

IN PURSUIT



LESSON #35 • FROM IDA MCKINLEY

BEING VISIBLE WHILE VULNERABLE IS A FORM OF COURAGE



by Michelle Gullion

Ida Saxton McKinley was the only First Lady to serve her role while living with epilepsy. She experienced sudden, brief seizures, during which those around her would cover her face with a cloth until the convulsions passed. Afterward, Ida would resume her activities, although she often felt weak and tired. At a time when many individuals with disabilities were stigmatized and hidden from public view, Ida bravely fulfilled her duties as the White House hostess.

Born into a wealthy family, Ida's early life was marked by privilege and opportunity, and her keen intelligence was both admired and envied in her hometown of Canton, Ohio. After receiving a well-rounded education, she worked as a cashier in her father's bank during the late 1860s—an unprecedented role for a young woman that raised eyebrows in the community. She was an active and popular member of the town, dedicating her free time to fundraising for a new building for her Presbyterian church and teaching Sunday school.

When Ida Saxton, known as the “Belle of Canton,” married the rising politician and future 25th President of the United States, Major William McKinley, their union seemed destined for greatness. However, life would prove to be anything but a fairy tale.



Mrs. William McKinley | Photographed by Barnett McFee Clinedinst

On Christmas Day in 1871, Ida gave birth to her first daughter, Katie. Less than two years later, Ida experienced complications during her second pregnancy, likely suffering from preeclampsia, a condition caused by high blood pressure. In the 1870s, there were no methods for measuring blood pressure or treatments available to manage it. During the delivery, Ida suffered a stroke that left her with sporadic seizures and weakness on the right side of her body. Both mother and child faced serious health challenges, leading to the loss of her second daughter, also named Ida, who lived for only four months. Tragically, two years later, her beloved three-year-old daughter, Katie, died from a childhood illness. The immense devastation and shared sorrow that Ida and William McKinley experienced ultimately deepened their devotion to one another. Ida slowly learned to navigate a new way of life with a disability. Now her physical activities were confined, uncertain, and solitary while she battled with mental depression and grief.

Interspersed with the difficult times were moments when Ida led a relatively normal life. On the McKinleys' tenth wedding anniversary in 1881, Ida and William hiked up the Sierra Mountains with walking sticks. However, the unpredictability of her seizures remained a constant concern. William sought out the best doctors in the country for her treatment. The only medication known to help with epilepsy was potassium bromide, which required careful dosage monitoring. This medication also had side effects, and Ida suffered from complications, including feelings of desolation, headaches, and loss of appetite. Like many people who do not feel well, Ida could sometimes be cross and demanding, and doctors did not appreciate her noncompliance with their orders.

Due to Ida McKinley's disabilities, the McKinley family lived a transient lifestyle, often staying in hotel suites in Washington, DC, Columbus, Ohio, or on the top floor of Ida's ancestral home in Canton. Aides, nurses, and family assisted with her day-to-day needs. Despite her challenges, Ida found ways to stay mentally active and perfected her needlework skills, making over three thousand pairs of crocheted slippers in various sizes. When visitors came to see her husband, William, they were often greeted by Ida, absorbed in her crochet work. She warmly inquired about their reasons for visiting and their personal lives. If a family member was ill or a baby was expected, she would send them home with a pair of her crocheted slippers. Ida's gentle approach made each guest feel at ease, and the witty banter between the McKinleys fostered personal connections and loyalty.

Ida was a steadfast supporter and defender of her husband, William, and he, in turn, carefully guarded her disabilities and medications. They never publicly discussed her seizures, as during their lifetime, epilepsy was often misunderstood and mistakenly equated with insanity. Many people diagnosed with epilepsy were

institutionalized, and there was no specific name to define the condition; instead, the term “invalid” was used to label those who were considered “sickly.”

When Ida experienced a seizure during an event, William would discreetly cover her face until it passed before resuming the conversation. His political influence helped keep her condition a secret. Although she was respected as the president’s wife, her identity as a woman with thoughts and feelings was often overlooked. Washington elites gossiped about Ida, noting her pale complexion and demeanor, and rumors circulated that she made a hissing sound while her face was covered.

As William’s presidential duties increased, he could no longer personally oversee Ida’s medications. This led to her suffering the effects of bromide poisoning. For the first time, the White House physician took charge of her medications, which improved her health. However, she continued to be publicly perceived as a stereotypical invalid. Critics of the McKinleys exploited this perception, and the widespread ableism of the time harmed Ida’s reputation. Historians have often viewed President McKinley’s career through the lens of Ida’s perceived invalidism as a significant drawback.

On the morning of September 6, 1901 – just six months after his Inauguration – the McKinleys took a special railcar to view Niagara Falls. Ida opted to rest while William attended a public reception at the Pan-American Exposition. An assassin concealed his gun in the line of greeters and shot William in the abdomen. Ida maintained a brave demeanor, taking carriage rides each day until his death eight days later, understanding how much hope she represented to the public. She even told the press, “It is a great pleasure to know the deep interest and sympathy felt by the American people. The case is progressing so favorably that we are all very happy.”

Close family and friends remarked on Ida’s mental and physical strength during this time, noting that she did not suffer any epileptic seizures. However, after President McKinley’s death, both the White House physician and her family forbade her from appearing in official public mourning and at the burial. Angered by this exclusion, she turned to the new President Theodore Roosevelt, who granted her wish to accompany her husband’s coffin back to Washington before returning to their home in Ohio.

Once her deep grief settled, Ida returned to her work of crocheting slippers, playing cards with friends, and enjoying daily rides as the McKinley National Monument was built in Canton. She commissioned four stained-glass windows depicting biblical figures for her husband’s beloved parish in Canton, the First Methodist Episcopal Church. The portraits represent Joshua the Soldier as a fighter for moral good, Moses the Lawgiver as a defender of justice, John the Humanitarian as someone with compassion for everyone, and Cornelius the Centurion as a world leader. These figures commemorate how Ida wanted her husband’s presidential legacy to be remembered.

Ida McKinley accepted her disability and embraced her role as First Lady. Remarkably, she did not allow the stereotyping and stigma associated with epilepsy to hinder her actions during a time of significant medical ignorance. She continuously did what she could within her limitations, stood up for herself and those she loved, and spoke out about what she believed was right. Despite this, she remained subject to the ableism of a society that often failed to embrace those with disabilities.