



Lynne
Cheney

JAMES
A LIFE RECONSIDERED
MADISON

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Lynne Cheney is the author and coauthor of twelve books, including six bestsellers about American history for children. The wife of former vice president Dick Cheney, she lives in McLean, Virginia, and Wilson, Wyoming.

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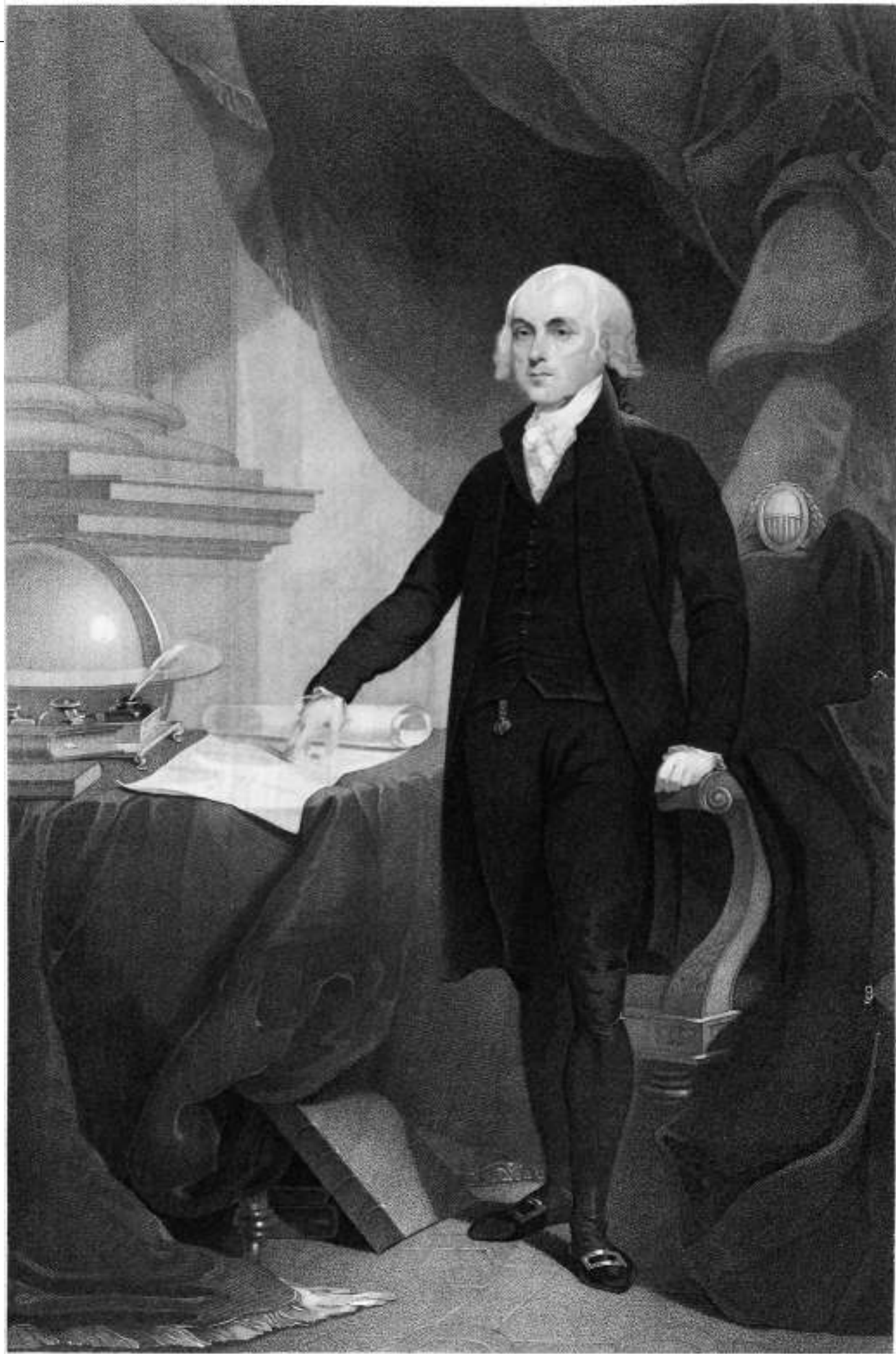
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PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS
Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) LLC
375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014



USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia | New Zealand | India | South Africa | China

penguin.com

A Penguin Random House Company

First published in the United States of America by Viking Penguin, a member of Penguin Group (USA) LLC, 2014

Published in Penguin Books 2015

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THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HAS CATALOGED THE HARDCOVER EDITION AS FOLLOWS:

Cheney, Lynne V.

James Madison : a life reconsidered / Lynne Cheney.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-698-16345-4

1. Madison, James, 1751–1836. 2. United States—Politics and government—1809–1817. 3. United States—Politics and government—1789–1815. 4. Presidents—United States—Biography. 5. Statesmen—United States—Biography. I. Title.

E342.C48 2014

973.5'1092—dc23

[B]

2013047837

Cover image: *Portrait of James Madison* by Gilbert Stuart. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Gift of Mrs. George S. Robbins.

