



Bass Otis, *Mrs. James Madison*, ca. 1817. Oil on canvas. New-York Historical Society, Gift of Thomas Jefferson Bryan, 1867.308.

Module 1 focuses on Dolley Madison and the important role she played in the political life of the early republic. At the time, partisan divide ran so deep it sometimes ended in physical fights, even duels. Dolley Madison was not officially a politician, of course, but she

was a woman of great political savvy. And she used the power of her position and her personality to offer a new way for politicians, always male, to interact and bridge the disagreements and rivalries that separated them.

This module explores Dolley Madison's life from childhood to old age—her Quaker upbringing and later slave ownership, her first marriage and traumatic early loss, her friendships, her money problems, and her relationship with her troubled son. But the central focus is Dolley Madison as the astute political partner of James Madison during his terms as secretary of state and president. It offers a new way to look at the nation's early history, and at the part women played in bringing the Constitution to life on the ground, even as laws and attitudes restricted their freedom. And it provides a lens for looking more broadly at the lives of women in the early republic—not only elite white women like Dolley, but the women of different races and classes who interacted with her.

Suggested Activities

- ★ Whenever you introduce a women's history component into your lessons, ask the students to consider both how this changes their understanding of the event and why it is important to have multiple perspectives.
- ★ Ask students to use **Resources 2, 3, 4, and 5** to make a case either for or against the following quote by James Tilton: "The men possess the more ostensible powers of making and executing laws . . . [but] the women, in every free country, have an absolute control of manners; and it is confessed, that in a republic, manners are of equal importance with laws."
- ★ Define coverture using **Resource 1**, and then examine the life stories of **Dolley Madison** and **Eliza Brock** to determine how this law affected their lives.
- ★ Ask students to use **Resources 3 and 4** along with the life stories of **Dolley Madison** and **Margaret Bayard Smith** to determine how, despite legal and cultural limitations, women were able to exert political influence in the early republic. What effect did they have on the shape of the new government?
- ★ Compare and contrast the life stories of **Dolley Madison**, **Eliza Brock**, and **Sukey**. What limitations did they all share as women in the early American period? In what ways did their racial and class differences affect their daily lives?
- ★ Compare and contrast Dolley Madison's and Paul Jennings's accounts of the evacuation of the White House and the fall of Washington (**Resources 6, 7, and 8**). Why do you think one of these accounts became history, while the other was essentially forgotten?
- ★ **James Madison** and **Margaret Bayard Smith** both had a passion for politics, but Margaret's gender prevented her from pursuing a public life. Ask students to compare how these two individuals pursued their passion within the confines of their gender roles.
- ★ As a class, reorganize the **Could and Should** passages into two columns: laws and rules. Discuss the difference between a law and a cultural expectation or rule. What are the consequences for breaking either? Then, ask the students to research and discuss the laws and cultural expectations that govern both women and men today. How much has changed?

- ★ Compare Dolley Madison's tenure as first lady with those of Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, Michelle Obama, and Melania Trump. How has the role of first lady evolved? What has stayed the same? What do their actions and experiences reveal about expectations of women in the current U.S.?

Discussion Questions

- ★ How did the early state governments tackle the question of women's legal status under the new Constitution of the United States of America?
- ★ What limitations did coverture place on women?
- ★ How did women in the early republic participate in politics?
- ★ What major challenge threatened the functionality of the new U.S. government?
- ★ What role did Dolley Madison and other leading Washington women play in stabilizing the new government?
- ★ What role did race and class play in determining a woman's social status and life choices?