Eliza Brock ca. 1779–1850s

Remembering

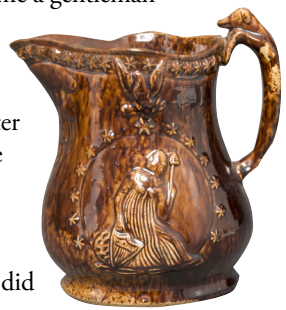
One day, when she was 65 years old, Eliza Brock wrote a letter. She put the date at the top—February 21, 1844—and addressed one of the most famous people in America. "Mrs. Madison," she began, "Madam, its a long time ago in the Autumn of the memorable year of Seventeen hundred and Ninety Three I was at that time a poor Servant girl in the family of Moses Levy, a Lawyer." The man who lived next door, she wrote, was a "gentleman a Lawyer also, by the name of Todd, the House was a Small one and Stood a little more out." Mrs. Madison would have known immediately that Eliza was writing about her first husband's father, also named John Todd.

When she received this letter, Dolley Madison was 75 years old, impoverished, and unwell. But few people outside her circle knew this. To the American public, she was still a beloved figure. Just the previous month, the House of Representatives had passed a resolution to give her a seat within the chamber, the first woman so honored. Newspapers all over the country carried the story, and Eliza Brock probably saw one. In her letter, she noted "Seeing your name lately mentioned."

Eliza Brock did not refer to yellow fever, just the "memorable year," 1793, which was information enough. The disease struck Philadelphia that summer, when Eliza, a white servant, was about 14. No one knew then that mosquitos carried the virus. A prominent local doctor blamed rotting coffee on the docks. Because he said that black people were immune, many were left behind as whites fled the city.

Eliza Brock's Signature, Letter to Dolley Madison, February 21, 1844. Library of Congress, Dolley Madison Papers, Microfilm Reel 1-2.

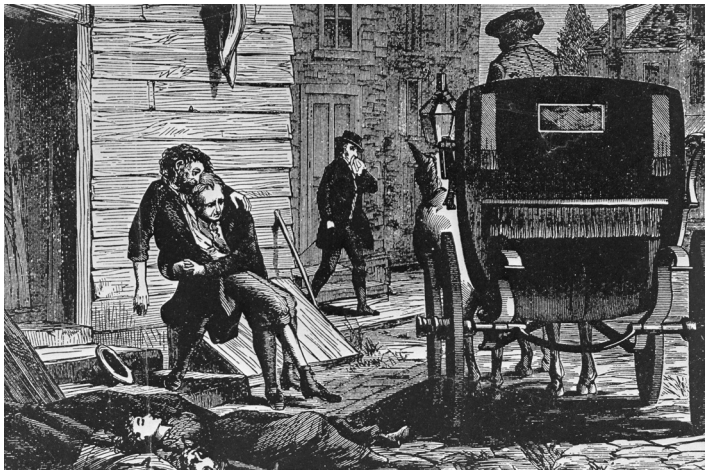
"I was left alone by the family, except the black Servants three in number one a little black girl, She ran every where, one day when I was at the Pump . . . this little girl run out and told me a gentleman in that Small House wanted to see me, with my Pitcher of water in my hand as she Said he was verry Sick and alone.



Attributed to Thomas Haig's Pottery, *Pitcher*, 1812–ca.1893. Earthenware. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Jay A. and Emma Lewis, 2008, 2008-25-15.

"I went in and did all I Could for the poor Man he asked me to fetch him some frute from the Store of a Coloured man kept at the time, I got it he was very gratefull I went over Several times and did all I Could, he often repeted to me, my Wife will reward you for this poor Man he did not Suffer long, he was just [recently] dead, when my father found his way into the pestilential City and took myself and a Brother who was an aprentice to a trade in the Same street wee had thirty miles to walk and got out with great difficulty I did not return to Phila for a number of years."

Over the summer and fall, yellow fever killed 5,000 of the city's 45,000 residents. Eliza and her brother were among the 17,000 who fled. She may not have known that shortly after Mr. Todd died, the fever claimed his wife. But the newspapers made it clear that Dolley Madison, the wife of a president, had, fifty years earlier, been the daughter-in-law of the dying man in the small house.



Man Helping Sick Person, 1793. Original Caption: *Yellow Fever Epidemic in Philadelphia, 1793.* Woodcut. Bettmann / Contributor.

