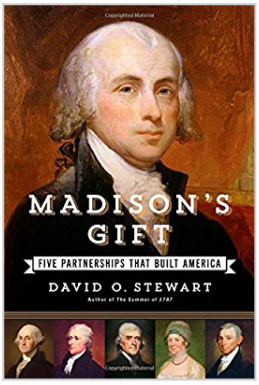


# Madison's Gift: Five Partnerships That Built America

*By David O. Stewart*



**Madison's Gift: Five Partnerships That Built America** By David O. Stewart

Historian David O. Stewart restores James Madison, sometimes overshadowed by his fellow Founders, to his proper place as the most significant framer of the new nation.

Short, plain, balding, neither soldier nor orator, low on charisma and high on intelligence, Madison cared more about achieving results than taking the credit. To reach his lifelong goal of a self-governing constitutional republic, he blended his talents with those of key partners. It was Madison who led the drive for the Constitutional Convention and pressed for an effective new government as his patron George Washington lent the effort legitimacy; Madison who wrote the Federalist Papers with Alexander Hamilton to secure the Constitution's ratification; Madison who corrected the greatest blunder of the Constitution by drafting and securing passage of the Bill of Rights with Washington's support; Madison who joined Thomas Jefferson to found the nation’s first political party and move the nation toward broad democratic principles; Madison, with James Monroe, who guided the new nation through its first war in 1812, really its Second War of Independence; and it was Madison who handed the reins of government to the last of the Founders, his old friend and sometime rival Monroe. These were the main characters in his life.

But it was his final partnership that allowed Madison to escape his natural shyness and reach the greatest heights. Dolley was the woman he married in middle age and who presided over both him and an enlivened White House. This partnership was a love story, a unique one that sustained Madison through his political rise, his presidency, and a fruitful retirement.

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## Editorial Review

Review
“[Stewart’s] insights are illuminating . . . He weaves vivid, sometimes poignant details throughout the grand sweep of historical events. He brings early history alive in a way that offers today's readers perspective.” (*Christian Science Monitor*)

“Stewart has a knack for offering telling details that humanize historical figures . . . *Madison’s Gift* is a fascinating look at how unfinished the nation was in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and how one unlikely figure managed to help guide it from a precarious confederation of reluctant states to a self-governing republic that has prospered for more than two centuries.” (*Richmond Times-Dispatch*)

“Stewart is an acknowledged master of narrative history. He can explain a political crisis or an ideological debate with perfect clarity and exactly the sense of urgency required to capture and hold the reader’s attention.” (*The Washington Post*)

“A fond portrait of the mild-mannered Virginian and implacable advocate for the young American government. . . . Historian and novelist Stewart offers a pertinent lesson on Madison's ability to forge working bonds with other founding members of the new American government, even if they did not always see eye to eye. . . . Stewart's lively character sketches employ sprightly prose and impeccable research.” (*Kirkus Reviews*)

Stewart examines [Madison] from a fresh angle . . . [he] illuminates much about the history-making relationships among these celebrated figures that in other books might remain obscured. Readers of history are in good hands with this dependable guide, which approaches its subject with a smooth, easy going style. (*Publishers Weekly*)

“A sparkling, well-written work that tells a balanced story of a man who worked diligently with his contemporaries for the greater good. . . . Madison is a hero for our times, and David O. Stewart nimbly re-introduces us to him.” (*Washington Independent Review of Books*)

“This eminently readable work is recommended for lay readers and should be considered alongside Lynne Cheney’s *James Madison.”* (*Library Journal*)

“This is a well-done effort to provide a different perspective on Madison’s career.” (*Booklist*)

“It’s hard to imagine anyone saying anything new about James Madison, but David O. Stewart with his ‘five partnerships’ has done it; and he has done it in a very beautifully written book.” (Gordon S. Wood, author of "The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States")

“David Stewart has created a compelling and nuanced portrait of Madison that reveals him anew. *Madison’s Gift* is a fascinating exploration of the profound emotional bonds behind the young Republic.” (Amanda Foreman, author of "A World on Fire")

