

[An African American] Man's Reminiscences of  
James Madison

by Paul Jennings

**PREFACE**

Among the laborers at the Department of the Interior is an intelligent [African American] man, Paul Jennings, who was born [into slavery] on President Madison's estate, in Montpelier, Va., in 1799. Paul was a servant of Mr. Madison, 'til his death, and afterwards of Daniel Webster, having bought his freedom from Mrs. Madison. His character for sobriety, truth, and fidelity, is unquestioned; and as he was a daily witness of interesting events, I have thought some of his recollections were worth writing down in almost his own language.

**Reminiscences of Madison**

About ten years before Mr. Madison was president, he and Colonel Monroe were rival candidates for the Legislature. Mr. Madison was anxious to be elected, and sent his chariot to bring up a Scotchman to the polls, who lived in the neighborhood. But when brought up, [the Scotchman] cried out: "Put me down for Colonel Monroe, for he was the first man that took me by the hand in this country." Colonel Monroe was elected, and his friends joked Mr. Madison pretty hard about his Scotch friend, and I have heard Mr. Madison and Colonel Monroe have many a hearty laugh over the subject, for years after.

When Mr. Madison was chosen president, we came on and moved into the White House; the east room was not finished, and Pennsylvania Avenue was not paved, but was always in an awful condition from either mud or dust. The city was a dreary place.

Mr. Robert Smith was then secretary of state, but as he and Mr. Madison could not agree, he was removed, and Colonel Monroe appointed to his place. Dr. Eustis was secretary of war—rather a rough, blustering man; Mr. Gallatin, a tip-top man, was secretary of the treasury; and Mr. Hamilton, of South Carolina, a pleasant gentleman, who thought Mr. Madison could do nothing wrong, and who always concurred in everything he said, was secretary of the navy.

Before the war of 1812 was declared, there were frequent consultations at the White House as to the expediency of doing it. Colonel Monroe was always fierce for it, so were Messieurs Lowndes, Giles, Poydrass, and Pope—all Southerners; all his secretaries were likewise in favor of it.

Soon after war was declared, Mr. Madison made his regular summer visit to his farm in Virginia. We had not been there long before an express reached us one evening, informing Mr. Madison of General Hull's surrender. He was astounded at the news, and started back to Washington the next morning.

After the war had been going on for a couple of years, the people of Washington began to be alarmed for the safety of the city, as the British held Chesapeake Bay with a powerful fleet and army. Everything seemed to be left to General Armstrong, then secretary of war, who ridiculed the idea that there was any danger. But, in August 1814, the enemy had got so near, there could be no doubt of their intentions. Great alarm existed, and some feeble preparations for defense were made. Commodore Barney's flotilla was stripped of men, who were placed in battery, at Bladensburg, where they fought splendidly. A large part of his men were tall . . . [African Americans], mixed with white sailors and marines. Mr. Madison reviewed them just before the fight. . . . They fought till a large part of them were killed or wounded; and Barney himself wounded and taken prisoner. One or two of these [African Americans] are still living here.

Well, on the 24th of August, sure enough, the British reached Bladensburg, and the fight began between 11 and 12. Even that very morning General Armstrong assured Mrs. Madison there was no danger. The president, with General Armstrong, General Winder, Colonel Monroe, Richard Rush,

Mr. Graham, Tench Ringgold, and Mr. Duvall, rode out on horseback to Bladensburg to see how things looked. Mrs. Madison ordered dinner to be ready at 3, as usual; I set the table myself, and brought up the ale, cider . . . and placed them in the coolers, as all the cabinet and several military gentlemen and strangers were expected. While waiting, at just about 3, as Sukey, the house-servant, was lolling out of a chamber window, James Smith, a free man who had accompanied Mr. Madison to Bladensburg, galloped up to the house, waving his hat, and cried out, "Clear out, clear out! General Armstrong has ordered a retreat!" All then was confusion. Mrs. Madison ordered her carriage, and passing through the dining room, caught up what silver she could crowd into her old-fashioned reticule, and then jumped into the chariot with her servant girl Sukey, and Daniel Carroll, who took charge of them; Jo. Bolin drove them over to Georgetown Heights; the British were expected in a few minutes. Mr. Cutts, her brother-in-law, sent me to a stable on 14th street, for his carriage. People were running in every direction. John Freeman (the [African American] butler) drove off in the coachee with his wife, child, and servant; also a feather bed lashed on behind the coachee, which was all the furniture saved, except part of the silver and the portrait of Washington (of which I will tell you by-and-by).

