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# At the Hem of Government: First Ladies and Political Sociability in the Early Republic

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## Abstract

*From 1789 to 1817, three ladies—Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison—all contributed to the creation of an American political culture that relied on the participation of women to run smoothly. To help with the establishment of the fledgling American government, the Republican Court was created. This social institution allowed for open discussions and cordial relationships between politicians all under the guidance of women. The topic of this paper is the evolution of the Republican Court through four administrations and three First Ladies. This paper looks at the influential political role women played in the early republic, the French influence on American politics and American women, as well as the partisan backlash women involved in politics received and the importance of etiquette to political functions. Ultimately, this thesis examines how the Republican Court was integral to the search for an American political culture after the American Revolution and how the Republican Court became its most successful version under the command of First Lady Dolley Payne Todd Madison. Her skills at politicking and her charming personality allowed the Republican Court to become an essential and settled part of American political culture in the early republic.*

In 1861, American painter Daniel Huntington completed a large oil painting titled *The Republican Court*. It depicted sixty-four identifiable his-

torical figures from the Revolutionary generation gathered for a reception during the Washington Administration. Martha Washington stands elevated on a raised platform as the central figure, her husband George Washington standing amongst the crowd with his arm outstretched towards his wife. His strikingly tall figure is, for once, smaller and shorter than Martha as she stands above every other major figure in the room. The scene is full of grandeur, men and women dressed in their finest and whispered discussions in every corner, but most of the faces are turned towards the stage. They look to Martha Washington as a leader in this gathering: she is the authority in the room, and this is her court. John Jay, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton serve as accent pieces in a trio to Mrs. Washington's right and another crowded group of men, including Thomas Jefferson, stand in the back corner to her right. Other prominent members of America's high society seem to orbit Martha rather than her husband. The women are at the forefront of this historical painting, including Abigail Adams and Elizabeth Hamilton, and frequent participants in the titular Republican Court, such as Anne Willing Bingham, Pamela Dwight Sedgwick, and Sophia Chew Philips.

Here stands Martha Washington as a leader of Americans, as she began the creation of an American set of manners and social functions that would make up the Republican Court. The court and the women who ruled it evolved over the course of four administrations and these ritualized informal gatherings became a powerful institution of



Figure 1. Daniel Huntington, *The Republican Court (Lady Washington's Reception Day)*, 1861, Oil on canvas, 66 x 109 1/16 in., Brooklyn Museum, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/487>.

American political culture. The 1861 production of Huntington's painting reveals the cultural importance of Martha Washington's receptions, as they were once called. This large piece was completed at the beginning of the Civil War and people across the nation deeply felt the fracturing of everything the Revolutionary generation had fought to create.

### 1. Historiography

A look back at the genteel conduct and honorable figures of America's early days was part of the reason *The Republican Court* was created, as painters as well as historians tried to capture what exactly made the United States so unique. It was part of a wave of nostalgia for the early republic, and around the same time this painting was completed, a trio of historians addressed the set of practices and manners that became the Republican Court. In a time of extreme uncertainty over the future of the country, Rufus Wilmot Griswold,

Elizabeth Fries Ellet, and Anne Hollingsworth Wharton looked back to what made the United States successful in the first place, finding an answer in the social life of early American capitals and the role of women in their cohesion. Griswold's work, *The Republican Court or American Society in the Days of Washington* "proffered a structure for the origins of the republic that placed primacy on feminine presence and on well-bred social intercourse tempered by feminine sensibility."<sup>1</sup> Though this work was limited to the Washington administration, Griswold thoroughly examined the origins of the nation and how well-mannered conversation, led by women, could allow for more bipartisan cooperation that led to less divisive government.

Elizabeth Fries Ellet in her 1869 work *The Court Circles of the Republic* underlined the im-

<sup>1</sup>David S. Shields and Fredrika J. Teute, "The Republican Court and the Historiography of a Women's Domain in the Public Sphere," *Journal of the Early Republic* 35, no. 2 (2015): 11.

portance of female-run spaces as, “deportment in the drawing-room was a reflex of temper in the Cabinet and the Senate; and styles of living and conversation were continually referred to as evidences of political tendencies.”<sup>2</sup> Ellet also examined how women helped set political precedents and standards, and how, “in spite of republicanism’s best efforts to segregate women from the public sphere by privatizing their influence within the home, elite women continued to exert political influence in court circles well into the nineteenth century.”<sup>3</sup> Ellet fully recognized the power that elite women held in politics, even more so than Griswold, but it was Anne Wharton who highlighted the complexity of that power.

*Through Colonial Doorways* was written in 1893 by Anne Wharton. Her work underlined how the delicate combination of a republican government and an aristocratic style found in the Republican Court by early American women created an atmosphere of “stately courtesy and dignity, combined with a certain simplicity” that Wharton felt had never been recaptured since. Wharton engaged in an early feminist history that did not situate women outside of male-controlled power structures, but instead highlighted how women operated within them. Her understanding, alongside the works of Griswold and Ellet, initiated the study of the Republican Court for future historians, though the subject took a hiatus for almost a century until it was reignited in the 20th century.

The first work to kick off the most recent wave of interest in the Republican Court, “The Republican Court and the Historiography of a Women’s Domain in the Public Sphere,” a paper presented in 1994 by David S. Shields and

<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Fries Ellet, *The Court Circles of the Republic: Or, the Beauties and Celebrities of the Nation, Illustrating Life and Society Under Eighteen Presidents, Describing the Social Features of the Successive Administrations from Washington to Grant* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Publishing Company, 1872), 41.

<sup>3</sup>Shields and Teute, “The Republican Court and the Historiography of a Women’s Domain in the Public Sphere,” 180.

Fredrika J. Teute, clearly defines the Republican Court. It was the gatherings of men and women which were attended by and accessible to, “persons connected with the government and their families, to distinguished strangers, and indeed to all men and women whose social position entitled them to a recognition in polite and cultivated society.”<sup>4</sup> The function of this Court was to “institute a practice of polite conversation flexible enough to enable social civility around the new national government.”<sup>5</sup> Shields and Teute make it clear that the Republican Court was celebrated by the nineteenth-century historians but was very controversial from the time it debuted. This Republican Court was attempting to establish an authority of government in a society where the government was unstable and it was necessary to the smooth functioning of the government. To create that authority the Washington Administration looked to the power structures that they were familiar with, which were those of the European aristocracy.