“In this brilliantly conceived and beautifully written work, Stewart has contributed not only the best of the many recent volumes on Madison himself, but also made a signal contribution to our understanding of the

founding of the Republic." (Ralph Ketcham, author of "James Madison: A Biography")

"James Madison was the shy, bookish, serviceable man who always managed to come out on top. David O. Stewart tracks him through the partnerships, personal and political, that defined his career, shaped a new nation—and lifted him to the White House." (Richard Brookhiser, author of "James Madison")

About the Author
David O. Stewart is an award-winning author and the president of the *Washington Independent Review of Books*. He is the author of several acclaimed histories, including *Madison's Gift: Five Partnerships That Built America*; *The Summer of 1787: The Men Who Invented the Constitution*; *Impeached: The Trial of President Andrew Johnson and the Fight for Lincoln's Legacy*; and *American Emperor: Aaron Burr's Challenge to Jefferson's America*. Stewart's first novel is *The Lincoln Deception*.


Madison's Gift

# 1

# THE END OF THE BEGINNING

The great news reached Philadelphia in November of 1783, when James Madison was packing for home. Britain had signed a peace treaty that recognized American independence, redeeming eight years of bitter sacrifices by the American rebels. They had defeated the most powerful nation on earth and won the right to govern themselves.

Madison and his three million countrymen faced fundamental questions. Could the thirteen states remain united across fifteen hundred miles of Atlantic coast and almost as far into the western forests? Could they maintain a republic in a world of monarchies? Could they avoid anarchy at one extreme and autocratic rule at the other?

The thirty-two-year-old Madison, who was finishing four years as a Virginia delegate to Congress, faced questions of his own. After a spell of ill health and aimlessness as a wealthy graduate of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), he had found purpose in the Revolution. A month with his county militia in 1775 established that the bookish Virginian was a poor candidate for soldiering. He not only was short and slight—no taller than five feet six inches and a bit over one hundred pounds—but also suffered from chronic intestinal woes and fits that resembled epilepsy. He put down his musket and applied his revolutionary ardor to politics. After serving in Virginia's provisional government, Madison went to Congress in 1779, still only twenty-eight. Through hard work and talent, he became a central figure in a legislative body crowded with the second-raters.

The past year had been a turbulent one. Madison had lost his heart to Kitty Floyd, the fifteen-year-old daughter of a New York delegate who lived in the same Philadelphia boardinghouse as Madison. He had hoped to marry Kitty and had courted her assiduously. In late April, when the Floyd family journeyed to New Jersey, the infatuated Madison rode sixty miles with them, then returned to Philadelphia.1

But by early August the affair was off; within a year, Kitty would be engaged to a medical student much nearer her own age. The blow fell hard on Madison. Fifty years later, the hurt was still so sharp that he blacked out portions of an old letter that mentioned the failed romance.2

Madison's public life had also brought disappointments. The new nation could not pay its bills, starting with huge debts to France and to its own citizens. The government created by the Articles of Confederation could impose taxes only with the consent of all thirteen states. Because no tax ever commanded such unanimous support, Congress had to ask the states, politely, to send money to pay for the war, and now for the peace. Voluntary state payments always fell below what was needed, so Congress gasped along on whatever came to hand.

The lack of money ignited a crisis in the winter of 1783. Unpaid soldiers, camped on the Hudson River above New York City, grumbled about mutiny. A delegation of officers carried a petition to Congress in Philadelphia, demanding their back pay. In late February, Madison joined five congressional delegates in a dramatic evening session with the disgruntled soldiers. By the flickering firelight, delegate Alexander Hamilton of New York made dark pronouncements. A former army officer himself, Hamilton warned that some officers aimed to oust George Washington as commander and to remain in arms until they were paid.3

Congress made more promises to the soldiers, as did state officials, but they were empty ones. There was no money. It was a recipe for insurrection: an army with no enemy to fight and real grievances against its own government.4 Inflammatory letters circulated among the officers, urging an end to the waiting. Lest they "grow old in poverty, wretchedness and contempt," one railed, the soldiers must "change the milk and water style" of their demands.5

In Congress, Madison urged the fractious states to agree on a national tax that would pay the nation's soldiers and its debts. Without such action, he predicted, "a dissolution of the Union would be inevitable"; the southern states would go one way, New England another, the middle states a third, each seeking alliances with European powers.6 Congress appointed Madison to a committee charged with developing a fiscal solution.

