"What A Dread Prospect...": Dolley Madison's Plague Year

It is frequently said that Dolley Payne Todd (later Mrs. James Madison, Jr.) was left a well-to-do widow¹ upon the death by yellow fever of her young husband, lawyer John Todd, Jr. But manuscript letters in the possession of a Todd descendant² indicate such a statement must be qualified. After the deaths on October 24, 1793, of both her husband in Philadelphia and her infant son in the nearby resort of Gray’s Ferry, to which she and her two children had been sent to escape the plague, Dolley Todd was so destitute she could not return to Philadelphia. She was without funds and unable to secure a settlement of her husband’s estate from her brother-in-law, merchant James Todd.

For Dolley Todd a most trying period of fourteen months began in early October with the deaths, also by yellow fever, of both her mother-in-law and father-in-law. On October 12, John Todd, Jr., in Philadelphia, announced to his brother James, safely out of the city in Darby, the death of their mother:

Philad* Octob: 12th 1793

My dear Brother

The Tear falls from my Eyes while I am about to inform of the Sorrowful and afflicting Trial which has again taken Place in the family — Our Dear Mother is no more! She died last night a little before 12 o’Clock. I am

¹ [Lucia B. Cutts], Memoirs and Letters of Dolly Madison . . . Edited by Her Grand-Niece (Boston and New York, 1887), 14; Ella K. Barnard, Dorothy Payne, Quakeress (Philadelphia, 1909), 75; Elizabeth L. Dean, Dolly Madison: The Nation’s Hostess (Boston, 1928), 63; Katherine Anthony, Dolly Madison, Her Life and Times (Garden City, N. Y., 1949), 52–53, 79.

² The owner, Mr. W. Parsons Todd, Morristown, N. J., has graciously granted permission for these letters to be printed. They are on indefinite loan to Independence National Historical Park and will be part of the interpretive program of the restored and refurnished Dilworth-Todd-Moylan House.
about to follow her to the Cold Inclosure of the Grave. May we individually improve from this Serious Probation with which we have been inflicted. I can scarcely write.

Adieu, may the Almighty 
    preserve the survivors
    Thine Sincerely
    John Todd Jr.

That Dolley Todd was aware of her father-in-law's imminent demise and of her husband's precarious situation is revealed in the letter she sent, from her refuge in Gray's Ferry, to her brother-in-law.

Oh, my dear brother, what a dread prospect has thy last Letter presented to me! A revered Father in the jaws of Death, & a Love'd Husband in perpetual danger I have long wished for an opportunity of writing to thee & enquireing what we could do? I am almost distracted with distress & apprihension Is it too late for their removal? or can no interferance of their Earthly friends rescue them from the two general fate? I have repeatedly Entreated John to leave home, from which we are now unavoidably Banished but alass he cannot leave his Father

I did not receive thy first Letter & am in ignorance of the particulars thee Mentions Pray write me soon again. I wish much to see you, but my Child is sick, & I have no way of geting to you.

My best love to Ailez & the little ones Belieave me sincerely & affectionately thyne.

D. P. Todd

4th day Evening 9 oClock

Within two weeks of the deaths of the elder Todds came the deaths of Dolley's husband and youngest son. John Todd, Jr., died in Philadelphia and his infant son, William Temple Todd, died in Gray's Ferry on the same day, October 24. James Todd later described the events leading up to his brother's death:

... It is too true indeed that my father, Mother & Brother are no more. Among thousands of others, they have fallen victims to the ferocious disorder that of late prevailed in our distressed City. ...

After having been about a Week in the Country I returned to town in order to induce Father & Mother to go out. My Brother was then in town 'tho his Family was out, and he had not determined whether to leave at all or not. Our parents did not seem intirely free to go and at any rate not to leave Johnny in town. Some time was taken up & the Yearly Meeting intervened before they could all agree to come out, and in the mean time
Isaac Hastings a student of my Brother's who had staid in town particularly to attend to his Business fell sick. My brother could not leave him and My Parents could not leave Johnny.

On the 28 Sep the Day before my Brother's young man died, Father was taken sick, and died on the 2nd October about 5 In the Even. I had procured a House in the Country for Mother & Brother to come to and they were preparing to set out on the 5th Oct when Mother was taken ill. She died on the 12th and the next day Brother came out. He was unwilling to come to the House I had prepared for his reception which was within a few Yards of the one in which my family was placed. I wished him to come there as being near to me, I could be constantly with him and our Situation endearing us, the more we might have been to each other a mutual Consolation. He chose rather to reside at some tavern near me, but the Tavern keepers were afraid to take him in and he at length [decided] to go to his Family. Fearful of himself and unwilling to endanger the health of his Family, he exposed himself perhaps rather more than was prudent. He slept by himself in a lower Apartment of the House, and was out in the Dew both the Evening and morning before he was taken sick.

