



DOLLEYMADISONHOUSE

The Dolley Madison House, one of a small group of historic buildings on the east side of Lafayette Square in Washington, DC, now serves as conference, reception, and office space for the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit. This is a brief sketch of its story, which is closely joined to the history of our nation.

The house was completed in 1820 by former Massachusetts Congressman Richard Cutts and his wife, Anna Payne Cutts, Dolley Madison's younger sister. The small, colonial structure was a simple building of buff-colored stone, two stories high with an attic, and a garden in the rear of the house. This was the first residence to be built on the east side of President's Square, which later became known as Lafayette Square. Shortly after the house was completed, the city council appropriated funds to cut a road, later named Madison Place, from Pennsylvania Avenue to H Street.

In 1828, Richard Cutts encountered financial difficulties and was arrested and imprisoned. Released on a plea of insolvency, he agreed to sell his house and grounds to former President Madison for the appraised value of \$5,750. Madison was reluctant to purchase the house but did so to prevent his sister-in-law and her children from being evicted. The family continued to live in the house until Mrs. Cutts died in 1832.

During this time, the Madisons were living in retirement at Montpelier, their Virginia estate. Former President Madison died there on June 28, 1836, leaving his property to his wife Dolley and her heirs. In the fall of 1837, Dolley decided to move to Washington and make her home in the house on Lafayette Square; the financial burden of maintaining the house and grounds at Montpelier had become too great for her. However, the Washington house was badly in need of repair and refurnishing, and she lacked the money to do so. To cover these expenses, she offered to sell some of

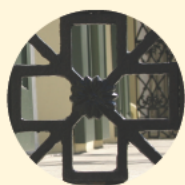


*A copy of the Gilbert Stuart portrait of Dolley, painted in 1804 while she was performing the role of First Lady for President Jefferson, adorns the wall above the fireplace in the Assembly Room.*



her husband's papers from the Constitutional Convention to the federal government. Congress accepted her offer, appropriated \$30,000 for the purchase of the papers in late 1837, and later authorized an additional amount of \$25,000 to be paid in 1848.

Though close to seventy years old when she returned to Washington, Dolley quickly resumed her role as a leader of Washington society, a position that she had first assumed when her husband was appointed Secretary of State under President Thomas Jefferson. Since President Jefferson was a widower, Dolley often took on the role of White House hostess, presiding over official dinners and receptions. When Madison became the fourth President in 1808, Dolley was already well acquainted with the social traditions of the White House and the trappings of Washington society.



In her role as First Lady, Dolley created a sense of national etiquette and style that was appropriate for the new nation's capital. She fashioned a social setting that supported the unique political environment of the center of power, yet adapted to the needs of a growing nation still in the process of defining itself.

With Dolley as First Lady, the White House became the symbol that it is today: a place that Americans saw as "their" house. Dolley's open houses, known as the "Wednesday Drawing Room," allowed all types of people to see the inside of the White House and feel as though they had access to the government, be they bricklayers or members of Congress. She brought her considerable charm and political acumen to these settings.

When the Madisons left Washington in 1817 and retired to Montpelier at the end of the President's two terms, Washington society keenly felt the loss of its leading light. Upon her return to the city in 1837, Dolley's home soon became a bustling center of activity for Washington society.





The first person to call on Dolley was former President John Quincy Adams, who wrote in his diary:

*This morning I visited Mrs. Madison, who has come to take up her residence in this city. I had not seen her since March 1809. The depredations of time are not so perceptible in her appearance as might be expected. She is a woman of placid appearance, equable temperament, and less susceptible to the lacerations of the scourges of the world abroad than most others...*

New Year's Day and the Fourth of July were popular visiting days at the Madison House. Often people attending a reception at the White House would, upon leaving those festivities, walk across Lafayette Square to pay their respects to Mrs. Madison.

Sadly, Dolley's life in her Washington home was not without its problems. Her son by her first marriage, Payne Todd, was a spendthrift, and a constant drain on her meager resources. In 1839, Dolley was forced to return to Montpelier and rent out the Washington house. Her tenants were leading politicians, including Senator William C. Preston of South Carolina, Attorney General John J. Crittenden, and New York

Congressman James J. Roosevelt. Seeking funds to deal with her mounting debts, Dolley traveled to New York in 1842, to obtain a \$3,000 mortgage on the Washington house from John Jacob Astor. Even with the mortgage, Dolley's financial problems continued to mount at Montpelier. In 1844, she found it necessary to sell part of the estate. Later that same year she sold the whole plantation and moved back to the house on Lafayette Square.

