Introduction

IN 1924 A POPULAR AND PROLIFIC BIOGRAPHER NAMED GAMALIEL Bradford wrote an essay about Dolley Madison for a collection he was assembling entitled *Wives.* Bradford was a much admired writer at the beginning of the twentieth century who crafted psychological portraits he called "psychographs." He wanted to picture the soul, the character, and the personality of the human being, to discover the temperament, demeanor, and mood. He chose biography, he explained, because it "is the story of life." "When we read biography," he said, "we are holding up the mirror to our own hearts."[1]

Wives was a volume devoted to women who "would probably have lived quiet, utterly unknown lives except for their masculine connections," he wrote a friend. Bradford liked writing about women. "When you come to study them," he observed, "you often find them more interesting than the men." In making up his list of subjects, Bradford decided on several president's wives and included Dolley Madison. But he found writing about her hard slogging. He simply could not get to know her. "Spent a whole morning," he wrote in his journal in 1924, "in the hope of finding some touch that might make Dolly Madison stand out a little more vividly." He was exasperated, as he "found nothing for that purpose."[2] In reading his essay, we feel his

frustration. "It is hardly fair to infer that the woman had no inner life because we hear nothing of it," he argued, almost as if in dialogue with himself, "but it is safe to assume that the rush of external impressions left her little time to brood upon her own soul, its nature or its workings." He had read what he could find and discovered "little of inward experience."[3]

Yet by 1924 there had appeared two volumes of her letters. Lucia B. Cutts, the granddaughter of Dolley's beloved sister Anna Payne Cutts, compiled the first edition, which was entitled *Memoirs and Letters of Dolly Madison* and published in 1886. She declared that her object was to "lay before the public a series of private letters, written, without the most remote idea of publication, by a woman to her nearest and dearest relations." She promised that these letters would "furnish an exact transcript of the feeling of the writer, in times of no ordinary trial."[4] In fact, however, Lucia B. Cutts was careful to lay before the reading public an edited version of her great-aunt, bowdlerizing the letters she included in order to present the most attractive image of her ancestor.

Nearly thirty years later a Washington, D.C., historian named Allen C. Clark collected and published an expanded version of Dolley's letters entitled *Life and Letters of Dolly Madison.* Like Cutts, Clark swore he was presenting a wholly truthful portrait. His goal, he explained, was to let the reader decide whether "the unfading fame of Mrs. Madison has its foundation more on fact or more on fancy." And yet his adoration shines forth in the first sentence of his book: "The incomparable Dolly!" He continues: "The queens of our chosen kings are a long line . . . but Queen Dolly sparkles the most."[5] He too cut, edited, and reshaped her letters.

Not only had these two books been published by the time Bradford set to work, but a host of essays and book-length biographies of Mrs. Madison already existed. Some of the writers, such as Harriet Upton, Mary Logan, and Sarah K. Bolton, were reform activists looking for models for young American women. Ella Kent Barnard was interested in Dolley's Quaker background.[6] Some of these biographers took themselves seriously as historians; others were popular novelists. Most, however, wrote hagiography. None could have informed Bradford about her inner life. Their evaluations of her career reveal their goals and their sources.

All these writers seem happy to have assessed Dolley Madison's contributions within rather narrow definitions of what best suited a woman's public activity. Her first biographer and her contemporary, Margaret Bayard Smith, admired her, in the end, because of her "warm heart, that lent its glow to her cheek and its sparkle to her eye," and "the kindness and benevolence of her disposition." Lucia B. Cutts pictured her as "ambitious in that she

endeavored to make her husband's administration a brilliant and successful one." Ella Kent Barnard respected her for her "ready tact" and "kind and loving thoughtfulness." Maud Wilder Goodwin, writing for a late nineteenth-century series on women for the Daughters of the American Revolution, agreed with Bradford that Mrs. Madison "lived very much upon the surface of things" but added that the president's wife was "charming and magnetic." Elizabeth Fries Ellet, the scholar who first introduced women's history to American readers in her *Women of the American Revolution,* envisioned Dolley as a perfect hostess, an American queen who dressed simply and furnished her house plainly while making her hospitality and charity "bounteously liberal."[7]

More recently, historians have taken this portrait and turned it on its head. The early scholars defined Dolley Madison's role as smoothing James Madison's path, lending him social sophistication, establishing a gathering place for the city's elite through her parties, and blending European fashion with American simplicity: she became a jewel in her husband's crown. Current historians argue instead that through her parties she invented a public space, invited everyone of importance—both men and women—to participate, provided the environment for networking and the building of interest groups, and then, using her feminine charms, manipulated and guided a fractious Congress. In so doing, she achieved a political goal that her husband could not attain. As one recent historian has written, "Like Thomas Jefferson, Dolley attracted the members, cajoling, charming, and bullying them, in a gracious way of course."[8] Both of these interpretations are based on the same sources.

