

DOLLEY MADISON



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I was born in 1768 to a Virginia Quaker family, the John Paynes. My name was Dorothea, but I like to be called by my nickname, “Dolley.” I was raised by the strict principles of the Society of Friends. One of those principles was to avoid wearing jewelry, because it was considered to be a sign of vanity. So, when my grandmother gave me some of her jewelry, I had to wear it in a tiny bag around my neck, under my kerchief.

In 1783, I moved with my family to Philadelphia, which was then the capital of the United States. While there, I met and married a man named John Todd. We had two sons. In 1793, an epidemic of yellow fever, a terrible disease, struck the city of Philadelphia. My husband and my youngest son died during the epidemic.

The following year, 1794, I met James Madison and we soon married. He was small, quiet, and pleasant, a dignified man who loved to converse with people. I was plump, pretty, and lively. While “Jemmy” was president, I became one of the most noted hostesses who ever lived in the President's House. I loved to wear velvet and satin gowns, embroidered slippers, and pearls. (I got away from those strict Quaker principles!) Even though I was kept busy at the President's House, I found time to cut hundreds of garments for the orphan children of Washington.

In 1814, during the War of 1812, British raiders burned the executive mansion. I gathered together the state papers and put them in a large bag to keep them from being destroyed. I also saved the Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington. After the war, returning soldiers laid a British flag at my feet and greeted me as “Queen Dolley.”

After my husband's death at our estate at Montpelier, Virginia, in 1836, I returned to Washington to live. Over the next dozen years many old friends came to pay their respects to me at Presidential receptions.