On the 17th Oct. having been 3 or 4 days in the Country, he arose very early and went out in the fields aGunning. When he came in to his Breakfast, he felt chilly and was apprehensive of the prevailing fever coming on. He came that Morning to town, ab 14 miles and went to the House (where the Nurse & domestics were) I had left.

I did not hear of it till late that night and the next day I rode in to see him. Finding him better than I expected, I flattered myself that it was only a Cold he had caught. He died six days after on the 24th October.

3 Among Friends buried during the epidemic was "Isaac Hastings, attorney at law." See Mathew Carey, A Short Account . . . of the Malignant Fever . . . In Philadelphia, 3rd edition corrected by the author (Philadelphia, November 30, 1793), p. 4 of appendix. Verification of the death date can be found in David Evans' Day Book, II, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, wherein, on Sept. 29, 1793, "John Todd Junr Esqr" was charged "To making a mahogany Coffin for Heston his Clerk—— 7 —." Given the orthographic irregularities of the period, this Hastings may be the Isaac Heston whose letter appeared in The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography (PMHB), LXXXVI (1962), 204-207.

4 John Todd, Jr., loved to hunt in fields and marshes. See letters from John to his brother, James, Sept. 15 and Oct. 24, 1785, in W. Parsons Todd Collection (WPT). In such an environment, he may have been bitten by the yellow fever carrier, Aedes aegypti.

5 Cf. John Todd, Jr.'s purported demise at Gray's Ferry in Cutts, 13; Barnard, 72; Dean, 67; Anthony, 79-81; Irving Brant, James Madison, Father of the Constitution, 1757–1800 (Indianapolis and New York, 1950), 406; Mary E. Springer, Dolly Madison, A Story of the War of 1812 (New York, 1906), 37. Even more specific evidence is James Todd's account with Dolley Todd, under date of Dec. 15, 1793, WPT, wherein he notes: "To 2 Carpets, to be delivered to Dolly Todd; which were in James Todd's Room in which Jno Todd Jr. lay in his last Illness rendered useless to Ja Todd, who has been under the necessity of purchasing new ones——"
His youngest child (aged about 7 weeks) which had been very weakly from its birth died on the same day in the Country, so that our "woes indeed were not Solitary. . . ." 6

Still weak after the birth of her second child, Dolley Todd was almost crushed by her multiple losses. Mrs. Mary Payne, Dolley's mother, sent an anguished note about her daughter's situation to the Todd family nurse in Philadelphia.

O my Dear Dear Nurse

How shall I express my feelings. O it seems to me as if my hart would brake. My poor Dear Dolley, what does she & will she suffer. How distressing is her situation; the same day Consined her Dear husband & her little babe to the silent grave. She has no frend in town Nurse, but thee to depend on. She is here amonge strangers & frenless. She is in debt for the buriel of her babe & nearly moneyless, having only nineteen Dollers left & a number of other Debts to pay before she can move & we must go from this [place] in a few days.

Pray Consider her Condision & if her poor Dear husband has Left any Money with thee, contrive to send it to her. Also if it is possible for thee to apoint a time & place, we will try to meet thee. Dolley is very unwell & wishes the Chier & horse sent Imeadally to her that she may get from this Place. She cant write her self to Day, but will by John. 7

Bereft of mother-in-law, father-in-law, husband, and son, Dolley encountered an unexpected obstacle to her economic well-being in her brother-in-law. She desperately needed money and sought possession of her husband's effects. By the terms of John Todd, Jr.'s will, Dolley was not only to receive all his "Estate real and personal," but, in addition, was named exclusive executrix of the estate. Todd's fellow lawyers, Edward Burd and Edward Tilghman, were named to "give such Advice and Assistance to my dear Wife as they shall think prudent with Respect to the Management of my small estate and the settling of my unfinished business." 8 But James Todd took possession of his brother's effects before Dolley was able to leave Gray's Ferry. After a few days, Dolley Todd asked her brother-in-law to send John's effects to her.

7 John was the Negro servant "Black John," mentioned in Dolley Todd's letter to James Todd, c. Oct. 30, 1793, below.
8 The will of John Todd, Jr., is dated July 2, 1793. Philadelphia Municipal Archives.
My dear Brother

An opportunity offering this Morning, to thee I have sent on thy Letter, & request a copy of our Fathers Will, as our seperation may be soon, & a conveyance from Wilmington will not be so convenient. The papers, also, of my Husband contained in the Trunk.

I was hurt, My dear Jamy, that the Idea of his Libary should occur as a proper source for raising money. Book's from which he wished his Child improved, shall remain sacred, and I would feel the pinching hand of Poverty before I disposed of them.

I have not time to say much, but trust in Heaven "all will be rite" & that our homes may yet afford us a plentiful assilum

with Love to you all

D P Todd

Second day Morn 8 o Clock

Three days later, Dolley again requested James to deliver her effects.

