

# First Ladies of America



Filling in as White House hostess for President Thomas Jefferson, Dolley Madison acquired invaluable experience that served her well when her own husband, James Madison, was elected to the nation's highest office. Noted for her charm, warm personality and disarming sense of humor, Mrs. Madison's success as first lady was an important factor in her husband winning a second term in office. Additionally, her dazzling years in Washington set the standard by which future first ladies would be judged.

Born in North Carolina in 1768 to John and Mary Payne, Dolley Madison grew up in a strict Quaker environment. After spending most of her youth in Virginia, she moved to Philadelphia with her family when she was approaching marriageable age. Her family fell on hard times and Dolley ended up a young woman on her own.

In 1790, she married John Todd Jr., a Quaker lawyer in Philadelphia, and they had two sons. Life turned tragic, however, when Philadelphia was struck by an outbreak of yellow fever. Dolley's husband and infant son, Temple, both died, and at the age of 25, she found herself a widow and single mother living inside America's largest city.

Dolley's fortunes changed again when she met Virginia Congressman James Madison. Madison was 17 years older and a longstanding bachelor. But as the father of the Constitution, he was also one of America's most famous and revered individuals. He was enthralled by Dolley, and following a brief courtship, they married.

As James Madison continued his political ascent, his wife discovered her significant talents as a hostess. During President Thomas Jefferson's administration, Dolley often served as hostess because neither the president or vice-president had a wife, and by the time she entered the White House with her own husband, she was well-known and adored by both men and women alike.

As first lady, Dolley Madison initiated the first inaugural ball, and she quickly became known for her lively receptions. Her guest lists crossed party lines but her goodwill and charm usually kept people on best behavior. She was the first first lady to adopt a specific public project. She helped establish a Washington, D.C., home for orphaned girls by serving as both a fundraiser and board member.

## James Madison's Administration 1809-1817

Her most memorable moment, perhaps, is the brave example she set when the British set fire to Washington in August 1814. Before making her escape from the White House, Mrs. Madison removed numerous valuable items, including an irreplaceable Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington.

After President Madison left office, his wife returned with him to their beloved Virginia estate, Montpelier, but she returned to Washington after his death and once again stayed busy as a hostess on the social scene. Upon her own death in 1849, President Zachary Taylor eulogized her, saying, "She will never be forgotten, because she was truly our First Lady for a half-century." His remark was the first time the title "First Lady" was uttered, and it became the title that all future presidents' wives would inherit.

## Dolley Payne Todd Madison

**Born:** May 20, 1768, in Guilford County, North Carolina

**Education:** Unknown

**Marriage:** 1790 to John Todd, Jr.; 1794 to James Madison

**Children:** John Payne Todd (1792-1852); William Temple Todd (1793)

**Died:** July 12, 1849, in Washington, D.C.