While Congress dithered, one man prevented mutiny. General Washington called an assembly of officers for March 15, the ides of March. For those who knew their Shakespeare, it must have seemed a portentous date.

Standing before his brother officers, Washington recalled sacrifices shared through battle and privation, misery and loss. This was not the time, he said, to "open the floodgates of civil discord and deluge our rising empire in blood." It was not his prepared statement, but a theatrical aside, that carried the day. When he began to read a letter aloud, Washington stumbled over the words, then donned a pair of spectacles. "Gentlemen," he said. "You must pardon me. I have grown gray in your service and now find myself growing blind." Some wept. Most were ashamed. All were moved. The mutiny dissolved with a unanimous resolution supporting Washington.

In the breathing space won by the general, Madison concocted a plan. It was a political hodgepodge. He proposed a twenty-five-year import tax that was set too low to pay off the debt, so he wishfully assumed that states would continue to contribute money to the national government, plus additional revenues from the sale of western lands. In a closing exhortation, Madison argued that through this plan "the cause of liberty will acquire a dignity and luster which it has never yet enjoyed." Continued drift, he warned, would mean the failure of "the last and fairest experiment in favor of the rights of human nature."7

Six weeks later, Washington echoed Madison's appeal in his own "Circular Letter of Farewell to the Army."

The states' actions on the national tax would determine, he wrote, "whether the Revolution must ultimately be considered . . . a blessing or a curse, not to the present age alone, for with our fate will the destiny of unborn millions be involved."8

Neither appeal worked. Virginia, home to both Madison and Washington, refused to adopt the plan, killing it outright. Worse was coming.

Within days of Washington's circular, disgruntled Pennsylvania soldiers surrounded Philadelphia's State House, where Congress was sitting, and demanded their back pay. When Pennsylvania's governor refused to call out his state's militia to oppose the mutineers, the congressional delegates fled, resolving to reconvene in tiny Princeton, New Jersey.

Although Madison had spent three happy years in Princeton as a student, he despised it as the nation's temporary capital. He was depressed by the spectacle of Congress cowering in a remote village to escape its own soldiers. The room he shared with another Virginian measured "not more than 10 square feet." For one roommate to dress, the other had to remain in the single bed. The only position available for writing "scarcely admits the use of any of my limbs."9 On top of the rejection by Kitty Floyd, his world was turning bleak.

For the first time in his career, Madison began to play hooky. He missed more than half of the congressional sessions between June 30 and early November, when his term expired. Unless he was needed in Princeton to achieve a quorum, he stayed in Philadelphia. Even when he was in Princeton, Madison was listless. Usually a compulsive note taker, he wrote down nothing about the debates. He offered no excuse for his inattention to duty. One letter recorded, almost defiantly, that he was composing it "in bed in my Chamber in the Hotel" at six-thirty in the evening. When Virginia again missed its voluntary payment to Congress, Madison's disenchantment grew stronger.10

Madison was changing his focus. With the end of the war and the end of his congressional term, he was lifting his gaze from the daily struggles in Congress to the largest challenge facing Americans: whether they could create a government that preserved the Revolution's exhilarating ideals yet functioned effectively. This would be the work of his life.11

For the next three decades, Madison's contributions to his country would be incomparable. Without Madison, the Constitutional Convention of 1787 might never have happened. But for him, that gathering could have ended in failure. He led the difficult fight to ratify the Constitution, then a lonely crusade for the Bill of Rights. In the first months of the new government in 1789, it was Madison who advised President Washington on the critical decisions and legislation that established the new republic on a solid footing. When political conflict began to tear the infant nation apart in the 1790s, Madison joined with Thomas Jefferson to form the first true political party and steer it to a position of dominance. And when the republic faced its first foreign war, the profoundly unmilitary Madison, as America's first war president, unsteadily coaxed an unprepared nation to a surprisingly satisfactory peace and a flowering prosperity.