Major authors that followed Shields and Teute were Catherine Allgor, Susan Branson, and Rosemarie Zagari. Allgor focused on the impact of elite women in the politics of the early republic in *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* and, more specifically, the life of Dolley Madison as First Lady and her role in the creation of the Republican Court in the politics of Washington City in her work *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*. Susan Branson examines the influence of France on the women of the early republic, specifically in Philadelphia, and the development and evolution of the French Salon in America in her work *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National*

<sup>4</sup>Rufus Wilmot Griswold, *The Republican Court of American Society in the Days of Washington* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1854), 165.

<sup>5</sup>Shields and Teute, “The Republican Court and the Historiography of a Women’s Domain in the Public Sphere,” 172.

*Philadelphia*. The partisan “backlash”, mostly from Democratic-Republicans, against the influence of female politicians on the government is examined by Rosemarie Zagarri in her work *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*.

“At the Hem of Government” brings together these three authors’ works, especially Allgor’s work on the Republican Court and the influential political role that women played, with Branson’s stress on the French accent these practices had, and Zagarri’s emphasis on the partisan reaction against female politicians. This work examines the development of the early American public space called the Republican Court through the course of four administrations, three cities, and three First Ladies. The Republican Court was part of the search for identity that Americans began when they became independent from England and this paper will argue that Dolley Madison, the third First Lady of the United States, used her experiences of politicking and her charming personality to create a Republican Court that was, more than any before it, an essential and settled part of American political culture. To understand the Republican Court, European influences (mostly French) are examined as well as the origins of the salon that the Republican Court is based on.

## **2. Origins: Martha Washington, Abigail Adams and Dolley Madison**

The search for an American culture began as soon as the country declared its independence and the women of the Republican Court played a key part in developing how leading Americans were going to act beyond the halls of Congress. But what exactly was the Republican Court? At first, it was Mrs. Washington’s Friday night salons, which lasted from eight to ten in the evening as well as George Washington’s formal Tuesday afternoon levees and Thursday night dinners.<sup>6</sup> These events

<sup>6</sup>Jeanne E. Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic: Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and the Cre-*

were established to connect the President to other politicians and to his constituents, as well as connect politicians to each other and create a hospitable environment for brokering deals and passing laws. Government leaders needed informal venues to gather support for their projects, gather information from all over the country, gather support from state representatives, and to create a unified sense of government for the public.<sup>7</sup> Social events were a place for the high tensions of early American politics to relax under the guidance of women. While these events served male politicians, they were also a place for women to combine the public sphere with the private and influence politics in a time when they were forbidden from voting and holding office.<sup>8</sup> These events were primarily attended by elite Americans and so they gained much criticism from Democratic-Republican politicians who felt that this was a step on the path to a corrupt and tyrannical government. The Republican Court never existed without constant criticism of its function and of the women’s involvement in politics. The origins of the Republican Court in France’s old regime added to Republicans claims of Federalists’ monarchical tendencies and corruption.

The early American salon, the center stage of the Republican Court, was based on the European Enlightenment salon. Historian Susan Branson writes that it can be traced back to French influences as “the American salon was a product of American culture, but not exclusively so,” as it “owed some of its features to French influence as well.”<sup>9</sup> The French did not discuss poli-

*ation of an Iconic American Role* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 70.

<sup>7</sup>David S. Shields and Fredrika J. Teute, “The Court of Abigail Adams,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 35, no. 2 (2015): 231.

<sup>8</sup>Jeanne E. Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic: Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and the Creation of an Iconic American Role*, 18.

<sup>9</sup>Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 126.

tics during their salons but instead gathered both men and women in a sociable way to have intellectual conversations. Women were especially important to these types of gatherings, as they held the position of “salonnière”, which was a “civilizing force” in a female-centered, mixed-gender setting.<sup>10</sup> Women wielded domestic and harmonizing powers to keep conversations going while multiple points of view were expressed at the same time. Women “were essential, not peripheral, to this enterprise.”<sup>11</sup> This social setting established a place within the private sphere that women were in charge of, so when the concept of the salon crossed the Atlantic, it “assumed a character unique to the time and place.”<sup>12</sup> The one aspect that set salons in the early republic apart from their European and colonial British counterparts was the intentional inclusion of political discussion that salonnières often avoided. Because of this unique difference, women not only had access to political discussions in the early republic but were situated at the forefront of the discussion as they controlled the venue and conversation.

The establishment of the federal government and of the Republican Court created a new place for women to be active in public, social, and political life. The salon, with its French origins, was a place where “gender, politics, and society intersected” and allowed women access “to public political space through the vehicle of social occasions for the nation’s political elite.”<sup>13</sup> The American salon was a political institution in a way that the French salons were not. The French Enlightenment salon was instead a place for men and women to gather and discuss culture or pursue intellectual topics. This Enlightenment era event brought women to the forefront, as they were a civilizing force in intellectual discussions. The idea that women were not only present, but essential to these gatherings, was based on the philo-

sophical idea of “complementarity,” which understood that “autonomous, rational beings (gendered male) were not sufficient to the attainment of the ends they sought by nature, whether philosophical, social, or political.”<sup>14</sup> Women were needed to temper the emotions and thoughts of men and to help guide them with a gentle hand to the enlightened and intellectual discussion that they were pursuing. And so, French women dominated the position of salonnière and that allowed them to not only participate but control conversations of culture and education.<sup>15</sup> By the last decade of the eighteenth century, the French salons faded during the political upheaval and violence of the French Revolution.

In the United States, the salons of the Republican Court were the same in that women were the main hosts, led intellectual conversations, and acted as a civilizing force against hot male tempers. However, the American salons were much more politically oriented than French salons. What made the American salons so politically focused versus the French salons was the social season that they followed. The social season was dictated by the months when Congress was in session rather than any climate or weather-related calendar. The practice of the social season being decided by Congress began in New York City and later followed in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. The very nature of the American salon was politically based on its members, the members of Congress and their wives and families and based on the season that it occurred.

### 3. Martha Washington: A Reluctant Salonnière

The Republican Court began with Martha Washington, though her Friday evening event was scheduled before Martha had ever set foot in New

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 126.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 126.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 127.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 125.

<sup>14</sup>Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Cornell University Press, 1994), 4-9; quoted in Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 126.

<sup>15</sup>Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 127-128.