There has yet to be a good biography of Dolley Madison. Although some of the existing attempts make enjoyable reading, they all portray her as the nation's hostess, the wife who charmed the nation and its capital, the strong and courageous patriot who guarded the White House against the British until she fled with George Washington's portrait under her arm and her husband's papers stuffed in her carriage. This is the woman who has lent her name to snacking cakes and ice cream. None of the biographies captures her inner life or discusses the range of her emotions and thoughts. The reason for this lies in large measure with Dolley Payne Todd Madison herself.

It was a hot August day in 1834 when Dolley Madison received a letter from her old Washington friend Margaret Bayard Smith.[9] Smith had agreed to write a biographical sketch of Mrs. Madison for a new four-volume work, *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans.* Few women were to be

found in any of the volumes, and few women were asked to write for the project. The third volume, scheduled for publication in 1836, was to include essays on both James and Dolley Madison. No other woman was to be included in that volume. It was an important assignment, even for so distinguished a writer as Smith. As Smith began researching her subject, she asked Dolley to jot down her memories, outline her family history, and lend Smith some copies of her letters. Who were her parents, where had she grown up, what kind of education had she received, when had she moved to Philadelphia, and who were her siblings? The former First Lady responded with a brief account of her early history: birth, parents, education, first and second marriages. But it was very slight information indeed, and despite repeated requests and promises, Dolley sent her biographer little more.[10]

There were, of course, practical reasons for her reserve. She was busy caring for her increasingly ill husband and shouldering the burdens of housekeeping as well as receiving streams of visitors. Indeed she explained to Smith that she would have to "plead also my constant engagements of different sorts at home." But her reasons may have been both more complicated and more typical of her generation than her preoccupations as a housewife might indicate. Biographers during the Early Republic strove to proclaim America's virtue and glory to their fellow Americans and to the world; they wanted to instill the values they saw in the founding fathers in the nation as a whole.[11] In this environment the public side of great personages was important, but not their private lives. Public figures, including James Madison, destroyed their personal correspondence, and many of Dolley's surviving letters instruct their recipients to burn them. As one contemporary biographer wrote, "Private character is much more an object of individual curiosity, than of general interest, or public importance. A representative of it may amuse and entertain; but it is rarely calculated to improve." Thus Dolley told her niece Mary Cutts that she could not give Smith "anything of importance *in my own Eyes,*" adding that she found "egotism . . . so repugnant to my nature that I shrink from recording my own feelings, acts or doings."[12]

And yet while Dolley Madison stonewalled her biographer, she was careful to provide her with one particular letter. She wanted Smith to have the letter she had mailed her sister in August 1814 describing her own heroic actions during the British attack on Washington. She was insistent that Smith receive it, telling her nieces, "If you have lost it or omitted to give it to her, it will be much to my injury."[13] As a result, what stands out most in Smith's short biography of Dolley is that single letter. The rest of the sketch Smith wrote largely from her own memory. She had, after all, resided in Washington since

the beginning of the Jefferson administration and had been good friends with the Madisons for over three decades. She knew what social life was like in the early days of the city and how Dolley had conducted herself as First Lady. She remembered what the president's mansion had looked like before it was burned, and she had visited Montpelier, the Madison plantation in Orange County, Virginia. Smith included no direct quotes in her work. But she did reprint this one letter.