I will here mention that although the British were expected every minute, they did not arrive for some hours. . . .

About sundown I walked over to the Georgetown ferry, and found the president and all hands (the gentlemen named before, who acted as a sort of body-guard for him) waiting for the boat. It soon returned, and we all crossed over, and passed up the road about a mile; they then left us servants to wander about. In a short time several wagons from Bladensburg, drawn by Barney's artillery horses, passed up the road, having crossed the Long Bridge before it was set on fire. . . . I heard a tremendous explosion, and, rushing out, saw that the public buildings, navy yard, ropewalks, [and so forth], were on fire.

Mrs. Madison slept that night at Mrs. Love's, two or three miles over the river. After leaving that place she called in at a house, and went upstairs. The lady of the house learning who she was, became furious, and went to the stairs and screamed out, "Miss Madison! if that's you, come down and go out! Your husband has got mine out fighting, and . . . you shan't stay in my house; so get out!" Mrs. Madison complied, and went to Mrs. Minor's, a few miles further, where she stayed a day or two, and then returned to Washington, where she found Mr. Madison at her brother-in-law's, Richard Cutts, on F street. All the facts about Mrs. M. I learned from her servant Sukey. We moved into the house of Colonel John B. Taylor, corner of 18th street and New York Avenue, where we lived till the news of peace arrived.

In two or three weeks after we returned, Congress met in extra session, at Blodgett's old shell of a house on 7th street (where the General Post-office now stands). It was three stories high, and had been used for a theatre . . . an Irish boarding house, [and so forth] but both Houses of Congress managed to get along in it very well, notwithstanding it had to accommodate the Patent-office, City and General Post-office, committee-rooms, and what was left of the Congressional Library, at the same time. Things are very different now.

The next summer, Mr. John Law, a large property-holder about the Capitol, fearing it would not be rebuilt, got up a subscription and built a large brick building . . . and offered it to Congress for their use, till the Capitol could be rebuilt. This coaxed them back, though strong efforts were made to remove the seat of government north; but the southern members kept it here.

It has often been stated in print, that when Mrs. Madison escaped from the White House, she cut out from the frame the large portrait of Washington (now in one of the parlors there), and carried it off. This is totally false. She had no time for doing it. It would have required a ladder to get it down. All she carried off was the silver in her reticule, as the British were thought to be but a few squares off, and were expected every moment. John Susé (a Frenchman, then door-keeper, and still living) and Magraw, the president's gardener, took it down and sent it off on a wagon, with some large silver urns and such other valuables as could be hastily got hold of. When the British did arrive, they ate up the very dinner . . . that I had prepared for the president's party.

When the news of peace arrived, we were crazy with joy. Miss Sally Coles, a cousin of Mrs. Madison, and afterwards wife of Andrew Stevenson, since minister to England, came to the head of the stairs, crying out, "Peace! peace!" . . . I played the President's March on the violin . . . and such another joyful time was never seen in Washington. Mr. Madison and all his cabinet were as pleased as any, but did not show their joy in this manner.

Mrs. Madison was a remarkably fine woman. She was beloved by everybody in Washington. . . . Whenever soldiers marched by, during the war, she always sent out and invited them in to take . . . refreshments, giving them liberally of the best in the house. . . . In the last days of her life, before Congress purchased her husband's papers, she was in a state of absolute poverty, and I think sometimes suffered for the necessities of life. While I was a servant to Mr. Webster, he often sent me to her with a market-basket full of provisions, and told me whenever I saw anything in the house that I thought she was in need of, to take it to her. I often did this, and occasionally gave her small sums from my own pocket, though I had years before bought my freedom of her.

Mr. Madison, I think, was one of the best men that ever lived. . . . He was temperate in his habits. . . . He ate light breakfasts and no suppers, but rather a hearty dinner. . . .

