

Ladies who became FIRST

Elizabeth Kortright – the Ninth in a Series by Randall Priest

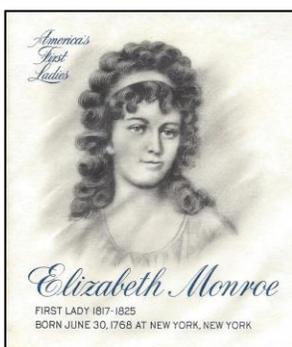


Figure 1

Elizabeth Kortright Monroe [Figure 1] was born in 1768 in New York City, New York, to Lawrence Kortright, a wealthy merchant, and Hannah Aspenwall Kortright. She was the youngest of three daughters. Lawrence was one of the founders of the New York Chamber of Congress. He was also a Loyalist during the Revolutionary War. Hannah died when Elizabeth was nine, and her father never remarried. Without much documentation of her years before marriage, it is believed that she was raised by her grandmother at her vast estate in old Harlem, New York. As a young lady of good social standing, it was probably considered important enough to provide Elizabeth with something of a formal education; in light of her ease with life in France and Spain, she was likely instructed in French and Latin as well as the traditional "social graces" for young women of her class - literature, music, dancing and sewing.

William Grayson and his cousin James Monroe [Figure 2] came to New York as members of the Continental Congress. At the theater one evening, William described Elizabeth and her sisters as having "made so brilliant and lovely an appearance as to depopulate all the other boxes of all the genteel male people therein." James and Elizabeth became an item and soon married. James was 27 and Elizabeth was 17. After a brief honeymoon on Long Island, the newlyweds returned to New York to live with her father until the Congress adjourned.

The young couple planned to live in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where James began his practice of law. His political career, however, kept them on the move as the family increased by two daughters and a son who died before reaching his second birthday.



Figure 2

For 17 years, James Monroe alternated between foreign missions and service as governor or legislator of Virginia. In 1794, James was appointed United States Minister to France by President George Washington. Elizabeth was fond of Paris and its people, and she was well-received by both the local and diplomatic communities. Elizabeth's adoption of French clothing combined with her physical beauty earned her the appellation of "La Belle Americane." To Europeans unfamiliar with the social implications of "democracy," Elizabeth struck a familiar tone. By her lineage, adoption of formal European aristocratic behavior and costumes which was a modified version of those adorned by titled personages, Elizabeth Monroe put forth an image that was not unfamiliar to powerful figures on the Continent.

Figure 4



Figure 3

During the last days of the French Revolution, Elizabeth Monroe made a name for herself by her courageous visit to Adrienne de Noailles de Lafayette, the imprisoned wife of the Marquis de Lafayette [Figure 3 & 4], who was a great personal friend of George Washington and many other revolutionary era patriots, and France's most prominent supporter of American independence. By her unofficial visit, a clear message was sent to



the French government. Not wishing to offend their ally, Adrienne de Lafayette was released. The Monroes also provided support and shelter to the American citizen Thomas Paine in Paris after he was arrested for his opposition to the execution of Louis XVI.

While in France, the Monroes' daughter Eliza became a friend of Hortense de Beauharnais, step-daughter of Napoleon, and both girls received their education in the school of Madame Jeanne Campan, who had been an advisor on court etiquette to Marie Antoinette. This association led to a friendship between the family of Napoleon Bonaparte and the Monroes. James was recalled from his Ambassadorship in 1796 due to his support of France in the opposition of the Jay Treaty.

When Monroe was elected Governor of Virginia (1799-1803), Elizabeth Monroe began commuting between the capital city of Richmond and Charlottesville; during this time her father and son died and she developed serious health problems which would eventually lead to her increasing withdrawal from frequent public duties. Many of the symptoms that were described by contemporaries suggest that it was a type of epilepsy or some illness that in later years frequently left her shaking and falling into unconsciousness.

In 1811, the Monroes appeared on the Washington, D.C. scene when James became President Madison's Secretary of State. However, Elizabeth was seldom seen and did not make calls on the wives of her husband's peers.

Figure 5

James Monroe took the Presidential oath of office in 1817 [Figure 5]. The White House was still under renovation after it had been burned by the British during the War of 1812 [Figure 6]. The reception after the swearing-in ceremony was held at his private residence; however, Elizabeth Monroe did not attend. Elizabeth asked her daughter, Mrs. Eliza Hay, to receive visitors one morning a week at the White House, but reciprocal calls were not made. The newly decorated White House opened on New Year's Day 1818, but did little to improve Mrs. Monroe's reputation. The décor was extravagant and very French-elegant, but excessive and too European for average American tastes. (It should be noted that it is thought that James Monroe picked out the furnishings himself.)



Figure 6

consequence of her fragile health and reserved social nature, as well as the prestige she hoped to convey by limiting the access of the President's wife to the spouses of other officials, Elizabeth Monroe established a European-style, less democratic protocol.

Mrs. Monroe did win some increased popularity during her husband's second term. One of her last public appearances was the New Year's Day celebration of 1825; a guest at the function described the First Lady as "regal looking" and noted details of interest: "Her dress was superb black velvet; neck and arms bare and beautifully formed; her hair in puffs and dressed high on the head and ornamented with white ostrich plumes; around her neck an elegant pearl necklace. Though no longer young, she is still a very handsome woman."

A first did happen in the first term of James Monroe. In 1820, the first marriage of a president's child took place in the White House. The younger daughter, Maria Monroe, married her first cousin Samuel L Gouverneur. The Monroes were criticized for keeping the wedding private. Only 42 members of the family and close friends were invited; excluded were members of the cabinet and other high political officials.

In retirement at Oak Hill, the Monroes' plantation estate in Loudon County, Virginia, Elizabeth Monroe died on September 23, 1830. To what extent Elizabeth Monroe was politically influential or expressed an opinion on the events and decisions faced by her husband are not known; it was widely accepted that after her death, James Monroe burned all their correspondence to each other. In remembering his wife, Monroe would later write obliquely that she had shared fully in all aspects of his public service career and was always motivated by the interests of the United States.

Reference:

Postal Commemorative Society // First Ladies of the White House by Nancy J. Skarmas
The Presidents of the U.S. of A. by Frank Freidel // www.whitehouse.gov/1600/first-ladies