



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### The First Lady of Alexandria

*Alexandria Times, March 6, 2014*

*Image: Betty Ford at Gadsby's Tavern, 1975. Courtesy, Gerald Ford Library.*

In celebration of Women's History Month, Out of the Attic will — in the coming weeks — focus on the significant women who called Alexandria home. And perhaps one of the most remarkable was Elizabeth Ann Bloomer Ford, better known as “Betty,” who was first lady from 1974 to 1977.

Ford largely reinvented the role of first lady, routinely getting involved in controversial political and social issues of her time. Often at odds with her husband and his political party, she sparked vigorous debate around American kitchen tables and water coolers during a period of rapidly changing attitudes.

Born in Chicago in 1918, Ford pursued a promising early career as a dancer and model in New York City, later moving to Grand Rapids, Mich., to be near her mother. In 1948 she married Gerald R. Ford, a Grand Rapids lawyer running for congress.

She had been divorced from her first husband, William Warren, only a year earlier and the wedding date was delayed because of Gerald Ford's concern that voters might disapprove of his marriage to a divorcee.

After he won the election, the Fords moved to 1521 Mount Eagle Place at Parkfairfax in Alexandria where they began raising a family.

In 1955, they moved into a new, Colonial-style home at 514 Crown View Drive, where the family grew to include four children: Michael, John, Steven and Susan. During this time, Betty Ford was active in the lives of her children. She volunteered with the Boy and Girl Scouts, and lent a hand with public school and sporting activities. She also worked with the Alexandria Cancer Fund.

Although both the Nixon and the Ford families spent their early years living at Parkfairfax, Betty Ford and Pat Nixon were very different in composure and style as first ladies. Nixon was a seasoned political wife and rarely expressed contentious opinions. Betty Ford, meanwhile, routinely commented on emerging attitudes involving subjects like sex, abortion, drug use and women's rights.

Conservatives in her husband's party were shocked at her liberal stance, but her approval ratings skyrocketed to about 75 percent — far exceeding her husband's popularity. In perhaps her most selfless role, she actively discussed her trials with breast cancer, as well as alcohol and drug abuse, to assist others afflicted with such conditions.

This 1975 photo of Betty Ford at Gadsby's Tavern, where she served as honorary chair of the Friends of Gadsby's Tavern Museum, captures her love for the city she lived in for 23 years. Although the Fords indicated they would return to their Alexandria home after leaving the White House, they retired to Palm Springs instead.





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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Later, Betty Ford wrote, "For me, leaving the White House wasn't nearly so much of a wrench as leaving our house in Alexandria."

*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*