

Washington Burns

The British marched into Washington as the sun set on August 24, 1814. After setting fire to the Capitol building, they proceeded to the White House and helped themselves to the food and drink Paul Jennings had set out earlier. The admiral in charge, Sir George Cockburn, took a portrait of Dolley Madison from the wall and promised to “exhibit her in London.” Then the White House was torched, followed by the Treasury and other government buildings. This engraving was published just weeks later in Britain, where the long war with France was the major focus. The press and the public crowded over the destruction of their former colony’s capital city.

In December 1814, the Treaty of Ghent ended the War of 1812 with no clear victor. But Americans still felt like winners. They had defeated the British in the Battle of New Orleans, which was fought after the treaty was signed but before the news arrived in the U.S. The story of Dolley Madison fiercely waiting for her husband and rescuing the iconic George Washington portrait was told, retold, and embellished. It became part of the mythology of the war, and of Dolley.

But Washington was in ruins. Should the government relocate to a different city, and if so, which one? Would abandoning the city send the wrong message about American strength and determination? Should Washington be rebuilt? Congress debated for nearly five months, then voted to stay and rebuild. Dolley and James Madison moved into the city’s largest existing house, which Dolley decorated as best she could with borrowed, inexpensive, or second-hand furniture. They later moved to a brick townhouse, where they lived for the rest of James’s term. They never lived in the White House again, but the renovated building was ready for James’s successor, President James Monroe.

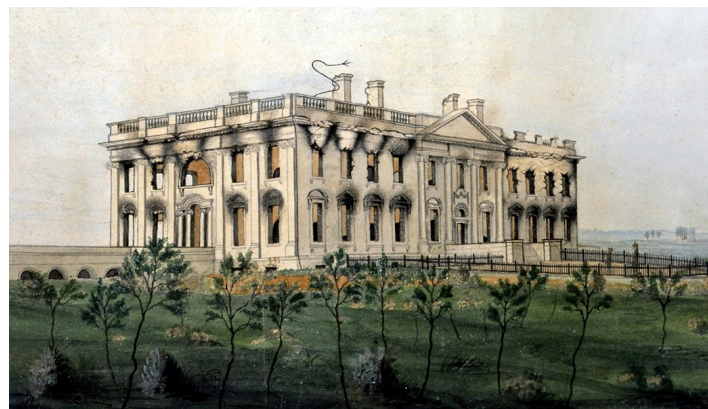
Discussion Questions

- ★ What was the significance of this event for the British? For the Americans?
- ★ Why would Congress choose to rebuild Washington, rather than start a new capital elsewhere? Do you agree with this decision? Why or why not?

Sources: Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); Donald R. Hickey, *Don't Give Up the Ship!: Myths of the War of 1812* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006).



(Above) West Smithfield, Published by G. Thompson, *The Taking of the City of Washington in America*, 1814. Wood engraving. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., 96510111.



(Left) George Munger, *The President's House*, 1814–1815. Watercolor on paper. White House Historical Association / White House Collection.