

Saving Washington



Attributed to Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington*, 1796. Oil on canvas. White House Historical Association / White House Collection.

Over two days in 1814, Dolley Madison wrote a letter to her sister, describing the

impending British attack during the War of 1812. Twenty years later, Margaret Bayard Smith asked to see Dolley's letters for

Dolley Madison's Extract

Tuesday Augt. 23d. 1814.

Dear Sister.

—My husband left me yesterday morng. to join Gen. Winder. He enquired anxiously whether I had courage, or firmness to remain in the President's house until his return, on the morrow, or succeeding day, and on my assurance that I had no fear but for him and the success of our army, he left me, beseeching me to take care of myself, and of the cabinet papers, public and private. I have since recd. two despatches from him, written with a pencil; the last is alarming, because he desires I should be ready at a moment's warning to enter my carriage and leave the city; that the enemy seemed stronger than had been reported and that it might happen that they would reach the city, with intention to destroy it. X X X

X X X I am accordingly ready; I have pressed as many cabinet papers into trunks as to fill one carriage; our private property must be sacrificed, as it is impossible to procure wagons for its transportation. I am determined not to go myself until I see Mr. Madison safe, and he can accompany me, as I hear of much hostility towards him, X X X disaffection stalks around us.

X X X X X My friends and acquaintances are all gone; Even Col. C— with his hundred men, who were stationed as a guard in the enclosure.

X X French John (a faithful domestic,) with his usual activity and resolution, offers to spike the cannon at the gate, and to lay a train of powder which would blow up the British, should they enter the house. To the last proposition I positively object, without being able, however, to make him understand why all advantages in war may not be taken.

Wednesday morng., twelve O'clock. Since sunrise I have been turning my spy glass in every direction and watching with unwearied anxiety, hoping to discern the approach of my dear husband and his friends; but, alas, I can descry only groups of military wandering in all directions, as if there was a lack of arms, or of spirit to fight for their own firesides!

Three O'clock. Will you believe it, my Sister? We have had a battle or skirmish near Bladensburg, and I am still here within sound of the cannon! Mr. Madison comes not; may God protect him! Two messengers covered with dust, come to bid me fly; but I wait for him. X X X At this late hour a wagon has been procured, I have had it filled with the plate and most valuable portable articles belonging to the house; whether it will reach its destination; the Bank of Maryland, or fall into the hands of British soldiery, events must determine.

Our kind friend, Mr. Carroll, has come to hasten my departure, and is in a very bad humor with me because I insist on waiting until the large picture of Gen. Washington is secured, and it requires to be unscrewed from the wall. This process was found too tedious for these perilous moments; I have ordered the frame to be broken, and the canvass taken out it is done, and the precious portrait placed in the hands of two gentlemen of New York, for safe keeping. And now, dear sister, I must leave this house, or the retreating army will make me a prisoner in it, by filling up the road I am directed to take. When I shall again write you, or where I shall be tomorrow, I cannot tell!!

Dolley Payne Todd Madison to Lucy Payne Washington Todd, 23 August 1814, in *The Dolley Madison Digital Edition*, ed. Holly C. Shulman. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2004. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/dmde/DPM0469> (accessed by M. Waters, 8-8-2016).

Note

X's = Dolley Madison's use of ellipses.

Saving Washington *continued*

her *National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans* profile of Mrs. Madison. Dolley eventually produced what she called an extract of this letter.

Historians do not question Dolley's version of these alarming two days, although some details do not match other eyewitness accounts. People often remember traumatic events differently. Historians do, however, wonder about Dolley's account of the letter itself. She offered conflicting stories about the original letter's location and condition. The letter's tone seems more composed than rushed or panicky. It may be that Dolley wrote, or rewrote, this "extract" in 1836, but it became the accepted version. When Mrs. Smith included the entire letter in her profile, Americans celebrated Dolley's wifely devotion and her patriotic bravery. More than ten years later, Dolley again defended her view of these events after "our kind friend, Mr. Carroll," took credit for saving the large picture of General Washington.

The painting is a 5' x 8' copy of Gilbert Stuart's famous Lansdowne portrait of George Washington, and is widely

believed to have been executed by Stuart himself. In 1817, it was returned to the rebuilt White House, where it still hangs.

Discussion Questions

- ★ French John wanted to blow up the British attackers after the president's staff and family had evacuated the White House. Why did Dolley Madison disagree?
- ★ Why would Dolley Madison make such a point of saving George Washington's portrait? What other items did she save?
- ★ Why did this episode become legendary?

Sources: Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); "Who Said Dolley Was a Heroine?" Editorial Notes, The Dolley Madison Digital Edition, Holly C. Shulman, ed., <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/dmde/editorialnote.xqy?note=all#n6> (accessed by M. Waters, 9-23-2016); Dolley Madison to Robert G. L. De Peyster, 11 February 1848, *Encyclopedia Virginia*, http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Letter_from_Dolley_Madison_to_Robert_G_L_De_Peyster_February_11_1848 (accessed by M. Waters, 9-24-2016); David Mattern, "The Famous Letter: Dolley Madison Has the Last Word," *White House History*, Fall 1998. Washington, DC: White House Historical Association, 38-43.



Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *The White House ("President's House") Washington, DC, East Front Elevation*, 1807. Drawing on paper: watercolor, ink, and wash. Latrobe Architectural Drawing Archive, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., 97505109.



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