



American FLOTUS - Dolley Madison: Her Life and Letters featuring Holly Shulman

Alan Lowe: Welcome to American FLOTUS, a podcast produced by a partnership of the First Ladies Association for Research and Education or FLARE, and the American POTUS podcast. I'm your host, Alan Lowe, and I'm very pleased to welcome our guest for this episode, Dr. Holly Shulman. With her M.A. from Columbia University and her Ph.D. from the University of Maryland, Holly has served as a research professor at the University of Virginia for over 20 years. During that time, she's contributed so much to first ladies' scholarship, including shedding a light on the life and legacy of Dolley Madison. Holly was the editor of the Dolley Madison Digital Edition and is the author of the book that is our focus today, *The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison*. Holly, welcome to American FLOTUS.

Holly Shulman: It's my pleasure to be here.

Alan: Before we dive into some specific letters and learn more about Dolley, where can our listeners find the letters of Dolley Madison online?

Holly: They're published by the University of Virginia Press, as was the book you mentioned. The University of Virginia Press has something called Rotunda, which is its electronic imprint. And so they have not only the papers of Dolley Madison, but James Madison, George Washington, all of the founding fathers, James Polk. It goes on and on and on and on. The publication is called the Dolley Madison Digital Edition, and it exists in an electronic format only. It does not have a paper equivalent. And in that it's somewhat exceptional. The interested reader or scholar can go to the University of Virginia Press website, go down to Rotunda and look for it. You will see that it is behind a paywall, but if someone has some research they want to do, or is a student or whatever, they can write to the editor there and, usually, they will give something between a 24-hour and a three-month free period.

Alan: I see. Very nice.

Holly: You can get it; you just don't own it. You've borrowed it.

Alan: I see. I know we did something similar. I was director of the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum for a while, and we went fully digital in the annotated papers of Lincoln that we were doing while I was there. So, let's turn to one of the things I know that had to have been a challenge in looking at the letters of Dolley Madison, and that's that Dolley and James made an effort to not preserve personal correspondence.

Why was that the case and how did the letters that ended up in collections survive?

Holly: All right, first, let me start with a kind of a plug for documentary editing. What a documentary editor does is that a project will start with a great sweep, and they will go from collection to collection to collection. Biggest collection for Dolley is at the Library of Congress, but there are collections at Princeton. There are collections at UVA. Sometimes people will just contact you and you'll be surprised they have something that you didn't have. One of the letters that you liked and you've mentioned later on that we'll get to, when her sister Anna writes her in August of 1814, we found at the home of a woman who was in fact related to Anna Cutts, to the Cutts family, Dolley's sister's family. Three of us went up there and we looked through her records and she did not even know that she had it, but there it was. We took a picture of it. She still has it or has donated it, I'm not

sure. But a documentary editor doesn't take the artifact. It takes the image of the artifact. And then you begin the work of transcribing and verifying and annotating. So, we ended up with the Dolley Madison Digital Edition with about 3,400 letters and over 3,500 documents.

And the book to which you have just referred published 300 of them. So, if the listener again wants a fuller picture of both Dolley and the era, in a book, we could do 300 letters. But online, at no greater cost than online, except our salaries, we could do well over 3,500. Let me answer your question furthermore because your question is why didn't they save their letters as Washington did, as Jefferson did.

If you want to know details about George Washington's plantation they were kept in great detail. If you want to know something about Montpelier, James Madison's plantation, there's nothing. There are a number of reasons for it. Partly, James Madison himself believed that the personal should not be part of history. That a biography of an important person, for him, an important man, should be only the political actions that person took and not look at that politician or diplomat as a person with a personal life. When James Madison retired, he spent a lot of time organizing his papers and what he culled from his papers were then published in 1840 in three volumes. What they burned in the process, we quite frankly don't know. There was probably some of that. There are some other things. John Payne Todd took letters and sold them. That was her son. And her son was a profligate, a wastrel. And as I will say later, the serpent in the Garden of Eden. There was probably other kinds of scattering. We know that Dolley's great-great-niece sold off papers in 1899 that had belonged to her. So, she had held them for 50 years and 60 years, and then she sold them.

And then there's a question in Dolley's mind, what was important and what was not important. So, if the reader wants to know about Dolley's early life there's very little that will come from correspondence. There are Quaker records. There are some letters. There are land records. There are all the other kinds of things that historians turn to, but she just didn't keep them.

