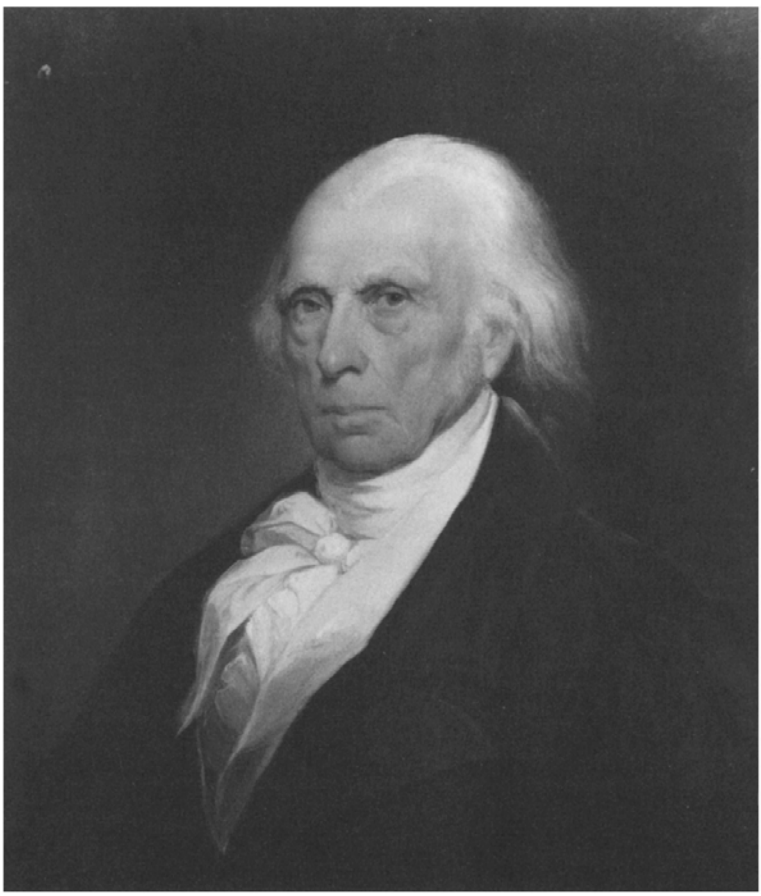
THE LAST OF THE FATHERS

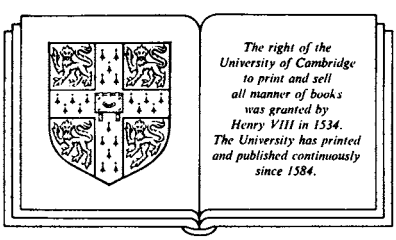


James Madison in 1833. Portrait by Asher Durand. (Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society, New York City).

THE LAST OF THE FATHERS

James Madison and the Republican Legacy

DREW R. McCOY



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"MY SENSATIONS for many months past have intimated to me not to expect a long or healthy life." These were grim words from a privileged young man who might have anticipated, notwithstanding some evidence of poor health, the best that his society could offer. In this case, however, the best may not have been enough. Writing in the early 1770s to another recent graduate of the College of New Jersey, James Madison was troubled by more than his fragile constitution and a recent bout of mysterious nervous seizures. His morbid premonitions were also aroused by confusion about what he should do with his life and perhaps by some doubt that he would find anything worth doing. Proclaiming himself "too dull and infirm now to look out for any extraordinary things in this world," the twenty-one-year-old Virginian seemed to despair of finding a vocation worthy of his idealism.[1]

Within a few years, however, the young man discovered a Revolutionary cause that inspired a career that was anything but ordinary. And another sixty years later, he had no choice but to marvel at his unanticipated longevity. Writing to the historian Jared Sparks in the summer of 1831, the octogenarian Madison, now a hero revered by new generations of young men, admitted that he was wandering alone into another age. Indeed, among the members of several of the most important groups from America's Revolutionary past, including the delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, only he survived. "Having outlived so many of my cotemporaries," he quipped to Sparks, "I ought not to forget that I may be thought to have outlived myself."[2]

In fact, Madison had another five years to ponder the phenome-

1 Madison to William Bradford, Nov. 9, 1772, in William T. Hutchinson et al., eds., *The Papers of James Madison* (Chicago, Charlottesville, 1962–), I, 75.

