

# FIRST LADY OF THE MINT

*Wyoming's only female governor, Nellie Tayloe Ross went on to serve as U.S. Mint director for 20 years.*

**N**ELLIE TAYLOE ROSS was an amazing woman and a pioneer on many fronts. As the first female governor in the United States and the first female U.S. Mint director, she was one of the most well-known political figures of the first half of the 20th century and paved the way for women in the United States to attain high-ranking government positions.

## Early Years

Ross was born Nellie Davis Tayloe on November 29, 1876, to James Wynn Tayloe and Elizabeth Blair Green Tayloe in St. Joseph, Missouri. Ross' childhood was unremarkable, despite having prominent ancestors on both sides of her family. Her father was from an influential southern family that included the builder of the Octagon House, the famous residence of U.S. President James Madison and his wife, Dolly, after the British burned the

White House in 1814. Her mother's side boasted a distant relative of George Washington.

In the aftermath of the Civil

War, the Tayloes struggled to keep their farm in operation. In 1884, when Ross was 7 years old, their home burned down,

forcing her parents to sell the farm in Missouri and move to Miltonvale, Kansas, where they had relatives. Her father started a grocery store, which was successful for a few years. Ross went to school and became involved in church activities. However, misfortune seemed to worm its way into the Tayloe's lives wherever they went. Ross's 4-year-old sister, Mattie, died just days after the family's first Christmas in Miltonvale, and five years later, Ross' mother died from typho-malaria. In 1892, after Ross graduated from Miltonvale High School, the family lost its business and home. Her father decided to move the Tayloe household to Omaha, Nebraska, to be close to her mother's brother and his wife.



▲ **THE OCTAGON HOUSE** in Washington, D.C., was built for Colonel John Tayloe III (1770-1828), a plantation owner and military officer who served in the Virginia House of Delegates and Virginia Senate. He also was a forebear of Nellie Tayloe Ross.

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA.ORG



*Nellie Tayloe Ross defeated many other Democrats running for governor of Wyoming and emerged victorious in November 1924.*

Ross lived in Omaha for the next 10 years and made ends meet teaching private music lessons. She then enrolled in the city's two-year teaching program and taught kindergarten for four years. After taking a trip to Europe that exposed her to urban and cosmopolitan culture, she visited relatives in Dover, Tennessee. While there, she met the love of her life, William Bradford Ross, who, in the early 1920s, would be elected the 12th governor of Wyoming.

After William passed the Tennessee State Bar and practiced law for a year, he moved to Wyoming and opened his own law firm. Nellie and William kept in touch by mail and eventually married on October 11, 1902. Eight-and-a-half months later, Nellie gave birth to twin sons. The Ross family had another son two years later who tragically died when he was 10 months old. (He was smothered by blankets



▲ **NELLIE T. ROSS** was asked to finish her husband's term as Wyoming's governor after his untimely death. In the 1925 photograph below, she's shown with Utah's Governor George H. Dern.



while riding in his buggy.)

William won the gubernatorial election in 1922, a surprise victory to many because he was a Democrat in a Republican-controlled state. Halfway into his term, however, William died due to complications from an appendectomy. At his funeral, the Democratic Party asked Nellie to finish her husband's term. She accepted the nomination for two reasons: first, because she needed to support her family; and second, because she wanted William's programs to continue.

### **First Governor**

Nellie Tayloe Ross defeated many other Democrats running for governor of Wyoming and emerged victorious in November 1924. Her greatest advantage over other candidates was that voters sympathized with the loss of her husband. (The distinction of electing the first woman governor of the United States also would be a source of pride for Wyoming residents.)

On January 5, 1925, Ross took the oath of office. During her term, she called for tax cuts, child labor laws, banking reform, assistance to farmers, and laws strengthening Prohibition and protection for women laborers. Because she was a Democrat in a predominately Republican state, only some of her legislation passed, such as her proposals to help farmers and prohibit child labor.

Although Ross never planned a career in politics, she ended up becoming one of the best-known politicians in the first half of the 20th century. She remained adamant that she did not want any special preference because she was a woman. She was de-



*In her 1934 closing report, Ross noted that the mint's production had risen to 65.7 million coins—a 72 percent increase over the previous year.*

terminated to succeed on her own merits. She was re-nominated in the 1926 gubernatorial election, but lost her bid because she no longer had the voters' sympathy.

She served only one elected term in office, but she did not leave the political scene altogether. She was a member of the Democratic National Committee and later became a vice chair in the organization. In the 1932 U.S. presidential election, Ross worked with the party's Women's Speakers Bureau, campaigning for Franklin D. Roosevelt. When Roosevelt was elected, he announced he would name a number of women to several high-ranking government positions. He appointed Ross director of the U.S. Mint, making her the first woman to head any federal agency.