Alan: So, though you have told the story the best you can with those select letters and gotten us from her youth up to Philadelphia, she has a first husband who passes away, and then Dolley met and wed James Madison in 1794. And one of the letters you include in *The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison* is written from Dolley to James 11 years after they're

married. It's October 23rd of 1805, and he evidently had just left on a trip, and she immediately wrote him a letter that ended up by saying: "Adieu, my beloved, our hearts understand each other. In fond affection, thine." Do you think, is that indicative of their relationship? Was it a real loving relationship?

Holly: I think it was a loving relationship. Let me tell you one thing that has complicated it for historians and that is after she wed Madison, which she did on the estate of her sister Lucy, who had married the nephew of George Washington and they lived on a plantation in what's now West Virginia, was then western Virginia. Afterwards she sat down in her bedroom where they were staying and she wrote a letter to one of her oldest and best friends and she signed it, Dolley Madison. And under that she said, 'alas'.

Alan: Ooh.

Holly: She misspelled it: A-l-a-s-s. What does that mean? We don't really know. Perhaps it was a rocky start. She was certainly looking for someone who would take care of her son. She had lost a husband and a son in the yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793. This son, who turned out to be such a miserable wastrel, was only three at the time when they got married. And she needed someone who she thought would take care of him. She loved Virginia and she had lived for most of the first 15 years of her life on a plantation in Virginia with cousins by the name of Coles and Winston. And she therefore, I think, was very happy to return to a plantation life. And by all accounts, James Madison was in fact an absolutely delightful private person. He was short, as we all know. He was very formal and very distant in public company, as many of your listeners may know. But in private, he was apparently very warm. And he was very witty and very charming. So, whatever the public image you have of James Madison is not the private James Madison.

Another quote that I did not send you is when he's courting her, he sends a letter to a cousin of hers who had married a member of her family, the Coles family, and lived in southern Virginia. And in that letter, this cousin of hers says to her, "he burns with desire." Now that's pretty blatant and whatever for the time. So he was clearly passionately in love with her for the first time. He had never been married before. We don't know anything about the emotional life of his childhood, but there must have been something about her warmth, her hospitality, her whole personality, and

also at the same time a deep vulnerability that she carried that attracted her, and she to him, as somebody who was both so successful and also so charming, and somebody who really would take care of her.

Alan: It's not usually something we associate with Madison, as you said. We see him as kind of remote, the father of the Constitution and to hear that he was burning with desire gives you a whole new perspective.

Holly: Right. He, as I say, if you read some of the visitors' accounts of men and women who went to visit them when he was in retirement in Montpelier, time after time, after time, after time, visitor after visitor, after visitor says, "He tells the most wonderful stories; he is so charming; he has [such a] such a glitter in his eyes."

Alan: Interesting.

Holly: He was charming. I had a quote here that I wanted to read about their relationship. Actually, two quotes here. One is that she had two sisters who were still living. One sister who died in 1807, and then two sisters who lived until 1832 and 1846. Her sister Lucy lived with her for a while. Lucy was the one who married George Washington's nephew, and that Washington died in 1809. And so Lucy lived with them for a while in the White House. Lucy, after she remarries and goes off to Kentucky says, "How is my dear brother James? Tell him I hope he misses me at meals and takes his usual walk to and fro in the little sitting room in the evening. And when he kisses you, he was always so fearful of making my mouth water." A wonderful quote.

And to tell you another side of that. He dies considerably before she does. But in the immediate aftermath of his death and her becoming a widow, she asks Thomas Jefferson's only surviving daughter to come visit--Martha. And Martha brings one of her daughters. Martha then writes as a visitor's account: "Mrs. Madison sought comfort in the close friendship of her old and much loved friend, Mrs. Randolph. They were inseparable." But then she describes what the house was like, what Montpelier was like after James died, and this is in the weeks after James died. "The house seemed utterly deserted. The great statesman, loving husband, kind master, and attentive friend was gone. And we three seemed lost in the great desolate house. Mrs. Madison was broken hearted."

Alan So real evidence of a deep, loving relationship.

Holly: Yes, yes.

Alan: Absolutely. So getting back to their happier days in the White House. As First Lady, she really helped set new Republican standards as a hostess. How did she do that? And did she do any of that when she was wife of the Secretary of State? When, of course, Jefferson was a widower, and we know she helped serve in a hostess role some. Did she do that under Jefferson or just when she was First Lady?

Holly: Really just when she was First Lady. Jefferson rarely entertained with women. And then she was sometimes there, sometimes one of his daughters. At that point, two daughters are living him, but almost entirely he entertained male only events.