After he retired from the presidency, he amused himself chiefly on his farm. At the election for members of the Virginia Legislature, in 1829 or '30, just after General Jackson's accession, he voted for James Barbour, who had been a strong Adams man. He also presided, I think, over the Convention for amending the Constitution, in 1832.

After the news of peace, and of General Jackson's victory at New Orleans, which reached here about the same time, there were great illuminations. We moved into the Seven Buildings, corner of 19th-street and Pennsylvania Avenue, and while there, General Jackson came on with his wife, to whom numerous dinner-parties and levees were given. Mr. Madison also held levees every Wednesday evening, at which . . . punch, coffee, ice-cream, [and so forth] were liberally served, unlike the present custom.

While Mr. Jefferson was president, he and Mr. Madison (then his secretary of state) were extremely intimate; in fact, two brothers could not have been more so. Mr. Jefferson always stopped over night at Mr. Madison's, in going and returning from Washington.

I have heard Mr. Madison say, that when he went to school, he cut his own wood for exercise. He often did it also when at his farm in Virginia. He was very neat, but never extravagant, in his clothes. He always dressed wholly in black—coat, breeches, and silk stockings, with buckles in his shoes and breeches. He never had but one suit at a time. He had some poor relatives that he had to help, and wished to set them an example of economy in the matter of dress. He was very fond of horses, and an excellent judge of them. . . . He never had less than seven horses in his Washington stables while president.

After Mr. Madison retired from the presidency, in 1817, he invariably made a visit twice a year to Mr. Jefferson—sometimes stopping two or three weeks—till Mr. Jefferson's death, in 1826.

I was always with Mr. Madison till he died, and shaved him every other day for sixteen years. For six months before his death, he was unable to walk, and spent most of his time reclined on a couch; but his mind was bright, and with his numerous visitors he talked with as much animation and strength of voice as I ever heard him in his best days. I was present when he died. That morning Sukey brought him his breakfast, as usual. He could not swallow. His niece, Mrs. Willis, said, "What is the matter, Uncle James?" "Nothing more than a change of mind, my dear." His head instantly dropped, and he ceased breathing as quietly as the snuff of a candle goes out. He was about eighty-four years old, and was followed to the grave by an immense procession of white and [African American] people. The pall-bearers were Governor Barbour, Philip P. Barbour, Charles P. Howard, and Reuben Conway; the two last were neighboring farmers.

Twenty years after the White House was burned, Dolley Madison was asked to select some letters for publication about the event. Historians believe Dolley Madison may have written this letter at that time, recalling a letter she may written to her sister during the actual event.

### First Lady Dolley Madison's Letter to Her Sister

*Extract from a letter to my sister.*

Tuesday, Aug. 23d, 1814.

Dear Sister:

My husband left me yesterday morning to join General Winder. He inquired anxiously whether I had courage or firmness to remain in the President's house until his return on the morrow, or succeeding day; and on my assurance that I had no fear but for him and the success of our army, he left me, beseeching me to take care of myself, and of the cabinet papers, public and private. I have since received two dispatches from him, written with a pencil; but the last is alarming, because he desires I should be ready at a moment's warning to enter my carriage and leave the city; that the enemy seemed stronger than had been reported, and that it might happen that they would reach the city with intention to destroy it. . . . I am accordingly ready; I have pressed as many cabinet papers into trunks as will fill one carriage; our private property must be sacrificed, as it is impossible to procure wagons for its transportation. I am determined not to go myself until I see Mr. Madison safe, and he can accompany me—as I hear of much hostility towards him . . . disaffection stalks around us. . . . My friends and acquaintances are all gone—even Colonel C—with his hundred men, who were stationed as a guard in the enclosure. . . . French John (a faithful domestic), with his usual activity and resolution, offers to spike the cannon at the gates, and to lay a train of powder which would blow up the British should they enter the house. To the last proposition I positively object, without being able, however, to make him understand why all advantages in war may not be taken.

Wednesday morning, 12 o'clock.—Since sunrise I have been turning my spy-glass in every direction, and watching with unwearied anxiety, hoping to discern the approach of my dear husband and his friends; but alas, I can descry only groups of military wandering in all directions as if there was a lack of arms, or of spirit to fight for their own firesides!

3 o'clock.

