

*Aug 24, 1814:*

## British troops set fire to the White House

On this day in 1814, during the War of 1812 between the United States and England, British troops enter Washington, D.C. and burn the White House in retaliation for the American attack on the city of York in Ontario, Canada, in June 1812.

When the British arrived at the White House, they found that President James Madison and his first lady Dolley had already fled to safety in Maryland. Soldiers reportedly sat down to eat a meal made of leftover food from the White House scullery using White House dishes and silver before ransacking the presidential mansion and setting it ablaze.

According to the White House Historical Society and Dolley's personal letters, President James Madison had left the White House on August 22 to meet with his generals on the battlefield, just as British troops threatened to enter the capitol. Before leaving, he asked his wife Dolley if she had the "courage or firmness" to wait for his intended return the next day. He asked her to gather important state papers and be prepared to abandon the White House at any moment.

The next day, Dolley and a few servants scanned the horizon with spyglasses waiting for either Madison or the British army to show up. As British troops gathered in the distance, Dolley decided to abandon the couple's personal belongings and instead saved a full-length portrait of former president George Washington from desecration. Dolley wrote to her sister on the night of August 23 of the difficulty involved in saving the painting. Since the portrait was screwed to the wall, she ordered the frame to be broken and the canvas pulled out and rolled up. Paul Jennings, who was born into slavery at Montpelier, James Madison's Virginia mansion, helped save a now-famous portrait of George Washington, painted by Gilbert Stuart.

As the story goes, Jennings and Dolley Madison, the president's wife, conspired to save the portrait. In his autobiography, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*, Jennings dismissed that tale. Jennings wrote that he, a French cook, and another person were asked to disassemble the portrait's frame and spirit it away.

Two unidentified "gentlemen from New York" hustled it away for safe-keeping. The task complete, Dolley wrote "and now, dear sister, I must leave this house, or the retreating army will make me a prisoner in it by filling up the road I am directed to take." Dolley left the White House and found her husband at their predetermined meeting place in the middle of a thunderstorm.

Although President Madison and his wife were able to return to Washington only three days later when British troops had moved on, they never again lived in the White House. Madison served the rest of his term residing at the city's Octagon House. It was not until 1817 that newly elected president James Monroe moved back into the reconstructed building.