But when she got to the White House, one of the things they were not going to do is have the same kind of entertainment style that Jefferson had. It was impossible for many different reasons. And so she set about to actually create a Republican White House. Now you need to remember that the first two presidents, both Washington and Adams, had very self-consciously created Federalist and rather monarchical in style, or at least in the American eye, monarchical in style establishments.

And then Jefferson goes totally in the other direction. There are lots of stories I could tell you, but for the moment, just believe me, he lopes off in this very radical direction, which is completely unsuitable for the Madisons. And so, there is Dolley, and she is moving into this White House which is basically unfurnished. Jefferson had brought most of his own things and had not paid a whole lot of attention to the White House decor. James Madison is more than delighted to have his wife take over. This would not have been true of other people. George Washington decorated both in Philadelphia, where he was president, and in Mount Vernon. It was not Martha. But Dolley did all of those things. And that says also something about both of them as people and their relationship. And she did it in a number of ways. The first and perhaps the most important is she decorated the White House, and she's quite famous for decorating the White House. The problem is that the building burned, and so we don't have that White House anymore. But that's what she did.

And she worked with a man named Benjamin Henry Latrobe, a very famous architect and designer, and Latrobe's wife who was an old Philadelphia friend of Dolley's. And Latrobe has a quote, which I think in some ways says it all, that in decorating the White House, he was going to base his design as much as possible on how the Greeks furnished their houses. He said, "Greece was free. In Greece every citizen felt himself an important part of the Republic." Now we can argue with whether we think that was true today, but clearly Latrobe did. And so what Latrobe, and then Dolley working with him and Mary Latrobe, they really tried to marry elegance and a kind of Republican patriotism, homage to the ancient world, and you could see that in their furniture and so on and so forth. That's very important.

The second thing she does is dress, and she makes her statement on inauguration day. On inauguration day, she is there at the inauguration, which had not been true for the previous wives. She dresses in a very plain, what's called Kendrick dress which is a tightly woven either cotton or linen, and a very plain neck and a bonnet of velvet and plumes. Very simple. And had her husband dress in a suit made from American wool, not from any imported wool. And then in the evening, there was a large inaugural party, which was the first such event in inaugural history. There she wore a velvet dress that had no trimmings. She wore pearl earrings, pearl necklace, no diamonds.

Now, first of all, they couldn't afford diamonds. Second of all, diamonds were what Europeans wore. The wife of the British minister, for example, was plastered with diamonds. She was wealthy; she was ostentatious. Not the First Lady of the United States. She was dressed in pearls and velvet, and it wasn't heavily woven and decorated. The third is food. She made a big effort to make sure that when people came to dinner and they came for dinner often, and when she had her parties which she did every Wednesday night which became known as "squeezes" because there were so many people, she served something that was both elegant and plain at the same time.

It's the same thing as decor. It's both Greek and simple. At the same time, it's elegant and shows off the power of the American state. I have another quote in which a man named Jonathan Roberts, who's a progressive Republican from Pennsylvania, notes that what was eaten was soup and meats and pastries and vegetables and beer, as well as wine. He says, "In

attendance there were mostly strangers and they all gathered happily, or not happily, but without acrimony.” While it was probably a lavish meal for Roberts, who insisted on coming in his good Republican boots rather than shiny shoes that a more elegant man would've worn, he said, “The food was plain and economical and conducted with much ease and plainness.” This was, again, quite an accolade for this man who was a very determined, sort of a left-wing member of the progressive wing of the then Democratic party.

Alan: Well, as Dolley is hosting these events, it's a very challenging time in American history. A lot of intense partisan fighting leading up to the war of 1812. How did Dolley as First Lady navigate those difficult waters?

Holly: I think she just did, and she sometimes hated it. Sometimes she stayed away. I have a quote here that the then British administrator, who was basically what we think of as an ambassador, called her “fat and 40 and not fair.” He also accused her of being the daughter of a tavern keeper and herself having been a Virginia barmaid, both of which were untrue. So, they tried to slander her in all kinds of ways. There was a poem written right after the burning of the White House called the Bladensburg Races, which you can find online. But it was a satirical poem meant to show that the Madisons really only cared for themselves; they did not really care for the nation. So that's how she did it. But that is not to say that she liked it. Those were two different kinds of things. So, when she talked, even in Montpelier which was less strain than in Washington, she talks about her favorite aide-de-camp had gone back to France. She was acting in his department. She was exhausted.

