

Dolley Payne Todd Madison, First Lady

From The White House website:

“Dolley Payne Todd Madison, one of the best known and loved First Ladies, was the wife of James Madison, the fourth President of the United States (1809-1817). Her iconic style and social presence boosted her husband’s popularity as President.

“For half a century she was the most important woman in the social circles of America. To this day she remains one of the best known and best loved ladies of the White House--though often referred to, mistakenly, as Dorothy or Dorothea.

“She always called herself Dolley, and by that name the New Garden Monthly Meeting of the Society of Friends, in Piedmont, North Carolina, recorded her birth to John and Mary Coles Payne, settlers from Virginia. In 1769 John Payne took his family back to his home colony [Virginia], and in 1783 he moved them to Philadelphia, city of the Quakers. Dolley grew up in the strict discipline of the Society, but nothing muted her happy personality and her warm heart.

“John Todd, Jr., a lawyer, exchanged marriage vows with Dolley in 1790. Just three years later he died in a yellow-fever epidemic, leaving his wife with a small son.

“By this time Philadelphia had become the capital city. With her charm and her laughing blue eyes, fair skin, and black curls, the young widow attracted distinguished attention. Before long Dolley was reporting to her best friend that ‘the great little Madison has asked...to see me this evening.’

“Although Representative James Madison of Virginia was 17 years her senior, and Episcopalian in background, they were married in September 1794. The marriage, though childless, was notably happy; ‘our hearts understand each other,’ she assured him. He could even be patient with Dolley’s son Payne, who mishandled his own affairs--and, eventually, mismanaged Madison’s estate.

“Discarding the somber Quaker dress after her second marriage, Dolley chose the finest of fashions. Margaret Bayard Smith, chronicler of early Washington social life, wrote: ‘She looked a Queen...It would be absolutely impossible for any one to behave with more perfect propriety than she did.’ Blessed with a desire to please and a willingness to be pleased, Dolley made her home the center of society when Madison began, in 1801, his eight years as Jefferson’s Secretary of State. She assisted at the White House when the President asked her help in receiving ladies, and presided at the first inaugural ball in Washington when her husband became Chief Executive in 1809.

“Dolley’s social graces made her famous. Her political acumen, prized by her husband, is less renowned, though her gracious tact smoothed many a quarrel. Hostile statesmen, difficult envoys from Spain or Tunisia, warrior chiefs from the west, flustered youngsters--she always welcomed everyone. Forced to flee from the White House by a British army during the War of 1812, she returned to find the mansion in ruins. Undaunted by temporary quarters, she entertained as skillfully as ever.

“At their plantation Montpelier in Virginia, the Madisons lived in pleasant retirement until he died in 1836. She returned to the capital in the autumn of 1836, and friends found tactful ways to supplement her diminished income. She remained in Washington until her death in 1849, honored and loved by all. The delightful personality of this unusual woman is a cherished part of her country’s history.”¹

Note: The biographies of the First Ladies on WhiteHouse.gov are from “the First Ladies of the United States of America,” by Allida Black and were copyrighted in 2009 by the White House Historical Association.

A more detailed account from the National First Ladies’ Library (whose work is in collaboration with the National Park Service):



Dolley Payne Todd Madison

Photo is from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and courtesy of National First Ladies’ Library

¹ Black, Allida. “First Families-Dolley Payne Todd Madison.” *The White House*, Google, Accessed July 1, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/first-families/dolley-payne-todd-madison/>

Dolley Payne was born May 20, 1768 in Guilford County, North Carolina.



An artist's conception of the building considered to be the birthplace of Dolley Payne Madison in New Garden, North Carolina. (drawing by Anna Bell Bonds)

Photo is courtesy of National First Ladies' Library.

Early Life and Religion: Dolley's father was John Payne who was born in 1736 in Goochland County, Virginia. It is believed that he had been a planter but emancipated his slaves in accordance with his Quaker beliefs. In 1783 he moved to Philadelphia where he opened a small laundry starch-making business that unfortunately failed. He died on October 24, 1792.

Dolley's mother was Mary Coles who was born in 1745. She married John Payne in 1761 in Hanover County, Virginia. At the time of their marriage, Mary was a Quaker and John, an Episcopalian. The next year in 1764, Payne applied for membership in the Society of Quakers and was accepted. In 1766 the couple moved to North Carolina with other Quaker families; however in 1769, the Payne family returned to Virginia and 1783 relocated again--this time to Philadelphia.