York City, then capital of the United States government.<sup>16</sup> Martha had supported her husband George throughout the Revolutionary War, visiting him as often as she could and arriving infallibly every winter to spend time with him before the fighting began anew in the spring, though the constant years of war and travel did wear her down so that by the time the war with England had ended, she was ready to settle down at Mount Vernon.<sup>17</sup> Martha was unhappy about reentering public life from the General's wife to the President's wife and her unhappiness comes through her letters. Martha was unprepared for the attention she would have to give and how little time she would have to herself. In a letter to her niece, Martha complained that "I have been so much engaged since I came here. . . I have not had one half hour to myself since the day of my arrival."<sup>18</sup> Martha's entire relaxed style of living in Virginia was turned upside down in New York City, as "her hair had to be set and dressed every day by a visiting hairdresser, and she attended much more to her clothes."<sup>19</sup> Martha was quite suddenly the hostess of the nation and had to help contribute to the making of an American identity through her social events, a role that she had neither signed up for nor was thrilled about.

Martha's enthusiasm about her new life was low. The First Lady felt trapped in her new role, quite literally, as she wrote to her niece again in October, writing, "I live a very dull life hear and know nothing that passes in the town — I never goe to the publick place. . . and as I can not doe as I like I am obstinate and stay at home a great deal."<sup>20</sup> Her most poignant statement from this let-

ter comes when she expresses, "I think I am more like a state prisoner than anything else" because "there [are] certain bounds set for me which I must not depart from."<sup>21</sup> However, Martha Washington was not someone to fall into despair easily, and though her daily activities and social events were limited from what she was used to in Virginia, she found ways to make peace with her situation. By December of 1789 in a letter to Mercy Otis Warren, Martha expressed how she wished she and George had "been left to grow old in solitude and tranquility together", but ultimately conceded, "I will not, however, contemplate with too much regret disappointments that were enevitable. . . I cannot blame him for having acted according to his ideas of duty in obeying the voice of his country."<sup>22</sup> Though Martha's life had been turned upside down ever since the colonies went to war with England, she knew that her husband had made an honorable decision in the service of his country. Her letter to Warren shows how Martha approached her life and her Republican Court. She wrote, "I am still determined to be cheerful and to be happy in whatever situation I may be, for I have also learnt from experianence that the greater part of our happiness or misary depends on our dispositions, and not upon our circumstances."<sup>23</sup> Martha's court had been announced even before she had arrived, it was something she did not organize herself, but she found a way to adapt into the role quickly as she had years of experience as a hostess and had the right attitude to take on the task.

She began on the day after she arrived in New York City, hosting "the first of one of the many formal dinner parties. . . where primarily members of Congress were hosted on a rotating basis to ensure that men from all factions and states had

<sup>16</sup>Patricia Brady, *Martha Washington: An American Life* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 165.

<sup>17</sup>Brady, 158.

<sup>18</sup>Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, June 8, 1789, in "*Worthy Partner*": *The Papers of Martha Washington*, ed. by Joseph E. Fields, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 215.

<sup>19</sup>Brady, Martha Washington, 164.

<sup>20</sup>Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, October 23, 1789, in "*Worthy Partner*", ed. by Fields, 220.

<sup>21</sup>Martha Washington to Fanny Basset Washington, October 23, 1789, in "*Worthy Partner*", ed. by Fields, 220.

<sup>22</sup>Martha Washington to Mercy Otis Warren, December 26, 1789, in "*Worthy Partner*", ed. by Fields, 223.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.



an opportunity to interact with the president.”<sup>24</sup> These events were different than the ones she had hosted in the past, as they were mostly for political invitees instead of friends and families. That week marked the first gathering of the Republican Court on Friday. This also marked the beginning of an interconnected female network that ran through Martha, Abigail Adams, and other various wives of politicians. Alongside the events hosted by Martha were “separate dinners and drawing rooms...hosted by Abigail Adams, and lesser functions...given by the wives of Congress or those who held other political posts.”<sup>25</sup> This was the start of a new system that functioned alongside the official federal government. Martha Washington had accepted her role as cheerfully as possible and was now the leader of a group “of female elite social leaders who fostered the behind-the-scenes interactions that helped define the character of the new style of federal government and that enhanced more effective communication, which was so crucial in those early days.”<sup>26</sup> But this system was entirely new, just like the federal government it accompanied, which had copied some of the aristocratic traditions from Europe to strengthen the authority of the federal government and the President while also trying to promote the republicanism that had been fought for during the Revolution, and Martha Washington’s Republican Court followed suit.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to salons, the Republican Court consisted of the weekly afternoon levees and evening dinners hosted by the Washingtons in New York City. Thursday dinners were for members of Washingtons administration, foreign dignitaries, and congressmen and senators who were all carefully invited based on their region and political disposition as to avoid signs of favoritism for any group. The dinner was by invitation only, but Tuesday levees were for any white, male, and

respectable person to call on the President to discuss their issues.<sup>28</sup> This event was an affair of stiff formalities and protocol which lasted from three to four in the afternoon. George Washington waited inside his house for visitors, with “his hair in full dress... yellow gloves on his hands; holding a cocked hat with a cockade in it, and the edges adorned with a black feather about an inch deep.”<sup>29</sup> The fine dress that Washington wore signified his position as a leader, as well-made and fashionable clothing symbolized authority. This was another holdover from the days of aristocracy and it was a way for Washington to demonstrate that he was an authority in his new federal government in the best way he knew how. Tuesday ceremonies continued as the visiting men entered the room and stood in a circle until the doors were closed fifteen minutes past the hour. At this time, Washington would greet each visitor and have a brief conversation with them until he had spoken with everyone and returned to his original spot. After Washington was finished, each man bowed to him and filed out of the room.<sup>30</sup>

This formal ritual was part of the effort to create the image of a reliable government with regular functions and a sense of authority for the public to trust in. Establishing public times for the men, even if those men were strictly higher-class citizens, to interact with the president and have a chance for their voices to be heard in this new republican experiment was an important point for creating trust. Washington needed to gather support for the union he had helped to create and find a way to make congressmen and senators come together despite their regional and political differences. To create that sense of authority that was so important to the fledgling federal government, he needed help. He needed women.

<sup>28</sup>Brady, *Martha Washington*, 165.