She wrote to another friend in the same year, later on in 1813, she wrote to a close friend of hers saying all of the women who were, what we might call in French [unclear] Washington, as the French called [unclear], they were all going. There weren't so many things to do in Washington. There weren't museums and entertainment and so on and so forth. One of the very big entertainments was to go to the gallery and listen to congressmen debate. Dolley wrote to her friend that she had decided she would not do that. She said that, “Congress where all delight to listen to the violence of evil spirits.” And we might underline that, the violence of evil spirits. She herself preferred to stay home, “quietly at home, as quietly as one can be.” Then she added “who has so much to feel at the expression for and against their conduct.”

Alan: Interesting.

Holly: But she did it. She didn't really have a choice. And she knew how politically important it was. And she knew that it was important when the war was over. And before he retires, they went at first for a three-month period or maybe a two-month period to Montpelier, then came back to Washington and go back again. But in that first period in March, she just gets ill. You know how you sometimes can get really sick after a period of great stress. She just went to bed for a few weeks. She was exhausted and stressed and she just collapsed.

Alan: Yeah. Well, you mentioned she understood the political scene. Do we know, did she give James policy or political advice of any type?

Holly: We don't know. There is another biographer who feels that James would not have been as successful as he was, if we call him successful as a president, about which historians still argue. In any case, we honestly and truly don't know. We don't have the correspondence that tells us. It's hard to believe that in the privacy of their room, given that they were close, they didn't talk about politics.

I plucked for you here, a quote from 1805 that I thought was indicative. Now this is when he was Secretary of State, not when he's president. She is in Philadelphia because she has a bad knee, and she has gone to Philadelphia to have an operation and the recovery of that operation. Imagine having an operation in 1805. I mean, you don't want to think about there are no antibiotics, there's no pain medication, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The doctor pretty much lays her up in bed for a long time.

James returns because he has work to do in Washington, DC. He's the Secretary of State. He has to go back. And so this is one of the very few times we have any correspondence between them. She writes to him: "I wish you would indulge me with some information respecting the war with Spain and the disagreement with England as it is so generally expected here that I am at a loss what to surmise. You know, I am not much of a politician, but I am extremely anxious to hear as far as you may think proper what is going forward in the Cabinet. On this subject, I believe you would not desire your wife the active partisan."

Again, I think whatever they did in private, we just really don't know. In public she tried to play a very feminine, if you will in today's words, a gendered role, and be the hostess and do what she did well and not confront her opponents.

Alan: What a wonderful window these letters give on Dolley. I always say the raw material of history is where you need to turn, and this is really great proof of that. And you mentioned a letter earlier that really caught my attention in your book. A letter to her sister, a very famous letter, to her sister Anna Cutts, describing the evacuation of the White House with the famous scene of her saving the Gilbert Stewart portrait of George Washington.

Why did Dolley think that was an important, not only important artifact to save, but an important story to be told?

Holly: So we have two different answers here if you may excuse me.

Alan: Please.

Holly: The first is the letter itself. We do not know if there was ever such a letter written at the time. We have only one copy of it. And it was sent to a woman she knew in Washington who was a poet, a writer, a novelist, and who was asked to write a biographical sketch of Dolley Madison in a collection. It was four volumes, and I think it had one woman per volume, and Dolley was one of them. She told almost nothing about her own life to this woman. Dolley, in fact, lied about her childhood. But she did include this letter, and it's not clear whether this was a revision of a letter or if it's a wholly made up letter. So that's the first part of the question. Was it real, or was it fabricated in the 1820s?

But the second is your question about George Washington. The question about George Washington is important and carries on in her life until the late 1840s, if you believe. First of all, dining rooms were the portrait rooms. And so this very large, probably seven foot tall portrait of George Washington, or you know, between five and seven feet tall portrait of George Washington, hung at the head of the room that was the dining room. George Washington had an importance that I think it's hard to understand today. He was the most beloved of all presidents. Later on, in my childhood, we celebrated Washington's birthday, and we celebrated

Lincoln's birthday, and we've collapsed them into Presidents' Day. But at the time in Washington, DC, there would be a party celebrating the birthday of George Washington every year and all over the country and toasts and so on and so forth. He was the icon of America. Now, what would have happened had the British come in and captured that picture? That's what they were really afraid of. And what they believed at the time is that they would've taken this iconic portrait back to the streets of London and paraded it around the streets in a fashion that, in a less at least outwardly civilized way, they would have taken the head of James Madison and marched around London with the head of the president.

Well, they didn't do that, but they would have taken the portrait of George Washington and paraded it as a statement that they had won, and they had wiped out the American Republic. It was very important to keep it, and she knew that. And at the time everyone knows it. It just, it doesn't seem as important today because the past is a different country. Hard to go back to that time where George Washington and his portrait were, without doubt in my mind, the most important picture that existed in the United States and the most important portrait of any American and it was in the White House.