After her husband's death in 1792, Mary Payne briefly opened the family home to boarders, including Congressman Aaron Burr of New York. Several years later, Burr introduced her daughter, who at that time was the widowed Dolley Todd to Congressman James Madison of Virginia. The next year in 1793 Mary moved to *Harewood* in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, into the home of her daughter Lucy Washington. Mary died in October 1807.²

"Dolley was born into the Quaker faith, but expelled after her marriage to non-Quaker James Madison."³ When married to Madison, she attended the Episcopal church and was confirmed in that faith on July 15, 1845, at St. John's Church, Washington, D.C.

² Author unknown. "First Ladies Biography: Dolley Madison." *National First Ladies' Library*, Google, Accessed July 8, 2021, <http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=4>

³ *Ibid.*

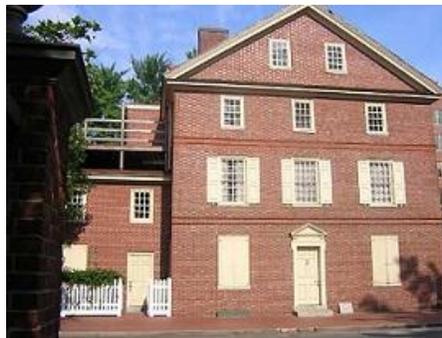


Dolley Payne Todd in the traditional garb of the Quaker faith.

Photo is from the Library of Congress and courtesy of National First Ladies' Library.

Education: No record exists of any formal education. Dolley Payne was 15 years old at the time the family moved to Philadelphia (and was past the usual age for school).

Marriages: Dolley was twenty-one years old when she married John Todd, a lawyer on January 7, 1790 at the Pine Street Meeting House in Philadelphia. Dolley and John lived with [their two sons](#) at the Todd House "...a modest three-story brick house at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets. Todd died [three years later] in a yellow fever epidemic [in} 1793."⁴



The Todd House today

Photo is from the Independence Historical Park, National Park Service, and courtesy of National First Ladies' Library.

⁴ *Ibid.*

At the age of twenty-six, Dolley married James Madison on September 26, 1794 at *Harewood* estate in Charles Town, West Virginia. At this time James was a planter and a U.S. Congressman from Virginia. Following the wedding the couple lived in Madison's elegant three-story Spruce Street brick house in Washington, D.C. until his retirement in 1797 when they moved to the Madison's family plantation, *Montpelier*, in Orange, Virginia.

Dolley had two sons John Payne Todd (1792-1852) and William Isaac Todd (1793) by her marriage to John Payne. Her youngest son William Isaac Todd died when he was three months old, the same day as his father.

“Her surviving son, always known by the name of Payne, would come to live with his mother and her second husband, James Madison at his plantation home in Orange, Virginia, ‘Montpelier.’ During the presidential years, he would be placed in the nearby St. John’s College in Maryland but failed as a student.

“In an attempt to give Payne a sense of purpose, his step-father sent him as part of the American diplomatic mission which negotiated the Treaty of Ghent and ended the War of 1812. However, he left the delegation and made his way across Europe, beginning a lifelong addiction to gambling and alcohol.



Payne Todd

Photo is from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and courtesy of National First Ladies' Library.

“While James Madison was alive, he kept from Dolley Madison the huge debts run up by her son. After she was widowed, however, Dolley Madison was confronted with the financial ruin created by her son, eventually sending her to the brink of poverty.”⁵

“Although she assumed the traditional role of wife and housekeeper following her first marriage, Dolley Todd also had the assistance of her younger sister Anna, who lived with her and there is suggestion that she was of help to John Todd in his legal work. Following her second marriage and then her 1797 move to Madison's Virginia estate, Dolley Madison assumed not only

⁵ *Ibid.*

household management of the plantation and slaves, but also cared for her elderly mother-in-law who lived there.

“James Madison served as Secretary of State in the Administration of his friend, President Thomas Jefferson, from 1801 to 1809, and the Madisons moved to Washington, D.C.

“At those receptions and dinners which the widowed President [Jefferson] felt necessitated a female co-host, he asked Dolley Madison to aide him. While she was not a presidential wife or in any way given an official designation, her exposure to the political and diplomatic figures who were guests of the President, as well as to the general public who came to meet him, provided her with a lengthy experience as a White House hostess. Notably, she also took a large public role in the fundraising effort that supported the exploration of the Louisiana Territory by explorers Lewis and Clark. These eight years of fore-knowledge and opportunity to consciously create her own public persona were the crucial factor that enabled her to shape what was only a marital relationship to the President into a genuine public role that was soon called ‘Presidentress’ by some chroniclers.”⁶

Presidential Campaign and Inauguration: “Dolley Madison’s popularity as a hostess in Washington added greatly to the recognition of her husband by those members of Congress whose electoral votes then chose the winner of presidential races. During the 1808 election, however, there was an attempt by Federalist newspapers in Baltimore and Boston that implied Mrs. Madison had been intimate with President Jefferson as a way of attacking her character. [However,] her popularity prevailed during the 1812 election.



