



THOMAS JEFFERSON & DOLLEY MADISON

Dolley Payne Madison Biography

1768-1849

The Early Years

Born in 1768 in North Carolina to Quaker Virginia-born parents, Dolley Payne returned with her family to Hanover County, Virginia, when she was a baby. She spent the next decade and a half growing up in colonial Virginia, although no records have survived to tell us the story of those years. In 1783 her father, John Payne, manumitted his slaves and moved the family to Philadelphia, where he set himself up in business as a laundry-starch merchant. By that time Dolley had seven siblings: brothers Walter, William Temple, Isaac, and John Coles, and sisters Mary, Lucy, and Anna. Another girl, whom the Paynes named “Philadelphia” to celebrate their move, died in infancy.

Philadelphia was a thriving city in the 1780s, a leading commercial and cultural center, and the largest city in the British colonies of North America. In 1790 it became the capital of the new nation. But post-Revolutionary Philadelphia was also suffering from inflation and economic turmoil. By 1789 John Payne’s business had failed, he was unable to pay his debts, and his Quaker meeting expelled him. Mary Payne opened a boarding house to support her family. Amidst this family upheaval Dolley met her first husband, John Todd, a young Quaker lawyer, and married him in 1790. They soon had two children, John Payne and William Temple. In 1792 her father died, and a year after that the yellow fever epidemic struck Philadelphia.

Contemporary accounts of the epidemic are horrifying. No one understood the disease and everyone feared it. Children were orphaned, families perished, and adults fled their spouse and kin. In the fall of 1793 Dolley Payne Todd moved to a countryside resort outside Philadelphia, but her husband remained in the city to care for his parents and his law practice. First his parents died, and then he too perished. On October 14 Dolley was left a widow, with no father or father-in-law to help care for her and her child.

Less than a year later, on September 15, 1794, Dolley married James Madison, a prosperous Virginia planter, a leading Republican politician in the new government of the United States, and the architect of the Constitution. He was seventeen years older than she, and an Episcopalian rather than a Quaker. Never previously married, he was short and unprepossessing of figure, but he was brilliant and witty and he offered her security, a willingness to take on her young son, and the promise of returning to the Virginia world of her youth.

The Madisons rented a spacious and comfortable three-story house in Philadelphia. Her mother moved in with her sister Lucy, who had wed the nephew of George Washington, a young man named George Steptoe Washington, and brought with her the two youngest Payne children, Mary and John Coles. Dolley took into her household her sister Anna, and the new family unit consisted of Dolley, James, Anna, and Dolley’s toddler son, John Payne Todd.

It was in these years that Dolley first began to experience political society and to learn about national politics. She socialized within the world of diplomats, congressmen, and government leaders. She and her friends gossiped about politics and politicians. And she experienced the bitterness of partisan dispute as President Washington’s government fell out over Alexander Hamilton’s plans for assumption and funding of the national debt and then quarreled over the Jay Treaty.

When the Federalist John Adams was elected president in 1796, James Madison announced his retirement. In 1797 the Madisons moved to Montpelier, the comfortable plantation that belonged to James's parents, located in Orange County in the Piedmont region of Virginia. There, Dolley devoted her life to her family and socialized with the local gentry. She had a young son and a teenage sister to care for. In 1800 Thomas Jefferson, a Republican and a close friend and political ally of James's, was elected President. In May of 1801 Dolley would make yet another move, this time to the new capital city of Washington, D.C., after Jefferson named James Madison as his secretary of state.

The Secretary of State Years

Dolley and James Madison arrived in Washington, D.C., on May 1, 1801. Thomas Jefferson had been elected president of the United States on the Republican ticket in an election that remains one of the most hotly—and bitterly—contested in American history. Jefferson asked James to accept the cabinet position of secretary of state. James agreed to do so, but the Madisons delayed coming to Washington until May as James's father was dying.

