



Andrew Jackson and His World

Female Trouble: Andrew Jackson versus the Ladies of Washington

by Catherine Allgor

Andrew Jackson was mad. It was February 1829, a wintry day in Washington, DC, and President-elect Jackson was in a fury about the public's reaction to his Cabinet announcements. To be fair, Jackson was already angry when he arrived in the capital a month before. The target for his anger: the ladies of Washington City.

The ladies who so infuriated Andrew Jackson were the white elite and middle-class women of the city, members of local families and female kin of government officials. By necessity, government officials were transient, coming to the capital only part of the year and perhaps only for a term or so. Indeed, Jackson's own daughter-in-law and official hostess, Emily Donelson, was a newcomer. But the wives of prominent men with long careers such as Floride Calhoun, wife of Senator and Vice President-elect John C. Calhoun, were capital fixtures. Local families in Washington were year-round and often of long standing. Margaret Bayard Smith, writer and journalist, had come to the new city during its first official year as the capital. Arriving in 1801, she had lived there for almost thirty years with her husband, Samuel Harrison Smith, who began the *National Intelligencer* newspaper.

Ruling-class women have played an important part in every city's formation, but Washington women enjoyed particular powers and freedoms. The Founders deliberately designed the new federal government with as little bureaucracy as possible, in direct contrast to the monarchy they had fought against. They did not know that the republic they were building would turn into a powerful nation-state that would require a strong federal government. Within this structure, the Founders' wives and daughters borrowed from older, courtly styles of politicking, creating a sphere parallel to their men folk's official one. The social world, ruled by women, was an early form of political machine that dispensed patronage, made political deals, and entertained a good deal of legislative business. In the soft candlelight of an influential lady's parlor, male legislators felt they could make alliances and deals that would not stand the glare of the official spotlight. In addition, in the decades before the United States became a two-party democracy, the incipient ruling class learned to work together—not in Congress, where men beat each other with canes and shouted, but at social events, which required all to be on their best behavior.

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The ladies of Washington not only hosted the political game, they played it. In their informal way, they performed functions that would become part of the official governmental structure in the years to come. Their "party machine" presaged the institutionalized party machines that would function in the political landscape of the 1830s. These women also acted as a kind of civil service. Fearing charges of corruption, male officials were reluctant to be seen giving out government jobs, while their wives and female relations sponsored candidates freely. Any man who wanted a government post knew the best



Rachel Jackson, miniature portrait, ca. 1824, attributed to Mary C. Strobel. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

route lay in petitioning a powerful woman.

The ladies of Washington were not feminists or radicals and would have been horrified if anyone had accused them of playing politics. From their point of view, they were eminently respectable, moral women taking care of their family and friends. If this meant giving a job to a deserving young man, well, it was all part of their role. But they were powerful and enjoyed playing politics and, on occasion, expressing political opinions. And during the presidential election of 1828, they expressed themselves on the topic of candidate Andrew Jackson's wife, Rachel Donelson Robards Jackson.

During the campaign, the supporters of Jackson's opponent, President John Quincy Adams, painted Andrew Jackson as a violent, backcountry savage. The infamous "Coffin Handbill" displayed a line of coffins representing the men Jackson had killed in duels or executed as a military commander. Pro-Adams men also used the circumstances of Jackson's marriage to Rachel Donelson Robards to depict their rival as a lustful, angry man who would take whatever he wanted—in this case, a woman from her husband.

The truth was that when Rachel Donelson Robards and Andrew Jackson met on the frontier, she was married to Lewis Robards, a cruel man who had deserted her. When Rachel got word that Lewis Robards had divorced her, she married Andrew in 1791. When the couple discovered a few years later that the divorce had not been finalized, they remarried legally. By the time of the election, the Jacksons had lived happily together for decades, and Rachel Jackson was the soul of respectability.

But opposition newspapers seized upon the story, painting Rachel Jackson as a loose woman and the Jackson marriage as bigamous. In the end, the scandal did little to influence male voters. Legally improvised marriages were all too common on the frontier. However, Rachel Jackson suffered more bad press: Washingtonians who did not credit the more sensational stories still enjoyed mocking her country ways, and joked about her smoking her pipe in the White House. Andrew Jackson kept most of this from his wife, who was already nervous about being First Lady. Sadly, a few days before the victorious Jacksons were to leave for Washington, Rachel heard these stories, collapsed, and shortly died, probably of a heart attack.

As it became known that slanders and satire had brought on Rachel Jackson's death, Washingtonians reacted with shock, sorrow, and unease. As a "man of the people," Andrew Jackson had already expressed his scorn for capital society and "politics as usual." He threatened to clean house by sweeping aside long-term office holders. No doubt some ladies were ashamed that they had made fun of this countrywoman, but they and others also feared the repercussions. Margaret Bayard Smith echoed the thoughts of many when she mourned the loss of Rachel Jackson as "a wife who, it is said, could control the violence of his tempers." Though grief can soften a man, Bayard Smith warned it could also "sour" him, and if it did so in this case, "the public councils and affairs will have reason to deplore this awful and sudden event."

So Andrew Jackson's anger was already at the boiling point on that cold February day in 1829, as he fumed about public reaction to his Cabinet choice. All had hoped for a strong Cabinet of able men, who, in the absence of Jackson's wife, could curb the President's impulses and temper. What they got was what the press called scornfully "a millennium of minnows"—lesser men who could not control their leader.