The pale-yellow gown Dolley Madison may have worn to the first Inaugural Ball. The photo is from the Smithsonian Museum and is courtesy of the National First Ladies’ Library.

⁶ *Ibid.*

“In preparation for the inaugural ceremonies of James Madison on March 4, 1809, Captain Tom Tingey, commandant of the Washington Navy Yard, had requested Dolley Madison's permission and sponsorship of a dance and dinner, and she readily agreed; thus, the first presidential ‘inaugural ball’ took place that evening. Held at Long's Hotel, on Capitol Hill, there were four hundred guests in attendance. The event began at 7 p.m., opening with the playing of ‘Jefferson's March,’ followed by the entrance of the former President. Next, ‘Madison's March’ was played and the new president and his wife entered. Dressed in a buff-colored velvet gown, wearing pearls and large plumes in a turban, Mrs. Madison made a dramatic impression.

“Although she did not join in the dancing, her sister Anna Cutts ‘opened’ that portion of the program. A formal dinner followed, and Dolley Madison took her place at the crescent-shaped table, seated between the French Minister, General Louis-Marie Turreau de Garambouville and the British Minister, David Montagu Erskine.”⁷

First Lady: “With more conscious effort than either of her two predecessors, and with an enthusiasm for public life that neither of them had, Dolley Madison forged the highly public role as a President's wife, believing that the citizenry was her constituency as well as that of her husband's. This would establish her as the standard against which all her successors would be held, well into the mid-20th century. This persona was specifically created to serve the political fortunes of not only the President, but also of the United States. She would steer conversation with political figures, including their spouses, in a way that revealed their positions on issues facing the Madison Administration, or sought to convince them to consider the viewpoint of her husband.



Dolley Madison in her ubiquitous turban and low-cut dress.

Photo is from the New York Historical Society and courtesy of National First Ladies' Library.

⁷ *Ibid.*

“She fortified her role of hostess by the visual effect of both the executive mansion and her own person, redecorating the public rooms in a style grand enough to impress foreign diplomats and dressing in a regal, yet simple manner. She used her clothing style to make herself visibly distinct and define her own public identity, most notably by her trademark turban.

“Her ebullient personality, although often masking deep-seated worry, had the effect of relaxing her guests, regardless of their political views. Dolley Madison also exercised political influence by utilizing all the acceptable forms of behavior for women at the time, through correspondence, entertaining and cultivating personal alliances with the spouses of important political figures. On numerous occasions, she sought to place supporters, friends and family members into official government positions.

“Dolley Madison was the first First Lady to formally associate herself with a specific public project; as a fundraiser, supporter and board member, she helped to found a Washington, D.C. home for young orphaned girls. She also befriended nuns from a local Catholic school and began a lifelong association with the organization.

“To a degree larger than even Martha Washington, with whom the public had been familiar since the American Revolution, Dolley Madison became a genuinely public celebrity. She was often referred to as ‘Lady Madison,’ honored by having a ship named for her, being solicited by authors to help promote new books, and even depicted on a magazine cover.



Dolley Madison was the first First Lady depicted on the cover of a magazine, the PortFolio, published in Philadelphia.

Photo is from *carlanthonyonline.com* and courtesy of National First Ladies' Library.

“Her legend was made lasting, however, by her conscious act of symbolic patriotism in the hours preceding the burning of Washington by British troops during the War of 1812. She famously refused to leave the White House before being assured that the large portrait of George Washington [by Gilbert Stuart] was removed from the walls and taken safely away from potential destruction or defacing by the encroaching enemy.



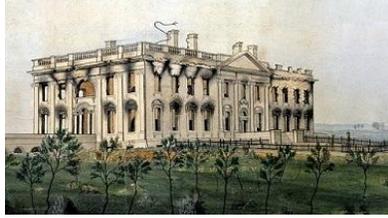
A mural showing Dolley-Madison as she directed the rescue of the George Washington portrait before the British burned the White House

Photo is from Montpelier and courtesy of National First Ladies' Library.

“Undocumented legend contends that Dolley Madison sponsored an egg-rolling contest for children on or near the lawn of the nearly-completed Capitol Building, although it was at the time not yet landscaped.

