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The Madisons at Montpelier: Reflections on the Founding Couple

Ralph Ketcham

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Restored to its original splendor, Montpelier is now a national shrine, but before Montpelier became a place of study and tribute, it was a home. Often kept from it by the business of the young nation, James and Dolley Madison could finally take up permanent residence when they retired from Washington in 1817. Their lifelong friend Thomas Jefferson predicted that, at Montpelier, the retiring Madison could return to his "books and farm, to tranquility, and independence," that he would be released "from incessant labors, corroding anxieties, active enemies, and interested friends."

As the celebrated historian Ralph Ketcham shows, this would turn out to be only partly true. Although the Madisons were no longer in Washington, Dolley continued to take part in its social scene from afar, dominating it just as she had during Jefferson’s and her husband’s administrations, commenting on people and events there and advising the multitude of young people who thought of her as the creator of society life in the young republic. James maintained a steady correspondence about public questions ranging from Native American affairs, slavery, and utopian reform to religion and education. He also took an active role at the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1829-30, in the defeat of nullification, and in the establishment of the University of Virginia, of which he was the rector for eight years after Jefferson’s death. Exploring Madison’s role in these post-presidential issues reveals a man of extraordinary intellectual vitality and helps us to better understand Madison’s political thought. His friendships with figures such as Jefferson, James Monroe, and the Marquis de Lafayette--as well as his assessment of them (he outlived them all)--shed valuable light on the nature of the republic they had all helped found.

In their last years, James and Dolley Madison personified the republican institutions and culture of the new nation--James as the father of the Constitution and its chief propounder for nearly half a century, and Dolley as the creator of the role of "First Lady." Anything but uneventful, the retirement period at Montpelier should be seen as a crucial element in our understanding of this remarkable couple.

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