<sup>29</sup>William Sullivan, *Familiar Letters on Public Characters, and Public Events: From the Peace of 1783, to the Peace of 1815* (Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Metcalfe, 1834), 89.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>24</sup>Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 69.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 70–71.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 71.



Martha's Court copied many traits from the courts of Europe, with fine dress and sometimes introductions required for entry. In fact, "at first, Tuesdays and Fridays from nine to three o'clock had been open to appropriately dressed male individuals without formal appointments."<sup>31</sup> At the Friday night levee, Martha greeted incoming visitors on a "raised seat," which struck many Democratic-Republicans as dangerously close to a monarchical convention, while the guests either curtseyed or bowed to Martha and briefly greeted with the president.<sup>32,33</sup> Martha did try to distance her events and herself from anything too aristocratic, by serving simple and republican refreshments like "Ice creams & Lemonade" as well as dressing in "simple white muslin gowns at the events she hosted" as to appear as republican a figure as possible.<sup>34</sup> Martha's court did fall into some aristocratic tendencies of rank and dress. In a letter to Mary Smith Cranch, Abigail Adams describes a very crowded Friday night at "mrs W— s publick day", remarking on the crowd's appearance in "diamonds & great hoops", though the matter of rank is what mattered at this particular levee.<sup>35</sup> Abigail noted that she, as the wife of the Vice President, expects her "station... always at the right hand of Mrs W." but some other ladies in attendance, "through want of knowing what is right" sometimes take her seat, "but on such an occasion the President never fails of Seeing that it is relinquished for me."<sup>36</sup> This unofficial mistake was made enough that President Washington "removed Ladies Several times," but by the time the letter was written, "they have now learnt to rise &

give it me."<sup>37</sup> Abigail knew that this matter of rank was an aristocratic matter and so she asked Mary Smith Cranch, in a facetious tone, to keep "this between our selves, as all distinction you know is unpopular."<sup>38</sup> As a Federalist, like her husband, Abigail mocked the exaggerated reactions against the Washingtons' levees and dinners.

Americans judged each other and their entertainment by European standards and the Federalists understood this. Abigail Adams believed that she deserved her place next to Martha Washington because of her rank as the Vice President's wife but knew that if her place were officially situated that Democratic-Republicans would react. Despite the claims that aristocratic functions destroyed societies, "appropriating elements of European gentility provided a means by which elite families could demonstrate their elevated social status."<sup>39</sup> European styles of conveying power were all that the Washingtons knew, as they were both members of Virginia's elite class and so they both struggled with the complaints from republican newspapers. Martha kept her opinions on the matter mostly to conversation and letters to those close to her, but George anguished over the public attacks more.<sup>40</sup> In a conversation with Thomas Jefferson, Washington "expressed the extreme wretchedness of his existence while in office, and went lengthily into the late attacks on him for levees" while explaining "how he had been led into them by the persons he consulted at New York, and that if he could but know what the sense of the public was, he would most cheerfully conform to it."<sup>41</sup> The Washingtons were at

<sup>31</sup>Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 72.

<sup>32</sup>Brady, *Martha Washington*, 167.

<sup>33</sup>Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 79.

<sup>34</sup>Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, 9 August 1789 in *Founders Online*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-08-02-0214>.

<sup>35</sup>Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, 5 January 1790, in *Founders Online*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-09-02-0001>.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Samantha Sing Key, "Aristocratic Pretension in Republican Ballrooms: Dance, Etiquette, and Identity in Washington City, 1804," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 16, no. 3 (2018): 466.

<sup>40</sup>Shields and Teute, "The Court of Abigail Adams," 233.

<sup>41</sup>Thomas Jefferson's Notes on a Conversation with Washington, 7 February 1793, *Founders Online*, National Archives. <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-12-02-0071>.

a loss regarding what they should do and so they simply continued their events while trying to keep away from as many aristocratic pretensions as they could. One of the biggest defendants of the Martha Washington's Republican Court was Abigail Adams, whose letters often described the Friday night levees and praised both Washingtons on their style of governing.

Martha Washington did her duty to the Republican Court. She and her husband followed through with what they believed to be best for their country, but Martha was not interested in the politics of the new federal government and did not utilize the space the Republican Court created to exercise any sort of power through power brokering with political appointments or writing campaigns like her two successors did. Martha established the Court, but she was not interested in its functions beyond helping her husband because, above all, Martha valued her private life and valued her husband's happiness and health.

#### 4. Abigail Adams: A Politician in Writing

Abigail Adams was a strong defender of the Washingtons' Friday night levees and criticized the popular Democratic-Republican hatred of aristocratic practices. She wrote to her sister, saying "faction and Antifederalism may turn every Innocent action to evil."<sup>42</sup> Abigail believed that the reactions to the levees by politicians like Thomas Jefferson were overblown and she believed in the good character of George and Martha Washington. She described George in a letter to her sister as "a singular example of modesty and diffidence. he had a dignity which forbids Familiarity mixed with an easy affability which creates Love and Reverence" and compared Martha to the monarchs of Europe, writing,

"Mrs Washington is one of those unassuming Characters which Creat Love &

<sup>42</sup>Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, 27 July 1790, in *Founders Online*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-09-02-0044>.

Esteem, a most becoming pleasantness sits upon her countenance, & an unaffected deportment which renders her the object of veneration and Respect, with all these feelings and Sensations I found myself much more deeply impressed than I ever did before their Majesties of Britain."<sup>43</sup>

Abigail Adams respected both Washingtons immensely and valued her place next to them, as displayed in her letter about her right-hand seat. The month after Abigail took up her place at the head of the Republican Court, she wrote to Martha to ask for advice, writing that Martha had left the position on the good side of the public and had "universal satisfaction Love esteem and Respect... from all Ranks of persons" and that her calm reactions to criticism, which Abigail describes as "the Tongue of Slander the pen of Calumny... nor the bitterness of envy have never once to my knowledge assailed any part of your conduct" were admirable enough that Abigail wanted to be "so exemplary a Character" as well.<sup>44</sup> Her fears came through in this call for help, as Abigail wrote that the Martha's legacy "cannot fail to excite an Emulation in the Bosom of your Successor, must at the Same time fill her mind with an anxious Solitude least she should fall far short of her most amiable predecessor."<sup>45</sup> Abigail asked for Martha to "communicate to Me those Rules which you prescribed & practised upon as it respected receiving & returning visits, both to strangers and citizens as it respected invitations of a publick or private nature."<sup>46</sup> Abigail looked to her predecessor for guidance, and Abigail's admiration for Martha influenced her

<sup>43</sup>Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, 12 July 1789, in *Founders Online*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-08-02-0210>.

