

Dolley Madison 1768–1849



Bass Otis, *Mrs. James Madison*, ca. 1817. Oil on canvas. New-York Historical Society, Gift of Thomas Jefferson Bryan, 1867.308.

Dolley Payne, Dolley Todd, Dolley Madison

Dolley Payne grew up in a Quaker family on a Virginia farm. When she was 15, her father, a fervent convert to

his wife's faith, followed Quaker teaching and freed his slaves, then moved the family to Philadelphia. His new business failed, a “weakness” that prompted his

expulsion from Quaker Meeting, and his wife took in boarders to make ends meet. Perhaps pressured by her father, who died shortly after, Dolley, at 22, married Quaker lawyer John Todd, whom she had once rejected. Her 11-year-old sister, Anna, lived with them.

The Todds' first son, called Payne, was born in 1791, and a second son, William, followed in 1793. In the late summer of that year, yellow fever hit Philadelphia, and before cold weather ended the epidemic, Dolley lost four members of her family: her father-in-law, her mother-in-law, and then, on the same October day, her husband and three-month-old William. She wrote a half-finished sentence in a letter: “I am now so unwell that I can't . . .”

Added to her grief, Dolley faced an extremely difficult situation. She was a widow caring for her small son and her young sister. Men were considered responsible for their female relatives; it was one of the social side effects of coverture (see [Resource 1](#)). But all the men who might have cared for Dolley were gone. Her husband had left her some money in his will, but his brother, the estate's executor, withheld it until Dolley sued him later. In the immediate aftermath of the yellow fever epidemic, she had, according to her worried mother, only \$19, many debts, and the unpaid bill for her baby's funeral. Like many American women, Dolley faced extreme emotional loss and



James Sharples Sr., *Dolley Madison*, ca. 1796–1797. Pastel on paper. Independence National Historic Park, Philadelphia.

financial strain at the same time. Fifty years later, she would face them again.

Dolley's mother went to live with a married daughter, and Dolley, Payne, and Anna moved back to the family home. Philadelphia was then the nation's temporary capital and most sophisticated city. Dolley, even in her despair, was a beautiful woman who caught the eye of many men, including Virginia Congressman James Madison. She almost surely wanted and needed to remarry. Supporting herself, Anna, and Payne as a single woman would have seemed next to impossible. But she seemed to genuinely care for the man she called “the great little Madison.”

Dolley Madison 1768–1849 *continued*

Dolley and James Madison were married in September 1794, not quite a year after her first husband's death. For marrying so soon, outside the faith, Dolley, too, was expelled from Meeting. From then on, she attended Episcopal services with James, and later complained about her rigid Quaker upbringing. There is no evidence that, despite her childhood faith, she disapproved of the Madisons as slaveholders. Her father had owned slaves, after all, and his decision to free them had thrown the family into chaos. She may have been attracted to Madison *because* he was a Southerner, as she had been as a child, not in spite of it.

If slavery was not a point of contention between them, James Madison was still an odd match for Dolley. A shy, wealthy bachelor of 43, he was famous as the man who drafted the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Dolley was a widowed mother who charmed nearly everyone she met. But by all accounts, theirs was a good marriage, and a powerful political partnership. When James's adversary, John Adams, was elected president in 1796, they moved from Philadelphia to Montpelier, the Madisons' tobacco plantation. In 1801, they moved again, to the nation's unfinished new capital, Washington City. Thomas Jefferson had been elected president, and named James his secretary of state.

Washington City

Because Jefferson was widowed, Dolley often cohosted events at the White House if women were present. This gave her



first-hand experience with the political questions that plagued Washington and generated much of the in-fighting. How big should the federal government be? How do we get the nation's work done? How do we avoid producing our own brand of tyranny? Republicans like James and President Jefferson tended to come from the slave-holding South and valued tradition. They conflicted sharply with Federalists like Alexander Hamilton and other Northerners who focused on cities and manufacturing. "Republican" and "Federalist" were not formal political parties, but they were distinct camps, and bitter disagreements made their working together nearly impossible.



(Far left) Joseph Wood, *Dolley (Payne) Todd Madison*, 1817. Oil on canvas. Virginia Historical Society, 1967.14.

