

Hello, Dolley: America's first female fashion plate

by William C. Kashatus

When we think of the dynamic women who have shaped American fashion and culture, the names Jacqueline Kennedy, Grace Kelly and Katharine Hepburn come to mind almost immediately.

But in her recent book, "Looking for Jackie: American Fashion Icons," Kathleen Craughwell-Varda points out that Dolley Madison was the first woman to capture the imagination of the U.S. public. She was also a Philadelphian who distanced herself from a strict Quaker upbringing to become the first trendsetter in a young nation.

Born June 20, 1768, Dolley was one of nine children of John and Mary Coles Payne, Virginia plantation owners. When she was 15, her father, a devout Quaker, freed their slaves and moved the family to Philadelphia. There, in a more densely populated urban setting, she seemed to flourish. Her personality and striking looks caught the attention of a young Quaker lawyer, John Todd Jr., whom she married in 1790.

It was an exciting time in Philadelphia's history. Aside from being the national capitol, the city was the largest in North America, as well as the principal seat of the American press and bar, and the leader in American medicine and artistic culture. The constant flow of public officials and foreign dignitaries gave the city a special air of extravagance, while Philadelphia's Quaker heritage lent a refreshing sense of idealism.

For a young lawyer like John Todd, there was plenty of business inside and outside of government circles. While he established a fairly lucrative law practice and became an active member of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, Dolley looked after their two young sons at their three-story brick rowhouse on the northeast corner of 4th and Walnut Streets.

When the yellow fever epidemic struck Philadelphia in 1793, Dolley and the children were sent into the countryside to escape the rapidly spreading disease. But John stayed behind to care for his ailing parents, who soon perished.

When John Todd finally rejoined his family in the countryside, he, too, displayed symptoms of the dreaded fever. On Oct. 24, 1793, both he and their younger son died. At the young age of 25, Dolley Todd was a widow.

Within a year's time, Dolley met and married James Madison, a shy, 43-year-old Virginia congressman. For the indiscretion of marrying outside her Quaker faith, she was disowned by the Society of Friends.

But her banishment only seemed to allow her true self to shine. Dolley discarded her plain gray Quaker garments for bright clothing and elegant turbans. She loved entertaining and delighted in giving large, formal dinner parties. Her exceptional memory for names and a remarkable ability to put guests at ease made her an asset to Madison's political career.

So impressed was Thomas Jefferson, a widower, with these qualities that, upon his election to the presidency in 1800, he often called on Dolley to act as White House hostess in the absence of a first lady. In this capacity, she was able to further her own husband's diplomatic objectives as secretary of state.

Enemies were often persuaded to put aside their antagonisms, and Dolley was able to glean valuable information from

heavily from ancient Greek prototypes, they were painted and gilded, with caned seats softened by the additions of velvet cushions.

Once the redecoration was complete, Dolley opened the White House to the public with weekly social gatherings. Sometimes, as many as 300 people would cram themselves into the small formal rooms to discuss politics, flirt or show off their stylish clothing. Dolley became so popular

that even her habit of taking snuff — considered very undilike — was overlooked.

According to Craughwell-Varda, the first lady's "devotion to fine clothes and parties, combined with her high visibility, made her the primary source of fashion trends for American women."

Her clothes "permeated the public consciousness," and detailed descriptions of them appear constantly in the diaries, letters and newspapers of the period. Among the most eye-catching are:

■ "A white cambric dress, buttoned all the way up and with a strip of embroidery along the buttonholes and a ruffled hem. Over her shoulder was a peach-colored silk scarf with a rich border. Her satin spencer and her gauze turban were the same color."

■ "She wore a gown of yellow satin, embroidered all over with sprigs of butter-flies, her bonnet a feathered creation."

■ "Mrs. Madison startled everyone by wearing black velvet, gold-trimmed and worn with a gold-lace turban, with a tiara with twenty-three sapphires. She looked brilliant."

During the War of 1812, when the British threatened Washington, Dolley demonstrated her courage by staying behind in the White House to supervise the removal of documents and artwork,

including Gilbert Stuart's famous portrait of George Washington.

When Madison's term expired in 1817, he and Dolley retired to their Virginia estate, Montpelier. While they still entertained, financial woes plagued the Madisons. After James died in 1836, Dolley was reduced to near poverty. She eventually had to sell Montpelier to pay her debts.

Granted a lifetime seat on the floor of the House of Representatives, Dolley returned to the capitol, where she spent the rest of her life, remaining the center of Washington society.

When she died in July 1849, hundreds lined up to pay their final respects outside St. John's Episcopal Church. "She will never be forgotten," said President Zachary Taylor in his eulogy,

"because she was truly our 'First Lady' for a half-century."

It was the first recorded usage of a title that has become synonymous with the original American fashion icon, Dolley Madison. ■

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DOLLEY MADISON PORTRAIT BY GILBERT STUART ("LOOKING FOR JACKIE")

guests in an amiable, unobtrusive manner.

She also became acquainted with the wife of the French foreign minister, Madame Pichon, who introduced Dolley to the latest French fashions. Fine, sheer fabrics, high waists, low necklines and short sleeves were considered "elegant" as well as wildly popular in France. But in the United States they denoted a lack of modesty. Still, Dolley became the greatest and most visible proponent of the French style, and her mode of dress stirred controversy.

But public criticism diminished after her husband was elected president in 1808. The new first lady paid all the expected social calls and downplayed her exceptional intelligence to avoid intimidating political dignitaries who might be useful to the president. She refurbished the White House in the neoclassical style to reflect the elegance and strength of the ancient republics, upon which the federal government was based. While the splayed legs and curved backs of sofas and chairs borrowed

How a nice Quaker girl showed D.C. how to party