The society women of Washington focused on one particular appointment: Andrew Jackson's friend John Eaton, chosen as secretary of war. In their view, John Eaton wasn't the problem: his wife was. A beautiful widow, Margaret O'Neale Timberlake Eaton was a local boardinghouse keeper's daughter with

a dubious sexual reputation. Among other accusations, she was said to have started an affair with John Eaton before her first husband died. Washington's elite would not only be forced to interact with her, but since President Jackson and Secretary of State Martin Van Buren both were widowers, and John Eaton was a Jackson favorite, Margaret Eaton would serve as the *de facto* First Lady. The ladies were scandalized by this sudden ascension to the pinnacle of Washington society.

There was a deeper reason for their reaction, aside from the local knowledge of the new Mrs. Eaton. Andrew Jackson rose to power as the first Democratic president. To many, "democracy" meant "rule by the mob," and there was doubt about the value of the "common man." The elevation of "Peggy" (her detractors scornfully called her by this coarse nickname for "Margaret") showed Jackson's lack of judgment, as she was deemed "common" in both senses—ordinary and vulgar.

The day Cabinet posts were announced, a delegation of Washington insiders paid a call on the President-elect to warn him that by "thrusting" Margaret Eaton on the ladies of Washington, by forcing them to interact with her at dinners and parties, he would have trouble. Jackson reacted ferociously: "Do you suppose that I have been sent by the people to consult the ladies of Washington as to the proper persons to compose my Cabinet?" Old Hickory saw the attacks on Margaret on par with the attacks on his beloved Rachel. Margaret Eaton quoted Jackson: "I tell you, Margaret, I had rather have live vermin on my back than the tongue of one of these Washington women on my reputation." Little did he know that by not listening to this particular segment of "We the People," he came close to dooming his administration.

Jackson's reaction incited what became known as the "Peggy Eaton Affair," or the "Petticoat War," and the first shot was fired during the Inaugural Ball. Washingtonians arrived at the ball already jittery. The inauguration ceremony had gone well enough, but the reception had turned into a riot with revelers breaking glassware and furniture. Margaret Bayard Smith wryly remarked, "It was the People's day and the people's President and the People would rule." The "Era of the Common Man" had not begun auspiciously.

At the ball, the ladies of the administration, led by Floride Calhoun, cut Margaret Eaton dead, refusing to be introduced to or to speak with her. From that night on, the "Eaton Malaria" spread. Calhoun and her allies (including the Cabinet wives) persuaded even the President's own daughter-in-law and hostess, Emily Donelson, to join with them against Margaret. By their use of invitations and their behaviors at social events the ladies of Washington pressured everyone to choose sides. Soon parties and balls became mini-demonstrations of whether one was a "Jackson man" or not. Social events had always been somewhat partisan; now they became "life or death" declarations, stifling bi-partisan activity.

The men folk tried to keep up, jockeying for position, looking for any political hay to be made. Martin Van Buren, a widower, took the Eatons' side and positioned himself to be Andrew Jackson's successor. (He would win the election of 1836.) Vice President-elect John C. Calhoun had assumed he would be the president after Jackson, but his wife's role in the "Malaria" pushed him out, contributing to Calhoun's sense of alienation from the Union and his pro-secession stance.

At first it seemed that Jackson's stubbornness would win, as he gave parties and dinners with Margaret Eaton on his arm. Yet when Emily Donelson continued to side with the more experienced political women, Jackson sent her home, a frustrating signal to the President that he could not exert authority even in his own family. Cabinet meeting after meeting was held, either to refute the slippery charges of sexual impropriety (at one point Jackson thundered, "She is as chaste as a virgin!") or to allow the President to simply "roar" at his Cabinet, insisting that the Cabinet families visit and socialize with Margaret Eaton.

By the spring of 1831, as the affair dragged on, Washington society was afraid to move for fear of offending someone important. Deadlocked, the parlors of the city closed. With no unofficial meeting place, political business stalled from the Cabinet on down. The mighty Andrew Jackson, who fought like a lion in battle, could not prevail against a battalion of Washington ladies.

Finally, Jackson admitted defeat. Martin Van Buren and John Eaton withdrew from their positions in order to break the stalemate. When other Cabinet members with “anti-Peggy” wives refused to follow suit, Jackson fired them. The story of the Eaton Affair, which had remained largely confined to Washington circles, suddenly became a national story. Never before had a president fired his whole Cabinet. Americans across the United States, fearful that such a move forecasted a coup d'état or worse, clamored to know the reason why. The disgruntled former Cabinet members, safe in their home districts, were only too happy to oblige with a tale of executive tyranny. The nation's newspapers exploded when they discovered a woman at the center of this unprecedented housecleaning. They dubbed Margaret Eaton “the Doom of the Republic,” casting her as the sign of the federal government's end. When the Eatons returned to Tennessee, and later traveled to Spain in a delegation from the United States, it seemed the ladies of Washington had won.

But in the end, everyone lost. Andrew Jackson began his political career in the rough-and-tumble, all-male world of the frontier. He was unaware of the role of women in politics and nation-building. Ironically, Jackson, who would become famous for extending and furthering democracy, could not recognize their work as “political.” For their parts, the elite women of Washington overstepped their influence. To refuse a person of dubious reputation was a privilege wielded by upper-class societies in all cities. Yet Washington City was different. By the 1820s, it was clear that Washington was built by, on, and for national politics, and everything in the city—including its social life—needed to bow to that reality. Nothing showed this more clearly than the Eaton Affair. As the political culture embraced a two-party system in the 1830s and 1840s, the ladies of Washington continued to exert their political power—but they had learned that, in the capital, society was always the handmaiden to politics.

Catherine Allgor's book, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington City Help Build a City and a Government (2000)*, won the prize for the best first book from the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic. Her political biography, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation (2006)*, was a finalist for the George Washington Book Prize.