Version_2

*To my grandchildren—
Kate, Elizabeth, Grace, Philip, Richard, Sam, and Sarah Lynne*

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PROLOGUE

PHILADELPHIA, MAY 5, 1787

He hurried along Market Street, his high-crowned hat offering scant protection against the rain. Had he passed this way earlier in the day, shoppers would have slowed his pace, drawn by the covered market that stretched for blocks down the center of the street. Now, with the afternoon wearing on and a thunderstorm over the city, only a few bargain hunters remained. Farmers who had brought produce in from the Pennsylvania countryside were scrambling into their wagons for what promised to be a muddy trek home.¹

Visitors to Philadelphia found the market a wonder, but the residents of Market Street were not fond of it. They repeatedly—and futilely—tried to halt its expansion, arguing that the crowds did real estate values no good. Better to have the more peaceful setting enjoyed by residents farther west, the direction that the hurrying figure was headed. He crossed Fifth Street, its wet cobblestones glistening underfoot, then with springing step went up the stairs and entered the door of the ample brick building on the corner. It was the comfortable residence of Mary House, an elderly widow who lived there with her son, Samuel, her daughter, Eliza Trist, and Mrs. Trist's son, Hore Browse. It was also one of Philadelphia's most highly regarded boardinghouses, a home away from home for many of America's political notables.²

Thirty-six-year-old James Madison, shaking off rain inside the front door, was one of Mrs. House's regulars. He had begun staying with her in 1780, when he first became a member of the Continental Congress, and now, after a day-and-a-half ride by stagecoach from New York, he was at her lodgings again, this time to attend a convention scheduled for the second Monday in May. Over the past seven years, Madison had spent more time at Mrs. House's than at his Virginia home, and he had come to regard her family as his family. He was particularly fond of Mrs. Trist, a woman of spirit and wit. In 1784 she had traveled by flatboat down the Mississippi to Louisiana to be with her husband, Nicholas, a former British officer. She recorded flora and fauna along the way for Thomas Jefferson, another Virginian who stayed at the Market Street lodgings, unaware as she was taking notes that she had become a widow. Between the last letter she received from Nicholas and the beginning of her trip downriver, he had died. Jefferson and Madison, learning of Nicholas's fate, wrote to each other of their concern for Mrs. Trist. With the Spanish having closed the Mississippi to American navigation, how would she get back to Philadelphia? But she found a way, sailing first to Jamaica and from there back home.³

At no more than five feet six inches tall, Madison was not physically imposing in the way Jefferson was, or the great Washington, whom Mrs. Trist and her mother were expecting to arrive in little over a week. But he was fit and well proportioned, and as he gazed out at the world from deep-set light blue eyes, he had a presence about him, "a habit of self-possession," Jefferson called it, "which placed at ready command the rich resources of his luminous and discriminating mind."⁴

Madison did not leap forward to meet strangers or try to dominate in conversation. He was naturally reserved and perhaps also influenced by a lesson of his youth. From the *Spectator*, a London

periodical that he favored in his early years, he had learned that modesty becomes a man. Famed *Spectator* author Joseph Addison described it as “a guard to virtue” and noted that it “sets off every great talent which a man can be possessed of.”⁵

By now Madison also understood that reticence had its political uses. It was wise to avoid strong statements while circumstances were still unfolding. It was often advantageous to put forth proposals anonymously and thus avoid alienating allies who might not agree. If in avoiding center stage Madison missed some of the praise, he also avoided some of the criticism, thus saving his reputation for a future day.

Madison dressed plainly, as befitted a man who did not want to be conspicuous. Eventually, he would wear only black. His public speaking was as unadorned as his dress. His words and ideas came forth with coolness and clarity, unobscured by drama. Although no one thought of him as an orator for the ages, those who paid attention understood that when he spoke he was enormously effective. “If [eloquence] includes persuasion by convincing,” his fellow Virginian John Marshall wrote, “Mr. Madison was the most eloquent man I ever heard.”⁶

Thomas Jefferson believed that Madison’s reserve had held him back when he first began his public career, and another friend, Samuel Stanhope Smith, told him that his early achievements had come “in spite of all your modesty.” But the reputation that Madison had acquired by the time he arrived in Philadelphia in May 1787 suggests that his manner had been little hindrance. “Every person seems to acknowledge his greatness,” commented William Pierce, who, like Madison, was a delegate to the Philadelphia convention. Indeed, now that Madison’s intellect and political skill were so widely recognized, his demeanor seemed to burnish his reputation. Despite all his renown, he remained, in Pierce’s words, “a gentleman of great modesty, with a remarkable sweet temper.”⁷

• • •

ALTHOUGH SHE WAS the same age as Congressman Madison, Eliza Trist sometimes assumed a motherly attitude toward him. She knew from Jefferson that much as he had accomplished, he was likely to achieve still more, and she worried about the “torrent of abuse” he would have to bear as he rose higher. “He has a soul replete with gentleness, humanity, and every social virtue,” she wrote to Jefferson, “and yet I am certain that some wretch or other will write against him. . . . It will hurt his feelings and injure his health, take my word.” Mrs. Trist almost certainly knew that in addition to the common ailments of the day—dysentery, fevers, influenza—Madison suffered from “sudden attacks” that he described as “somewhat resembling epilepsy, and suspending the intellectual functions.” Historians of a later time would dismiss these attacks. “Epileptoid hysteria,” his most influential biographer would call them.⁸ But Madison’s description fits today’s understanding of epilepsy. His sudden attacks might well have been complex partial seizures, which leave the affected person conscious but with his or her comprehension and ability to communicate impaired—the “intellectual functions” suspended, one might reasonably say. In Madison’s day such attacks were not generally regarded as epileptic, which may account for the qualifiers in his description. “Epilepsy” was a term reserved for convulsive seizures. But Madison saw a relationship between his attacks and those in which people fell to the ground and convulsed, an understanding that put him in advance of his time.

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MADISON DID NOT MAKE a show of himself, but neither did he lack vanity. His jacket and breeches were

finely made, his stockings usually silk. He powdered his hair and combed it forward to a point in order to cover a receding hairline.⁹ And unassuming though he might seem, he did not hesitate to take on enormous projects. Standing in Mrs. House's parlor, his clothes still damp from the rain, he had a scheme in mind about as grand as could be imagined. He intended to use the upcoming convention to create a nation out of the thirteen individual states that four years before had thrown off the rule of Great Britain—and not just any nation, but one such as never had been seen before.