In 1801 Dolley was thirty-three years old and gracious, attractive, gregarious, warm, and charming. She arrived in a city that was newborn and still awkward, ugly, and filled with poverty; it was a difficult place to live in for many of those accustomed to the grace and charm of a major city such as Philadelphia or London. Often hard to traverse, its streets were sometimes blocked by potholes and were frequently filled with dust or mud. It was more a town than a city, with a population in 1801 of only around three thousand. Many of the European diplomats sent to the United States remained in Philadelphia rather than brave the discomfort of Washington. There was no old elite, no resident culture. Congressmen more often than not lived as bachelors in boardinghouses, returning home to their wives and families as soon as Congressional sessions ended. The permanent elite included cabinet members, a small government bureaucracy, and a few diplomats. Washington was also a city torn by partisan strife, albeit governed by a president who firmly kept party hostility from his door, carefully inviting only members of one political group or another to the White House to dine, and then nearly always in small numbers.

The Madisons knew all the members of Washington society. They invited the city elite to tea, dined at their houses, and met them at the races, and Dolley became friends with many of the wives. In this small society Dolley thrived. She was quickly known for her grace and generosity. But that did not keep her from becoming embroiled in the politics that roiled the city and the nation. Even in these years she found herself being asked to help others through patronage for government jobs, or to help strangers who needed government aid. And many of the letters in this section touch on contemporary politics and diplomacy, as well as on politicians and diplomats.

The conflict in which she played the most conspicuous role took place when Thomas Jefferson manipulated diplomatic protocol to express his hostility toward Great Britain, an event that has become known as “the Merry Affair.” Britain decided to send a minister (and not the lower-grade representative known as a *chargé d'affaires*) named Anthony Merry to Washington. Jefferson decided to flaunt diplomatic protocols through etiquette, and thereby to thumb his nose at Britain. The president dressed in his most casual clothes to receive Merry, who was scandalized. When the president held a reception dinner for the British minister and his wife, he took Dolley into the dining room on his arm, rather than Elizabeth Merry. Dolley thus became a pawn in Jefferson's chess games of domestic policy and foreign relations. It must have been a negative lesson for both Madisons; certainly Jefferson's rule of “Pell Mell” was not one to which the Madisons adhered after 1809.

It is during this period that we find ourselves reading about Dolley and her family, about her domestic anxieties, pleasures, and grief. In 1804 her sister Anna married a congressman from the Maine District of Massachusetts, Richard Cutts. Dolley adored her sister, and mourned her parting. In 1805 Dolley began a long bout with an ulcerated knee, which finally took her to Philadelphia for months of care under the ministering hand of Dr. Philip Syng Physick. It was the longest period in their married lives that the Madisons were separated and their letters are filled with their mutual affection. That same year her brother, John Coles Payne, exhibited his addiction to alcohol and gambling. In 1806 two of her nieces died. In 1807 her mother passed away, and a year later her sister Mary succumbed to tuberculosis.

By the start of 1809 her once-large family had been reduced to two surviving sisters, Anna and Lucy, her alcoholic brother John, her still-young son, John Payne Todd, and her husband. The letters in this section reflect her feelings of pain and loss.

The First Lady Years

On March 4, 1809, James Madison was inaugurated as the fourth president of the United States, and Dolley Madison became the nation's third First Lady. No longer was she simply a leading member of the ruling elite of the city; she would now preside over the capital with a series of new duties as the wife of the head of state that would claim her time and attention. Her letters reflect this shift. There is less talk about family joy and sorrow. The correspondence in this section often concerns patronage, political gossip, and political activities.

She began the process of defining the position of a republican mistress of state—the republican equivalent of the queen married to the reigning monarch—on the day of her inauguration. She chose a gown of beige velvet and wore a turban with a feather. By American standards her dress was elegant, perhaps even regal; by European standards it was far too simple and plain. It was a statement of American republican leadership: fit for a new nation; good enough to meet the diplomats representing the world's powers. She proceeded to decorate the White House, working with the famous architect Benjamin Latrobe and her old friend, his wife, Elizabeth Hazlehurst Latrobe. And finally she initiated her series of evening entertainments, so popular that they soon became known as “squeezes.” She threaded a path between the demands of the radical Republicans whose support her husband needed, and the unrelenting Federalists, whose enmity was part of her husband's political challenge.