<sup>44</sup>Abigail Adams to Martha Washington, 9 February 1797, in *Founders Online*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-11-02-0289>.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

style of running levees, but her own personality and life experiences also influenced what would change for the next four years.

The capital had moved to Philadelphia during the Washington administration and so when Abigail took her place as First Lady on May 6, 1796, she arrived at the house previously occupied by the Washingtons. Born in Massachusetts, her New Englander upbringing influenced her tastes to be more republican and so the Republican Court reflected her tastes. Abigail was much more interested in politics than Martha, a fact known to friends and family, as Mercy Otis Warren once wrote in letter from 1776, "I write in a very Great Hurry or I should touch a Little on politicks, knowing you Love a Little seasoning of that Nature in Every production."<sup>47</sup> Both women were married to men who were, officially or not, Federalist and so the first two First Ladies shared a similar political leaning and they had similar feelings towards their family as "both tended to be most comfortable among family and were somewhat reluctant participants in the necessary sociopolitical whirl of the early republic."<sup>48</sup> They both also dressed similarly in a conservative fashion, though Abigail Adams had gained an appreciation of beautiful clothing and jewelry.<sup>49</sup> Martha Washington had spent her entire life in the colonies but Abigail had traveled and experienced the European aristocracy in person. She was not a fan of courtly functions, as the formality and ceremony were exhausting and the cold attitude of royalty gave Abigail an appreciation for American republican simplicity and a dislike for courts and pretensions.<sup>50</sup> The major difference between the ladies was the amount of time they dedicated to politics and their pens.

Abigail Adams used her connections of

<sup>47</sup>Mercy Otis Warren to Abigail Adams, 7 February 1776, in *Founders Online*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0226>.

<sup>48</sup>Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 76

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>50</sup>Shields and Teute, "The Court of Abigail Adams," 228.

friends and families to contribute to and counteract the Democratic-Republican and Federalist newspaper battles. In a letter, Abigail complained of a one-sided newspaper printing, writing, "I see by the Chronical that you, only have one side of the Question."<sup>51</sup> She then enclosed with the letter a print that explained her husband's side of the current foreign affair, writing simply, "make the Chronical insert it."<sup>52</sup> As the divided press continued to rile both sides over foreign affairs, Abigail took it upon herself to set records straight and made use of her connections for political purposes.<sup>53</sup> She also used these connections as a political sounding board to gain a sense of what the general public would think about an issue, as she once sent a copy of John Adams's speech for Congress to her sister for her to share so that Abigail and John could "learn the comments upon it, with a veiw to discover the Temper and sentiments of the publick mind."<sup>54</sup> This shows twofold the admirable aspects of how Abigail Adams acted as First Lady. First, she utilized her family connections to help her husband's political career and, secondly, she took it upon herself to act upon John Adams's behalf and was earnestly invested in his policies and actions as president. While Martha Washington cared deeply for her husband and his wellbeing, she was never as intimately involved in the inner workings of his political life. Her Republican Court was about making connections between people to create a smoothly functioning system for the new federal government to operate with. Abigail, without changing much, found a way to manage opinions using "her own considerable critical faculties, canny political instincts,

<sup>51</sup>Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, 3 June 1797, in *Founders Online*, (University of Virginia Press), <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-12-02-0088>.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup>Shields and Teute, "The Court of Abigail Adams," 234.

<sup>54</sup>Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, 16 May 1797, in *Founders Online*, (University of Virginia Press), <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-12-02-0075>.

and writing ability.”<sup>55</sup> She expanded the role of the First Lady from only making connections to helping her husband improve his political career through writing.

The influence on politics that Abigail wielded was useful to her husband, but her efforts did not incite a support for women’s rights in the early Republic. In a letter to James Sullivan about the ever expanding eligibility of voting rights in 1776, John Adams expressed his growing apprehension towards voting rights, writing that “it is dangerous to open So fruitfull a Source of Controversy and Altercation, as would be opened by attempting to alter the Qualifications of Voters. There will be no End to it. . . Women will demand a Vote.”<sup>56</sup> Adams does not simply want to exclude women because they may disagree with his politics, but because he, like many others, felt that women were unfit to be involved in politics. The letter also includes Adams’s reasoning for the exclusion of women from politics, asking “but why exclude Women? You will Say, because their Delicacy renders them unfit for Practice and Experience, in the great Business of Life, and the hardy Enterprizes of War, as well as the arduous Cares of State.” He goes on, writing, “besides, their attention is So much engaged with the necessary Nurture of their Children, that Nature had made them fittest for domestic Cares.”<sup>57</sup> John Adams believed that only elite men should be able to vote, an opinion that he did not flaunt in front of his wife. In a 1799 letter to his son, John Adams wrote about his opinion on women’s place in the family and in society, writing “there can never be any regular Government of a Nation, without a marked Subordination of Mothers and Children to the Father.”<sup>58</sup> This opinion, however, he asked be kept a secret

<sup>55</sup> Shields and Teute, “The Court of Abigail Adams,” 235.

<sup>56</sup> John Adams to James Sullivan, 26 May 1776, in *Founders Online*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-04-02-0091>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> John Adams to Thomas Boylston Adams, 17 October 1799, in *Founders Online*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-0482>.

from the rest of the family, including his wife as he feared her reaction, saying “this Opinion is a Secret between you and me. – if you divulge it to any one, it will soon be known to all, and will infallibly raise a Rebellion against me.”<sup>59</sup> John Adams failed to see the irony in trying to prevent a rebellion against laws that others felt were unjust, but his opinion was common in the early republic and remained unchallenged for decades.

Abigail Adams continued the role that Martha Washington began and expanded upon its functions to help her husbands’ political career, though her efforts did not coincide with approval for female influence in politics from her husband. The next First Lady, after a hiatus of two terms with Thomas Jefferson, would push the role past the standards set by Martha and Abigail into a completely different era for the Republican Court. Dolley Madison, wife of James Madison, took on the role of First Lady on March 4, 1809. The style of dress, manners, and events that Dolley would bring to the role made “Martha and Abigail appear as plain sparrows alongside a peacock.”<sup>60</sup> However, there was one administration in between Adams and Madison, which lacked a First Lady and took a radically different approach to the sociability of politics in the new capital of Washington City.

