

Dolley Madison

1768–1849



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY The wife of President James Madison, Dolley Madison is one of the best known first ladies. She was celebrated as a heroine of the War of 1812.



As you read the biography below, reflect on Dolley Madison's influence as a first lady. How did she contribute to her husband's presidency?



Getty Images

Dolley Payne, born in 1768, was raised in a strict Quaker family. When she was 15, her family moved to Philadelphia where she met and married John Todd. The couple had two children. Dolley was widowed at the age of 25 when her husband and youngest son died in a yellow fever epidemic.

Within the year, Dolley had written to tell her best friend that “the great little Madison has asked . . . to see me this evening.” Aaron Burr had introduced the couple, and the attraction between the two had been immediate. Dolley married James Madison in September 1794. The two were happy together, and Dolley told her husband that “our hearts understand each other.” Madison took Dolley and her son to live on his plantation in Virginia.

In 1801 James Madison became Thomas Jefferson's secretary of state. The Madisons moved to the new capital in Washington. Jefferson was a widower, and Dolley often served as his hostess at the White House. She was known and loved for her style and for her social grace. A witness to Washington social life wrote that Dolley “looked like a Queen . . . It would be absolutely impossible for any one to behave with more perfect propriety than she did.”

In 1808 James Madison was elected the fourth president of the United States. Dolley decorated and furnished the White House in a style that was both elegant and comfortable. At weekly receptions, she opened the doors of the White House to almost anyone who wanted to come. She entertained often and made her guests feel welcome. In the election of 1812, many Americans criticized Madison for the war. Some historians credit Dolley for using her invitation lists to win him favor and a second term.

In August of 1814, two years after the beginning of the War of 1812, the British were marching on Washington, D.C. President Madison had gone to review the troops, and his wife had remained at the White House to

Forging the New Republic**Biography**

protect important papers. As troops approached, Dolley loaded a wagon with valuables and sent them to safety. She then determined to save the portrait of General George Washington. Dolley wrote to her sister "it is done . . . and now, dear sister I must leave this house, or [the] retreating army will make me a prisoner in it." Dolley fled, and British forces set fire to the White House. The American people celebrated Dolley as one of the heroes of the war. When the Madisons returned to Washington, she continued to entertain in her new home with the same warmth and style.

By the time her husband's terms as president had ended, Dolley had served as hostess at the White House for 16 years. In 1817 the Madisons returned to their home in Virginia. They remained there until Madison's death in 1836. A year later Dolley moved back to Washington and took up her social life, living across the street from the White House. She died in Washington in 1849. At her funeral, President Zachary Taylor, his cabinet, and members of Congress paid their respects.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Identify** Why was Dolley Madison so popular as a first lady?

2. **Analyze** Why were Dolley's efforts to save valuables from the White House considered heroic?

ACTIVITY

Dolley Madison was the first president's wife to decorate the White House to reflect her own personal style. She created a national space that was both stately and comfortable. Since that time, other first ladies have followed her example. Work with a team to select a first lady and locate photos from the White House during her husband's term in office. Create a visual display that shows her style of decorating. Share the displays as a class and discuss what the décor suggests about these presidents and their first ladies.