



## HELEN HERRON

MRS. WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT  
Member No. 178  
1861 – 1943

Daughter of Judge John Williamson Herron (1827 – 1912)  
and Harriet Anne Collins (1833 – 1902)

Elected February 1909  
Colonial State – Connecticut  
Transferred to Connecticut  
Ancestor Governor Thomas Wells

A month before she moved to the White House, Nellie Taft became a Colonial Dame in Ohio. She was a direct descendent of Governor Thomas Wells. She transferred her membership to Connecticut when her husband was teaching at Yale. “After the White House years, Nellie busied herself by writing her memoirs, *Recollections of Full Years*. She enjoyed observing the successes of her children and their families and became very active in the National Society of the Colonial Dames. Along with her husband, she is buried in Arlington National Cemetery”. Her husband was appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in 1921 and the Taft’s lived in Washington, D. C. and both were buried at the National Cemetery at Arlington – she didn’t care a bit for her lineage but she did become interested in colonial architecture.

Helen Louise Herron “Nellie” Taft (June 2, 1861 – May 22, 1943) was the wife of William Howard Taft and First Lady of the United States from 1909 to 1913.

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, the fourth child of Judge John Williamson Herron (1827–1912), a law partner of Rutherford B. Hayes, and Harriet Collins-Herron (1833–1901), Nellie graduated from the Cincinnati College of Music and taught school briefly before her marriage. With her parents, she attended the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary celebration of President and Mrs. Rutherford B. Hayes at the White House in 1877. Her grandfather, Ela Collins and uncle William Collins were both members of Congress.

Two years later, she met William Howard Taft at a bobsledding party in Cincinnati; he was 22 years old, she was 18. He asked her out for the first time in February 1880, but they did not date regularly until 1882. He proposed in April 1885, and she accepted in May. Taft married Nellie on June 19, 1886, at the home of the bride’s parents in Cincinnati. The wedding was performed by the Reverend D.N.A. Hoge of Zanesville, Ohio. Taft’s younger brother Horace Taft was best man. The couple honeymooned one day in New York City and four days at Sea Bright, New Jersey, before setting off on a three-month tour of Europe.

Upon their return, they settled in Cincinnati. Mrs. Taft encouraged her husband’s political career despite his oft-stated preference for the judiciary. She welcomed each step in her husband’s political career: state judge, Solicitor General of the United States, and federal circuit court judge. In 1900 he agreed to take charge of American civil government in the Philippines. Further travel with her husband, who became Secretary of War in 1904, brought a widened interest in world politics and a cosmopolitan circle of friends.

The Tafts had two sons and a daughter. Robert Alphonso Taft (1889–1953) was a political leader, Helen Taft (1891–1987) was an educator, and Charles Phelps Taft II (1897–1983) was a civic leader.

As First Lady, she still took an interest in politics but concentrated on giving the administration a particular social brilliance. Only two months after the inauguration she suffered a severe stroke. An indomitable will had her back in command again within a year. At the New Year’s reception for 1910, she appeared in white crepe embroidered with gold—a graceful figure. Her daughter left college for a year to take part in social life at the White House, and the gaiety of Helen’s debut enhanced the 1910 Christmas season.

During four years famous for social events, the most outstanding was an evening garden party for several thousand guests on the Tafts’ silver wedding anniversary, June 19, 1911. Mrs. Taft remembered this as “the greatest event” in her White House experience. Her own book, *Recollections of Full Years*, gives her account of a varied life. And the capital’s famous Japanese cherry trees, planted around the Tidal Basin at her request, form a notable memorial.

Her public role in Washington did not end when she left the White House. In 1921 her husband was appointed Chief Justice of the United States—the position he had desired most of all—and she continued to live in the capital after his death in 1930. Retaining to the end her love of travel and of classical music, she died at her home on May 22, 1943.

### WHITE HOUSE BIOGRAPHY

Helen Herron Taft As “the only unusual incident” of her girlhood, “Nellie” Herron Taft recalled her visit to the White House at 17 as the guest of President and Mrs. Hayes, intimate friends of her parents. Fourth child of Harriet Collins and John W. Herron, born in 1861, she had grown up in Cincinnati, Ohio, attending a private school in the city and studying music with enthusiasm.

The year after this notable visit she met “that adorable Will Taft,” a tall young lawyer, at a sledding party. They found intellectual interests in common; friendship matured into love; Helen Herron and William Howard Taft were married in 1886. A “treasure,” he called her, “self-contained, independent, and of unusual application.” He wondered if they would ever reach Washington “in any official capacity” and suggested to her that they might — when she became Secretary of the Treasury!

No woman could hope for such a career in that day, but Mrs. Taft welcomed each step in her husband’s: state judge, Solicitor General of the United States, federal circuit judge. In 1900 he agreed to take charge of American civil government in the Philippines. By now the children numbered three: Robert, Helen, and Charles. The delight with which she undertook the journey, and her willingness to take her children to a country still unsettled by war, were characteristic of this woman who loved a challenge. In Manila she handled a difficult role with enthusiasm and tact; she relished travel to Japan and China, and a special diplomatic mission to the Vatican.

Further travel with her husband, who became Secretary of War in 1904, brought a widened interest in world politics and a cosmopolitan circle of friends. His election to the Presidency in 1908 gave her a position she had long desired.

### THE NATIONAL CYCLOPEDIA OF AMERICAN GENEALOGY

TAFT, Helen Herron, wife of Pres. Taft, was born in Cincinnati, O., June 2, 1861, daughter of John Williamson and Harriet (Collins) Herron. Her first American ancestor was Francis Herron, who came from County Antrim, Ireland, in 1734, and settled at Pequa, Lancaster CO., Pa. He married Mary McNutt, and the line of descent is traced through their son William, who married Nancy Reynolds, and their son Francis Herron, who married Jane Wills and was Mrs. Taft’s grandfather. She was educated first at Miss Nourse’s private school in Cincinnati, and then at the University of Cincinnati. Ever since she was a small child she had known William Howard Taft, and she was married to him in her father’s home in Cincinnati on June 19, 1886. The union is probably the wisest act in act in Pres. Taft’s brilliant career. It was through his wife’s influence that he resigned his position on the bench to re-enter actively into politics, and later accepted the post of governor of the Philippines. Mrs. Taft has accompanied her husband on his various trips to every part of the world. She is passionately fond of music, and is one of the founders and patronesses of the Cincinnati Orchestra Association. She speaks more than one foreign language, and is an art connoisseur of discriminating taste.

Her mother Harriet Collins Herron (1833 – 1902) was the daughter of Ela and Maria Clinton Collins (1791 – 1871) and granddaughter of Reverend Isaac Clinton and Charity Wells (Spring Grove Cemetery Record for Maria C. Collins)