

Dolley Madison, North Carolina's Legendary First Lady

Series: Legends



Dolley Madison was the wife of James Madison, fourth president of the United States. She is also the only first lady born in North Carolina. She gained fame for her bravery and style and also for shaping the role of first lady. But how much of what people know about Dolley Madison is fact, and how much is fiction?

She was born Dolley Payne on May 20, 1768, in what is now Greensboro, Guilford County. Eleven months later after her birth, Dolley's family moved to Virginia. She grew up and went to school in that state. In 1782 her family moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which was then the capital of the United States.

Dolley married John Todd Jr. in January 1790 and soon had two sons. Her husband and one son died in 1793. A year later she met James Madison, a congressman. They married a few months later. They lived in Philadelphia for three years and then moved to Virginia. In 1801 Thomas Jefferson took office as president and asked Madison to be his secretary of state. (Do you know what the secretary of state does? Find out at <http://bensguide.gpo.gov/>.) The Madisons moved to Washington, D.C., the nation's new capital.

In 1809 Madison was elected president. As first lady Dolley decorated the almost empty White House and went on to promote the arts, libraries, an orphanage, and the building of the Washington Monument. She became quite famous and popular throughout the country.

Sometimes legends start because they make good stories. Many people think Dolley was the first person to serve ice cream in the White House. But President Jefferson offered the sweet treat to his visitors in 1802, seven years before Dolley became first lady. George Washington, an even earlier fan of the dessert, bought an ice cream machine in 1784.

Dolley is best known for her heroic actions in the War of 1812. On August 22, 1814, British troops attacked Washington. President Madison was with his soldiers outside the city, but Dolley was in the White House. As she prepared to leave, she gathered up important government papers. She also insisted on taking a famous portrait of George Washington with her. Her servants removed the painting from its heavy frame and loaded

it and the papers in a wagon. They all escaped just before the British burned the White House and other buildings in the city.

President and Mrs. Madison lived in Washington until Madison's second term ended in 1817. They returned to Virginia, where they remained until his death in 1836. A year later Dolley moved back to Washington. She resumed her role as a popular hostess and spent her time entertaining friends and government officials. By the time she died on July 12, 1849, she had known the first eleven presidents.

A legend in her own time and today, Dolley Madison has captured the nation's heart for more than 150 years.