

## *When the White House Burned*

One person's act of courage has tremendous power – even to changing the outcome of a war.

Such was the case of Dolley Madison (1768 – 1849), wife of the fourth President of the United States James Madison and First Lady from 1809 to 1817.

President Madison had declared war against Great Britain in 1812, and that action was not popular with many Americans, especially when the first year of conflict brought a series of shattering American defeats. New England was in a virtual state of secession, the governor of Vermont ordered the state militia to resign from national service, and in Massachusetts, there was talk of negotiating a separate peace with the enemy.

On Aug. 24, 1814, after defeating the Americans at the Battle of Bladensburg, a British force led by Maj. Gen. Robert Ross occupied Washington, D.C., and set fire to many public buildings. The facilities of the U.S. government, including the White House and the U.S. Capitol, were largely destroyed.

While President Madison rode out to the battlefield in an attempt to instill confidence in the untrained troops, the citizens of Washington streamed out of the city into Virginia. Even the militia assigned to protect the White House deserted their posts. But Dolley Madison refused to budge. Before the White House was burned, Dolley saved her husband's papers, a framed copy of the Declaration of Independence, and a valuable portrait of George Washington. She would leave only at the last minute. She hurried to her waiting carriage, went to Georgetown and the next day crossed over the Potomac into Virginia. With the danger lower after the British left Washington, a few days later she returned to the capital to meet her husband.



Dolley's bravery silenced her husband's critics and infused the once-divided nation with a new spirit. When news of the British burning of the White House spread, people who had been denouncing the war and talking surrender abruptly changed their minds. Confronted by a united, determined people, the British were more than willing to sign a peace treaty six months later.

Courage can take many forms, such as acting with resolve under fire as Dolley did, standing on principle in the face of great opposition, acting with integrity, even when it may disadvantage you, or defending the rights of the helpless and the needy.

God promises His presence when we face challenging times: "Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6 NKJ).