

Save that Parchment - Dolly Madison's letter, August 23rd, 1814

Editors Note: The War of 1812 was less than forty years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. On August 23rd, 1814, "Save that Parchment" were probably the words called out by First Lady Dolly Madison to a White House clerk. The next day, the British attacked and took over Washington DC. By fortunate timing or hand of Providence, the Declaration of Independence and other founding documents were saved from being burned, or stolen, by a government clerk who sprinted them away to Leesburg, Virginia. Without quick action by Dolly Madison and a White House clerk, they would not be available for us to view today. What a fitting tribute to George Washington, for Dolly Madison to risk capture by the British waiting for his portrait removed from the White House wall. The following evening, British Admiral Cockburn dined at the White House, and after dinner, ordered the Capital to be burned.

Dear Sister

My husband left me yesterday morng. to join Gen. Winder. He enquired anxiously whether I had courage, or firmness to remain in the President's house until his return, on the morrow, or succeeding day, and on my assurance that I had no fear but for him and the success of our army, he left me, beseeching me to take care of myself, and of the cabinet papers, public and private. I have since recd. two despatches from him, written with a pencil; the last is alarming, because he desires I should be ready at a moment's warning to enter my carriage and leave the city; that the enemy seemed stronger than had been reported, and that it might happen that they would reach the city, with intention to destroy it. ... I am accordingly ready; I have pressed as many cabinet papers into trunks as to fill one carriage; our private property must be sacrificed, as it is impossible to procure wagons for its transportation. I am determined not to go myself until I see Mr. Madison safe, and he can accompany me, as I hear of much hostility towards him, ... disaffection stalks around us. ... My friends and acquaintances are all gone; Even Col. C with his hundred men, who were stationed as a guard in the enclosure. ... French John (a faithful domestic,) with his usual activity and resolution, offers to spike the cannon at the gate, and to lay a train of powder which would blow up the British, should they enter the house. To the last proposition I positively object, without being able, however, to make him understand why all advantages in war may not be taken.

Wednesday morng., twelve o'clock. Since sunrise I have been turning my spy glass in every direction and watching with unwearied anxiety, hoping to discern the approach of my dear husband and his friends; but, alas, I can descry only groups of military wandering in all directions, as if there was a lack of arms, or of spirit to fight for their own firesides!

Three O'clock. Will you believe it, my Sister? We have had a battle or skirmish near Bladensburg, and I am still here within sound of the cannon! Mr. Madison comes not; may God protect him! Two messengers covered with dust, come to bid me fly; but I wait for him. ... At this late hour a wagon has been procured, I have had it filled with the plate and most valuable portable articles belonging to the house; whether it will reach its destination; the Bank of Maryland, or fall into the hands of British soldiery, events must determine.

Our kind friend, Mr. Carroll, has come to hasten my departure, and is in a very bad humor with me

because I insist on waiting until the large picture of Gen. Washington is secured, and it requires to be unscrewed from the wall. This process was found too tedious for these perilous moments; I have ordered the frame to be broken, and the canvass taken out it is done, and the precious portrait placed in the hands of two gentlemen of New York, for safe keeping. 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. When I shall again write you, or where I shall be tomorrow, I cannot tell!!¹

Endnote

1. The White House Historical Association, Dolly Madison, the White House, and the War of 1812, http://www.whitehousehistory.org/04/subs/1812_a.html

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