

Margaret Bayard Smith 1778–1844

Mrs. Smith Comes to Washington

In 1801, Margaret Bayard Smith and her husband, Samuel Harrison Smith, were invited to dinner at the White House, which was then called the President's Palace, a lofty name for a leaky new building with little furniture. Her husband was a journalist, brought to town by President Thomas Jefferson to start a Republican newspaper. Margaret had grown up in a family of prominent Philadelphia Federalists who called Jefferson vulgar and coarse. But upon meeting him, Margaret found him to be “dignified . . . gentlemanly . . . refined.” They became lifelong friends.

Among the guests that night were Dolley and James Madison. Margaret liked them immediately. Before long, Margaret and Dolley were trading books, exchanging gifts and political news. Their friendship would last all their lives. Margaret Bayard Smith was never in the limelight as Dolley was, but she was part of Washington's inner circle. The letters and articles she wrote have given historians much of what is known about politics and the capital city in the nation's early years.

Public vs. Private

At the time of this dinner, important American attitudes had shifted, including ideas about women. In the colonial period, women were thought to be immoral,



Charles Bird King, *Margaret Bayard Smith*, ca. 1829. Oil on canvas. Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, Rhode Island, Gift of the artist.

emotional creatures who needed a man's guidance. After the Revolution, and the Enlightenment ideas that propelled it, women were seen as morally strong, and rational. They were in a position to make

men more virtuous and patriotic, and to raise their children to be good citizens.

Virtue and good citizenship mattered because the survival of the country was

not guaranteed. People worried that as time went on, the values that had inspired the nation's founding would be forgotten. Women could prevent this. They were seen as the key to America's future and stability. Writers like Susanna Rowson and Judith Sargent Murray demanded education both as their right and to make them better and more useful to their husbands, children, and country. The influential Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, joined them in promoting girls' education. Young ladies' academies grew up in every state to provide girls from well-off families with the knowledge they would need as patriotic wives and mothers. Historians now call this idea republican womanhood and date it to the period between the Revolution and around 1820.

For many women, republican womanhood provided a new sense of purpose and a proud role. For Margaret Bayard Smith, that role may have seemed too small. A writer of letters, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, she wanted to write about politics the way men could, but it was considered improper. Women were not supposed to engage publicly in the critical issues that faced the government and the nation.

Margaret wrote for two decades before she published any of her work, and then she became one of the best-known women writers of her time. But she may have expected to publish one day, because she followed the rules, even in her early writing.

Margaret Bayard Smith 1778–1844 *continued*

She avoided dealing directly with politics, and focused on acceptably female topics.

Margaret let details about politicians' homes, parties, and personalities tell a political story. In 1809, just after Thomas Jefferson left office, she described him as a doting grandfather with no interest in regaining power. The new president, James Madison, was "plain, friendly, communicative, & unceremonious." Dolley was welcoming, informal, "unassuming." Margaret was speaking to the anxiety of a new nation. Americans were not yet sure that the Constitution would hold or that elected officials would surrender power when their terms ended. She was reassuring them.

If Margaret's public writing obeyed conventions, her private journals were more candid, especially about the roles women were expected to play. Here she confessed that she loved society, but not *Washington* society, which was "barren of enjoyment." The ritual of visits and calling cards left her exhausted "by the entrance of persons I cared nothing about." Margaret was a wealthy woman with servants—she and her beloved husband refused to own slaves. But she felt constrained by the "business of a family—every day alike, every day the house has to be put in order, the food prepared & the clothing made or mended." She wanted time to think and read and write. She wanted to "plunge into . . . the daring enterprises of life." A man's sphere was unlimited, she wrote. "But I am a woman.

And society says, 'Thus far and no further [shall] thou come'—Why then has nature given me a mind so active and enquiring?"

Profiling Dolley Madison

By 1834, Margaret was a well-known published writer. She was asked to profile Dolley Madison for the *National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*. Dolley offered to cooperate, but she was privately nervous. She did not want to seem egotistical—no woman of her time did. She also knew that her letters to her sisters showed her "unvarnished opinions," and she instructed her nieces not to give them to Mrs. Smith. Dolley wanted to be remembered as a good wife and helpmate to her husband, and especially as the rescuer of George Washington's portrait during the War of 1812. She gave Margaret the letter that proved it. (See **Resource 6.**) When the profile was published in 1836, Dolley was pleased. Margaret wrote to her sister, "all I say [about Dolley] is true—but I have not of course told the whole truth."

Margaret no doubt knew at least some of Dolley Madison's unvarnished opinions about Washington politics, but she also knew women needed to tread carefully, that their reputations mattered. This was true when Dolley was at the peak of her Washington influence, and even more true when the profile was published. By the 1830s, the "true woman" ideal was well-established, replacing the patriotic role of republican



T. Cartwright and George Beck, *George Town and Federal City*, 1801. Aquatint. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., 2002695146.

womanhood. Women were expected to focus on home, family, and religion while men remained in charge. (See **Resource 14.**) Dolley was James Madison's intelligent political partner, clever in the ways of Washington. She was not a "true woman." As Dolley's

biographer, Margaret Bayard Smith faced the dilemma of writing truthfully and admiringly about her subject without offending current sensibilities. She and Dolley both knew that whatever the reality was, some things were better left unsaid.

Discussion Questions

- ★ What limitations did Margaret Bayard Smith face as a female writer?
- ★ How did Margaret Bayard Smith feel about the limitations she faced? How did she work around them?
- ★ What role did Margaret Bayard Smith play in shaping Dolley Madison's legacy?
- ★ What were the cultural expectations for women like Margaret Bayard Smith?

Sources: Catherine Allgor, "Margaret Bayard Smith's 1809 Journey to Monticello and Montpelier: The Politics of Performance in the Early Republic," *Early American Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 2012), 30-68; Cassandra Good, "A Transcript of My Heart": The Unpublished Diaries of Margaret Bayard Smith," *Washington History*, Fall/Winter 2005, 67-82; Margaret Bayard Smith, "Mrs. Madison," *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*, Vol. III, 1836, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=yale.39002007779425;view=1up;seq=44> (accessed by M. Waters, 9-23-2016); Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, Gaillard Hunt, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015027775694;view=1up;seq=11> (accessed by M. Waters, 9-15-2016); Fredrika J. Teute, "In 'The Gloom of Evening': Margaret Bayard Smith's View in Black and White of Early Washington Society," *The Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 1996, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015027775694;view=1up;seq=11> (accessed by M. Waters, 9-20-2016).