

PROJECT TITLE: **Dolley Madison: Our Nation's "First Lady"**

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SUBJECT & GRADE LEVEL: History- 2<sup>nd</sup>  
Grade

## **SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH**

### **1. Primary Investigative Question :**

Who was the first woman to be called America's *First Lady* and how did she earn her title?

### **Contextual Essay:**

Across the United States, classrooms are filled with young girls looking for a historical role model. When history is introduced to young students, our educational system recognizes and honors many Founding Fathers. What about the women who served alongside these historical male figures? Dolley Madison earned her right among these men, as she helped to define the role and responsibilities of an American *First Lady*. She worked hard to establish a fine line between the American Queen and the common man. Many of the responsibilities that were established are still in place today. Her leadership qualities, combined with her charm, determination, and ambition proved this; as she is remembered by many for her accomplishments. Her flair for food, entertaining, and fashion established her as a trendsetter in our new nation, while her ability to bring political enemies together in social gatherings helped to serve as a model for future politics. The term *First Lady* was very fitting for Dolley Madison, as she was the "first" in many things during the early formation of our nation. "She became one of the best known and best-loved women in America. Indeed, she is better remembered than some of the kings under whose rule she lived and many of the presidents who succeeded her husband in office." (Cote, 2005 pg. 16)

In a time when women played the role of wife and companion, Dolley Madison was making a name for herself as a trendsetter in fashion, decorating, and entertaining. When Dolley took on the role of hostess for Thomas Jefferson and her husband, James, she also accepted the responsibility of decorating the empty interior mansion, which had traditionally been a man's responsibility. Each room was filled with lavish colors, rich fabrics, and fashionable new furniture. While Madison loved the influence of Grecian and neo-classical styles, she insisted that all furniture must be American made. The new *First Lady* had created a venue that would be able to impress international visitors, as well as the constituents of the new young nation and was used for both social and political entertaining. Madison's love of style and fashion brought an end to the traditional dress of women in the Washington. She was often seen in the latest French fashions, popularizing the empire dress with revealing necklines, bare arms, imported materials and rich colors. Her dresses were often accessorized with a turban headdress or a bright feather that became her signature look.

"If leaders are born as well as made, Dolley seems to have been born a leader, full of ambition and the desire to be the center of attention and activity." (Allgor, 2006 pg.2) As soon as Dolley arrived in Washington with her husband as the newly appointed Secretary of State in 1801, she assumed the role of Thomas Jefferson's official hostess at the President's House. Jefferson entered his presidency as a widower and Dolly was willing to fill this role as hostess and begin her career in social politicking. As the wife of President James Madison, Dolley created her own style of hosting that may have been considered less conventional than that of earlier leaders. While her gender prevented her from participating in open political decisions, she held "dove meetings" with other congressional wives to discuss current events, hosted political dinners, and made calls to important political leaders in Washington. Instead of the small dinner parties that she had hosted for Jefferson, she opened the doors of her newly decorated drawing rooms to diplomats, congressmen, and the common man. These weekly meetings came to be known as Mrs. Madison's Wednesday nights. "Dolley adapted a form of the European royal levee. By calling them drawing rooms, Dolley made them seem less continental, while still evoking a touch of the British gentry." (Allgor, 2006 pg. 188) "Dolley's drawing rooms brought disparate parts of the capital together, like one large, diverse family." (Allgor, 2006 pg. 192). She respected the opinions of visitors on opposing issues, treated all with respect and encouraged political leaders to work together in bipartisan ways. In a time when many politicians were fighting in the streets, dueling with guns and engaged in heated debates in Congress, many civilized discussions and decisions were made with the help of Dolley's cakes, wine, dancing, and charm. Dolley also played a large leadership role by transcribing her husband's letters, notes, and essays. By performing this tedious task, we now have records of the early history of our nation preserved today.

During her husband's presidency, the War of 1812 broke out. It was during this military conflict that Dolley would commit an act of bravery that may have changed history. As she heard the approaching sounds of British cannons, she wrote a letter to her sister, Lucy Payne Washington Cutts. In this letter, she writes, "I have pressed as many cabinet papers into trunks as to fill one carriage; our private property must be sacrificed, as it is impossible to procure wagons for its transportation." (Mattern & Shulman, 2003 pg. 193) Prior to the President's Home being burned, Dolley saved many important documents that may have been destroyed without her quick thinking and brave acts. She is also remembered for saving the famous portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart. While many are unsure of the truth about this legend, Dolley did understand what might happen if the picture of our first President was to fall into the hands of the British. If it were not able to be saved, she asked that it be destroyed. She knew the important symbol of our "Father of Liberty" in the hands of the British would serve as a sign of victory if "it was paraded through the streets of London as a prize of war." (Allgor, 2006 pg.5) It was not only her brave acts during the War of 1812, but her willingness to return to the city to oversee the reconstruction of the White House and continue her responsibilities as *First Lady*, that showed a courageous Dolley.