### **U.S. Mint Director**

In April 1933, Ross increased the U.S. Mint's facilities, production and staffing—the largest expansion in mint history. When Roosevelt signed Executive Order 6102, which required all individuals to turn in their gold bullion, certificates and coins, Ross had to lease storage space while new vaults were built in Philadelphia and Denver, and a new mint was constructed in San Francisco. While overseeing this huge construction initiative, she also had to meet the rising demand for coinage.

In her 1934 closing report, Ross noted that the mint's production had risen to 65.7 million coins—a 72-percent increase over the previous year—and the value of the precious metals collected exceeded \$1 billion. She also updated security to protect the vast wealth. The mint established its own set of



PHOTOS: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS & HERITAGE AUCTIONS (COIN)

▲ **AS U.S. MINT DIRECTOR**, Ross (right) worked with Assistant U.S. Treasurer Marion Glass Banister (left).

rigorous qualifications, and Ross equipped all its guards with the most powerful weapons available. Aside from occasional intrusions by U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr., she generally was able to run the mint as she saw fit. As long as she upheld Congressional statutes and had no run-ins with the General Accounting Office, she had no need for supervision.

Ross often referred to the workforce as “the mint family” and strived to create a workplace where her employees felt valued as individuals. In *Governor Lady: The Life and Times of Nellie Tayloe Ross* (2005), author Teva Scheer writes, “She combined an almost maternal empathy and warmth with the reserved authority of a respected father figure.” She even became close friends with some of the staff, who went with her on outings and joined her at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

During Ross' 20-year tenure as mint director, many coin de-

signs changed. She always had admired Benjamin Franklin and wanted to portray him on a coin. In 1947 she asked the mint's chief engraver to come up with designs to show the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. The latter didn't like the crack in the Liberty Bell or the small eagle on the reverse, but the mint proceeded with the originally proposed design anyway. (It's ironic that Franklin was paired with an eagle, since he wanted the national bird to be a turkey and thought poorly of eagles.



▲ **IN 1943 ROSS** asked the U.S. Senate to authorize the production of zinc-coated steel cents because copper was in short supply during World War II.

Actual size: 19mm



*While the steel cent helped the mint meet its production quota,  
the public hated the new composition.*



▲ **ROSS AND EDWARD CHIEF** of the U.S. Treasury Department Procurement Division inspect some of the 390 plaster models submitted for the Jefferson nickel design competition in 1938.

Franklin opposed portraits on coins and believed proverbs should be placed on them instead.) Ross also was involved with proposed designs for the Jefferson nickel. When the mint held an open competition for a new nickel design in 1938, she was one of four judges who sat on the design review board.

When World War II rocked the country, the mint encountered several obstacles that strained output, including shortages of qualified employees, capital investments for production expansion, and precious metals. Mint metallurgists struggled to provide alloys that would allow the facilities to meet the demand for coinage, and Ross asked the U.S. Senate to authorize the production of zinc-coated steel cents. While this coin helped the mint meet its production quota, the public hated the new composition because it made the cent and dime too similar in appearance.

Ross also was very frugal with her annual appropriation and came up with innovative ways to save money. She required her workers to wear spats (an ankle covering), aprons and gloves to capture metal dust and fragments. The clothes were burned after a time to recover any precious-metal remnants. The water employees showered in at work and the air leaving the mint were filtered, likewise to capture any loose metal. All these measures helped the mint recycle about \$100,000 worth of silver and gold annually.

Ross also rewarded employees and managers who came up with ideas to increase efficiency. Cash awards totaling \$4,100 were handed out in 1952 to 10 employees who suggested innovations that saved the mint \$720,000 annually. This makes one wonder if Ross' frugality influenced her coin-design choices. During her tenure, the nickel, dime, quarter and half dollar all

changed from stylized depictions of liberty to more utilitarian portrayals of past U.S. presidents and historical figures.

### Long Legacy

Ross' successes allowed her to continue at her post during all of Roosevelt's terms and through Harry S. Truman's presidency. She spent almost 20 years at the mint and was replaced in 1952.

Nellie Tayloe Ross continued to live in Washington, D.C., and died on December 19, 1977, at the age of 101. Few people attended her funeral service. She outlived her generation, and the history she helped make was largely forgotten by her country and state. Her family returned her body to Cheyenne, Wyoming, to be buried next to her husband.

The *New York Times* stated in her obituary that she was "ever feminine, never a feminist: a woman in politics who had not lost her womanliness." Even though her most prominent work took place after her term in Wyoming, most people remember her as the first female governor in the history of the United States. ■

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