“Another claim, which has persisted, but for which there is no documentation, credits Dolley Madison with convincing the President to permit Washingtonian Francis Scott Key to board a truce ship in an effort to seek the freedom of a captured friend. Moreover, that when he did so, he witnessed the firing on Fort McHenry and wrote the poem which became the Star Spangled Banner.

“Finally, there is the suggestion that it was Dolley Madison who urged both the President and Congress to keep Washington as the capitol city, rather than permit it to be returned to Philadelphia. Contemporary accounts do record her rage at the British for burning her favorite city and she did resume her entertaining as a symbol of rebirth in Washington, in the two buildings that she and the President occupied in the capital for the duration of his Administration.



George Munger's painting of the burned President's House [painted] a year after the fire [August 24, 1814]

The photo is from the White House Historical Association and courtesy of the National First Ladies' Library.

“Dolley Madison is also widely credited, largely through legend, for popularizing the dessert of ice cream. It is established that she was unlikely the first to serve it at the White House. The Library of Congress, among other sources, however, retains a copy of Thomas Jefferson’s own recipe for ice cream. It was also known to be served by George and Martha Washington at Mount Vernon. However, there is at least one report of her serving a ‘pink dome’ of ice cream in public to guests.”⁸

Post-Presidential Life: “While it was with great regret that Dolley Madison left Washington, D.C., she was also eager to enjoy the company of her beloved husband at his Virginia plantation, Montpelier.



Mrs. Madison at the end of her White House tenure.

Photo is from the Virginia Historical Society and is courtesy of National First Ladies' Library.

⁸ *Ibid.*

“At Montpelier, Dolley Madison took an increased role as the predominant family member, caring for her increasingly infirm husband, while managing household improvements, the cultivation of foods by enslaved people which made the plantations self-sufficient, and welcoming both distinguished visitors and strangers who called there.



The Madison Estate, Montpelier

The photo is from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and courtesy of the National First Ladies' Library.

“During their post-presidential years, she also aided her husband in the organization and preparation for public release of the papers he used in drafting the U.S. Constitution. Following his 1836 death and the increasing burden of vast debt accumulated by her irresponsible son, she was forced to sell their Virginia properties, including the Madison plantation Montpelier. In 1844, she returned permanently to Washington, D.C., living across from the White House in a row house owned by her former husband. Her near-poverty was alleviated only when Congress agreed to purchase part of her husband's papers.



Dolley Madison's Washington home, just across Lafayette Square from the White House.

The photo is from *Wikipedia* and courtesy of the National First Ladies' Library.

"She was also awarded an honorary seat in Congress, permitting her to watch congressional debates from the floor, where members sat at their desks. She was, in addition, the first private citizen to transmit a message via telegraph, an honor given her by its inventor Samuel F. B. Morse.



A former First Lady at the time, Dolley Madison was the chronologically-earliest to be photographed.

Photo is from the Greensboro Historical Museum and courtesy of the National First Ladies' Library.

“Even as a former First Lady, Dolley Madison continued to influence the evolving public role played by a presidential wife or official hostess. Incumbent First Ladies Julia Tyler and Sarah Polk, as well as the hostess for the invalid first Mrs. Tyler, her daughter-in-law Priscilla Cooper Tyler--all drew upon Mrs. Madison's advice on how to conduct their public role. Her last public appearance was on the arm of President James K. Polk at his last White House reception.

“It was she who introduced Angelica Singleton, the daughter of a maternal first cousin, Rebecca Coles, to Abraham Van Buren, the son of widower President Martin Van Buren. The younger cousin thus became the First Lady for the Van Buren Administration. She maintained a close personal friendship with former First Lady Louisa Adams, also then living in Washington.

“As one who knew personally figures like Washington and Jefferson, Dolley Madison became a symbol of the Founding Era as the nation moved into the antebellum period. She would often be called on to recollect the lives of the founders and her personal collection of portraits, autographed letters and other associated objects became something of a private museum. She was also nevertheless insistent on having her own role during the War of 1812 remembered.”⁹

Death: Dolley died at her home in Washington, D.C. on July 12, 1849. She was 81 years old. She was buried in the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C. and later re-interred at Montpelier in Orange, Virginia. “According to legend, it was at Dolley Madison’s funeral that incumbent President Zachary Taylor eulogized her as ‘**First Lady,**’ **perhaps this being the first known use of the title in connection with a President’s wife.** No record of [Taylor’s] eulogy is extant.”¹⁰

Note: President Zachary Taylor was a cousin of President James Madison (reference “The Taylor-Madison Connection”).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*