Even before taking up her duties, Dolley was pressed to help others gain political influence, patronage, and favors. She concentrated her energies on aiding her kith and kin. She went out of her way for her cousin Isaac Coles and her old friends the Randolphs. She brought young women, such as Phoebe Morris, to live in the White House in order to meet potential husbands and refine their social skills.

The politics of the Madison presidency was dominated by foreign affairs, especially the conflict between France and England. In June of 1812 the country declared war against Great Britain. Dolley strongly supported the war from the beginning, but when the enemy opened operations in the Chesapeake Bay in 1813 her temper grew hot, and she came to despise Rear Admiral George Cockburn. That summer proved especially difficult as James grew gravely ill. A year later, in August 1814, the British landed troops thirty-five miles from Washington. August 24 found Dolley guarding the White House, and with the advance of the British troops, saving the Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington along with official papers, silver, and other valuables.

When the Madisons returned to Washington, they moved into the Octagon House, a mansion owned by John Tayloe located close to the White House. And with the nation they soon rejoiced in the end of war.

Throughout these years, Dolley continued to cherish her family. In 1809 her brother-in-law George Steptoe Washington died, and her sister Lucy spent much of the next several years living in the President's Mansion before marrying Supreme Court Associate Justice Thomas Todd in 1812, in the first wedding ever held in the White House. In 1809 her brother, John Coles Payne, returned from North Africa, where he had spent more time gambling than working at American diplomacy. Her son, John Payne Todd, failed as a student, and the Madisons sent him along with the peace mission headed by Albert Gallatin in 1814, where he, like his uncle, began accumulating debt.

By 1817 Dolley had succeeded in establishing herself as the First Lady of the land, and in so doing set the model for her successors to follow. As her old Philadelphia friend Eliza Collins Lee wrote her on March 4, 1817, “it is more difficult to deserve the gratitude and thanks of the community than their congratulations. *You* have deservedly received of all.”

Montpelier Years

James Madison left office on March 4, 1817. The Madisons remained in Washington for another month, packing up their belongings, going to parties in their honor, saying good-bye to what had been, in so many ways, *their* city. In April they departed and returned to Montpelier, the Madison family estate.

It was a seismic shift for Dolley. Although she had resided in the countryside for the first fifteen years of her life, since then she had lived an urban life, first in Philadelphia and after 1801 in Washington, D.C. Prior to their retirement in 1817 the longest period she had spent in Orange County was the four years between 1797 and 1801. She had been a young mother then, and during her Washington years Montpelier had been more of a summer home than a permanent residence. Now she was moving to a quiet, rural, plantation where she would be mistress of over one hundred slaves living in villages of slave cabins on four different farms.

The Madisons received visitors by the score. Some were local gentry, others members of the Madison and Payne families, and then there were the distinguished politicians, writers, diplomats, reformers, and other dignitaries who added their numbers to the ranks of those for whom Dolley provided. Dinners for twenty were not unusual. Visitors flocked to Montpelier even when James was confined to his bed, too ill to move about.

It would have been difficult in the best of circumstances to entertain such a constant flow of company, but economic conditions in Virginia after the end of the war made the effort even harder. Demand for U.S. grain sharply declined, and there were dreadful seasons for tobacco and wheat. And yet there were always so many mouths to feed: slaves, family, and visitors. As Dolley complained in July of 1832, she would not depend on a plantation for *pin* money.

Problems with her family members made matters worse. John Payne Todd gambled and drank his way up and down the East Coast, spending money as if it were water, behaving as Edward Coles once wrote, like a serpent in the Garden of Eden. Her brother John Coles Payne married and settled nearby, but like his nephew he remained unstable and an alcoholic. And her brother-in-law, Richard Cutts, Anna's husband, went bankrupt and defaulted on his loans, leaving James to pick up the pieces. Her beloved sister Anna died in 1832, and soon after that James's health began steadily to decline.