2 Madison to Jared Sparks, June 1, 1831, in Gaillard Hunt, ed., *The Writings of James Madison* (New York and London, 1900–1910), IX, 460.

non. Save for Aaron Burr, whom he had known at college (and whose career followed a rather different trajectory into well-deserved ignominy), Madison survived longer than any other member of the most remarkable generation of public leaders in American history, one that his descendants now vaguely revere as the "Founding Fathers." Even for that generation his career was exceptional in both its sweep and its significance, for it intersected every major phase of the history of the American Revolution, the adoption of the Constitution, and the early republic. Three years after announcing his premature demise, the "dull and infirm" youth first entered public life as a member of his local Revolutionary committee, which he later represented at the Virginia Convention of 1776 – the constituent body, the elderly Madison reminded Sparks, that had drafted the commonwealth's first republican constitution. Within a few years the young Revolutionary's career carried him to the federal Congress, where he served with distinction during the final phase of the war for independence and then under the Articles of Confederation. And later in the same decade, of course, he earned his enduring reputation as the "Father of the Constitution" for his pivotal role in drafting and defending, most notably in *The Federalist* papers, the system of government that replaced that Congress – and that still remains in place two hundred years later.

Enough for any lifetime, perhaps; but Madison's work as Revolutionary and as Founder proved far from done. By the early 1790s he was busy organizing the Democratic–Republican movement that, as he interpreted the challenge, rescued both the Revolution and the Constitution from a renewed threat of monarchy in a second revolution, this time at the ballot box, which became known as the "Revolution of 1800." And then, as he entered his fifties and the young republic entered the nineteenth century, Madison rounded out his career with eight years as secretary of state and another eight as president. He even led the aged survivors of the first Revolution and their sons and daughters through a second war for independence against England. No wonder the octogenarian, surrounded by what his friend Thomas Jefferson had earlier called "a new generation whom we know not, and who know not us," seemed bemused by the thought that he was still alive.[3]

3 Jefferson as quoted in Gordon S. Wood, "The Disappointments of Jefferson," *New York Review of Books* 28 (Aug. 13, 1981), 8.

Given his immense contributions both to political theory and to the founding of the American republic, Madison has not suffered from lack of scholarly attention, and the historians, biographers, and political scientists who have taken his measure have generally concentrated their attention – with good reason – on his active years in public life. In this book, I focus instead on a relatively neglected phase of Madison's republican odyssey, the period between his retirement from public office in March 1817 and his death on June 28, 1836. I hope to convey the resonant significance of this final chapter in the life of a Revolutionary patriarch, and my basic premise is straightforward: Madison's survival well into the fourth decade of the nineteenth century presents a unique opportunity to enrich our understanding of some critical themes in American history between the Revolution and the Civil War. His two decades of retirement were fascinating and important years, both for him and for the republic whose history seemed inseparable from his own.

Madison was sixty-six years old when he completed his second term as president and returned to Montpelier, his gracious estate abutting the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Orange County, Virginia. All evidence – from his voluminous correspondence to the accounts of those who visited him – suggests the extraordinary immunity of his intellect, if not his body, to the ravages of age. Sparks, who spent several days at Montpelier in 1830, spoke for all such pilgrims when he confided to his journal that "the intellect and memory of Mr. Madison appear to retain all their pristine vigor."[4] Indeed, only a few days before the patriarch's death, another visitor, observing a wasted body that encased a mind "still as bright and sun-like as ever," commented appropriately: "Never have I seen *so much mind in so little matter*!"[5] Madison sustained his familiar habit of reading voraciously; he kept abreast of contemporary developments to a greater extent than did most Americans, young or old; and he avidly deepened his lifelong intellectual pursuits. This was no period of dotage. If nothing else, Madison's retirement offers inspiring commentary on the possibilities of old age. But his later years are significant for more than the tenacity of his singular intellect.