Asking

Eliza wrote of her life after the epidemic. She lost her first husband, then married again, "well above my expectations." Her second husband was Frederick Brock, a German immigrant. They owned a farm in rural Pennsylvania, where they lived well until her husband became ill. "[H]e died last november, I had two Children a Son and a daughter my daughter died young my dear Son married and went to Phila—three years Since he died of the Small Pox he left a widow and two Small Children the widow lived one year after and she died, I have the two Children."

Then, with obvious difficulty, Eliza made her request: "[M]y poor Husband once

Eliza Brock ca. 1779–1850s *continued*

possessed a large fortune but alas he has left me in verry poor Circumstances, and Seeing your name lately mentioned the thought has struck me and never been out of my mind that if you knew there was such a person alive, and in want you would help them. . . . Madam I hope you will not think little of me for reminding you of this long buried Sorrow if you doubt my word or think me unkind take no notice of this excuse my bad writing I could not trust any one to write fore me and I am not in the habit of writing for myself. . . . yours most respectfully, Eliza Brock."

William Russell Birch, *View in Third Street, from Spruce Street, Philadelphia, 1800*. Hand-colored engraving. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., 2002718881.

How Dolley Madison felt as she read this letter, we can only guess, but there is no evidence that she responded. She may have been known as America's Queen, but privately, she too was a widow in very poor circumstances. The day before Eliza wrote her letter, Dolley had written one herself, asking an unnamed person where she might borrow $200.

Eliza's World

Like all American women, Eliza Brock lived under the rules and customs of coverture. (See **Resource 1.**) As a young girl, she was a domestic servant, nearly the only work available to her, while her brother apprenticed to a trade that would give him a livelihood. Later, as a wife, Eliza had no legal existence as a person separate from her husband. When Frederick began buying parcels of land in the 1820s, only his name appeared on the deeds. He owned their farm; she did not—until he died, and then she was responsible for any debts he left. By that time, she had also buried her son and daughter-in-law and taken in her grandchildren. Late in her life, Eliza faced family responsibilities, loss, grief, and financial straits, just as Dolley Madison did.

Coverture had a very broad effect, well beyond the law. Because women were expected to stay out of the public sphere, most girls' education was limited. Eliza had learned to read and write, but may have used those skills rarely, and lost confidence in them: "Excuse my bad writing. . . . I am not in the habit of writing for myself." A widow for only three months when she wrote to Mrs. Madison, Eliza was probably on her own for the first time in her life, with no one she could trust to write such a private letter for her.

Men were considered the heads of families, and women were often left out of public documents. In 1828, Eliza's local newspaper published a brief death notice: *Brock, Theresa, only dau. of Frederick Brock of Susqua. Co., at Brockville Aug. 20, 1828*. Eliza was the mother of this "only daughter," but she was not mentioned.

Nor did Eliza Brock appear in U.S. Census records until 1850, the first year women, children, and slaves were listed. She was 73 that year. The census shows her living on her farm with her 13-year-old grandson, 11-year-old granddaughter, and a woman in her twenties who may have been paid help or a boarder. There were no men listed who might have worked the farm. In response to one of the census questions, Eliza set the value of her property at $1,500. Among her close neighbors, she was neither the richest nor the poorest. Somehow she had managed to hold on to the family farm.

For the transcript of Eliza Brock's complete letter, see **Appendix A.**

Discussion Questions

- What does Eliza Brock's letter to Dolley Madison reveal about the lives of white working women in early America?
- Why was Eliza Brock struggling after the death of her husband?
- Why did Eliza Brock reach out to Dolley Madison in her time of need? What does this tell us about Dolley Madison's reputation and public image?

Sources: Emily C. Blackman, *History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, and Haffelfinger, 1873), https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t39z9ww3b;view=1up;seq=9 (accessed by M. Waters, 1-30-17); Eliza Brock to Dolley Payne Todd Madison, 21 February 1844, in *The Dolley Madison Digital Edition*, Holly C. Shulman, ed. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2004, http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/dmde/DPM2001 (accessed by M. Waters, 12-15-2016); Property records, Register and Recorder's Office, Susquehanna County, PA; "The Yellow Fever Epidemic in Philadelphia, 1793," *Contagion: Historical Views of Diseases and Epidemics*, Harvard University Library Open Collections Program, http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/contagion/yellowfever.html (accessed by M. Waters, 8-15-2016).