We may never know the contents of the original letter. Dolley Madison sent Smith only a copy of it, not the original. She wrote Smith that her letters were with her sister Lucy Washington Todd in Kentucky, and that she was "unwilling to have them exposed to the Mail," but she told Mary Cutts that "the original is nearly torn to bits by the mice" (although she gave no indication how she knew this if the letter was in Kentucky).[14] We might expect that in a moment of such stress she would have written in a more dashed and hurried fashion than usual, and yet there is a more formal quality to this letter as it was printed than is evident in most of her writing. Moreover, there are details included that she would not have needed to tell her sister. And we know that Dolley was not committed to telling Smith the truth, for she had already written in a letter that she had been born in North Carolina "whilst my Parents were there on a visit of one year to an Uncle," when in truth the Paynes had migrated to a Quaker community in central North Carolina and had remained there for three years before moving back to Virginia. Four years later she would write to an unknown correspondent that her husband had wanted her to read over his letters "and if any letter—or line—or word struck me as being calculated to injure the feelings of any one or wrong themselves that I would withdraw them or it." As a consequence, she admitted, she had made "slight corrections," as she felt these were "consonant to his wishes."[15]

But the letter of August 1814 is about courage and bravery. It is about one woman's determination to prevail against the enemy and champion American independence. Americans still carry the image of Dolley Madison saving the icons of the nation. When asked what they know about Dolley Madison, most Americans today recall her stand in Washington against the enemy, her courage, and her rescue of the portrait of the nation's greatest leader and founding hero, George Washington.[16]

She stamped her own legend. Her reticence, while appropriate for a woman of her time and station, served more than one purpose. Again and again she instructed her correspondents to burn her letters. She knowingly and carefully protected her personal and inner life. And she was careful about her public face.

From the very beginning, the editors of *The Papers of James Madison* considered acquiring the correspondence of Dolley Madison a critical part of their mission, and the project has continued to collect her letters over the past forty years. We are indebted to them in every way. Many of these letters were kept by their recipients and handed down over the generations. Some of the most personal letters, however, exist only because one of Dolley Madison's favorite nieces, Mary E. E. Cutts, transcribed them. They are not the same as the originals—Mary Cutts corrected spelling and grammar, deleted sections, and merged letters—but we are fortunate to have them. We now have copies of about two thousand of her letters in our collection. Some of these letters are invitations and thank-you notes, brief replies and responses. But others, especially her letters to her sisters Anna and Lucy, reveal her inner thoughts and anxieties. These are letters that, in the words of Gamaliel Bradford, picture her soul, character, and personality. They describe her close attachment to her family, her fears and her physical pain, her moments of pleasure, and her experiences of grief.

But the letters of Dolley Madison do more than that. Over the past generation both the general public and historians have become increasingly interested in the role of the First Lady and the ways in which women have exerted political power and helped define the nature of American society. The role of the First Lady emerged out of the constitutional design of the U.S. presidency. From the outset the president was not only the chief executive of the federal government; he was the head of state. As such, he presided over the nation's ceremonial functions, and he lived where he worked. The social life of the president, therefore, became intertwined with his political power. Once the national capital moved to Washington, D.C., and the White House became the center of the executive branch of the government, the president's social and ceremonial role became increasingly important. Within this context James and Dolley Madison fabricated the symbols of power and authority consistent with their republican ideology in a way that suited the First Lady as well as the president. In part this partnership of effort was deliberately fostered by James Madison, who was shy and retiring in public. But it was largely a consequence of Dolley Madison's strength, graciousness, and political perspicacity. Through her conduct she defined republican manners and created republican rituals that affirmed the political legitimacy of her husband. Historians have finally begun to write about this subject. But the new historiography is based on the old sources and presents the story of Dolley Madison as the flip side of the same coin. This volume presents the new sources needed to make a fresh examination of old narratives.[17]

A collection of letters is a kind of autobiography, diary, or journal. Thus *The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison* tells her story in her own voice. The letters reveal her private life: her loving sisters and her profligate son, her pleasures in Washington and her heartache at selling Montpelier. Many of the letters are so immediate that her emotions stand up from the page.

We have divided her life into five periods that trace the arc of her life and its inherent drama. The first period, covering her childhood and youth, extends from her birth in 1768 through 1801, when, as the wife of James Madison, she moved to the new capital of Washington, D.C. The second period covers those years when James was secretary of state and Dolley became the most important woman in the new city and new society. The third period contains her years of triumph, the White House years, from 1809 to 1817. The fourth, from 1817 to 1836, encompasses her years of country retirement, from the Madisons' return to Montpelier to the death of her husband. The final period coincides with her widowhood, those years of loss and deprivation when, desperately poor, she returned to Washington to live off her fame and her friends. She died in July 1849.

These letters present Dolley Madison's trials and triumphs and make it possible to do what Gamaliel Bradford could never accomplish: to gain admittance to her mind and her private emotions and to understand the importance of her role as the national capital's first First Lady.