He envisioned a vast republic where the people were sovereign and their fundamental rights respected as nowhere else on earth. Such a republic had been judged impossible by influential thinkers of the age. Without monarchical power at the center, they believed, a country of great size would come apart, riven by different interests and ambitions. Only in a small republic, where citizens held views and virtues in common, could there be stability. Madison perceived that this idea was based on a fiction. No society, not even the smallest, was truly homogeneous. Factions, or interest groups, were endemic to the human race, and the challenge was making sure that majority rule, which was at the heart of republican government, did not become an instrument for one faction to suppress others. The way to do this was to make the republic large enough so that no single interest dominated. “Extend the sphere,” Madison would soon explain, “and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens.”¹⁰

This insight—brilliant and prophetic—not only provided a rationale for the union of states that would be created by the Constitution; it would transform political thought, taking self-government from an impossible realm, in which all citizens virtuously suppressed their self-interest in the name of the common good, and moving it into reality, where interests competed with and checked one another.¹¹ A republic was no longer a distant ideal but something to which people around the world could aspire. Bringing the idea of the extended republic to bear at a time when a great nation was to be built was Madison's first grand act of creative genius—but by no means his last. Over the next five years, he, more than any other individual, would be responsible for creating the United States of America in the form we know it today.

Madison's time of extraordinary accomplishment came after years of intense focus, deep concentration, and nearly obsessive effort, behavior that describes most lives of genius, from Sir Isaac Newton's to Mozart's to Einstein's.¹² Some who have achieved greatly have had families that encouraged their passions, and Madison was among these fortunate. His father had sent him to fine schools. He had for years freed him from the necessity of earning a living, thus giving him time to study and practice the art of politics. Madison was also lucky to live in an era that demanded the skills he honed while at the same time inspiring the intensity with which he honed them. For a young man drawn to the subject of power and the possibilities of nation building, it is hard to imagine a more thrilling time to come of age than in the years leading up to the American Revolution.

He brought to the cause a fervent commitment to religious freedom, perhaps because he had experienced the misery of being told what he had to believe. In the eighteenth century, people suffering from epilepsy—or sudden attacks resembling it—had a double burden, the disorder itself and the religious view, widely held and fiercely defended, that sufferers were unclean, sinful, even possessed by demons. In his young manhood, when the attacks began, Madison had gone through a period of deep despondency, certain that he would die and worried about his soul. He eventually emerged from the gloom, and when he did, he was on fire with the idea that no one should have to accept ideas that seemed wrong to him. A man's conscience was his own, not the property of church or state.

He acted on this commitment when he was just twenty-two and saw Anglicans in his native Virginia misusing the authority of the state to persecute Baptists. He not only championed the Baptists' cause with a passion that broke through his usual reserve; he also began to explore how society could be organized to protect rights of conscience. More than a year before the Revolutionary War, he was, astonishingly, inquiring into ways "the constitution of [a] country" could foster freedom of belief.¹³ Even in his maiden venture into politics, he had a significant contribution to make, insisting that the new state of Virginia not merely tolerate religious differences but view each individual's conviction as a fundamental right.

Madison plunged into politics again and again. While serving in the Continental Congress, he became so immersed that he did not return home for nearly four years. Most recently he had been a member of the Virginia legislature, where he had seen to the passage of a law that Thomas Jefferson had written, the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. The enacting clauses of this legislation, he exulted to Jefferson, had "extinguished forever the ambitious hope of making laws for the human mind." He had also been delving deep into history, poring over hundreds of volumes that Jefferson sent him from Paris, a "literary cargo" concerning laws and constitutions.¹⁴ He was determined to find out how past unions of states had fared and, combining history with his own experience, to understand why the United States, under its current governing document, the Articles of Confederation, was failing to live up to its abundant promise.

By the time of the Philadelphia convention, Madison was the political equivalent of Mozart in the late 1770s, who after years of writing music was about to create his greatest works. He was Einstein, who after years of studying with "holy zeal" was on the verge of his *annus mirabilis*, the miracle year of 1905, in which he would establish the basis of the theory of relativity and quantum physics. As Madison climbed the narrow stairs in Mrs. House's boardinghouse and headed for his room, he was more knowledgeable and better practiced in the theories and realities of representative government than anyone in the country or even the world. And he was about to do what geniuses do: change forever the way people think.¹⁵

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AT HIS DESK in the waning light of that rainy afternoon, Madison wrote a hurried letter to William Irvine, a Pennsylvanian who was one of his allies, and then he almost certainly turned his thoughts to the upcoming gathering. He had spent months working to ensure the convention's success: penning legislation to throw Virginia's support behind it, persuading Washington to attend, taking steps to see that the Confederation Congress didn't hinder its proceedings. Now he worked on the convention's agenda, not because anyone had asked him to, but because he understood that the surest path to the governmental framework he envisioned lay in providing the program that would guide discussion. He also knew that having others of influence lined up behind his plan would give it greater force. One of his chief reasons for arriving early in Philadelphia—he was the first out-of-state delegate there—was the chance it gave him to meet with others as they arrived and convince them of the benefits of his proposal.

At the convention, he would be one of the chief participants in debate while at the same time keeping notes that would create a historical record of immeasurable worth. The Constitution that the delegates finally agreed upon would not be everything he had wanted, but he quickly concluded it was more than anyone could have hoped, and with John Jay and Alexander Hamilton he defended it in *The Federalist*, a series of essays that has become a classic of political thought. Madison would be crucial

to securing the ratification of the Constitution in Virginia, the biggest and most powerful state, and he would face down Patrick Henry, the most famed orator of the day, in order to do so.

Madison would have a greater hand than anyone at setting the government based on the Constitution in motion, including drafting a bill of rights and getting the necessary amendments through Congress. He would lead in the founding of the first political party, once again upending conventional wisdom. So frowned upon was the idea of partisanship that Jefferson once declared, “If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all.” But Madison defended parties as “natural to most political societies.”¹⁶ They were a legitimate vehicle for free people to use to advance their views and interests.