(Left) William Russell Birch, *A view of the Capitol of Washington before it was burnt down by the British*, ca. 1800. Watercolor. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., 2004661947.

George Washington and John Adams, during their administrations, had held big parties at the president's home. President Jefferson preferred small, all-male dinners to which he invited one political side or the other, never both. He may have wished to avoid bickering at his dinner table, but he also gained in personal power by preventing collaboration among officials.

By contrast, the Madisons frequently entertained crowds when James was secretary of state. Their home on F Street became the center of Washington's social life. When James Madison was elected president in 1808, Dolley brought big get-togethers back to the White House, but

they were not the sedate affairs of earlier years. Her social events were fun, noisy, and relaxed, and so crowded they were called "squeezes" (see **Resource 3**). Elegantly dressed for the occasion (see **Resource 5**), Dolley made introductions where needed and kept cordial conversations going, even between enemies. Her events were important because they were not simply parties. By providing an environment where officials could meet socially, regularly, across their divisions, she helped create an informal but essential political culture.

The crisis of James Madison's administration was the War of 1812. The British invaded Washington, and the Madisons escaped just hours before the White House was seized and

Dolley Madison 1768–1849 *continued*



Baroness Anne-Marguerite-Henriette Hyde de Neuville, *Montpelier*, 1818, Watercolor, Musée Franco-Américain du Château de Blérancourt.

burned to the ground. Dolley's role in this event and what followed was widely covered. She was celebrated for her courage in rescuing the portrait of George Washington as well as crucial government papers, her determination to wait for James even at her own risk, and her dedication to rebuilding the city later. (See the life story of **James Madison**, **Resource 6**, **Resource 7**, and **Resource 8**.) Combined with her other admired qualities, Dolley Madison symbolized values Americans prided themselves on: down-

to-earth authenticity, bravery and toughness under pressure, resilience and a refusal to be beaten. For the rest of her life, she was seen as a national hero, known, oddly enough, as America's Queen.

Retirement

After James's second term ended, the Madisons returned to Montpelier for what should have been easy years. But financial troubles

resulted from Payne's substantial gambling debts. Dolley and James paid them to protect Payne's reputation. After James died in 1836, Dolley faced this ongoing problem alone (see **Resource 9**). She sold James's papers to Congress for less than she had hoped, and sold some of Montpelier's 100 slaves—without their consent, in violation of James's will. Finally, in 1844, she sold Montpelier and returned to Washington. Dolley was still an American icon, perhaps the country's most beloved woman. President Zachary Taylor referred to her with a new term of honor: first lady. But her private financial struggles continued to the end of her life.

Dolley Madison was celebrated in her time for her beauty, style, and charisma, and for her bravery and quick-wittedness during the War of 1812. But her most significant contribution was more subtle and more consciously political. When she arrived on the scene, politics was a rough game: physical fights, shouting matches, stony silences, even duels. The United States had its Constitution and Bill of Rights, but it was not clear how actual people were to do the nation's work. The idea of bipartisan cooperation did not exist; there was not even a word for it. But Dolley Madison understood that warring factions needed a safe place to come together, and that social life, especially with women present, would require good behavior from all. In this setting, even enemies could have an informal conversation and quietly look for common ground.

Dolley Madison did not fundamentally alter Washington politics, which remained a rough game. But her social events, which she planned so carefully and understood so well, provided a model that stressed civility over the cold shoulder, and cooperation over coercion. It allowed adversaries to see each other as human beings.

Discussion Questions

- ★ For how many years did Dolley Madison lead the Washington social scene? Why does the length of her tenure matter?
- ★ How did Dolley Madison reshape the political landscape of Washington? What effect did her efforts have on the young nation?
- ★ Dolley Madison was widowed twice in her life. How did the deaths of her husbands affect her legal and social standing?
- ★ What do we learn about Dolley Madison and her world from her experiences with slavery?

Sources: Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); James Madison's Montpelier: Home of James and Dolley Madison, www.montpelier.org (accessed by M. Waters, July-August 2016); The Dolley Madison Digital Edition, Holly C. Shulman, ed., <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/dmde/> (accessed by M. Waters, July-September 2016).