In Philadelphia in 1783, at the threshold of this extraordinary future, Madison's mind did not hold dreams of power or of political office. Instead, he turned inward, resolving to improve himself through a course of study in law, government, and history. To meet the mighty challenges before it, America would need wisdom and judgment. Madison aimed to deepen his knowledge and powers of reason so he could serve the nation better.12

Earlier in 1783, Madison had intended to pursue his course of study as a newlywed in cosmopolitan

Philadelphia. When Miss Floyd's inconstancy sent that plan up in smoke, he resolved to return to Montpelier, his father's sprawling plantation in the western hills of Virginia, setting another pattern for the rest of his life. Past thirty and unmarried, Madison's ties remained strong to his parents and five surviving siblings (he was the eldest). Though the young Madison had chafed against Virginia's aristocratic slave culture, Montpelier was his home and a comfortable one at that. He would never really leave it. Until he was fifty, he honored and was financially dependent upon his father; he shared Montpelier with his mother until he was seventy-eight. Mother and son also shared a steady disposition that carried both through troubled times. An old friend recalled Mrs. Madison possessing "a certain mildness and equanimity for which I ever considered her remarkable."13

As he prepared to leave Philadelphia in late 1783, Madison bought gifts for his sisters and a new carriage for his father, plus medicine for his mother, whose recent illness alarmed him.14 At home in Virginia, he shed the political and personal failures of the last year. By the new year, he was deep into his reading. He celebrated the harsh winter in a letter to Thomas Jefferson, claiming it kept visitors from Montpelier and left him more time for study.15

Despite its disappointments, 1783 proved to be a pivotal year in James Madison's life, not for what he did but for what he prepared himself to do, beginning with his self-prescribed course of study and thinking. A man of the mind in so many ways—surely among the most intellectual of American leaders—he aspired to serve America's Revolution directly. Small, reserved in company, never a soldier, he was not an obvious candidate to leave a large imprint on the founding of the new republic. Lacking the narcissism of most political leaders, Madison did not elbow his way into the limelight or preen on public stages. Avuncular with friends, he could be ill at ease at public events. Rather than thrust himself forward, Madison preferred to blend his talents with those of others.

Madison's indelible imprint on the new nation sprang in large part from his ability to form rich partnerships with five talented contemporaries, an ability that blossomed in 1783. Those five partnerships underlay his greatest achievements. Late in life, when a correspondent tried to christen him the Father of the Constitution, Madison would have none of it. The Constitution was not, he insisted, "like the fabled Goddess of Wisdom, the offspring of a single brain. It ought to be regarded as the work of many hands and many heads." And so, he plainly thought, was the launching of the American republic.16

His steady disposition was central to his many partnerships. "Nothing could excite or ruffle him," wrote a longtime friend. "Under all circumstances he was collected, and ever mindful of what was due from him to others, and cautious not to wound the feelings of any one." That description captures an unusual leadership style, one focused on what "was due from him to others" and careful to impose no injury. Collegiality can be undervalued in public life. The solitary hero, the man on horseback, readily commands emotional attention. Madison's heroic moments tended, like him, to be quiet ones.