Madison’s genius would ripen into a wisdom that served him well for the eight years he was Jefferson’s secretary of state and for his two terms as president. Through the perilous losses and thrilling victories of the War of 1812, he was as steady a commander in chief as the United States has ever known. Even after the British burned the nation’s capital, he remained calm, resolute, and devoted to founding principles, refusing to heed calls to silence Americans opposed to the war. His contemporaries, while acknowledging that the course of the war with Great Britain was not always smooth, praised his success. “Notwithstand[ing] a thousand faults and blunders,” John Adams wrote, Madison’s administration had “acquired more glory and established more union than all his three predecessors, Washington, Adams, and Jefferson, put together.”¹⁷ Without precedent to guide him, James Madison would demonstrate that a republic could defend its honor and independence—and remain a republic still.

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PRAISE WOULD FOLLOW MADISON to the grave and beyond. Nine years after his death, Charles Jared Ingersoll would say that “no mind has stamped more of its impressions on American institutions than Madison’s.” But eventually his fine reputation would suffer, and he is popularly regarded today—when remembered at all—less as a bold thinker and superb politician than as a shy and sickly scholar, someone hardly suited for the demands of daily life, much less the rough-and-tumble world of politicking.¹⁸ The reasons for this transformed image are many, including Henry Adams’s late-nineteenth-century history of Madison’s administration, in which the fourth president is presented much as his worst enemies liked to describe him. Misunderstandings about Madison’s health enter in—as does our twenty-first-century inability to conceive of modesty and reserve as having any compatibility with politics.

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IT IS A PROMISING TIME to clear away misconceptions about Madison, brush off cobwebs that have accumulated around his achievements, and seek a deeper understanding of the man who did more than any other to conceive and establish the nation we know. His home at Montpelier, long burdened with massive twentieth-century additions, has now been beautifully restored. One can visit the dramatic redrawing room where the Madisons relaxed with guests; the dining room where they entertained, its walls decorated with historic prints; the library, the center of Madison’s intellectual life, where he kept some of his four thousand pamphlets and books.

Pathfinding authors, particularly biographers Irving Brant and Ralph Ketcham, have charted the way for researchers into Madison’s life, as Catherine Allgor has done for Mrs. Madison’s. J. C. A.

Stagg and his team at the University of Virginia—particularly senior associate editor David B. Mattern, as well as Mary Hackett and Angela Kreider—have drawn together thirty-five volumes of Madison’s papers in beautifully edited and annotated form and made them available online, providing an ease of access that past researchers could only have dreamed of.¹⁹ Holly C. Shulman, also at the University of Virginia, has led the project to get Dolley Madison’s papers edited and online, together with groundbreaking essays that provide invaluable context.

The thirty-five volumes of James Madison’s papers alone run to more than twenty thousand pages and writing about him requires exploring much more, including the voluminous papers of the leaders with whom his life intersected, figures such as George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton. Reconsidering James Madison’s life has been for me a project of many years, but what amazing company I have kept. I particularly treasure the time spent with that determined man in the high-crowned hat, rushing through the rain. He was on his way to creating a nation—and changing the world.

Chapter 1

SUNLIGHT AND SHADOWS

JAMES MADISON, one of the great lawgivers of the world, descended from generations of people who drew their living from the land. His great-great-grandfather John Madison had departed England in the middle of the seventeenth century with the rich soil of Virginia in mind. He sailed between Cape Charles and Cape Henry, entering the Chesapeake Bay with eleven men whose passages he had paid so that he might get “headrights”—grants of fifty acres—for each of them, as well as one for himself. The six hundred acres that the royal governor of Virginia granted him were in Gloucester County along the Mattaponi River, a tributary of the York, which is one of four great rivers flowing into the Chesapeake Bay.¹

The men whose passages Madison paid had agreed to indenture themselves for four or more years, hoping when they finished their terms to buy land and become tobacco planters themselves. Meanwhile, they labored in Madison’s fields, and in decades to come, he would import scores more servants, claiming headrights for each one. By the time of his death, he held grants to several thousand acres, most of them along the north side of the Mattaponi.²

John Madison’s son, also named John, followed a similar course, first acquiring land near his father’s, then moving farther inland, expanding his holdings as tobacco planters had to do if they wanted to survive. Tobacco quickly exhausted the soil, so every three years or so fields had to be abandoned and new land put under cultivation. This second John Madison is listed in a deed book as “ship carpenter,” an occupation he might have taken up to supplement his income. Being a tobacco planter allowed one to live independently, but crops and prices were at the mercy of the weather, the inclinations of Parliament, and the outbreak of foreign wars. Having a sideline, such as building the sloops, shallops, and flatboats that plied the rivers flowing into the Chesapeake, was insurance against contingencies. In 1707, John the ship carpenter also began to assume the responsibilities expected of Virginia’s gentry planters, becoming first a justice of the peace, charged with everything from recording cattle brands to deciding criminal cases, then a sheriff, responsible not only for enforcing the law but also for collecting quitrents and levies.³

The ship carpenter’s son Ambrose Madison married well. His wife, Frances, was the daughter of James Taylor, one of the Knights of the Golden Horseshoe, a group that Governor Alexander Spotswood had led on an expedition into the Shenandoah Valley. Before they crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains, the knights had explored the rolling hills of the Virginia Piedmont, land that glistened green from rain and sun. Spotswood gave each of his fellow explorers a small golden horseshoe to commemorate their trip, but the enduring gift was the knowledge they gathered of uncultivated lands that promised abundant tobacco crops. James Taylor patented vast stretches of the Piedmont, paying little over a penny an acre, and in 1723, two years after Ambrose Madison had married his daughter, Taylor arranged a transfer of 4,675 acres to him and Thomas Chew, another of his sons-in-law.⁴

