

Dolley Madison, Betsey Hamilton and Abraham Lincoln, Together at the Washington Monument

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On July 4, 1848, Dolley Madison, the 80-year-old widow of President James Madison, joined 90-year-old Elizabeth Hamilton on the mall in the nation's capital. The two women were unlikely allies though their husbands had worked together six decades earlier to write the Federalist Papers and to ratify the U.S. Constitution. During the first administration of President George Washington, however, Madison and Hamilton had drifted apart. They become political antagonists.

Elizabeth Hamilton had been a model of retiring domesticity until her husband was killed in a duel with Aaron Burr in 1804. As a widow, she spent the last five decades of her long life protecting her husband's memory and promoting civic pursuits. In 1848 the aging "Betsey" took up residence with her daughter in Washington -- where she struck up a friendship with the lively but twice-widowed Dolley Madison.

Together, they found a common cause. Dolley proposed that she and Betsey promote the construction of the long-delayed Washington Monument. Along with Louisa Adams, widow of John Quincy Adams, they led a women's committee to raise needed funds to start building. Historian Thomas Fleming noted: "Their appeal inspired startling numbers of people to open their wallets."

On February 22 1848, on the anniversary of George Washington's birth, the U.S. House of Representatives had held a brief session -- adjourning after a prayer for the "venerable sage" who lay a few yards away on his death bed. Just the day before, John Quincy Adams had risen to speak to the House. The Massachusetts congressman grasped the edge of his desk before abruptly collapsing from a fatal stroke. Adams was carried to the nearby Speaker's Lobby where on the evening of February 23 he died.

With death, the 81-year-old Adams lacked the historic timing of his own father, John Adams. At age 90, the nation's second president had died on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence -- supposedly after muttering, "Thomas Jefferson survives." If the elder Adams indeed made that statement, he had been wrong. Thomas Jefferson had hung onto life until he reached the magic milestone, predeceasing Adams by a few hours.

When John Quincy collapsed, nearby on the House floor was the future sixteenth President of the United States. Congressman Abraham Lincoln was appointed to the committee to organize Adams' funeral in the House.

Reverent of America's Founders, Lincoln became active as one of the managers for the "Birth Night Ball" that had been planned to raise funds to build the Washington Monument.

John Quincy Adams' collapse and death had delayed the Washington fund-raiser until March. With the widows' support, fund-raising was successful enough to justify laying the cornerstone on July 4. Dolley and Betsey attended -- along with Lincoln and 20,000 other onlookers. The Civil War would delay construction work and the monument would not be completed until 1884.

Abraham Lincoln's own deep admiration for the country's first president had begun as a boy when he read Parson Weems' biography of the nation's first president. An Illinois friend of Lincoln remembered that among those "Great men" Lincoln admired, "George Washington was the Greatest of all of them."

As a young politician Lincoln had said of his idol: "Washington is the mightiest name on earth -- long since mightiest in the cause of civil liberty; still mightiest in moral reformation. On that name, a eulogy is expected. It cannot be. To add brightness to the sun, or glory to the name of Washington, is alike impossible. Let none attempt it. In solemn awe pronounce the name, and in its naked deathless splendor, leave it shining on."

Lincoln, who revered the Declaration of Independence, would be called upon to vindicate the Declaration's proposition that "all men are created equal." The Civil War would cost the lives of more than 600,000 Americans. President Lincoln would be assassinated. In death, the sixteenth president who saved the Union would forever be linked to the first president who inaugurated that Union.

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