Now, she was very proud of having saved it. And she was, later in 1848, attacked in the newspapers for not having actually done it. I think this is wrong. I think that what she did was what a lady of her generation would do, or a lady of the next generation, or the next generation, or the next generation. And that is she told people to take it down. So, she had both-- and it's a young, enslaved valet whose name was Paul Jennings and the gardener who was white named McGraw--the two of them got up on a ladder and they had to unscrew it because it was screwed into the wall because it was so heavy. They had to unscrew it and then they knocked out the frame. But the portrait itself she gave to two men she knew and they took it away. So, when she said she saved the portrait, I think it's fair to say that, in fact, she did save the portrait. And to the end of her life, she felt that was the most important thing she had done as the wife of James Madison and as a First Lady and as a Republican hero.

Alan: Related to that evacuation of the White House too, you had another great letter from her sister Anna, dated August 23rd, 1814. And I'll read just quickly a line from that. It said, "My sister, tell me for God's sake where you are and what you are going to do. I have only time to ask Mr. C. to take out the forepart of the carriage, put in the piano and anything he can get in

there or in a wagon if the British are coming. We can hear nothing but what is horrible here. I know not who to send this to and will say but little.” So Anna is a frequent correspondent with Dolley. What can you tell us about Anna and Dolley's relationship?

Holly: Well, can I start with that? That letter itself indicates the chaos of the city at that time. Lucy, the other sister, was in Kentucky but Anna was in Washington. And Mr. C. is her husband, and this is the fog of war. The British are attacking. Everybody is terrified. Equally, they're terrified that this will lead to a slave rebellion. So you have to add that into the mix of the kind of terror that's going on in the white community. And so off everyone flees who can, and I think this reflects that chaos very well.

The other thing I think important is how close she was to her two sisters, especially Anna. Anna was her younger sister when her father died. I'm now going back to 1793, and her father dies and her mother has to open a boarding house. So she's about 15-16 years old. No, she's older than that because she's married, but she's still quite young. But her mother has to open a boarding house. Then Lucy marries this nephew of George Washington and then the year later, Dolley marries James Madison and the family splits up. This is not uncommon in the past. They did not have money. So, some of the family went off with Lucy and Dolley Madison takes Anna with her. She calls Anna her sister-daughter and they have this really important emotional relationship with each other that I imagine was equally important to both of them. Again, here is a quote from a letter that I think says something. Anna marries a man named Richard Cutts, who's a congressman from what's then the main district of Massachusetts. So they go and spend the summer in Saco, Maine--if anyone knows where Saco, Maine is--where the Cutts family resides. And Dolley is without her sister. Her sister, remember, has come with her and lived with her after the family dissolution after the death of her father. And then Anna becomes a woman, she gets married, she leaves, she becomes her own person.

And so almost immediately Dolley writes a letter to Anna saying, “Though few are the days past since you left me, my dearest Anna, they have been spent in anxious impatience to hear from you.” And then she writes again a few weeks later. “What are you about? Who do you see? Tell me all you possibly can. I am absolutely crying to hear from you again.” So these two sisters are very close to each other. Lucy is also very close. Anna, I think, is

even closer. And they are the people, I think, who Dolley is closest to in the world.

She loves her husband. But it's a 19th century arrangement. I mean, that is not to say they don't have a wonderful relationship. That is not to say they don't have a wonderful life in their bedroom, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But he spends his time thinking about important things such as the state of the country and she thinks about family and house and so on and so forth. So if she's really gossiping or she's really worried about sort of inner emotional turmoil, my guess is she turns to her sisters when she can. And so we just wish we had more letters from them than we do.

Alan: Well, the ones you include certainly show that close relationship. It was very obvious that it was very close. When Dolley and James get through the very tumultuous presidency--and thank goodness that the British leave--and they retire back to Montpelier, a beautiful place. If our listeners haven't been, they need to go. What was her life like there after the presidency? Did she stay involved at that point with the world of Washington?