Ambrose Madison shipped tobacco to London, ordered goods from there, and supplemented his family's income as a merchant. Like his father, he served as a county official and expanded his landholdings. He and Chew worked on improving their jointly held acreage, but they did not rely on indentured servants to fell the trees or put up buildings. Economic conditions had improved in England, while at the same time Virginia tobacco land had grown so scarce that a man who bound himself into servitude had little hope of becoming a planter. With fewer and fewer willing to indenture themselves, planters turned to another source of labor, the men and women whom they could buy from the slave ships that were an increasingly familiar sight in Chesapeake waters. Ambrose's first known purchase was in July 1721, when he paid the captain of the *Ann and Sarah* fifty pounds for "two Negro women."⁵

In the spring of 1732, Ambrose, in his thirties, took his wife and three young children to the plantation cut from the wilderness by people he had purchased, and not long after the family arrived, Ambrose Madison became very ill. When he died in late summer, three slaves, arrested for "suspicion of poisoning," were put on trial for conspiring to kill him. Pompey, the property of another landowner, was found guilty and hanged. Turk and Dido, Madison slaves, were judged to have been "concerned" in the crime "but not in such a degree as to be punished by death." They were sentenced to twenty-nine lashes each.⁶

Although Ambrose's was the first known instance, it was hardly the last in which slaves in the area were tried for poisoning masters. Another concerned Eve, accused of poisoning Peter Montague. In 1746 she was convicted and condemned to burn at the stake. Her sentence was carried out under the authority of the sheriff of Orange County—Thomas Chew, Ambrose Madison's brother-in-law.⁷

Ambrose's descendants, who almost certainly knew that a slave had been hanged for murdering him, left no record of how he died. A family history told of relatives who had been killed by Indians but mentioned not a word about Ambrose's untimely demise. The silence no doubt reflected a belief that to talk about slave resistance was to encourage it. Any hint that Ambrose was murdered also gave the lie to a benign version of slavery in which his descendants, like many slave owners, tried to believe. In this version, the slave was referred to as a servant or even part of the family. In 1777, James Madison, the future president, would advise his father, "The family have been pretty well since you left us except Anthony," who was an enslaved man with a high fever and a swollen arm.⁸

Frances Madison, widowed with three small children on the Virginia frontier, buried her husband next to their small house and turned to the enormous challenges facing her, not least of which was her husband's will. In his final agony, Ambrose had overlooked a crucial detail—dividing the patent he held jointly with Chew.⁹ Thus, upon Ambrose's death, the land on which his wife and children were living passed into Chew's hands and would descend to his heirs.

Unwilling to accept the fate that she had been handed, Frances reached an agreement with Chew. On May 26, 1737, in return for 2,850 acres of the patent, she paid him two hundred pounds, a significant amount, as much as a small planter might accumulate in a lifetime. It was a price per acre above the average of other properties sold in Orange County that month, but Chew doubtless pointed out that the land had been improved, with "houses, buildings, barns, dove houses, yards, orchards, gardens," as the deed specified. He seems to have given little ground to his widowed sister-in-law, but it might well have been that in that time and place neither she nor any of her family expected him to, and in the end the bargain was hers. She gained the acreage and its improvements for her "use and behoof . . . for and during the term of her natural life" and preserved the family estate not only for her son but also for the grandson who would become America's fourth president.¹⁰

As the person running the plantation, Frances Madison would have been familiar with every step in

the growing, harvesting, and marketing of tobacco, a plant that, as one contemporary observed, required “a great deal of skill and trouble in the right management of it.” The seeds, so small that ten thousand would fit in a teaspoon, had to be started not long after Christmas, preferably in a wooded site rich with mold. The seedlings were replanted in fields in the spring—but only after a rain shower or “season,” when the ground was wet. Within about a month, the plants had to be “topped” to encourage the growth of large leaves, then repeatedly “suckered,” which involved cutting shoots, and “wormed,” which meant removing grubs and hornworms. When the leaves began to spot and thicken, the tobacco was cut, and after wilting in the field, it was taken to tobacco houses and hung to cure. About the time that the tobacco was ready to be packed in hogsheads and transported to market, slaves were sowing seed for the next crop.¹¹

Frances put her mark (“FM”) on hogsheads leaving the Madison plantation and ordered goods from the London merchants to whom the tobacco was shipped, including ten narrow axes, a hydrometer, a quilted coat, and a pair of boots. Frances was a planter, a fact that made her an exception among her sex, but as she did the work of a man on the Virginia frontier, she also upheld the era’s standards of womanhood, ordering fabric for dresses and, from John Maynard & Son in London, two “good stays, or corsets, size small. She also added to the modest collection of books that Ambrose had owned at his death. She ordered a Bible commentary, two volumes of the British newspaper the *Guardian*, and, her biggest extravagance, eight volumes of the *Spectator*, a periodical known for its wit and commonsense humanity.¹²

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THE MADISONS OWNED thousands of acres and dozens of slaves and worked their land year-round, but income from farming remained unreliable. Frances’s son, known to history as James senior, to distinguish him from his famous son, found a multitude of ways to enhance the plantation’s earnings. He sold his neighbors everything from gunpowder and silk purses to brandy from his still. He sawed planks, built hogsheads, and rented out his enslaved carpenters, Peter and George, usually for long-term projects, but once to fight a fire. He oversaw the construction of buildings, including a tobacco house for John Norton and a privy for Erasmus Taylor. Eventually, he established an ironworks where he gained a reputation for quality goods and shrewd dealing.¹³

But he also became knowledgeable about the plantation’s mainstay and early on would have accompanied his family’s hogsheads down rolling roads to the Rappahannock. The few days’ journey was a price the Madisons paid for growing tobacco in the Piedmont, which was above navigable waters, but taking the yearly crop to Fredericksburg, a port village where British ships arrived, was also a chance to socialize. After leaving the Madison hogsheads at Royston’s warehouse, James senior could ferry across the Rappahannock and ride another day downriver to where one of his best friends, Francis Conway, lived. Their families had long been close. Francis’s father had been one of the executors of Ambrose’s will and died himself only a year later. Francis had a younger sister named Nelly, and in 1749, when she was seventeen, she and twenty-six-year-old James Madison Sr. were married.¹⁴