## 5. Interruption: The Jefferson Administration

When Thomas Jefferson came into office on March 4th, 1801, his first act of business was to dismantle the Republican Court. In a letter to Nathaniel Macon, Jefferson declared what would be the order of business now that he had control. He announced: “levees are done away.”<sup>61</sup> Its destruction was first on his list, above the army undergoing reforms or revisions in “Agen-

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 78.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Nathaniel Macon, 14 May 1801, in *Founders Online*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-34-02-0083>.

cies in every department.”<sup>62</sup> One of Thomas Jefferson’s worst fears was that the new nation he had helped create would fall into the corruption and decadence of European monarchies. The Federalist administrations of his two predecessors had frightened Jefferson, yet the state had “stood the waves into which she was steered with view to sink her.”<sup>63</sup> Now the state of ship would be put on “her republican tack” with Jefferson.<sup>64</sup> What offended Jefferson about salons was not their French precedent, but their monarchical one.

While women represented a calming and civilizing force in the role of the *salonnière*, they also represented everything that Jefferson wanted to avoid in his new republican government. George Washington had once condemned “Luxury, effeminacy, & corruption” in a republican nation, and Jefferson intended to make good on that promise.<sup>65</sup> In the late eighteenth century, effeminacy was “associated with luxury and self-indulgence” as well as “timidity, dependence, and foppishness.”<sup>66</sup> All virtues in a republican government were associated with men while all vices and weaknesses were associated with women.<sup>67</sup> This led to Jefferson’s banishment of austere etiquette associated with the Republican Court, as it contained every unrepugnant signifier, including women and its Old World roots, though his replacement for this developing system was lackluster.

When the United States was formed, debates about whether to retain aristocratic traditions was an undercurrent in every social gathering. Before

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Thomas Jefferson to John Dickinson, 6 March 1801, in *Founders Online*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-33-02-0156>.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>George Washington to James Warren, 7 October 1785, in *Founders Online*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-03-02-0266>.

<sup>66</sup>Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 31.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 31.

the revolution, the rules of etiquette were clearly stated and straight forward, with every social event conforming to the standards set by European models. After the revolution, aristocratic ranks no longer held sway and so elite Americans looked for new modes of defining the aristocracy. A series of events during the Jefferson administration highlight the issue of etiquette in the United States.

Anthony Merry, Britain’s representative to the United States, along with his wife Elizabeth Leathes Merry arrived in Washington City in 1803. Merry went to meet President Jefferson after his arrival and was alarmed to see the state of undress the president was in. Merry, who had followed diplomatic code and dressed accordingly in his finest clothing, later recalled that the president was half-dressed and, “indicated utter slovenliness and indifference to appearances that were in a state of negligence, actually studied.”<sup>68</sup> This display was not the end for Jefferson, who during the meeting, “proceeded to toss a down at the heel slipper into the air and catch it on the point of his foot.”<sup>69</sup> Jefferson’s staunch egalitarian republican ideals inclined him to purposefully subvert Merry’s expectations of etiquette in a show of hostility even though Merry was following a code of respect.

Following this first meeting were a series of offensive events. Anthony Merry was told by Secretary of State, James Madison, “that the rules of diplomatic etiquette previously followed were not precedents that bound the present administration.”<sup>70</sup> Following this strange first meeting was a dinner. In attendance at the dinner that, traditionally, would have been held in honor of the Merry’s, was the French *chargé d’affaires*, Louis André Pichon. England and France were then at war and etiquette dictated that neither party should attend the same event. The inclusion of the French diplomat was not an accidental faux pas by Jefferson, as he invited Pichon to the din-

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 31–32.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 32.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 33.

ner specifically and even encouraged him to cut short his business in Baltimore to attend this dinner. Next, Jefferson chose to lead Dolley Madison into the dinner and sit next to her instead of Elizabeth Merry. Dolley Madison, thinking this was a mistake, quietly whispered to Jefferson, “take Mrs. Merry.”<sup>71</sup> James Madison then led Elizabeth Merry into dinner himself, leaving Anthony Merry to search for his own seat. Jefferson and Madison later defended their actions and created a new set of etiquette rules, which they named “pele mele”. Jefferson, in an effort to put republican equality above what he deemed monarchical etiquette, had in fact tactfully used the rules of etiquette to insult Merry and Great Britain in his dining room rather than the halls of government.

Anthony Merry later declared the United States to be openly hostile to Great Britain. Merry wrote, complaining that the “pele mele” style of etiquette was “evidently from design and not from Ignorance and Awkwardness (though God knows a Great deal of both matters even of Common Etiquette is to be seen at every Step.”<sup>72</sup> Merry ended his letter with the conclusion that “foreign ministers in the United States were placed in a situation so degrading to the countries they represented and so personally disagreeable to themselves as to be almost intolerable.”<sup>73</sup> Thus began a social boycott, which included the Spanish minister, and which temporarily ruined sociability in Washington City, which had allowed for easier relations between politicians and therefore a smoother running of government.

The dispute between the Merrys and Jefferson had no sound resolution. Anthony Merry served out his time as British minister quietly and the pele mele style died out as quickly as it was introduced. The Merry Affair served a purpose of showing the importance of cordial relations between nations that relied on good etiquette and manners which were often led by women. Be-

cause Jefferson decided to flout what Anthony Merry believed were the traditional and correct ways to go about foreign affairs, their relationship was irreparably damaged. The situation with the Merrys never improved and Jefferson kept up his haughty republican ideals to the point that, when the United States was celebrating the acquisition of territory through the Louisiana Purchase, Elizabeth Merry was denied access to the party because she was wearing diamonds and they were deemed “undemocratic.”<sup>74</sup>

The issue of etiquette in the early republic was pervasive as Louisa Catherine Adams wrote in a letter to her mother-in-law, Abigail Adams, the “question [of etiquette] is not yet decided and I cannot conceive how it will end” and that “something must be done or society will become perfectly insupportable.”<sup>75</sup> This letter, written about confusing etiquette in the ballroom, and its statement on the question of etiquette sum up the issues of early American social culture that impacted all Americans in all social events which are perfectly displayed by the events of the Merry Affair.

