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“DEAR SISTER, I MUST LEAVE THIS HOUSE”

WASHINGTON, D.C., AUGUST 1814

*Dolley Madison to
Lucy Payne Washington Todd*

As the British advanced on Washington, residents and government employees fled in every available conveyance. The President nearly crossed the eastern branch of the Potomac (the Anacostia River) and met the approaching enemy head-on before he was luckily intercepted by General Winder, who provided him, Armstrong, Monroe, and other government officials with a U.S. Army escort that led them away from the field. First Lady Dolley Madison remained at the Executive Mansion to oversee the removal of executive records, a task badly hampered by shorthandedness and lack of transportation. As she recorded in this letter to her sister, she also saved several White House treasures, including Gilbert Stuart’s full-length oil of President Washington—a five-by-eight-foot replica of the iconic Lansdowne Portrait—now in the East Room of the White House. Dolley Madison reluctantly left the President’s house on the evening of August 23 and met her husband two nights later at Wiley’s Tavern, in Fairfax County, Virginia.

Dear Sister

Tuesday Augt. 23d. 1814.

My husband left me yesterday mornng. 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

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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 mornng., 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!!