Nelly “was not a beautiful woman,” according to Gaillard Hunt, an early Madison biographer, but Hunt was probably relying on a portrait painted by Charles Peale Polk in 1799, when Nelly was sixty-eight. Something in her youth attracted James senior, perhaps her piety, since that was her reputation in old age, but James senior’s cousin and close friend, the genial Joseph Chew, suggested the attraction was more than spiritual. Two weeks prior to James and Nelly’s wedding, Chew wrote to

James, “I hope before this Miss Nelly has made you happy.” After their wedding, Chew complained of not hearing from Madison. “Never since I left Virginia have I had one scrape of a pen,” he wrote. “I will make every allowance in your favor I can. The marrying a young agreeable wife will certainly make the moments slide away pleasantly, and that you should be happy no one desires or wishes more truly than myself but in that a few hours is due to your friend.”¹⁵

Two years later, while James senior and Nelly were visiting her mother at Port Conway, their first child, a son, was born. The date of his birth according to the Gregorian calendar, adopted the year after his birth, was March 16, 1751. Named James after his father, the baby was called Jemmy by his parents, and they prepared for his homecoming by having a woodworker, William Crittenden, make a cradle. Later the plantation overseer, Robert Martin, made Jemmy two small banyans, or tiny robes open in the front.¹⁶

When the baby was taken to the Madison family seat in the Piedmont, it was not to the house that dominates the site today but to Mount Pleasant, the simple frame home with a footprint of 416 square feet that Frances, Ambrose, and their three children had moved into nearly twenty years before.¹⁷ Now the house had four occupants: Frances, James senior, Nelly, and the baby. In 1753, when Nelly gave birth to a second son, Francis, there were five in the house, as there had been in Ambrose’s time. After a third son, Ambrose, named for his grandfather, arrived in 1755, Mount Pleasant might have seemed crowded, but when Catlett, a fourth son, was born in 1758 and died soon thereafter, the house, like Nelly’s heart, must have seemed to have a great and empty space in it.

Life was precarious in colonial Virginia. Newcomers had to survive the “seasoning,” the first year of sickness that killed many, and everyone faced a mortality rate much higher than in New England.¹⁸ Although the Piedmont was healthier than the Tidewater, which provided a near-perfect breeding ground for malarial mosquitoes, sickness still abounded, and the death of children was heartbreaking common. Of the twelve children Nelly would eventually bear, only seven would survive to adulthood.

Learned physicians under the influence of the Enlightenment were struggling to find scientific explanations of illness, but in everyday life the theories of Hippocrates, Aristotle, and Galen still prevailed. They regarded illness as an imbalance among the four humors—air (blood), earth (black bile), fire (yellow bile), and water (phlegm)—and associated the excess of a humor with certain diseases. Black bile, for example, was associated with epilepsy.¹⁹ Bleeding and purging could rid the body, so the theory went, of an excess of one humor or another and bring back a healthful balance. Herbs were prescribed for purging and healing, but the ideas of the medieval physician Paracelsus were also influential. On the theory that sickness was the result of poisons attacking the body from outside, he had recommended counteracting them with internal doses of metals and medicines from the laboratory, such as arsenic, antimony, and mercury.

Almost every plantation had a manual that advanced some mixture of theory and remedy. In the Madison household, it was *Quincy’s Dispensatory*, which Frances Madison added to the family library. In 1753, during Jemmy’s second year, she ordered medicines “for an epilepsy,” likely relying on *Quincy’s* to do so. She ordered several items—gentian root, cochineal, saffron, and camphor—that were in *Quincy’s* terminology “diaphoretics,” believed good for breaking a fever. For epilepsy, as for most ailments, purging was thought helpful, and on Frances’s list were two laxatives, Anderson’s *Pilula* and *pulvis basilicus*, or Royal Powder, a mixture containing antimony and mercury. Frances also ordered cardamom seeds, which, according to Quincy, eased the irritation caused by cathartics. Another item was lavender, good for all diseases of the head, according to Quincy, as was the *sal volatile oleosum* that Frances ordered. It had a strong ammoniac odor and could be used as a smelling salt or ingested. She also ordered *sal armoniac*, from which *sal volatile oleosum* could be made.

Sublimated from sea salt, urine, and animal excrement, *sal armoniac* could be used in “pocket smelling bottles,” Quincy said. In combination with tartar, he recommended it for “epilepsies, palsies and all nervous cases, because such fiery irritating volatiles stimulate and shake the fibers.”²⁰

Hard as it is for a twenty-first-century mind to contemplate Royal Powder and *sal armoniac* being administered to a toddler, James Madison—Jemmy, at this point—was the only member of his family for whom there is any indication of epilepsy and thus the most likely patient. Assuming that the seizures he suffered were fever related, as the medicines Frances Madison ordered seem to indicate, doctors today would likely diagnose febrile seizures, convulsions that can occur when a small child has a fever. A grandmother in colonial Virginia might be forgiven, however, for thinking the child had epilepsy. When Thomas Jefferson’s two-year-old grandson, Francis Eppes, suffered “dreadful fits” in 1804, his aunt wrote, “I cannot help fearing them to be epileptic.”²¹

Although children with febrile seizures are not considered to have epilepsy today, a history of them in early childhood, especially if they are prolonged, is common in the syndrome of temporal lobe epilepsy. The evidence available suggests that this was the pattern of Madison’s ailment: fever-related episodes when he was a toddler, then “sudden attacks” later in his life.²²