Holly: Yes and no. It is a beautiful place. If your audience has not been to Montpelier, it's utterly beautiful with a vista that looks over to the Blue Ridge Mountains, which is not as clear as it once was because of pollution. But on a really clear day, you can begin to see what they saw. Now, probably, in the middle of that are some fields and slaves working but it was a very beautiful view and a very beautiful house. And so they retire. And when James Madison retires, he retires. Again, go back to these visitor accounts which begin in 1817 after he has retired and they keep going until he dies in 1836. And again and again and again the visitors say how utterly wonderful it is to talk to James Madison about the history of America and how much they learn, and until the moment he dies how clear his mind is, what a magnificent storyteller he is, but he doesn't want to get involved in current politics. And he's asked. He's asked by letter again and again and again, Could you comment on this? Could you comment on this? Could you comment on this? His answer is to collect what he thinks are his most important documents, most of which are about the framing of the Constitution, and that is his answer to the public. But he is not telling these visitors. And she follows suit. She does what he wants, but at the same time, they have many visitors, some of whom are local, some of whom are relations, but many of whom are politicians who come to pay homage.

There's often a trip made--you go to Mount Vernon, then you go to Monticello, and then you go to Montpelier. And after 1826 the only person who's still alive is James Madison. So between 1826 and 1836 going to Montpelier is even more important. So to that extent, yes. But when they retire, they retire. You cannot imagine his [unclear]. He plays the role of the Roman Republican ruler who has retired and left the governing of the city, of a country, to the next president, to the next generation. And he lives on his estate.

Alan: Where they have many financial woes. Where did those woes come from? Why were they in such bad financial shape?

Holly: They were in bad financial shape because Virginia was in bad financial shape. As a productive plantation it was probably most successful under James Madison's father. It was James Madison's grandfather who established Montpelier, but it was James' father who really turned it into an establishment. And he was kind of this Type A personality who was a really chugging guy out to really make this plantation a success, which he did. And has a bunch of children but James is the oldest, so when the father dies, he's James Madison, Senior. So when James Madison Senior dies, James Madison, Junior. We don't usually think of the former president as James Madison, Junior. He takes over the plantation, but he's Secretary of State and then he's president of the United States. And even though he does go back, two things are important. One, he doesn't have the time to really take care of the plantation as it needs to be taken care of. And the second is that he gets a salary, at the time in those dollars, of \$25,000 a year. Not as Secretary of State; he gets \$10,000. But as president, he gets \$25,000. As long as he's president they don't have financial problems.

They return after the end of the war of 1812, which is also after the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the economy of Virginia and also Maryland begin to change enormously. Wheat crops that used to be in total demand in Europe because they were at war with the Napoleonic Wars dries up. The demand for tobacco diminishes and tobacco, of course, diminishes the soil. And so plantation after plantation after plantation becomes financially distressed.

There's another problem which is that in slave society, I think has been argued many times, is not necessarily a financially efficient operation. So

by the time we get to 1820, which is arguably kind of a watershed date, before which we may think of the trade in slavery as being mostly international or domestic but local. After 1820, the slave trade in the United States, the domestic slave trade in the United States, becomes a big business and it grows and it grows and it grows into very large companies. And that means--this is an awful way of saying it--but what any plantation has that's worth the most amount of money are the enslaved. And Virginia has more slaves than it knows what to do with. James Madison, however, is not like that. He's not comfortable with slavery, but he's not comfortable with slaves, if we could put it that way. That's why he becomes very involved with the American Colonization Society. He would like the black population of America to move back to Africa. There's no way in the world that that's gonna happen. But that's his hope, his dream, whatever. But he's also kind and he doesn't want to break up families. If you start to sell people, it's not simply that you don't know who they're going to. Your listeners may have seen *12 Years A Slave*. It's not simply that you get sold down South and you are in a personal situation which is unbearable, but your family is broken up. Not all families live on the same plantation, but there's a network of kin that are all the neighboring plantations as well. And so, if you begin to sell off your most valuable, especially men but also women, you break up their families, you leave their children without fathers, you leave their wives without husbands. It's even a more awful thing than I think people think of it as being. He did, at one point, sell 16 of his enslaved workers to a cousin in Louisiana. It's the only sale he made. And he did it because he was so broke.

So that's a major part. There is one other major part of his financial distress, and that is his stepson. His stepson gets into gambling debts and alcoholic debts. The son, John Payne Todd, ends up at one point in Philadelphia in jail. James Madison writes to his stepson and says, "for God's sakes, you've got to come back. You don't know how worried your mother is." This is again--we think of Dolley as this gracious, happy person, but we could go into her personal life later if you want. But in any case, probably, John Payne Todd racks up something like \$40,000 worth of debt. \$20,000 in those days' money, \$20,000 worth of which James Madison pays without ever telling Dolley. So that's another major reason.

There are these two things that are going on simultaneously. He works very hard at being a good planter after 1817, but after 1817, it's not so easy.