My dear Brother

I have solicited the favour of friend West to wait on thee to day in order to obtain some information concerning transactions in town, as I feel myself verry wanting at being disapointed in not seeing Black John yesterday, which was the day I apointed him to bring my Cloaths

I wrote thee some days ago, requesting a copy of the Will & the papers contain'd in the Trunk, I now hope friend West may be the bearer of them, as it is highly improper I should be without them. . . .

Of course, James Todd had a right to hold the effects of his father, John Todd, Sr., and of his mother, Mary Todd, but he overstepped his prerogative in seizing the effects of his brother. By the terms of John Todd, Sr.'s will, dated September 21, 1793, Samuel Jones, "city house carpenter," and Todd's two sons, James and John, were named as his executors. On November 14, Samuel Jones and James Todd were ordered to have ready, by December 14, an inventory of John Todd, Sr.'s effects. And on January 14, 1794, a division was made, on paper, of Mary Todd's clothing, but Dolley Todd had still re-

9 James Todd noted on the letter, "reed: 10.28.93."
10 On this letter, James Todd noted, "reed: 10.31.93."
11 The will of John Todd, Sr., is dated Sept. 21, 1793. Philadelphia Municipal Archives.
12 Letter of administration, signed by George Campbell, Register for the Probate of Wills, Nov. 14, 1793. Philadelphia Municipal Archives.
13 A note, dated Jan. 14, 1794, WPT, assigns two thirds of Mary Todd's clothing to Dolley Todd and one third to James Todd.
ceived no portion of her estate. In February, her patience gave out and she sent James a peremptory dispatch and retained an attorney, William Wilkins. A messenger handed James the following note:

As I have already suffered the most serious Inconvenience from the unnecessary Detention of my Part of my Mother in Law's property and of the Receipt Book and papers of my late Husband I am constrained once more to request and if a request is not sufficient, to demand that they may be delivered this day As I cannot wait thy return from the proposed Excursion without material Injury to my Affairs. The bearer waits for thy answer

Dolley P. Todd

7th Feb'y 94.

This time James Todd took heed, and Dolley began to receive her portion of Todd family furnishings and effects. But there was still no financial settlement of the various Todds' properties.

At this crucial juncture, through the good offices of Senator Aaron Burr, "the great little Madison" held his famous candlelit interview with Mrs. Dolley Todd, with its well-known consequences. Writing in August, 1794, attorney Wilkins expressed not only his pleasure at the forthcoming marriage, but his satisfaction that "an honorable asylum is offered to my gentle friend who has been so undeservedly and vindictively persecuted and over whose safety I have long anxiously watched."

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14 Wilkins was appointed by Dolley Todd as her attorney in the spring of 1794. See Brant, 406, 409-410.

15 Dolley Todd was heiress to her husband's property to the value of £434 5s. (£187 15s. of which was John Todd, Jr.'s library). See "Inventory and Appraisement of the Goods and Chattles &c late the property of John Todd Junior," Alderman Library, University of Virginia. After Mar. 5, 1794, Dolley Todd was to receive goods to the value of £201 9s. 8¾d. See "Acct. of Jas. Todd with Estate of John Todd, Jr.," WPT; the latter represented the elder Todds' effects.

16 Ironically enough, in November, 1794, Aaron and Theodosia Burr were asked to leave the same house (Dolley Todd having leased her home to Margaret Grant, widow), after a "disagreement" with the landlady, Mrs. Grant, according to fellow lodger Senator Ralph Izard. Izard Papers, Box I, Folder 6, Item 3, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.

17 This was Dolley Todd's characterization. On the famous interview, which led to their eventual engagement, see Springer, 37-38; Brant, 406; Barnard, 75-76; Dean, 68; Cutts, 15.

18 William Wilkins to Dolley P. Todd, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, quoted in Brant, 409.
After his marriage to Dolley Todd, James Madison took over the matter:

Philad* Jan'y 27. 1795

Sir

Mr. Wilkins who had requested and had undertaken to settle with you the business in which I have become interested by my marriage with the widow of your brother, being under an indisposition which prevents his attending to it, it is necessary for me to enter on the task myself.

For this purpose I shall be glad of an interview with you, without delay, either at my house or yours, as may be most convenient to you. From the last information given me by Mr. Wilkins, I conclude you have disposed of the property which was to be sold, and are otherwise prepared to favor me with an immediate settlement.

You will excuse, Sir, the earnestness of my request, as the time approaches for our leaving this city; and it is indispensable to my arrangements, as well as required by the duty which the Parent and Guardian owes to the interests of your infant nephew, that a full adjustment should be previously closed.

I am Sir, with respect,
Your Obed. humble Serv*
J. Madison Jr

Mr. Todd

Finally, in March, 1795, fourteen months after her greatest need, Dolley Todd Madison came into her financial inheritance from the Todd estates. Six checks, totaling $1,900,\(^{19}\) from the sale of the properties, were paid her, and one of the most difficult periods in her full life came to a close.

\(^{19}\) Dated March, 1795, the checks are in the possession of Mr. W. Parsons Todd.