1. Richard Hutch, "Explorations in Character: Gamaliel Bradford and Henry Murray as Psychobiographers," *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 4 (fall 1981): 313; see also Edward Wagenknecht, *Gamaliel Bradford* (Boston, 1982), esp. chap. 5; Bradford to C. B. Porter, 12 Aug. 1930, *The Letters of Gamaliel Bradford, 1918–1931,* ed. Van Wyck Brooks (Boston, 1934), 339 n. 1.

2. Gamaliel Bradford, *Wives* (New York, 1925), xi; Bradford to Marvin Sprague, 17 June 1924, *Letters of Gamaliel Bradford,* 193–94; Van Wyck Brooks, ed., *The Journal of Gamaliel Bradford, 1883–1932* (Boston, 1933), 371.

3. Bradford, *Wives,* 129. Bradford's essay on DPM was first printed in the first issue of the *Virginia Quarterly Review,* in April 1925.

4. Lucia B. Cutts, *Memoirs and Letters of Dolly Madison* (Boston, 1886), 2.

5. Allen C. Clark, *Life and Letters of Dolly Madison* (Washington, D.C., 1914), [i], 7.

6. Harriet Upton, *Our Early Presidents: Their Wives and Children* (Boston, 1890); Mary Logan, *The Part Taken by Women in American History* (Wilmington, Del., 1912); Sarah K. Bolton, *Famous Leaders among Women* (New York, 1895); Ella Kent Barnard, *Dorothy Payne, Quakeress* (Philadelphia, 1909).

7. Margaret Bayard Smith, "Mrs. Madison," in *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans,* ed. James Herring and James B. Longacre (4 vols.; Philadelphia, 1836), 3:1; Cutts, *Memoirs,* 72; Barnard, *Dorothy Payne,* 114; Maud Wilder Goodwin, *Dolly Madison* (New York, 1896), 70, 73; Elizabeth Fries Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution* (2 vols.; New York, 1848–50); Ellet, *The Court Circles of the Republic* (1869; rept. New York, 1975), 83. For Ellet herself, see Scott E. Casper, "An Uneasy Marriage of Sentiment and Scholarship: Elizabeth F. Ellet and the Domestic Origins of American Women's History," *Journal of Women's History* 4 (1993): 10–35.

8. Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville, Va., 2000), 73, 81.

9. The 25 Aug. 1834 heat wave was reported in the Baltimore *Chronicle and Daily Marylander* on 8 Sept. 1835.

10. DPM to Smith, 31 Aug. 1834. For the *National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans,* Herring and Longacre commissioned essays from among a wide range of their contemporaries. On 11 Sept. 1834 Smith's husband, Samuel Harrison Smith, in a short note to JM (DLC) mentioned "transmitting the enclosed letter for Mrs. Madison." Although DPM did not preserve this correspondence, we can presume that Margaret Bayard Smith was asking for more materials, as she may also have done indirectly through Mary and Dolley Cutts.

11. DPM to Margaret Bayard Smith, 17 Jan. 1835, DLC: J. Henley Smith Papers. For biography in the Early Republic, see Scott E. Casper, *"Constructing" American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999).

12. Charles Caldwell, quoted in Casper, *"Constructing" American Lives,* 61; DPM to Mary E. E. Cutts, 2 Dec. 1834.

13. DPM to Mary E. E. Cutts and Dolley P. Madison Cutts, 2 Jan. 1836, MCR-S.

14. DPM to Smith, 17 Jan. 1835, to Mary E. E. Cutts, October 1835.

15. DPM to Smith, 31 Aug. 1834; *PJM* 1:xvii.

16. For a fuller discussion, see David B. Mattern, "Dolley Madison Has the Last Word: The Famous Letter," *White House History* 4 (fall 1998): 38–43. The legend that DPM saved the Declaration of Independence, while not true, was depicted repeatedly in illustrations throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a fact that reflects her mythic status as America's great heroine of the War of 1812.

17. See Allgor, *Parlor Politics;* Jan Lewis, "Politics and the Ambivalence of the Private Sphere: Women in Early Washington, D.C.," in *A Republic for the Ages,* ed. Donald R. Kennon (Charlottesville, Va., 1999), 122–51; Fredrika J. Teute, "Roman Matron on the Banks of Tiber Creek: Margaret Bayard Smith and the Politicization of Spheres in the Nation's Capital," ibid., 89–121; Barbara Carson, *Ambitious Appetites: Dining, Behavior, and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington* (Washington, D.C., 1990); Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2001).