



Dolley Madison's Respect for Washington

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

In 1812, President James Madison was elected to his second term. The British were in the midst of a war with France, and they began a policy of boarding American ships and pressing U.S. sailors into service with the British Navy. Madison asked Congress to declare war on Great Britain. Britain blockaded the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of the United States and fought the Americans in land and sea battles throughout the U.S. and Canada.

The British Navy controlled the Chesapeake Bay and began moving up the Pawtuxet River closer to the capital city, Washington, D.C. After the Americans lost the Battle of Bladensburg in 1814, the British were only miles from closing in on the capital city. President Madison left the executive mansion to meet with his generals about the impending invasion and asked his wife to take all of the important documents with her if she was forced to evacuate.

NARRATIVE

Dolley Madison was the head of the social scene in Washington while her husband, James, was Secretary of State to Thomas Jefferson. Dolley regularly served as the ceremonial First Lady during important events because the president was a widower and needed a hostess at his side. In 1809, Dolley became the official First Lady when James was sworn in to serve as the fourth president. Dolley was a model of social behavior to the new society in Washington, and her popularity helped her husband gain increased social and political standing during his two terms in office.

Dolley held parties at the executive mansion that regularly brought together politicians and leaders from opposing political views. Dolley dressed to impress, and she outfitted the president's home with the highest sense of fashion and grandeur. While these sorts of over-the-top decorations may have seemed extravagant, Dolley used her gracious manners and the décor to bring people together, and her charm and ease with conversation helped her to navigate the sometimes contentious political scene in Washington. It was through her many dinner parties that Dolley was able to learn more about the political elite from around the world and their views on a variety of matters. She then could pass this information on to her husband and his political allies.

Dolley understood and respected the great nation that her husband had helped to build. In decorating the President's House, as it was known then, she made sure to include uniquely American art, furniture, and other decorations. One such item was a painting of President George Washington that hung in the state dining room.

NARRATIVE

Dolley Madison did not let the possibility of an attack during the War of 1812 dissuade her. Even when the Battle of Bladensburg was lost, and she knew that the British were on their way to D.C., she continued to plan a party. She would not let the British force her out of her home unless she knew for sure they were coming! Every few hours, Dolley went to the top of the mansion to look into a spyglass to see the British army. After many hours, Dolley and her staff realized that swarms of American soldiers and citizens were crowding the streets in Washington as they fled the city. She realized that she must leave soon.

Dolley and her servants hurriedly packed china, silverware, draperies, and important documents into a waiting carriage. As Dolley was about to leave the home she had known for five years, she noticed the portrait of George Washington hanging in the state dining room. She asked her servants to remove the painting so that it could be protected from the British. Unfortunately, the frame of the painting was bolted to the wall, and there were no tools available with which to remove it. Dolley implored them to break the frame and simply remove the painting itself. She would not stand for the British disrespecting the great leader who helped the nation secure its independence from them. Dolley and her staff sped off to safety shortly before the British made it to the city and burned many of the buildings including the U.S. Capitol and the President's House, but they did not damage the painting of George Washington. Just as she had shown her respect for the new nation by preparing the President's House as a social gathering point in which the people could take pride, Dolley Madison demonstrated her respect for the leader whose character and virtue had made him an indispensable man for the United States.