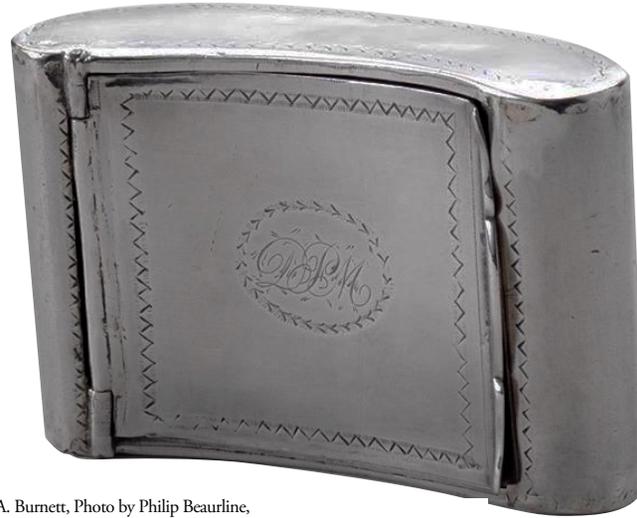


Parties and Politics

The president is expected to host congressmen in his home. George Washington and John Adams, or their wives, had hosted large social events. But Thomas Jefferson entertained much less, partly because his wife had died some years earlier, and partly because he wanted to maintain personal control and prevent lawmakers from collaborating. So he preferred to give small dinner parties for a few men, either Federalist or Republican, but never both at once.

The Madisons took a different approach when James was president. In addition to formal dinners for forty people or more, Dolley hosted regular Wednesday night parties in the Drawing Room. She published invitations in the newspapers, so all sorts of people appeared: male and female, Federalists and Republicans, elected officials and carriage drivers. Dressed to impress (see Resource 5), Dolley presided over events packed so tightly they were called “squeezes.”

Regardless of their politics, people came to the squeezes because so much of the unofficial business of government happened there. Dolley understood this, and reinforced it. As Margaret Bayard Smith wrote:



Charles A. Burnett, Photo by Philip Beaurline, *Dolley Madison's Snuffbox*, ca. 1800. Silver. Montpelier, a National Trust Historic Site, Bequest of Marion duPont Scott, NT85.2.45.

“Every visitor left her with the pleasing impression of being an especial favorite, of having been the object of peculiar attention. She never forgot a name she had once heard, nor a face she had once seen, nor the personal circumstances connected with every individual of her acquaintance.” And frequently, she shared the tobacco from her snuffbox, which Mrs. Smith said was a “perfect security from hostility.”

In a letter to her sister, Anna, Dolley reported on a gathering at the White House as the War of 1812 approached. She was well aware of the political significance of her events.

Discussion Questions

- ★ What do you learn about Dolley Madison from this letter?
- ★ Why did the Federalists decide to end their boycott of the Madison family's parties?
- ★ What does this episode reveal about Dolley Madison's political influence?

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/> (accessed by M. Waters, 9-28-2016).

Dolley's Letter to Anna

. . . The Vice P. lies dangerously ill—Electioneering for his office goes on beyond all description. The World seems running Mad, what with one thing & another—The Fed[eralists], as I told you, were all affronted with M[adison], refused to dine or come but they have changed their tack—last night & the night before, our rooms were crowded with republicans & such a rallying of our party has alarm'd them into a return. They came in a large party last night also & are continually calling—Even D. R. Will < . . . > who is a fine fellow, came last night. The old & the young Muster'd—The War business goes on slowly—but I fear twill be sure. . . .

Dolley Payne Todd Madison to her sister, Anna Payne Cutts, [ca. 27 March 1812], in *The Dolley Madison Digital Edition*, ed. Holly C. Shulman. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2004. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/DPM0318> (accessed by M. Waters, 9-7-16).

NOTES

The Vice P. = Vice President George Clinton, who died April 20, 1812.

D. R. Will = David Rogerson Williams of South Carolina, a Republican member of the House of Representatives.

< . . . > = missing or unreadable text.