By Robin Hill, independent historian, 23 October 2018

Nellie Tayloe Ross was born November 29, 1876 near St. Joseph, Missouri. She was educated in public and private schools, and attended a kindergarten training school in Omaha, Nebraska. Early family setbacks and tragedies were later purged from her life story, but she remained close to her brothers and other family members throughout her life. She taught school for a few years in Omaha before coming to Cheyenne in 1902, following her marriage to William Bradford Ross. Mr. Ross began a law practice in Wyoming and eventually became active in Democratic politics. After losses in state and national races in 1908 and 1910 discouraged his political ambitions, theRosses led an active social life. Nellie polished her poise and public-speaking skills through her participation in the temperance campaigns and women's clubs. In the wake of the incumbents governor's difficulties with post-war recession and drought, William Ross was elected to Wyoming’s gubernatorial office in the 1922 election on a platform of tax relief and prohibition.

Mrs. Ross avidly supported her husband. His sudden death in office in October, 1924, with two years left in his term, called for the special election required by state law. Neither party had cultivated a candidate, and the Democratic party nominated Mrs. Ross to complete her husband’s term. She initially declined, perhaps modestly concealing her ambition. "No one ever wanted it more," her son George wrote to his wife. She knew politics and wanted to see what she could do. At the last minute, she accepted the nomination and campaigned hard. She felt she was the best qualified to understand her husband’s goals and work to realize them. Mrs. Ross won the election handily and became the first woman governor in the United States (when she was inaugurated 16 days before Miriam A. Ferguson of Texas).

She wanted to continue her husband's policies of spending cuts, state loans for farmers and ranchers and strong enforcement of prohibition, and she went on to press additional proposals: requiring cities, counties, and school districts to have budgets; stronger state laws regulating banks; exploration of better ways to sell Wyoming’s heavy crude oil; earmarking some state mineral royalties for school districts; obtaining more funds for the university; improving safety for coal miners; protecting women in industrial jobs; and supporting a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would cut back on child labor. The Republican legislators supported five of her 11 proposals. Her great skill lay not in policy or administration but in representation of her state and her causes. She gave speeches across the country, and conducted a strenuous but unsuccessful campaign for reelection, colored by resistance to her support of prohibition. Nellie Tayloe Ross served from January 5, 1925 to January 3, 1927.

Following her defeat Mrs. Ross continued to be a popular speaker. Prominent women nation-wide, and Ross herself, recognized her value as a woman who had governed without either retreat from responsibility or loss of femininity. She was appointed as a vice-chairman of the Democratic National Committee in 1928, and directed the party’s women’s division. She campaigned extensively in 1932 for Franklin D. Roosevelt, who, following his inauguration in 1933, appointed Mrs. Ross to the position of Director of the United States Mint. Managing the Mint in a humane and effective fashion, for 20 years, was her true political career. After her retirement she continued to reside in Washington, D.C., and kept busy with speaking engagements. She died in 1977 at the age of 101, and is buried in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Sources