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MADISON GREW UP to love the outdoors and probably spent much of his boyhood riding and playing in the fields and forests with his brothers and the slave children on the plantation, but he was also bookish, reading *the Spectator* at an early age. His grandmother Frances likely encouraged him and was surely pleased to have him appreciate the lessons it taught. Early on he would have come across this: “Nothing can atone for the want of modesty, without which beauty is ungraceful and wit detestable.” Later he would have read about Prince Eugene of Savoy, who, said the *Spectator* (the eponymous author of the series), exemplified “the highest instance of a noble mind,” bearing “great qualities” without displaying “any consciousness that he is superior to the rest of the world.” James also encountered immodesty in the person of Simon Honeycomb, who claimed that women had forced him to abandon his modest ways. Because they liked rogues, he had been forced to become one, wenching, drinking, and keeping “company with those who lived most at large.” Characters such as Honeycomb were comic touches that would have appealed to a boy, and Madison would long remember *the Spectator* as “peculiarly adapted to inculcate in youthful minds, just sentiments, an appetite for knowledge, and a taste for the improvement of the mind and manners.”²³

In the pages of the *Spectator*, Madison followed friends who gathered at Will’s Coffee House, attended the theater in Drury Lane, and in general took advantage of urban pleasures. This world must have seemed wonderfully exotic to a boy in colonial Virginia, where there were no cities. The geography of the colony, with the Chesapeake Bay, the great rivers flowing into it, and the multitude of navigable tributaries flowing into the rivers, undermined the commercial need for cities. “Every person . . . can ship his tobacco at his own door and live independent,” wrote one mid-eighteenth-century visitor.²⁴ Towns developed—Williamsburg, Fredericksburg, Alexandria—but Virginia, the largest and most populous of the colonies, had no Boston or Philadelphia within its borders.

Living on isolated farms and plantations, Virginians compensated by opening their doors and dining rooms to all respectable passersby. They entertained at oyster suppers and squirrel barbecues, turned court days into occasions for dinners and horse races, and called in dancing masters to teach their children the elaborate steps of the minuet. One popular dancing master, a Mr. Christian, whom James senior paid in 1756 and 1758, started with his pupils after breakfast and kept them dancing until

after dark, not hesitating to deliver a sharp rebuke if they failed to show a respectful attitude.²⁵

Virginians also looked to Sunday, when going to church was a chance to mend souls and socialize. The Madisons attended the Brick Church, a two- or three-hour ride to the east, where James Madison Sr. was a vestryman and Frances Madison had joined with other good women of the parish to purchase a silver Communion set. The family prayed at the Brick Church, heard official notices, and exchanged news of politics and tobacco prices. As young James wandered among the congregation after services, he would have encountered a plethora of relatives, many of them named Taylor. Frances Taylor Madison's siblings were prolific—her brother George had fourteen sons—and many of Frances's brothers, sisters, nieces, and great-nephews were within easy distance of the Brick Church. Young James would also have seen Chews, Taliaferros, Beales, and Willises, families related to the Madisons and one another by blood, marriage, and sometimes both, forming what historian Bernard Bailyn called the “great tangled cousinry” of Virginia's gentry class.²⁶ One can imagine a curious young boy on the ride home inquiring which of the Beale cousins were his aunt Elizabeth's children and which belonged to his aunt Frances and asking how the Willises and Hites fit in.

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ON A SAD DAY in December 1761, the Madison family gathered at the Brick Church for the funeral of Frances Madison, who had died at sixty-one. The minister, the Reverend James Marye Jr., comforted the mourners with words from Revelations: “Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord . . . that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them.” That one of Frances's most lasting works was encouraging her grandson's love of learning seems likely from his father's making educational arrangements for him within months of her death. About the time the tulip poplars bloomed in 1762, young James began attending a boarding school on the banks of the Mattaponi, where the Madison family had started in America. There Master Jamie, as he was now known, found an instructor to whom he would be grateful throughout his life, Donald Robertson, an immigrant from Scotland, “a man of extensive learning and a distinguished teacher,” in Madison's words. Along with three dozen other boys, many of whom he knew, young James studied arithmetic, geography, algebra, and geometry. He also learned the languages essential for going to college, Latin and Greek, and studied French as well, though, as he later emphasized, he could only read it. He liked to recount how he had once tried to speak to a Frenchman, only to discover that the Scottish burr he had picked up from Robertson rendered him incomprehensible.²⁷

At Robertson's school, Madison found a library containing authors of antiquity, such as Thucydides, Virgil, and Cicero, and more recent thinkers, such as Locke and Montesquieu. In Robertson he found a teacher who knew how to make the connection of learning to life, even when teaching theoretical subjects. Notes that young James Madison made in a copybook show that Robertson began one lecture with the definition of a sign: “a thing that gives notice of something different from itself.” He next gave examples of natural signs, such as smiling, which indicates joy, and blushing, which speaks of shame. Then, after observing that such signs are universal, Robertson noted this exception: “Politicians and other cunning men of business, [who] by great and refined dissimulation, have in great measure confounded and stifled the natural indications of their inmost thoughts.”²⁸

Madison's copybook contains drawings that look like assignments in geometry and geography. One, a hexagonal fort surrounded by a twelve-sided moat inside a twenty-four-sided wall, was surely more interesting exercise for a boy than a rendering of abstract shapes would have been. Another

drawing, a standard rendering of planets in circular orbits around the sun, is made personal by the face on the sun, its nose and brows created by a single line and its rays so thickly drawn they appear to be a mane. The result is a solar system that appears to have a mildly friendly lion at its center.²⁹

Madison spent part of 1762 studying the English curriculum at Robertson's school, then moved into the Latin curriculum, or the college preparatory course, for four years before departing. He could have stayed longer, but there were now six children in the Madison family, four besides James of school age, and James senior, in whom a strain of frugality ran strong, seems to have decided to economize by hiring a live-in tutor for all of them. He had a candidate for the job, the new minister at the Brick Church, and room for the tutor in the house he had just built, a structure of some twelve rooms, located a third of a mile east of the old family home.³⁰