Friends and neighbors, keenly aware of her dire financial situation, found many ways to help her. Daniel Webster would frequently send his servant to Dolley's house with baskets of provisions. Although she had left behind or sold many of her possessions, Dolley would not leave her cow at Montpelier. She brought it with her to the Washington house, where it was kept in the rear yard. It was said that Dolley could make do without a carriage, but not without her cow.

Upon returning to Washington, Dolley brought with her the remainder of her husband's papers, which she placed in a trunk in her second floor bedroom. Just prior to the completion of the sale of those papers to the government in May 1848, the house caught fire. Though the servants rushed



to Dolley's room to rescue her, she refused to leave the house until she saw that the precious trunk was carried to safety. Her deep sense of history shone through in her actions that day, just as it did when she saved the portrait of President Washington from destruction by the British in 1814.

Dolley died on July 12, 1849, in her home on Lafayette Square. Funeral services were held a block away at St. John's Church. In attendance were President Zachary Taylor and his cabinet, members of the Diplomatic Corps, and members of Congress and the Supreme Court, as well as many others of Dolley's friends. It is said that it was at Dolley's funeral that the term "First Lady" came in to use, when President Taylor used it to refer to Dolley's unparalleled abilities as White House hostess, that established a standard for her successors to emulate.



The house on Madison Place was left to her son Payne Todd who sold it to Captain (later Admiral) Charles Wilkes in 1851. Wilkes had commanded the famous South Sea Exploring Expedition which, from 1838 to 1842, traveled more than 87,000 miles surveying 280 islands, Antarctica, and the Oregon coast. Wilkes made extensive alterations to the house: the gabled roof became flat, a back building was added, a bay window was placed on the south side of the house, the entrance was moved from Lafayette Square to H Street, the old doorway became a window, the front windows were cut down to the floor, and a balcony was added on the side facing Lafayette Square.

With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Wilkes turned his house over to the government and was assigned command of the *San Jacinto*, and became famous for his role in the Trent Affair. The house became the headquarters for General George B. McClellan, whom President Lincoln had chosen to head the Union Army. Crowds would gather around the entrance to the house to await the general's return and news of the war. Lincoln often called on

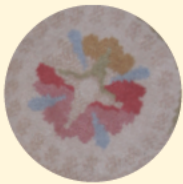




McClellan at the house. One night, however, McClellan returned home from a wedding and, without heeding the announcement that Lincoln was there to see him, went to bed leaving the President waiting in the parlor. Rightfully insulted, the President required McClellan from that point on to meet with him at the White House. Late in 1861, McClellan moved to larger quarters to accommodate his family and staff.

Wilkes returned at the end of the Civil War and lived in the house until his death on February 8, 1877. The house remained in the Wilkes family until 1886, when it was purchased by the Cosmos Club, a group of Washington intellectuals, for \$40,000. Renovations ensued, as the new owners increased the height of the third floor, built an assembly hall on the south side of the house, and added two stories above the assembly hall. Eventually, the Cosmos Club purchased Numbers 23 and 25 Madison Place, immediately adjacent to the Madison House and razed them both in order to build a large addition to accommodate the needs of their growing membership.

In 1930, Congress authorized the Secretary of the Treasury to acquire all privately owned land on Madison Place in accordance with the plans set out in the report of the McMillan Commission, which called for the demolition of all the houses on Madison Place to accommodate the growth of the Treasury Department. It was not until ten years later, in 1940, that the government was able to finalize the purchase of the Cosmos Club property for one million dollars. However, World War II intervened, preventing the implementation of the McMillan Commission Plan for Madison Place. The Cosmos Club rented its former property from the government until 1952, when it moved to its present headquarters in the Embassy Row section of Washington, making way for the National Science Foundation, which occupied the Dolley Madison House



from 1952 to 1958. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration was headquartered there from 1958 to 1964, and it was in the first-floor assembly room of the house that the Mercury Seven astronauts were introduced to the world.

At the urging of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, President John F. Kennedy, in 1962, approved a renewal plan for Lafayette Square, which provided for the restoration and preservation of the Dolley Madison House.

In 1968, with restoration completed, Chief Justice Earl Warren dedicated the Dolley Madison House as the headquarters of the Federal Judicial Center, created by Congress in 1967 to improve the administration of justice in the federal courts. In 1992, the Federal Judicial Center relocated to the Thurgood Marshall Federal Judiciary Building on Capitol Hill, and the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit became the most recent occupant of the Dolley Madison House. Today, while members of the staff of the Federal Circuit occupy the top two floors, the first floor has been carefully restored with period furnishings reflecting the type of décor that could have been in the house during the years that Dolley graced Washington society. 🌀



President Zachary  
Taylor eulogized  
Dolley saying,  
“She will never be  
forgotten because  
she was truly  
our first lady  
for a half-century.”



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Lafayette Square  
Washington, DC 20439