Alan: Well, we know James lived until 1836 and Dolley eventually was forced to sell Montpelier. In 1844 she moved back to Washington. When there, she made the effort to sell his papers to help with her financial woes. Was that successful? Did that help her?

Holly: Yes, but not as much as she had hoped. It basically in the long run probably saved her, but not the way James Madison envisioned. His hope for her was that even though Montpelier was not a successful plantation he would provide for her, and he would provide for her in these volumes that he was editing. They would then sell those volumes to a publisher, and he anticipated a return of a hundred thousand dollars. When he dies, she's left with trying to sell to a publisher, to a profitable for-profit publisher, these volumes and nobody wants them. And if they will take them, it's either that she pays half of the cost of publishing them, which she doesn't have, or that she just waits and sees whether they make any money or not. And so finally, there are a number of her friends, including Henry Clay, who says you need to go to Congress and this will become a publication of the Government Printing Office. And that is what she does. And these three volumes get published in 1840. There is another one that gets published later. The initial amount that Congress pays to her is \$30,000.

She takes it, but she is still responsible for his will, and he has left money to the American Colonization Society. He has left money to various other charities. And he has left money to his siblings, to the amount that he thinks would have been their fair share in the Montpelier Estate. So it's a great deal of money and it's a lot of stress just to find all these people. Some of his siblings by this time have dispersed or have died and she has to find their children. It's quite an effort. But that \$30,000 does manage to pay that off, but that does not leave her with money. And she has no idea how to run a plantation. None. And her son doesn't either. He has a little piece of the property, and he runs it as his plantation. But he has no idea what to do either, except that what happens with the enslaved, which he sells the property off in a series of transactions in 1843-1844. Her son, John Payne Todd, does keep some of those enslaved people.

Some of them go to the man who bought them, and some she takes to Washington with her. But she arrives in Washington, and she really doesn't have the money to live the life that she would like to live. She has one great asset and that is who she is. She does very well with that asset, but it's not a financial asset. She is invited everywhere. She doesn't invite people for

dinner. She invites people for tea. I think because dinner is too expensive. She gets dunned by her grocer. She gets dunned by various other bills. These are all in the publication of Rotunda, the University of Virginia Press. But she finally turns to Congress again. And Congress says, okay, we will give you \$25,000 more, and there's one more volume, and we will get that one more volume published, but we're putting this into a guardianship so it does not fall into the hands of your son.

Alan: Ah.

Holly: So that's how they take care of it. In the end that does, more or less, allow her to pay off her debts and conclude her life with some level of, perhaps, personal relief and ease. There's no way in which she is ever financially comfortable again. But, at the end of her life, she's attacked by the abolitionist newspapers. And one of the things that they say is that she complains about poverty, and she has no idea what real poverty is. They're right. So, she lives a life of gentile poverty as opposed to what we might call lower class, working class, free black. We have descriptions of not only black poverty or Irish poverty. Irish were very poor. That's not her case. It's gentile poverty, but it doesn't make her life easy. But she does have her standing, and that's who she is and how she lives, and she's very highly regarded. And if people want to know who she partied with, she has records that we published, again in the University of Virginia Press version, of her party lists.

Alan: You know, these letters are so personal in many ways. They are with friends and family, some of the biggest names in our early republic. How do these letters, these bits of correspondence, what do they tell you about these people? Do they come off better or worse than maybe their image that we might have in our minds now when you read these documents, this primary source material?

Holly: Well, I don't think that people like Henry Clay, who is a friend of hers and with whom she does have a correspondence, but it's not either a deeply political or personal correspondence. So, what you get is a sense just of that they have a relationship and what Washington is like. What it really tells you about is Dolley Madison herself. And we started to talk about this before, that we think of Dolley Madison as famous and glamorous, the hostess with the mostest. She becomes an advertising icon at the turn of the last century. Because it's before there are these movie

stars who become great celebrities. So they're looking for some woman to advertise for women's products. And Dolley has one other thing about her that we don't usually think about, and that is Dolley Madison in 1900 was beloved in both the North and the South. And that is exceptionally unusual.

She becomes the icon for ice cream. And people don't think about Dolley Madison and ice cream. There are ice cream cakes, there are "Dolly Madison" cakes. There are even "Dolly Madison" bedspreads and "Dolly Madison" hats, "Dolly Madison" stockings. All of that tells you something, I think, about Dolley Madison and the American imagination, which is that she's glamorous, she's famous, she's like a movie star. And if you are like that, of course you're happy because you have everything.

And in fact, you know Marilyn Monroe ended up committing suicide. The people who are so glamorous and famous--in Marilyn Monroe's case, beautiful--are not always so happy.