4 "CC" Proctor, ed., "After-Dinner Anecdotes of James Madison: Excerpt from Jared Sparks' Journal for 1829–1831," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 60 (1952), 264.

5 Reported in *Richmond Enquirer*, July 1, 1836.

We can begin to appreciate the symbolic interest of Madison's longevity simply by recalling that he was born in the middle of the eighteenth century, almost a decade before the accession of George III, and lived long enough to correspond with Princess Victoria, which he did in 1834.[6] A boy who had once been a subject of George II died a citizen of Andrew Jackson's republic. Historians tell us that this was a transitional period of especially intense and disruptive change in Anglo-American culture and society. Madison's character, as well as his republican vision, took form in the enlightened, neoclassical age of the American Revolution, and his reflections during the retirement years reveal his persistent effort to comprehend – and to influence – the fate of that Revolutionary vision as he encountered both its failures and the shocks of a new era. To that extent, Madison is notable for projecting a distinctively eighteenth-century vision of government and society into an explosive, rapidly fragmenting America that even he, ever mindful of the future, had only dimly anticipated. Indeed, compared to his close friend and political ally Jefferson, who died a decade earlier in 1826, Madison was privileged to observe more of the developments that dramatize what the historian George Dangerfield has aptly described as "the agonized passing of the Jeffersonian world."[7] In addition to the appearance of railroads, the emergence of militant abolitionists who demanded an immediate emancipation of all black Americans, and the eruption of a major slave rebellion close at hand in Virginia – none of which Jefferson lived to see – these developments included matters of such profound importance to "the Father of the Constitution" as a revolution in American political culture (that became dramatically apparent in the presidential election of 1828) and a constitutional crisis that pushed the republic to the brink of disunion.

Throughout these years Madison had to straddle, sometimes quite awkwardly, two different worlds – and eras – of political and cultural experience. As "Publius" in the late 1780s he had sought a cure for the dangerous disorder and injustice that traditionally afflicted

6 See Madison to Princess Victoria, Feb. 1, 1834, in [William C. Rives and Philip R. Fendall, eds.], *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison* (Philadelphia, 1865), IV, 568–569.

7 George Dangerfield, *The Awakening of American Nationalism, 1815–1828* (New York, 1965), 300.

(and discredited) popular government; in that respect as in others, his republican character and career were unmistakably cut from a neoclassical mold. But if Madison was at home in an enlightened world in which reason was enjoined to discipline the unsettling effects of passion, he grew old in a more modern world of romantic democracy in which passionate individualism threatened to overwhelm all restraints of custom, tradition, and history. His struggle to accommodate the conflicting values and demands of these two cultures, and to convey to a new generation the meaning of a Revolutionary past that was fast receding from memory, informs the central theme of the narrative that follows.

I might add that I also hope to serve another, quite different set of purposes in writing this book. Madison's achievements as political theorist and republican statesman have been duly acknowledged, and I am but one of many scholars who continue to be drawn to the task of enriching our understanding of his thought and statecraft. If the power of Madison's intellect has not diminished through the years, however, something important has been lost. That Madison has been unjustly consigned to the shadow of his ostensibly more brilliant and captivating colleague Jefferson is only part of the problem. The best efforts of Madison's intimates and admirers notwithstanding, very little sense of his personal qualities – his personality, character, and temperament – has survived. This is a significant loss, and not simply because he was a far more appealing figure than is commonly realized. Madison's personal character reflected the triumph of values that had resonant public, as well as private, significance. I believe that many of his contemporaries understood this. If, in subsequent years, this image of Madison has faded, and been replaced by a less flattering sense of him as deficient in some of the necessary qualities of character and leadership that make for true greatness, perhaps the problem is as much ours as his.