Compared with the great plantations of the Tidewater, the new house was modest, but rising two stories and made of brick, it was the finest dwelling in Orange County. Young James, helping carry furniture from tiny Mount Pleasant to the family's new home, was no doubt impressed by its roominess.³¹ The house was also splendidly situated, as the older house had not been, commanding a magnificent view, a thirty-mile vista over fields and forests to a long stretch of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The tutor living with the Madison family, Thomas Martin, had recently graduated from Nassau Hall of the College of New Jersey, known as Princeton University today. Together with his brother Alexander, another Nassau graduate, Thomas made the case that James should attend the New Jersey college. No doubt the brothers mentioned the school's new president, John Witherspoon, who was, like Donald Robertson, a product of the highly esteemed University of Edinburgh. Perhaps the Martins also talked about students at Princeton opposing British taxes. At the commencement in 1765, the year that Parliament had lit the fires of colonial outrage by imposing the Stamp Act, there had been a rousing oration on liberty, a valedictory address on patriotism, and a determination by the graduating class to wear only clothing made in America.³² James Madison Sr., a decided foe of British taxation, would have been favorably impressed by such an account.

Nassau Hall was also the least expensive university in the colonies, a fact that would not have escaped James senior's notice. And while the College of William and Mary was the place where aspiring sons of the Virginia gentry traditionally went, there had been troubling reports from Williamsburg of rioting, drinking, and all-night card games. In later years, Madison mentioned another Williamsburg disadvantage: its Tidewater location. He had been sent to Nassau Hall, he wrote "in preference to William and Mary, the climate of which was unhealthy for persons going from a mountainous region."³³

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IN THE MIDDLE of a parched summer, James, eighteen years old, left the Virginia upcountry for Princeton, accompanied by the Martins and an enslaved man named Sawney, who was also eighteen. The men traveled down dusty tree-lined roads through enervating heat to Fredericksburg, where they crossed the Rappahannock. They next encountered the Potomac, where they used Hooe's ferry to cross into Maryland. Assuming they followed the route of another traveler from about this time, they traveled a road that took them through Upper Marlboro and to the South River, where yet another ferry took them to Annapolis, a town of fewer than two hundred houses that commanded a splendid view of the Chesapeake. "The bay is twelve miles over," one visitor noted, "and beyond it you may discern the eastern shore, so that the scene is diversified with fields, wood, and water."³⁴

From Annapolis, they sailed across the Chesapeake in a northeasterly direction, landing on Maryland's Eastern Shore and moving by land northward to New Castle, the colonial capital of Delaware, "a place of very little consideration," according to one visitor, but it was followed by the "pretty village" of Wilmington.³⁵ Soon the party was on a ferry across the Schuylkill, then a short ride later at Philadelphia, America's largest city and a place full of wonder for a young man from the Virginia frontier. Mariners shouted to one another along crowded Water Street wharves. Splendid gentlemen on fine horses clattered through paved streets that were lit at night. There were coffeehouses, bookstores, a theater—establishments that made Philadelphia a New World version of the London Madison had read about in the *Spectator*. The city's most impressive building, located between Fifth and Sixth streets on Chestnut, was a Georgian structure of red brick surmounted by a bell tower. For now it was known as the Pennsylvania State House, but Americans of a later time would call it Independence Hall.

A ferry across the Delaware and a day's ride brought Madison and his party to their destination, the small village of Princeton, which had a single road and fewer than "eighty houses, all tolerably well built," one observer noted, "but little attention is paid them." Eyes were drawn instead to an immense stone edifice in the center of town, Nassau Hall, where James Madison would spend most of the next three years. The Martins left him there, and as James settled in to study for his entrance exams, he might have been homesick. In a letter to Thomas Martin, he referred to "the prospect before me of three years confinement," hastily adding that the time would be well compensated "by the advantage I hope to derive from it."³⁶

In fact, the years at Princeton were some of the happiest of his life. He met young men from every part of the country and formed close friendships with a few: William Bradford, a thoughtful and well-read young man whose father was a printer in Philadelphia; Philip Freneau, the brilliant and perpetually discontented son of a Huguenot wine merchant; Hugh Brackenridge, born in Scotland, a farmer's son, as smart as he was strong. Like the other hundred or so young men of Nassau Hall, Madison and his friends adhered to a rigid schedule. A bell rang at 5:00 a.m., and lest anyone fail to hear it, a servant followed, beating on every door. Students rushed to morning prayers, then returned to their rooms to study until breakfast at 8:00 a.m. Recitation came after breakfast and was followed by a time for study that lasted until a 1:00 p.m. dinner. From 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. was another study period, followed by evening prayer, supper, and another study period. After 9:00 p.m., students could go to bed, but, as one noted, "to go before is reproachful."³⁷

Tight as the schedule was, there was time for the discussions with other students that make college memorable. After his graduation Philip Freneau, who would play an important part in Madison's life would write to Madison about how he missed "conversation I delight in." Madison remembered chats of "an hour or two" with Bradford that were "recreation and release from business and books."³⁸

Philip Fithian, whose time at Princeton overlapped Madison's, fondly remembered the student hijinks of his college days: "Meeting and shoving in the dark entries; knocking at doors and going off without entering; strewing the entries in the night with greasy feathers; freezing the bell; ringing it at late hours of the night." He also recalled "parading bad women, burning Curse-John [the privy], darting sunbeams upon the town-people . . . , and ogling women with the telescope." In the case of Madison and his friends, at least some youthful energy was diverted into the American Whig Society, a debating club that John Witherspoon supported as part of his plan to encourage effective public speaking. No doubt there were many elevated orations as the Whigs took on their rivals in the Cliosophic Society, but what remains from their "paper wars" is spirited doggerel. In one bit of rhyme, Madison urges his fellow Whigs to be of good humor while the Clios manage their own doom

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