



THIS DAY IN HISTORY — MARCH 16, 1751 — THE FATHER OF THE CONSTITUTION IS BORN.

On this day in 1751, James Madison, drafter of the Constitution, recorder of the Constitutional Convention, author of the "Federalist Papers" and fourth president of the United States, is born on a plantation in Virginia.

Madison first distinguished himself as a student at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), where he successfully completed a four-year course of study in two years and, in 1769, helped found the American Whig Society, the second literary and debate society at Princeton (and the world), to rival the previously established Cliosophic Society.

Madison returned to Virginia with intellectual accolades but poor health in 1771. By 1776, he was sufficiently recovered to serve for three years in the legislature of the new state of Virginia, where he came to know and admire Thomas Jefferson. In this capacity, he assisted with the drafting of the Virginia Declaration of Religious Freedom and the critical decision for Virginia to cede its western claims to the Continental Congress.

Madison is best remembered for his critical role in the Constitutional Convention of 1787,

where he presented the Virginia Plan to the assembled delegates in Philadelphia and oversaw the difficult process of negotiation and compromise that led to the drafting of the final Constitution. Madison's published "Notes on the Convention" are considered the most detailed and accurate account of what occurred in the closed-session debates. (Madison forbade the publishing of his notes until all the participants were deceased.) After the Constitution was submitted to the people for ratification, Madison collaborated with John Jay and Alexander Hamilton on "The Federalist Papers," a series of pamphlets that argued for the acceptance of the new government. Madison penned the most famous of the pamphlets, "Federalist No. 10," which made an incisive argument for the ability of a large federation to preserve individual rights.

In 1794, Madison married a young widow, Dolley Payne Todd, who would prove to be Washington, D.C.'s finest hostess during Madison's years as secretary of state to the widowed Thomas Jefferson and then as the fourth president of the United States from 1809 to 1817. Dolley Madison earned a special place in the nation's memory for saving a portrait of George Washington before fleeing the burning White House during the War of 1812.

The War of 1812 tested Madison's presidency. The Federalists staunchly opposed Madison's declaration of war against the British and threatened to secede from the union during the Harford Convention. When the new nation managed to muster a tenuous victory, the Federalist Party was destroyed as America's status as a nation apart from Britain was secured.

After retiring from official political positions, Madison served Thomas Jefferson's beloved University of Virginia first as a member of the board of visitors and then as rector. In 1938, the State Teachers College at Harrisonburg, Virginia, was renamed in Madison's honor as Madison College; in 1976, it became James Madison University. - www.history.com