Jefferson’s administration was a low point for women in politics, as they were not allowed to participate in events at the President’s House. Jefferson’s opinions on the place of women in politics were not unique. The prevailing opinion of the era was that the best way for women to contribute to politics was through the role of the Republican Mother; a woman that might contribute politically to the nation by serving her family and raising them properly.<sup>76</sup> The Republican Mother “was to encourage in her sons civic interest and participation” and “educate her children and guide them in the paths of morality and virtue.”<sup>77</sup> She had to walk a thin line however, as “she was not to tell her male relatives for whom to vote.”<sup>78</sup> The Republican Mother differed from the “female politi-

<sup>74</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 240.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 283.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>72</sup> Lester, *Anthony Merry Redivivus*, 36.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

cian,” which was a term used for women in the early republic who were increasingly involved in politics. These women were different because instead of expressing their opinions by influencing the men around them, they “voiced their own political opinions, made their own political choices, and expressed their own political preferences.”<sup>79</sup> They were independently stating their political views and this gained a fair amount of both derision and praise from men and other women. This place for women in society did generate some debate, primarily between political adversaries in newspapers. Federalist newspapers printed anti-feminist literature more often than Democratic-Republicans, though neither party took a definitive stance on the issue.<sup>80</sup> The *Register* of Salem, Massachusetts noted that,

“It is said by one of the federalist papers that ‘Women have no business to speak about politicks and that a woman meddling in politicks is like a monkey in a China ware shop, where he can’t do any good but may do a great deal of mischief.’ On our part we are of a contrary opinion, we can see no reason why, with the same evidence before them, they cannot judge on politicks or any other subject equally with men – On many subjects they certainly are better judges.”<sup>81</sup>

The debate was politicized, as Democratic-Republican newspapers wrote in support for women but did not act on their behalf. The Founding Fathers’ opinions, regardless of party, were mostly unanimous on the issue. Jefferson wrote to Angelica Schuyler Church on May 24th of 1797

<sup>79</sup>Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 75.

<sup>80</sup>Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 279.

<sup>81</sup>Harriet Silvester Tapley, *Salem Imprints, 1768-1825: A History of the First Fifty Years of Printing in Salem, Massachusetts, with Some Account of the Bookshops, Booksellers, Bookbinders and the Private Libraries* (Salem, Mass.: The Essex Institute, 1927).

and stated that it is the privilege of women to not be involved in politics, writing that, “you will preserve, from temper and inclination, the happy privilege of the ladies, to leave to the rougher sex, and to the newspapers, their party squabbles and reproaches.”<sup>82</sup> Jefferson did not only think that he was preventing women from interfering in his administration, but that he was doing the right thing by keeping women away from the politics that he himself disliked, as he later stated in the letter that “a thorough disgust at these had withdrawn me from public life under an absolute determination to avoid whatever could disturb the tranquility of my mind.”<sup>83</sup> Through a belief that women truly had no place in the realm of politics, Jefferson used the full extent of his power as president to keep women separate from the government. This policy ended when James Madison was elected president and his wife, Dolley Payne Todd Madison, took control of the Republican Court.

## 6. Dolley Madison: A Republican Queen

Dolley Madison truly was a peacock of a First Lady, a woman with an outgoing personality, a sparkingly modern fashion, and a keen sense of conversation that made her ideal for furthering political aspirations. Dolley Madison was extremely likable. She charmed political allies and rivals alike as well as foreign ambassadors. As the Washingtons originally emulated the aristocratic qualities of society to demonstrate their authority, Dolley demonstrated personal qualities associated with high class. She was “vivacious, quick, and lively,” all qualities that “members of the upper class cultivated” to distinguish themselves from

<sup>82</sup>Thomas Jefferson to Angelica Schuyler Church, 24 May 1797, from *Founders Online*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-29-02-0310>.

<sup>83</sup>Thomas Jefferson to Angelica Schuyler Church, 24 May 1797, from *Founders Online*, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-29-02-0310>.



the lower classes.<sup>84</sup> Her aristocratic personality gave her the respect of higher class individuals, but she did not run into as much criticism about being unrepblican because no matter “how great a person greeted her or how comparatively unimportant a guest, her perfect dignity and her gently gracious interest were the same to all.”<sup>85</sup> Dolley knew how to put people at ease in conversation with her innate people skills. People saw and felt her sincerity and that drew them into conversation with her until she had fully charmed them. This was the skill of a politician, as was Dolley’s ability to never forget a name and face, a skill that she used often and in public to display her good nature.<sup>86</sup>— Her work in the Republican Court brought harmony when there was discord, which had been a driving function of the Court ever since its inception with Martha Washington and especially after Jefferson’s time in which he instituted “pele mele” etiquette and dismantled the Republican Court. Dolley Madison brought the Republican Court that Martha Washington had started back and gave it a new life with a new style. Dolley was an impartial patriot, and despite the fact that her husband was a founder of the Democratic-Republican Party, she was able to create “an atmosphere of openness toward those who held divergent political views” which made it easier for politicians with differing opinions to join in conversation together.<sup>87</sup> In her actions with her husband, Dolley knew when she had to soothe high tempers, as once James Madison and Francis Jackson, the British Minister, got into a heated argument until Dolley sent in refreshments including punch and cake. She once also calmed an angry Federalist who was arguing with her husband by inviting him to dinner, using her domestic duties to interrupt the men and remind them through her actions to remain civil.<sup>88</sup> Her extroverted per-

sonality was aided by her flashy fashion.

A large part of Dolley Madison’s attractive personality lay in her appearance which meant that clothing was an important part of her appeal. Just as George Washington used clothing to symbolize his authority during his tenure as president, Dolley Madison dressed to create a persona. She wore a turban, often with a large feather sticking out of the top alongside cutting edge dresses that were sometimes near scandalous. Dolley commanded attention with clothing and set herself apart from crowds of people. At one of her own drawing rooms, “she wore a satin dress with a train several yards long”, which was “rose-colored, and the train was white velvet, lined with lavender satin, edged with lace” alongside “a gold girdle, necklace, and bracelet, along with a white velvet turban, festooned with white ostrich-feather tops and a crown embroidered with gold thread.”<sup>89</sup> Dolley wore a different outfit at every one of her drawing rooms because each of her dresses were so unique they often could not be redone for multiple uses and the “Madison’s expended a great deal of money on Dolley’s wardrobe.”<sup>90</sup> She also typically wore pearls, which were sophisticated and elegant while not straying towards the aristocratic as diamonds were perceived to be. Dolley created a style that was queenly and aristocratic while not markedly displaying aristocratic fashions.<sup>91</sup> When not at her Republican Court, Dolley mostly dressed in plain, but fine, dresses. Her outfits were well put together but not extravagant in the daytime as she used them to visit or call upon the people of Washington City. Dolley used her clothing and appearance as part of her political authority, as she dressed in both expensive cloth as well as more modest fabrics such as muslin or fine linen, which allowed her to tap into the aristocratic tradition of power through symbolically fine clothing while also remaining a republican Amer-

<sup>84</sup>Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 243.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid, 246.

