

## This Day in History... August 24, 1814

### Dolley Madison Saves Famous Washington Portrait

On August 24, 1814, as British troops approached the American capital, First Lady Dolley Madison insisted on saving important historical relics, including a portrait of our first president.

Two years into the War of 1812, British troops were closing in on Washington, DC. They began landing in Maryland on August 17, and were headed for the American capitol. President Madison had left the White House to meet with his generals, but instructed his wife to gather important state papers and wait for his return. Dolley and the White House staff waited anxiously, staring through spyglasses for either President Madison or the British Army.



*White House Stamp from the Presidential Series*

Finally, they saw an army approaching in the distance – the British. Most of the city’s residents had fled, but Dolley remained at the White House packing a carriage with important items she didn’t want the British to find or destroy. As they drew closer, she pointed to the full-length portrait of George Washington, painted by Gilbert Stuart, and asked her staff to save the picture if possible, and if not to destroy it. “Under no circumstances all it to fall into the hands of the British.” The painting, known as the Lansdowne portrait, was a copy of one gifted to William Petty, 1st Marquess of Lansdowne, in 1796.

First the staffers tried to remove the whole frame from the wall. But it was screwed in and time was running out. They eventually broke the frame and removed the canvas. It was rolled up and stored away at a farmhouse outside the city for safekeeping. Dolley left the White House before the British arrived and met her husband at their established meeting point.



*Issued for the 150th anniversary of the Capitol building.*

Shortly after, British troops made their way to Capitol Hill. They entered the capitol waving the flag of truce, but were attacked by a small group of partisans. In response, the British commander ordered the burning of the White House and US Capitol building and flew the Union Flag over the capitol.

The British troops first set fire to the US Capitol building, destroying most of the interior. They then turned their sights on the building that produced the *National Intelligencer* – an anti-British newspaper. Neighborhood women convinced them not to burn the structure for fear it would destroy their houses as well, so Admiral George Cockburn directed his men to tear the building apart brick by brick.

The troops then marched down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House. After eating all of the food they could find and gathering some “souvenirs,” they set the White House on fire. Additional fuel was added to the fires to ensure the destruction of America’s capital. It had been reported that the flames were visible from as far away as Baltimore.

Within a day, a violent thunderstorm (which may have been a hurricane) tore through the city. The storm increased the damage, but extinguished the fires, and saved the exteriors of many of the buildings. After 25 hours, the British left the capitol to their ships, which had been badly damaged by the storm.



*Stamp pictures Washington, DC, as it looked in 1903.*



*Stamp picturing another Gilbert Stuart painting of Washington known as The Athenaeum.*



*Issued on Dolley’s 212th birthday.*



*Stamp pictures the White House and its designer James Hoban. He oversaw its rebuilding following the British attack.*

The Madisons returned a few days later, but were never able to live in the White House again. Repairs weren’t completed until 1817. But Dolley had successfully saved the historic portrait that to this day hangs in the White House.

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