

Ladies who became FIRST

DOROTHY PAYNE – the First of a Series by Randall Priest

Dolley Madison was born Dolley (or Dollie or Dolly) Payne in 1768, one of eight children and the oldest girl of Mary and John Payne, Jr. Originally from Virginia, John Payne and his family were living in Guilford County, North Carolina, as farmers when she was born. However, farming was only able to give his family a passable living. By 1769, John packed up his family and moved back to Virginia to live near his in-laws.

The Payne family members were strong Quakers. At the end of the Revolutionary War, John Payne liberated his slaves, moved to Philadelphia, and went into the business of manufacturing starch. After a short time, he was drifting into bankruptcy and his family into poverty.

In the same Quaker Meeting the Paynes were attending, there was a young lawyer named John Todd. John Todd helped John Payne clear a little money from the starch business. This money was used to set up Mrs. Payne as the keeper of a boardinghouse. As John Todd spent a lot of time around the Paynes, he came to know Dolley. Soon Dolley Payne and John Todd were seen together more and more, and on January 7, 1790, they were married. Three years later Philadelphia had its worst yellow-fever epidemic. Dolley lost her husband and the younger of her two children and was herself very ill.



Figure 1

At the boardinghouse in which Dolley was now living, she came to know many of its residents and they were very aware of a young woman with shiny black hair, blue eyes, standing 5'6" tall, who was easy to engage in conversation. One of the more elegant boarders was Senator Aaron Burr. It is believed that it was he who introduced James Madison to Dolley. Madison [Figure 2] was a short (5'4"), sparse, middle-aged (42 years old) man. Dolley, 25 at the time, was flattered and excited that one of the greatest men in the country wished to meet her. When the two met it was clear that Madison had serious intentions of marrying Dolley and that she would accept.

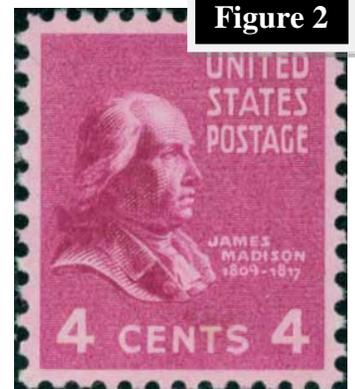


Figure 2

At the end of the summer in 1794 they were engaged and married on September 15, 1794. The wedding took place at the Harewood, a plantation in Virginia owned by President Washington's nephew who was married to one of Dolley's sisters. Due to the fact that James was Episcopalian, Dolley was 'excelled' from the Quakers for marrying outside her faith.

In 1800, James Madison was asked to be the Secretary of State for the Jefferson administration. After moving to Washington, D.C., Dolley Madison [Figure 1] began helping Thomas Jefferson's two daughters with the social season. Dolley would occasionally act as hostess for President Jefferson. Eight years later when James Madison was elected president, Dolley became "Lady Presidentress" after moving into the White House. For all of her experience and contacts and friends, it was easy for her to take over as "First Lady." Dolley was the type of person who always knew how to get the best out of people. She could also be very determined and strong when the time called for it.

When the War of 1812 started, it did not affect Washington, D.C., very much. However, by 1814, the war was moving onto land and pushing toward the Capital. "Have you the courage to stay here till I come back, tomorrow or next day?" asked the President of his wife. Dolley Madison replied, "I am not afraid of anything, if

only you are not harmed and our army triumphs.” “Goodbye then, and if anything happens, look out for the state papers,” said Madison, and then rode away.

At this time, many people of Washington, D.C., were packing what they could and leaving the city. Dolley received notice that the enemy was stronger than thought, and she needed to be ready to leave at a moment’s warning. The soldiers who had been left to guard the executive mansion had already gone. Dolley asked her staff who were still with her to get as many trunks her carriage would hold. She began packing up the most valuable papers as well as the White House silver and china.

About three in the afternoon two men galloped up to the White House and cried “Fly, fly! The house will be burned over your head.” Some of her friends had succeeded in getting a wagon and Mrs. Madison filled it with the White House silver. As they were about to get underway, Dolley said, “Not yet -- the portrait of Washington [Figure 3]; it must not fall into the hands of the enemy. That must be taken away before I leave the house.” The famous painting by Gilbert Stuart was in a heavy frame and screwed to the wall, but in the rush to remove it, no tools were found. “Get an ax and break the frame,” commanded Dolley Madison. The portrait was removed placed into the hands of two men from New York for safekeeping.



Figure 3



One more delay was encountered -- the Declaration of Independence [Figure 4, signing day July 4, 1776] was kept under glass, separate from the other state papers. Not listening to her friends, Dolley ran back into the house, broke the glass, and secured the Declaration. Only then did she

Figure 4

get into her carriage and drive away. Instead of sleeping that night, Dolley Madison, along with thousands of others, watched the fire destroying the Capital.

After the war and while the White House [Figure 5, as the White House appears after the rebuilding] was being rebuilt, the Madisons were getting the social life going again. At the end of James Madison’s second term in 1817, he and Dolley retired to Montpelier to live in their beautiful Virginia home where they entertained with true southern hospitality the many friends and tourists who visited them.



Figure 5

James Madison died in 1836 at the age of 85, and soon after Dolley returned to Washington, D.C., to be near her old friends. She was so well liked by everybody that Congress voted her a seat on the floor of the House.

On July 12, 1849, 81-year-old Dolley Madison passed away, leaving an imprint on all who follow in her footsteps an example of just what a “First Lady” should be. In his eulogy at Dolly’s funeral, President Zachary Taylor uttered the title that all future presidents’ wives would officially inherit: “She will never be forgotten because she was truly our **First Lady** for a half-century.”

Ref: First Ladies of the White House by Nancy J. Skarmeeas & www.whitehouse.gov