<sup>87</sup>Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 133.

<sup>88</sup>Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 246.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 235.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 235–36.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 240.

ican woman.<sup>92</sup>

Dolley Madison held a much different type of Republican Court than her predecessors. When first announcing her Wednesday night events, Dolley placed a general invite in the newspaper that required that guests be first introduced to Dolley and James, but a written introduction would be acceptable as well. Eventually this practice became forgotten and the weekly drawing rooms were open to any American that wanted to attend.<sup>93</sup> Unlike past courts, where most guests were seated throughout the event after formal greetings as they entered, Dolley's drawing room had most guests standing throughout the events with some chairs laid aside for weary visitors. Guests could mingle and chat without constraint throughout the night with no regulations on them which allowed for unpressured and unfettered political conversation. Private conversations could take place between small groups of people alongside larger open conversations for politicking to take place all over the space Dolley Madison had created. The drawing room was also packed, with Margaret Bayard Smith describing how the event had "sel-dom. . . less than two or three hundred, and generally more"<sup>94</sup> in attendance. The packed event was soon dubbed a "squeeze", after the fact that people had to squeeze in and around each other to enter the drawing room. The most vivid description of Dolley's Court comes from Washington Irving, as he described his entrance into the drawing room and opinions of the Madison's,

"I emerged from dirt and darkness into the blazing splendor of Mrs. Madison's drawing-room. Here I was most graciously received; found a crowded collection of great and little men, of ugly old women and beautiful young ones, and in ten minutes was hand and glove with half the people in the assemblage.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 238.

<sup>93</sup>Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 76.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 77.

Mrs. Madison is a fine, portly, buxom dame, who has a smile and a pleasant word for everybody. Her sisters, Mrs. Cutts and Mrs. Washington, are like the two merry wives of Windsor; but as to Jemmy Madison—ah! poor Jemmy!—he is but a withered little apple-John."<sup>95</sup>

Irving perfectly captured the striking difference between Dolley and James Madison, the former was tall and extroverted with something to say to everyone while the latter was quiet, short, and often blended into the crowd in his black clothing. This is another key reason why Dolley Madison was so important to James Madison and his political career, as Dolley drew the much needed attention to James in order for people to connect with him and his ideas. James Madison was a brilliant politician in his own right, but he did not have the people skills necessary to gain support like Dolley did. Dolley's skills at gathering support for her husband stemmed from her status as broker of power, mostly through position in the government that she could promise to political allies. James Madison's position as a Democratic-Republican also aided Dolley, as she was spared much of the heated partisan criticism that had plagued both of her Federalist predecessors. Though her own method of running the Republican Court aided her in avoiding criticism, her husband's place in the party that had so relentlessly criticized Martha and Abigail helped her as well.

On May 14, 1815, Abigail Adams wrote to Dolley Madison to ask her to persuade James Madison to give Abigail's grandson the position of "secretary of Legation, to the Mission of England."<sup>96</sup> She wrote, "unaccustomed to ask favours of this nature for Friends or connections

<sup>95</sup>Pierre Munroe Irving, *The Life and Letters of Washington Irving* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2001), 263.

<sup>96</sup>Abigail Adams to Dolley Madison, 14 May 1815, in *The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison*, ed. Holly C. Shulman and David B. Mattern (University of Virginia Press, n.d.), 200.

– I have the rather address you Madam, than the president...<sup>97</sup> The Adams' were staunch Federalists, while the Madison's were Democratic-Republicans, but still the female connection between Abigail and Dolley allowed Abigail to ask for assistance in securing a good position for her grandson. The female connections helped create cordial relationships with their husbands which allowed for easier policy making and smoother running of government. Abigail's request was not a unique one, as Dolley was often the broker between women asking for positions for their male family members and her husband's decision making. She could cross party lines with femininity in a way that her husband could not and in that way her charms were invaluable for gaining support. Dolley's political power and influence attracted frequent comment.

The Federalist candidate that ran against James Madison, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, complained that he "was beaten by Mr. and Mrs. Madison," though he may, "have had a better chance had I faced Mr. Madison alone."<sup>98</sup> This Federalist statesman knew that Dolley had contributed to his defeat and that she had been integral to the success of James Madison's campaign. Dolley's political influences were not invisible, but her personable manners and sincerity towards others made it difficult for others to dislike her enough to impact her husband's political career.

Dolley Madison took the Republican Court that had been established by Martha Washington, slightly expanded upon in its function by Abigail Adams, and temporarily retired by Thomas Jefferson, and created a whole new type of function that embraced every American. The lack of dress code, the open invitation to all Americans, and the open mingling that all made up the new Court were entirely new and unique. Dolley's extroverted and open personality brought a new era of politicking for the federal government. She created a Repub-

lican Court that no longer depended on the precedents set by European courts, like Martha and Abigail's had, but that was part of the new American identity that found the perfect balance between aristocratic markers of power with republican styles of manners and style.

## 7. Conclusion

From its inception, the Republican Court was part of the American struggle to create a stable system of government that citizens could trust and that upheld the republican values that had been fought for in the Revolutionary War. The role of women in male controlled political structures was not nonexistent, as the idea of public/private spheres had suggested, and despite efforts by men like Jefferson to keep women separate from politics, their presence proved to be invaluable to the smooth running of government. Martha Washington and Abigail Adams both ran the Republican Court and utilized the tenets of aristocracy to symbolize power but underutilized the institution they helmed by not becoming brokers of power or using female connections to rally support for their political causes to the extent of their successor Dolley Madison. It was not until 1809 that the Republican Court was its most successful because it was able to blend the aristocratic markers of power with republican ideals to create a space where politicking could happen without restraint under Dolley's guidance. Through three national capitals and three First Ladies, the nation had developed an established and functional political culture, partially created by, and supported by women.

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