And I think that's true with Dolley Madison. She did have wonderful circumstances. She had a loving husband. Let's start with the fact that she had a loving husband, and that when they moved back in their retirement years between 1817 and 1836, she did have a lot of people to entertain but it was never as difficult as Washington. But let's think of her in Washington as First Lady, because that's how we imagine Dolley most of all. She has an institution to run. No other First Lady before her had had such an institution to run. Her successor, Mrs. Monroe, retired from that institutional entertaining, and Mrs. Adams didn't do much of it. And then we get to Jackson, who is a widower, and then we get to Van Buren, who is a widower. So Dolley is in something of a unique position, and I do think she's America's real first, First Lady, and she establishes all of it. But in doing that, she has to make sure that the house is always ready for entertainment. Now, that takes a staff, and she does have help. I mean, she has upper-level staff to help her. The three most important two are white and one is black. But the second important white person comes and goes. I mean, not the same person comes and goes, but one person lasts for several years and then he leaves, and then another person comes, and he treats the enslaved in the kitchen very badly. And that blows up into a huge catastrophic moment inside of the White House. And it's a lot of work to run that kind of establishment.

Alan: Sure.

Holly: And at the same time, there are a lot of things in her life that are not happy. As I think I said, by the time she becomes wife of the Secretary of State, she's lost a son, a husband, a father. During the years when she's wife of the Secretary of State, she loses a sister, two nieces, and a mother.

Now, of course, there's no modern medicine. So how these things would've been treated in the 21st century, we don't know, or even after World War II, we don't know. But there's loss after loss after loss which leaves her with her husband, [and] with a son whom she adores but he's horrible and he often doesn't write her, and he doesn't take care of her, and he takes money off of her. She has some close friends, but she's experienced a lot of loss. And then as you point out, there she is in the White House. And day after day, during the war especially, she has to deal with those who print slurs of her in the newspapers. All of those newspapers are filled with slurs of her, and they say the most awful things, and then they come into the White House. The Federalists, for a while, think about avoiding the White House, but it's really the only game in town. And if they don't go to that, they don't do anything. So they come. So there she is with these sets of people, plus the diplomats. And the diplomats are not always so nice. The one who called her "fat and 40 but not fair" is a good example of a British diplomat who comes, and she knows what he thinks. And the British tend to really look down on the Americans, as you know. So, I think all of this is difficult. When they go back, as I say, I think it does get easier. She's protected from a lot by her husband. As I say, he protects her from a lot of the debt. Her family members come and visit her during the summer, which is probably her favorite time. She doesn't get along that well with his family. There are a few members of his family, but a lot of his family think she is stuck up and they don't really take to her. And she has one particularly difficult sister-in-law who marries a doctor, and they decide they have to move down, ultimately, to Tennessee. The Madisons really try and help them. They send some of their enslaved down with them, and horses and wagons and so on and so forth. And the Rose family never pays back with kindness or with grace. So there's all of that.

And then in 1832, her favorite sister Anna dies. Her only sister is still in Kentucky, having herself a difficult time because her second husband dies. She has three children by her first marriage who are fine, three boys. And then she has three children by her second marriage, one of whom ends up in a mental institution.

Alan: Oh, my goodness.

Holly: Life is not always as easy as we, you know, as we sort of think about. We project what we want on them, and these letters tell us what it was really like. That's what they do.

Alan: And that's a perfect way to conclude our conversation. They really do open that window, that door to see the real things that were going on for Dolley and James in that era. Before we end though, I want to ask, what are you working on right now? What's next for you?

Holly: Well, I'm still working on Dolley. I'm writing a book about Dolley and her enslaved, which will be published by the University of Virginia Press. And it's fascinating because again, I am going into records that are not just letters, but visitors' accounts. Also things like while she's in the White House, how do we think the lower-level staff is working? And we can know that by how many brooms they keep having to buy, and how many plates break, and so on and so forth. So I'm having a wonderful time writing this complicated book, which is not a book about Dolley as the First Lady as is conventionally done. It is really a book about who Dolley is and what her enslaved community means to her and she to them.

Alan: We'd love to have you back on American FLOTUS when that's done.

Holly: Thank you.

Alan: Well, thank you so much, Holly, for a really fascinating conversation about an amazing First Lady, and I want to thank all of you for listening and for your support. You can find more episodes of American FLOTUS at www.flare-net.org or americanpotus.org or, of course, on your favorite podcast platform.

Thanks for joining us, and I'll see you next time on American FLOTUS.