Dolley Madison’s Respect for Washington

- **Compelling Question**
  - How can being respectful of others help you to achieve success?

- **Virtue:** Respect

- **Definition** – Respect is civility flowing from personal humility.

- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will learn about the respect that First Lady Dolley Madison had for the city of Washington and its people as well as her respect for American treasures. Students will determine ways in which they can be respectful of others in their own lives.

- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze Dolley Madison’s respectful actions while she served as First Lady.
  - Students will evaluate Dolley Madison’s respect for other people even if they had opposing opinions.
  - Students will apply their knowledge of respectful behaviors to their own lives.

- **Background**
  - In 1812, President James Madison was elected to his second term, but war had again broken out with the British. The British had been in the midst of a fight with Napoleon Bonaparte’s ships in the Atlantic Ocean, and they began boarding American ships and pressing the sailors into service with the British Navy. Madison asked Congress to declare war on Great Britain. Britain blockaded the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of the United States, and they fought the Americans in land and sea battles between the U.S. and Canada and the Deep South.

  The British Navy controlled the Chesapeake Bay and began moving up the Pawtuxet River closer to the capital city, Washington. After the Americans lost the Battle of Bladensburg in 1814, the British were only miles from closing in on the capital city. President Madison left the executive mansion to meet with his generals about the impending invasion, and asked his wife to take all of the important documents with her if she was forced to evacuate.

  As the British drew near, Dolley Madison packed expensive household items like draperies and silverware as well as the important documents her husband requested, but she is probably best known for having her servants pull down the portrait of George Washington that hung in the dining room before leaving the mansion. Soon after she left, the British invaded the city and burned the executive mansion, the capitol building, the U.S. Treasury building, and other public buildings before retreating.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Midst
  - Napoleon Bonaparte
  - Blockaded
  - Chesapeake Bay
  - Pawtuxet River
  - Battle of Bladensburg
  - Impending
  - Evacuate
  - Draperies
  - Ceremonial
  - First Lady
  - Grandeur
  - Trite
  - Contentious
  - Elite
  - Spyglass
  - Swarms
  - Implored
• **Introduce Text**
  o Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

• **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  o As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    ▪ What challenges are you facing?
    ▪ What fears or concerns might you have?
    ▪ What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

• **Observation Questions**
  o What is Dolley Madison's identity as First Lady? How would that role be different than other roles she may have held?
  o Why was Dolley Madison so respectful of George Washington and the symbolism of his portrait?
  o Why did Dolley invite strangers into her home? Why did she believe it was her duty to save important artifacts and documents from the British?

• **Discussion Questions**
  o Discuss the following questions with your students.
    ▪ What is the historical context of the narrative?
    ▪ What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    ▪ How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    ▪ How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    ▪ How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    ▪ What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    ▪ Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    ▪ How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

• **Additional Resources**
  o The White House: Dolley Payne Todd Madison, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/first-ladies/dolleymadison](https://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/first-ladies/dolleymadison)
Handout A: Dolley Madison’s Respect for Washington

Background

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The British Navy controlled the Chesapeake Bay and began moving up the Pawtuxet River closer to the capital city, Washington. After the Americans lost the Battle of Bladensburg in 1814, the British were only miles from closing in on the capital city. President Madison left the executive mansion to meet with his generals about the impending invasion, and asked his wife to take all of the important documents with her if she was forced to evacuate.

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Narrative

Dolley Madison was the head of the social scene in Washington while her husband, James, was Secretary of State to Thomas Jefferson. Dolley regularly served as the ceremonial First Lady during important events because the president was a widower and needed a hostess at his side. In 1809, Dolley became the official First Lady when James was sworn in to serve as the fourth president. Dolley was a model of social behavior to the new society in Washington, and her popularity helped her husband gain in social and political standing during his two terms in office.

Dolley held parties at the executive mansion that regularly brought together politicians and leaders from opposing political views. Dolley dressed to impress and she outfitted the president’s home with the greatest sense of fashion and grandeur. While these sorts of over-the-top decorations may have seemed extravagant, Dolley used her gracious manners and the décor to bring people together, and her charm and ease with conversation helped her to navigate the sometimes contentious political scene in Washington. It was through her many dinner parties that Dolley was able to learn more about the political elite from around the world and their views on a variety of matters. She then could pass this information on to her husband and his political allies.

Dolley understood and respected the great nation that her husband had helped to build. In decorating the President’s House, as it was known then, she made sure to include uniquely American art, furniture, and other decorations. One such item was a painting of President George Washington that hung in state dining room.

A few years into James’ presidency, tensions with Great Britain began to grow. Madison asked Congress to declare war on the nation that the United States had fought a revolution against mere decades before. Two years into the war, in 1814, the British set their sights on Washington.

Dolley Madison did not let the possibility of an attack dissuade her. Even when the Battle of Bladensburg was lost and she knew that the British were on their way, she continued to plan a party. She would not let the British force her out of her home unless she knew for sure they were coming! Every few hours, Dolley went to the top of the mansion to look into a spyglass to see the British army. After many hours, Dolley and her staff realized that swarms of American soldiers and citizens were crowding the streets in Washington as they fled the city. She realized that she must leave soon.

Dolley and her servants hurriedly packed china, silverware, draperies, and important documents into a waiting carriage. As Dolley was about to leave the home she had known for five years, she noticed the portrait of George
Washington hanging in the state dining room. She asked her servants to remove the painting so that it could be protected from the British. Unfortunately, the frame of the painting was bolted to the wall and there were no tools available with which to remove it. Dolley implored them to break the frame and simply remove the painting itself. She would not stand for the British disrespecting the great leader who helped the nation secure its independence from them. Dolley and her staff sped off to safety shortly before the British made it to the city and burned many of the buildings including the U.S. Capitol and the President’s House, but they did not damage the painting of George Washington. Just as she had shown her respect for the new nation by preparing the President’s House as a social gathering point in which the people could take pride, Dolley Madison demonstrated her respect for the leader whose character and virtue had made him the indispensable man.