Will you believe it, my sister? We have had a battle or skirmish near Bladensburg, and I am still here, within sound of the cannons! Mr. Madison comes not; may God protect him! Two messengers covered with dust come to bid me fly; but I wait for him. . . . At this late hour a wagon has been procured. I have had it filled with the plate and most valuable portable articles belonging to the house; whether it will reach its destination, the Bank of Maryland, or fall into the hands of British soldiery, events must determine.

August 24, 1814.

Our kind friend, Mr. Carroll, has come to hasten my departure, and is in a very bad humor with me because I insist on waiting until the large picture of General Washington is secured, and it requires to be unscrewed from the wall. This process was found too tedious for these perilous moments! I have ordered the frame to be broken, and the canvas taken out; it is done, and the precious portrait placed in the hands of two gentlemen of New York for safe keeping. And now, dear sister, I must leave this house, or the retreating army will make me a prisoner in it, by filling up the road I am directed to take. When I shall again write you, or where I shall be tomorrow, I cannot tell!!

1. The authors of the passage and the letter provide accounts of historical events involving James and Dolley Madison. Write an essay analyzing the differences between the passage and the letter in their focus and interpretation. Use evidence from **both** the passage and the letter to support your response.

2. Read the sentences from the passage.

“Mrs. Madison was a remarkably fine woman. She was beloved by everybody in Washington. . . . Whenever soldiers marched by, during the war, she always sent out and invited them in to take . . . refreshments, giving them liberally of the best in the house. . . .”

What is the impact of the word choices on the tone of these sentences?

- (A) They create a questioning tone.
- (B) They indicate an expectant tone.
- (C) They suggest a humorous tone.
- (D) They create an admiring tone.

3. Read the sentences from the passage.

“He was very neat, but never extravagant, in his clothes. He always dressed wholly in black. . . . He never had but one suit at a time. He had some poor relatives that he had to help, and wished to set them an example of economy in the matter of dress.”

What is the meaning of word extravagant?

- (A) lavish
- (B) careful
- (C) simple
- (D) generous

4. Read the sentences from the passage.

“After leaving that place she called in at a house, and went upstairs. The lady of the house learning who she was, became furious, and went to the stairs and screamed out, ‘Miss Madison! if that’s you, come down and go out! Your husband has got mine out fighting, and . . . you shan’t stay in my house; so get out!’ ”

How do these sentences help to develop a key point in the passage?

- (A) They imply that Mrs. Madison had many friends in Washington, D.C.
- (B) They suggest that some United States citizens did not support the War of 1812.
- (C) They imply that Mrs. Madison planned to visit her sister in Washington, D.C.
- (D) They suggest that some British soldiers moved to Maryland after the War of 1812.

5. Read the sentence from the letter.

“... and on my assurance that I had no fear but for him and the success of our army, he left me, beseeching me to take care of myself, and of the cabinet papers, public and private.”

What does the word “beseeching” connote in the sentence?

- (A) impatience
- (B) rejection
- (C) urgency
- (D) courage

6. Read the sentence from the letter.

“... I have pressed as many cabinet papers into trunks as will fill one carriage; our private property must be sacrificed, as it is impossible to procure wagons for its transportation.”

What does the word trunks mean as it is used in the sentence?

- (A) rear compartments of automobiles
- (B) main stems of trees
- (C) large pieces of luggage
- (D) circuits between two telephone exchanges

7. Which evidence from the letter **most** strongly supports the idea that Dolley Madison was disappointed in the behavior of some soldiers?

- (A) “My husband left me yesterday morning to join General Winder.”
- (B) “My friends and acquaintances are all gone—even Colonel C—with his hundred men, who were stationed as a guard in the enclosure.”
- (C) “I can descry only groups of military wandering in all directions as if there was a lack of arms, or of spirit to fight for their own firesides!”
- (D) “We have had a battle or skirmish near Bladensburg, and I am still here, within sound of the cannons!”

8. How is Dolley Madison’s preparation for escape at 3:00 o’clock from the White House presented differently in the passage compared to the letter?

- (A) The passage explains the event as having a different cause than the letter does.
- (B) The passage reports the event using fewer references to common citizens than the letter uses.
- (C) The passage presents the event as involving fewer family members than were involved in the letter.
- (D) The passage describes the event using more details than the letter uses.