While Dolley Madison lived in an era when women were not in the political or public spotlight, she was admired for many outstanding qualities and achievements. She served as a hostess in the President's House for 16 years. This extended time on the job helped her to create the role of First Lady and set the standard that others would follow. Many honors were granted to Dolley as a result of her accomplishments. In 1844, Dolley was the first private citizen to send a telegraph message, an honor given to her by Samuel F.B. Morse. That same year, Dolley was given an honorary seat at the House of Representatives. This was given the highest compliment ever paid to a woman in the United States. After the war of 1812, many young children were left without parents or a home. Madison was the first of many *First Ladies* to support a public project by helping to build an orphanage, advocating for these young children and encouraging other women to follow in her example. She was recognized for her role in fundraising and her dedication to the construction of the Washington Monument and her early contributions to the formation of the new nation. When Dolley died in 1849, Washington City honored her with a state funeral, the largest seen at that time and the only First Lady to lie in state. "Along with President Zachary Taylor and his cabinet, both houses of Congress adjourned to march in the procession, escorting, one last time, the woman who had come to be known as "American's Queen." (Allgor, 2006 pg. 6)

Dolley Madison's role as America's *First Lady* took many paths. She served as a brave leader, a peacemaker, and an American Icon (Roberts, 2004 pg. 396) that set the standard that many still follow today. At a time when women could not vote or participate in political decisions, Dolley Madison is remembered as one of the most

influential female figures in history. Zachary Taylor remembered Dolley Madison during her funeral by saying, "She will never be forgotten because she was truly our first lady for a half-century." (Pflueger, 1999 pg. 115)

## **2. Annotated Bibliography**

Allgor, C. (2006). A Perfect Union. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Summary: This book tells the story of a young woman and her influence on politics in the formations of our country. It shows how Dolley used her charm and skill as a hostess to include all in the social events of Washington and Montpelier. Using these events to become more educated on political affairs, she was able to become a true creator of the American nation. Catherine Allgor uses the correspondence of Dolley Madison to create details that allow us to see into the life of this American leader. Many details are given on her selection of clothing, food, and decorating of the President's House and Montpelier.

Cote', R. (2004). Strength and Honor The Life of Dolley Madison. Mount Pleasant, SC: Corinthian Books.

Summary: The book includes a detailed timeline of major events in the life of the Madisons, a family background of the Payne and Madison family, and a detailed bibliography of both primary and secondary sources. This story opens with the heroic events of Dolley during the burning of Washington in 1814. The pages that follow are filled with many photographs, portraits, letters, etchings, maps, and political cartoons.

Mattern, D., & Shulman, H. (Ed.) (2003). The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.

Summary: This book provides a collection of correspondence from her early years to her life after the death of her husband. The collections are arranged by date for easy reference. The introduction provides a short summary of her life with numerous portraits and photographs. The book also includes an extensive annotated biographical directory for reference.

Pflueger, L. (1999). Dolley Madison: Courageous First Lady. Springfield, NJ: Enslow Publishers, Inc.

Summary: A short biography from birth to death, this story tells the life of Dolley Madison with an introduction retelling her heroic act of bravery during the War of 1812. There are many additional facts that make the reading interesting and informative. The book also

includes many photographs, letters, and an epilogue about events that occurred after her death as a result of her accomplishments.

Roberts, C. (2004). Founding Mothers. (Chapter 6-7). New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

Summary: Through the use of letters and stories, the author pieces together the formation of our country from 1775-1789. This book tells the stories of the women who influenced the Founding Fathers of our nation. Dolley Madison is mentioned in the later chapters as an American icon that would turn out to be more influential politically than all of her early predecessors.

Shulman, H. (2004). Dolley Madison's Life and Times. Retrieved February 2, 2010, from the World Wide Web: <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/dmde/bio-intro.xgy>

Summary: This article is the biography on the largest website available on Dolley Madison. The biography tells of Dolley's life from her birth to her return to Washington after the death of her husband. It highlights the accomplishments in each phase of her life.