Madison brought many gifts to his public career. He combined a sharp understanding of political and economic forces with an inspiring vision of a government that could achieve public goals while respecting personal liberty. But ultimately it was his gift for working with others that allowed him to play an outsize role in building the nation.17

Students of America's early years often neglect Madison, a mistake his contemporaries did not make. They named fifty-nine counties and towns after him, more than any other president. He is the only president to have a major avenue in Manhattan named after him; indeed, that street named an entire industry—advertising—which carries his name: Madison Avenue.18

Yet he has become easy to miss in accounts of the early republic. His soft voice has carried little better in the halls of history than it did in public chambers. His manner was unobtrusive. Some misjudged his talents. “Madison,” claimed the acid-tongued John Randolph of Roanoke, “was always some great man’s mistress—first Hamilton’s, then Jefferson’s.” Even Jefferson, on his deathbed, betrayed a core misunderstanding of the man who was his closest friend. After fondly reciting Madison’s virtues, the dying man added, “But, ah! He could never in his life stand up against strenuous opposition.” It would have been more accurate to say that Madison wasted little time in frontal assaults on entrenched opponents but, rather, searched for ways to persuade or work around those who disagreed with him, including Jefferson.19

Madison forged the five defining partnerships of his life with strikingly different characters. The small man from Virginia could assume different roles, adapting himself to the situations and personalities around him. Three of his partners were revolutionary leaders—Alexander Hamilton, George Washington, and Jefferson—each of whom radiated the personal magnetism that Madison lacked. The fourth, fellow Virginian James Monroe, was sometimes a sharp rival, sometimes a key ally, usually a warm friend. Through alliances with these four men, all of whom had talents he lacked, Madison was able to extend his own reach and amplify his own influence over events. With each, he assumed a different role, one that suited the situation and the partnership.

With Hamilton, a contemporary and intellectual peer, he joined in brotherly combat on behalf of the new Constitution. Washington was a generation older and the nation’s great leader, so Madison was a confidential adviser and consummate aide to the first president. With Jefferson he formed the deepest and most complex connection: political partnership, intellectual camaraderie, and personal friendship. With Monroe, who was younger and more impulsive, he played the role of elder brother, guide, and friend. In turn, each relied heavily on Madison at critical moments of their careers.

Those four partnerships all can be traced to 1783, but not the fifth. Though Madison and his fifth partner both lived in Philadelphia that year, not for ten more years would Madison meet Dolley Payne Todd and win her as his wife. To her, like the others, Madison conceded the spotlight, helping her become a public figure in her own right, sometimes called the “Lady Presidentess.” He happily yielded public acclaim to his gracious and outgoing partner. In return, she brought cheer and warmth into his life and became an integral part of his political success.

Two centuries later, James Madison’s America can exist only in our imaginations, framed by the words he and his contemporaries wrote, the land on which they lived, the objects they used, and the buildings they walked through. It was a world lit by the sun or the glow of candle, oil lamp, or fireplace. Travel was grueling, sometimes nightmarish. Foul weather delayed ships for weeks or months. Roads were cloying bogs on wet days, then rutted corduroy on dry ones. Wooden-wheeled vehicles punished the body even when not overset by drunken hostlers. In summer, river crossings were slow and ferry schedules unpredictable; winter gallops across frozen streams carried the constant risk of crashing through into frigid waters.

Home, even for the wealthy, was drafty and dark, heated by smoky fires. Personal hygiene was a challenge, hot water a luxury. Human waste was deposited in containers and sometimes thrown into the street, sometimes carried to disposal sites. Washing clothes was hard physical labor. Food preparation consumed hours. Unreliable drinking water drove most to prefer distilled or fermented beverages. Medical care featured the bleeding of ill patients. Death was a constant companion. Of James Madison’s ten siblings, five died by the age of seven and three others in middle age. (Some Madisons, though, reached great age: James lived to eighty-five; his father, a brother, and a sister all came close to that number; his mother died at ninety-seven.)20

Though many elements of Madison’s world are unfamiliar, the human beings in it are not. We recognize immediately their feelings and thoughts, their conflicts and affections. Through his correspondence, essays, and speeches, Madison primarily addressed the public issues of his time, often similar to those of our time. In letters with Dolley and close friends, the private Madison spoke directly, with genuine feeling. His sentences could be wooden, but his sentiments and ideas are as winning today as they were to his friends.

Madison lived in a network of intimate connections, from his large family to the most fertile political partnerships in our history, to a loving marriage that spanned four decades. With James Madison, often depicted in history as a dry creature of intellect, the core of his life was a genuine heart.

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