

The Breakfast Club

Constitutional Minute for 22 March 2025

5 Things You Probably Didn't Know About James Madison

On Sunday, the 16th of March, Madison's birthday, I found myself addressing a church group on the topic of Natural Law. I made sure to mention that the day was indeed James Madison's birthday. Later that day it suddenly dawned on me that I should have written a Constitutional Minute essay to commemorate my favorite Founder's special day. So here goes, a week late and "a dollar short."

Did you know:

1. James Madison Jr. was actually born on March 5, 1750. That year, England was still using the Julian Calendar and by then authorities had figured out that the calendar, in use since January, 45 BC, had been calculating a year as 365.25 days instead of what had now become accepted as the correct figure of 365.242 days (who knew?). This difference produced a lot of Leap Years to compensate. In addition, the Julian Calendar began each new year on March 25th. The year 1751 began 20 days after Madison's birth. The future politician celebrated his first birthday on March 5th in what had become 1751. But a curious thing happened the following year. In 1752 England joined other countries in shifting to the Gregorian calendar, which, in addition to using the correct figure of for a year: 365.242 days, used January 1st as the beginning of a new year. In September, 1752 eleven days were added to "catch up" with the Gregorian calendar and this changed Madison's birthdate to March 16th. When the dust settled, Madison's 1750 birth year became 1751 by moving declaring January 1st as the start of that year. and his birth day became March 16th. Clear as mud? Sorry, that's the best I can do in explaining what happened. If you don't like my explanation, try Wikipedia's.
2. Many Americans are aware that Madison was the first of 12 children born to James Madison, Sr. (1723-1801) and Eleanor Rose "Nellie" Conway Madison (1731-1829), but few people know what happened to Madison's siblings. First, only seven of the twelve, including "Jemmy" lived to adulthood. Two brothers died before or immediately after birth, another brother lived a mere 36 days and a 4-year old brother and seven-year old sister died weeks apart in a 1774 dysentery epidemic. It is likely all Madison's siblings would have survived with access to modern healthcare. "Jemmy" himself was a frail and sickly child who often pondered whether he would live to enjoy a long life (he died in 1836 at the age of 85, his next closest sibling died at age 81). Madison complained that his intense study schedule in college (he was admitted to the College of New Jersey as a sophomore and completed the remaining three years of study in two) further degraded his already frail constitution. A periodic "bilious fever" and a condition he likened to epilepsy nagged him in his early years.



Here is the record of Madison's eleven siblings. Notice the interesting, nearly uniform 2-year interval between births:

1751, March 16, - James Madison Jr. born (d. June 28, 1836, 85 yrs old).

1753, June 18, - Francis Taylor Madison born (d. April 5, 1800 - 47 yrs old) Became a planter in Orange County, VA. James is two.

1755, January 27, - William Ambrose Madison born (d. October 3, 1793 - 38 yrs old). Became a planter and a captain in the Virginia militia; died of yellow fever contracted in Richmond, Virginia. James is almost four

1758, February 10, - Catlett Madison born, died 36 days later on March 18, 1758. James is now seven and starting his education, taught by Grandmother Frances Conway.

1760, February 14, - Eleanor "Nellie" Conway Madison Hite born (d. December 24, 1802 - 42 yrs old). James is now almost nine.

1762, May 5, - William Taylor Madison born (d. July 19, 1843 - 81 yrs old). Became a General Officer in the Revolution and a lawyer, served in the Virginia legislature. On June 14, Madison began his studies at Donald Robertson's boarding school in King & Queen County, about three days travel by horse to the southeast.

1764, August 17, - Sarah Catlett Madison Macon born (d. October 17, 1843 - 79 yrs old). Madison was still studying with Donald Robertson.

1766, unknown date, - unnamed male child died the following day.

1768, February 6, - Elizabeth Madison born (d. May 17, 1775 - 7 yrs old, dysentery), Madison was now being tutored at home by Rev. Thomas Martin, new pastor of a nearby Presbyterian Church, who boarded with the Madisons in exchange for the tutoring. As a 1762 graduate of Princeton, Martin was almost certainly the one who convinced Madison to attend Princeton rather than William & Mary.

1770, unknown date, - unnamed male child stillborn. Madison was in his first year at Princeton (as a sophomore).