I make no effort in the following pages to disguise my admiration of Madison, at the risk, I suppose, of alienating the more skeptical reader. Although the book ultimately points clearly to Madison's shortcomings, both as a thinker and a leader, readers should understand that my emphasis, from the outset, is on presenting Madison through the eyes both of those who knew him well and of other contemporaries who came to admire him. In doing so, I seek to develop fresh perspectives that place conventional images of

Madison in better balance. And I hope to suggest, above all, the numerous, quite different, and sometimes tragic ways in which his character and the circumstances of his private life merged almost imperceptibly with the larger public issues that preoccupied him during his retirement.

I should add that my choice of this biographical approach to what is, in effect, intellectual and political history extends beyond Madison to include a small group of much younger, less prominent Virginians who plausibly considered themselves his legatees and who survived long enough to witness the Civil War and the early years of Reconstruction. Readers will note that I place particular emphasis on a conspicuous trio of young disciples – Edward Coles, Nicholas P. Trist, and William Cabell Rives – whose close association with Madison during his later years shaped their distinctive concerns and careers in quite different but revealing ways. As the story unfolds, I hope that my methodological point will become clear: without the biographical approach, it is simply impossible to appreciate the emotional urgency that attended Madison's commitment to a republican dream that, for him, defined the meaning of his own life. And that dream, embedded in the powerful force of his example, in turn inspired the impassioned but flawed endeavors of his legatees. As members of a generation old enough to have vivid memories of Madison but still young enough to see Madisonianism put to its supreme test in the holocaust of civil war, Coles, Trist, and Rives could not escape their own urgent choices. In that sense they represent variant resolutions of the tensions and issues that had once been united in Madison; in their careers we can discern the bending and distorting of ideas that their mentor had struggled, not always successfully, to keep in some workable balance. For both Madison and his heirs, in short, I hope to dramatize the actual working out in human lives of critical cultural and political issues.

Finally, a brief word about the book's structure may be helpful to the reader. The following chapters are organized topically and do not follow a strict chronological line through Madison's later years. They are meant, however, to form something more than a collection of separate essays on particular aspects of the larger subject. Since each succeeding chapter depends for its full thematic texture and development on its predecessors, and since the whole comprises

more than a sum of the parts, the chapters should be read in order. And the reader will discover, too, that while the book is focused on Madison's retirement, it frequently looks back, as he did, to the past. To that extent, *The Last of the Fathers* is concerned with more than just the final two decades of its subject's life. It seeks to offer fresh insight into the character of a republican commitment that, stretching across two centuries and several generations, defined a career that the morbid young man of the early 1770s could scarcely have imagined.

Besides, the life of a good and great man, when fairly delineated and committed to history, will survive when the pyramids of Egypt shall have passed away: it will stand forever a lofty beacon amid the vicissitudes and the wastes of time. Athens and Rome, the master states of antiquity, where liberty once delighted to dwell, for two thousand years have been doomed to ignorance, to superstition, and to worse than Egyptian bondage; yet the lives of their great worthies, shining with an undiminished lustre, after this long and fearful eclipse, warmed the bosoms of modern patriots, by whose efforts has been regained the jewel of inestimable value, so long lost to the world.

And if, in fulfillment of that stern decree which denounces decay and death on all human things – a decree before which Babylon and Jerusalem, Athens and Rome, and all that was illustrious in antiquity, have crumbled into dust – if it be irreversible to all, and America be doomed to travel through ages of bondage, let us indulge the consolatory hope that the life of Madison, triumphing over the injuries of time, may become a pillar of light by which some future patriot may reconduct his countrymen to their lost inheritance.

James Barbour, *Eulogium on the Life and Character of James Madison*

Montpelier in the early nineteenth century. Engraving by J. F. E. Prud'homme, after John G. Chapman, in James B. Longacre and James Herring, *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*, vol. III (Philadelphia, 1836). A visitor from New England in 1834 observed that "the estate of Montpelier is situated in the centre of an amphitheatre of mountains, and is one of the most romantic spots I ever beheld; just such a one as a philosopher might choose, there to close his earthly career." (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)