Throughout this period Dolley assisted James in editing his papers. James believed that the sale of his collected works would support Dolley as a widow. The two of them spent hours editing and copying letters and writings.

By 1836 James was clearly failing. Dolley increasingly had to spend her time nursing her husband, who had become her patient. He died on June 28, 1836.

Her marriage had lasted forty-two years. It had been a great success, giving her security, loving companionship, care for her child, and a role to play on the national stage. She in turn had served her husband well with love, support, and steadfastness. After his death she would enter the last period of her life, that of a widow, now on her own. It would be a new undertaking, and in many ways the most difficult one of all.

Widowhood: The First Ten Months

When Dolley Madison became a widow on June 28, 1836, she was faced with the task of selling her husband's papers. Ten months later, by April 4, 1837, she had accomplished the task. It was an extremely difficult period filled with loss and illness.

Nine days after James died, on July 5, Dolley wrote her first letter that we have from this period. She reached out to her brother-in-law, Richard Cutts, widower of Dolley's closest sister Anna. "I could never doubt your sympathy, dear brother, and require it much now." She was turning to those she loved and whose support she craved. "I would write more, dear Richard," she penned, "but have no power over my confused and oppressed mind to speak fully of the enduring goodness of my beloved husband. He left me many pledges of his confidence and love. Especially do I value all his writings."

Between July 1836 and the spring of 1837, she struggled to sell those writings. The couple had retired from Washington in 1817, and over the succeeding twenty years Dolley herself had put in many hours of labor copying James's materials and helping him in any way she could. James was certain that his notes on the debates during the Constitutional Convention, combined with a large number of other essays, records, and letters, would be worth the small fortune of \$100,000 when sold. Dolley believed him implicitly and explicitly, and approached the problems of widowhood with that promise in mind. Her tasks were multiple: to find a publisher for his papers, to pay out of the money received for these the bequests and the legacies contained in his will, and to continue to run Montpelier, the Madison family plantation.

As she pursued the tasks of selling her husband's oeuvre, distributing his charitable donations, and finding all of the nieces, nephews, great-nieces and great-nephews to whom James had left a bequest, she encountered numerous problems. It proved impossible to locate a publisher whom she could trust and who wanted the manuscript, and so eventually she sold James's papers to the Federal government. Unearthing all of the Madison family members indicated in James's will was extraordinarily hard, as many had moved outside Virginia and settled in distant places. Montpelier had been a financially losing proposition for decades, and at the age of sixty-eight Dolley had no skills to run the farm and manage over one hundred slaves, let alone do so profitably. And her health seriously deteriorated. She lost weight, suffered from chills and painful eye inflammations, and could barely handle a pen well enough to sign a letter.

Nor did she have the love and support she craved and needed. Her son had always been a gambler and an alcoholic, and throughout the Madisons' years of retirement, John Payne Todd had continued to work his way through the family money. His debts had created financial pressure on the family that James Madison was hard put to support. "None of these debts," James wrote in a draft of a letter to his former secretary, close friend, and Dolley's cousin, Edward Coles on February 23, 1827, "am I now provided [for], or have the prospect of being so." With his stepfather dead, Todd remained a needy and demanding absent son whose mother could never deny him anything. That left Dolley alone at Montpelier with her brother, John Coles Payne, and his family, but Payne was himself concerned about what would happen there subsequent to James's death, and determined to decamp for the West. Only Payne's daughter Annie, Anna Coles Payne Causten, remained by Dolley's side. She was sweet and loving, comforting and obedient, but young and innocent and a very slender reed.

Dolley survived by listening to the advice of a few well-connected friends and playing her old Washington game of influence to the best of her now-rusty abilities. On March 4, 1837, Congress purchased many of James's papers for \$30,000. On April 4 she could write her friends and supporters, William Cabell and Judith Page Walker Rives, "my general health is better." And, she went on, "I am very grateful for your efficient exertions on my behalf."

Adapted from The Dolley Madison Project, Virginia Center for Digital History, University of Virginia