile Bible which had been used by President Abraham Lincoln for his presidential oath. Most significant of all the events, in terms of Michelle Obama's intentions, was her foregoing a traditional women's event at which an incoming First Lady was traditionally honored the day before the Inauguration; instead, she and the president-elect hosted "a day of service," encouraging the millions of visitors to Washington for the Inaugural, as well as around the nation, to commit to volunteer service in their community. Forecasting her own agenda as First Lady to create a national voluntary service program, she emphasized in her videotaped message about the day that it was her hope such commitments would continue past January 19<sup>th</sup> and be ongoing.

#### **First Lady:**

2009, January 20 - current incumbency

45 years old

In her first weeks as First Lady, Michelle Obama has affirmed that her personal priority is the care of her two daughters. Although both are enrolled in school locally and live full-time at the White House with their parents, they are in a new city with new friends, and suddenly living a life where the most routine aspects of childhood are scrutinized by the press and public. The first manifestation of this public interest was a toy company which created dolls named after her daughters. After the First Lady expressed her dismay, the

company decided to discontinue the line.

In terms of the areas of public issues she intends to focus her attention, Michelle Obama has identified three: helping working mothers find balance between family and employment commitments, providing necessary support for American military families, and encouraging voluntarism in community service.

In her first weeks, the First Lady also made good on her promise to fully learn and integrate herself into her new community of Washington, D.C. She began with a working lunch with the city's mayor and his wife, visits to schools and drop-bys and speeches at the Department of Education and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Coming to the Cabinet Department headquarters were the first of her intended visits to all of the other executive branch divisions. She is making these trips to introduce herself as a personal representative of the new Administration and provide a sense of connection to the thousands of civil service federal employees, emphasizing that they work in concert for the common goals. This is an unprecedented effort by a First Lady. Not since the 1940's when Eleanor Roosevelt hosted several large receptions for women federal workers has a First Lady reached out in such a manner. In her remarks at HHS, Mrs. Obama emphasized that she was there to listen and interact; this recalls the "eyes and ears" role played by Eleanor Roosevelt, Lady Bird Johnson, Pat Nixon, and Rosalynn Carter as they made frequent trips throughout the country meeting and speaking with citizens, hearing their concerns and problems directly and reporting their reactions from such fact-finding missions back to the President.

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