1771, September 19, - Reuben Madison born. (d. June 5, 1775 - 4 yrs old, dysentery). James graduated Princeton six days after Reuben's birth, but remained another 6 months studying philosophy and Hebrew directly under college president Rev. John Witherspoon.

1774, October 4, - Frances "Fanny" Madison Rose born (d. October 4, 1823 - 49 yrs old). Madison was now back home self-studying law and tutoring his younger brothers and sisters.

When James Madison Jr. died in 1836, only his brother William, and sister Sarah were still alive. So much for "frailty."

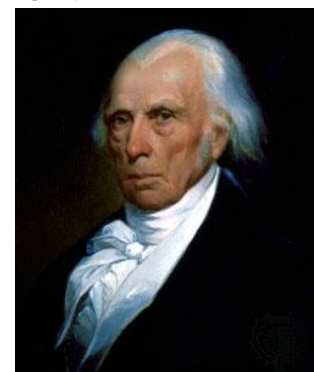
3. Madison married Dolley Payne, 17 years his junior, after Aaron Burr, who had been Madison's college classmate, introduced them. *Congressman* Burr had taken a room at the boarding establishment owned and operated by Dolley's mother. One day, *Congressman* Madison noticed Dolley walking across the street in Philadelphia (where Congress was then operating) and was immediately smitten. Upon finding out Burr knew her, James implored Burr make the introductions. The two were married after a "brisk" courtship, on September 15, 1794. Tragically, Burr's wife, Theodosia, had died earlier (May 18) that same year.



4. Burr had actually introduced Madison to "the Widow Todd;" Dolley's lawyer husband, John Todd, and 3-month-old son had died the year before in a yellow fever epidemic. At the onset of the epidemic, Dolley had fled to relatives in western Virginia with her 2-year old son, John Payne Todd, probably the only reason they survived. Although James adopted John Payne as his own son, as an adult, John Payne would become a royal "pain" and on multiple occasions Madison had to borrow money to pay his adopted son's gambling and spending debts, one time paying back a friend who had bailed John out of debtors prison. Madison's frequent and prolonged absences during the child's formative years while serving as Jefferson's Secretary of State (1801-1809) probably didn't help set the boy on a productive track.



5. James Madison spent approximately 27 years of his life in service to the Commonwealth of Virginia and his country. Two years on the Virginia Governor's Council, six years representing Virginia in the Confederation Congress, three years as a Delegate in the Virginia Assembly, eight years a Congressman, eight years as Secretary of State and eight years as President. As if this wasn't enough, Madison also served on Orange County's Committee of Safety in 1776, at the 5th Virginia Convention (1776) that composed Virginia's first Constitution and Declaration of Rights, at the 1787 Constitutional Convention, at Virginia's 1788 Ratifying Convention and, finally, in 1829 at the age of 78, at the Virginia state Constitutional Convention. Former Presidents received no "retirement benefits;" Madison had to frequently sell off land and slaves just to keep his estate afloat. After Madison's death in 1836, Dolley had to do the same, finally selling her husband's notes of the 1787 Convention to Congress to have funds to sustain her son and herself.



Next year, why don't we all put Madison's birthdate on your calendars and mark the occasion by reading one of the many good biographies of "The Father of the Constitution," listed below.

p.s. Madison humbly rejected the title "the Father of the Constitution," noting in a letter to a friend two years before his death that the document was instead "the work of many heads and many hands." Rest easy, Jemmy.

For further reading:

James Madison: A Biography, Ralph Ketcham, 1971. (The best, most complete biography of Madison)

The Education of James Madison, A Model for Today, by Mary-Elaine Swanson, 1992. (As you might expect, this focuses on the various components of this education)

Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787, by James Madison. "Madison's Notes")

Founding Friendship: George Washington, James Madison, and the Creation of the American Republic, by Stuart Leibiger, 1999. The great collaboration that produced the American government and how the relationship deteriorated)

The First Congress: How James Madison, George Washington, and a Group of Extraordinary Men Invented the Government, by Fergus M. Bordenwich, 2016. (self-explanatory)

A Perfect Union, Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation, by Catherine Allgore, 2007. Dolley Madison was an integral component of Madison's success)

A Slave in the White House: Paul Jennings and the Madisons, by Elizabeth Dowling Taylor, 2012. (A unique and intimate look at how Madison treated his slaves)

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