

Write to Me

James and Dolley Madison had no children, but they raised Dolley's son, Payne Todd, as their own. Payne was a troubled young man, an alcoholic and a gambler, and he caused agony for his parents in the last decades of their lives, when he was constantly in debt. In 1829, Payne was put in debtors' prison to work off \$200 to \$300 in debts. Dolley wrote to her sister, Anna: "Every feeling of my soul is wounded. Yet we shall do something." James and Dolley did "do something," again and again, even when Montpelier faced mounting financial problems of its own. Dolley's brother, John Payne, estimated that James spent a total of \$40,000 on Payne's gambling and living expenses over the years.



Mathew B. Brady, *Dolley Madison, three-quarter length portrait of a woman, facing front, seated*, 1848. Half-plate daguerreotype. White House Historical Association / White House Collection.

During his retirement, James organized his papers with Dolley's tireless editorial and secretarial help. In his will, he stipulated that these historic documents from his long career should be sold. He hoped the seven volumes would bring in \$100,000, and that Dolley would be financially secure for life. The year after James died, the first three volumes were purchased by Congress for only \$30,000. The money was used immediately to pay bills and Payne's debts. In 1844, when Dolley wrote this letter, she was hoping Payne would do as he had offered: help her sell additional volumes of James's papers. Her contact was Senator William Cabell Rives ("Mr. R.").

In the meantime, she was "without funds," and she owed a payment to her friend, John Jacob Astor, who had lent her money. She could barely bring herself to mention Payne's ongoing gambling debts: "I will say little more." Even the great honor of a seat in Congress seemed unimportant.

Dolley Madison was endlessly forgiving of Payne. Together, they had survived when yellow fever took four members of their family, a powerful bond between any mother and son. (See the life stories of **Dolley Madison** and **Eliza Brock**.) But as an adult, Payne never gave his mother the support she needed. He vanished frequently for long periods of



Attributed to Joseph Wood, *John Payne Todd*, ca. 1817. Watercolor on ivory. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Miss Mary Madison McGuire, 1936 (36.73).

time, reappearing only to ask for money. A few months after this letter, her finances no better, Dolley Madison was forced to sell Montpelier.

In 1848, the Library of Congress purchased the remaining four volumes of James' papers for \$25,000. Congress sent Dolley a check for \$5,000, but put the remainder in a trust fund, to keep the money out of Payne's hands.

Discussion Questions

- ★ What does this letter reveal about Dolley Madison's life after the death of her husband?
- ★ Why do you think Dolley Madison wanted or needed Payne's help?
- ★ What does Dolley Madison's letter teach us about the status of women in the new republic?

Sources: Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); The Dolley Madison Digital Edition, Holly C. Shulman, ed., <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/dmde/>.

Dolley Madison's Letter to Payne

Washington Jany. 22d. 44

If you love me, my dear son, write to me—tell me when you will come to offer the papers to Congress, and to do something with the 4th volume—we are without funds and those we owe are impatient—the time has arrived now when if lost or neglected will never return to us! Mr. R with whom only I have conversed, assured me that if he could do any thing in it—we should chuse—but he had made himself so unpopular—that no open efforts of his would do any good to my interest and therefore some influential member of the lower house should be chosen and employed. Oh, my son! I am too unhappy not to have you with me, and not to have even your opinion and directions, what to do myself or what individuals to engage and at what time! Do not let this often repeated request offend or hurt you my son—but I will say little more—as it is not good for me to write.

You have no doubt seen in the papers a Resolution of Congress inviting me to a seat—and my answer—It is nothing in my eyes or my heart, nor would compliments even higher, unless you and myself were on safe ground with our creditors.

Astor's interest is due the 19th of February—can you obtain it for me? Miss Legare's best respects to you.

Ever your affectionate mother
D. P. Madison.

[Envelope]
J. P. Todd
Montpelier
Orange Cy
Va.

Dolley Payne Todd Madison to John Payne Todd, 22 January 1844, in *The Dolley Madison Digital Edition*, ed. Holly C. Shulman. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2004. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/dmde/DPM1353> (accessed by M. Waters, 12-7-2016).

Note
chuse = choose