

# Dolley's documentary

BY: HANNAH WEVER  
REVIEW STAFF WRITER

Published: June 25, 2009



Photo by Hannah Wever

The country's first First Lady is the subject of a new documentary production which filmed scenes last week at Montpelier. The program, which depicts the life of Dolley Madison in her roles of cultured and elegant hostess, and sharp political advisor to her husband, President James Madison, is scheduled to air in early 2010 on PBS' "American Experience" history series.

Producers and filmmakers, of National Productions and Middlemarch Films, said they chose to tell Dolley Madison's story to portray

women's participation in politics during the early to mid 19th century. The program is produced and directed by Muffie Meyer, and written by Ron Blumer.

This unique perspective on American history will be the fourth in a series of historical programs by this filmmaking team. Recent productions are a Revolutionary War documentary and biographical programs about Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton.

"We were really wanting to tell the story of a woman for a change," tpt National Productions Executive Producer Catherine Allan explained. "[Dolley Madison] played a social role in a way that women could actually be involved in politics in those days." Allan said Dolley Madison's famed skills as a hostess and her political perspicacity made her one of the most influential women of her time. During James Madison's time in Washington, Dolley Madison was known for encouraging diplomats and politicians of both parties to engage in civil dialogue and cooperate in a bipartisan manner.

Earlier this year, crews filmed interviews with experts at Montpelier and the University of Virginia.

Location filming, including historical reenactment scenes began June 13 in Baltimore. Then, cast and crew moved to locations in and around Richmond shooting scenes at the state capital building and the Governor's Executive Mansion, among other places. Thursday, the production arrived in Orange County Thursday to film scenes at Montpelier.

Some of the film's scenes are shot on an authentic looking, colonial era set of cobblestone streets and early-America facades which have remained intact since being constructed three years ago. The colonial Virginia Film Commission backlot was first constructed for the Emmy-winning HBO miniseries about President John Adams.

A primary benefit to using the Virginia Film Commission's backlot, Allan explained, was that crews didn't have to spend hours and hours disguising and camouflaging anachronistic details like power lines and modern day streetscapes.

In fact, the New York-based production company relied heavily on the Virginia Film Commission to arrange for locations which bore historical significance to the Madisons. "The film commission has been incredibly helpful to us," Allan said.

At times, some locations served as stand-ins for others, Allan said. The Governor's Mansion in Richmond, for example, was the backdrop for White House scenes.

And because Montpelier has only just embarked on its quest to re-create an authentic interior for the house, much of Montpelier is now without furniture and fixtures. That means the footage used for the program will contain mainly exterior shots of Montpelier. Allan said Montpelier will appear in the program during the late 1700s, and again, during James Madison's retirement years. In these scenes, the Madisons are represented by stand-in actors.

Back in the New York studios actors will portray the famous first lady and her husband during filming later this summer, in scenes shot against studio sets. In the program, Dolley Madison will be portrayed by actress Eve Best and Jefferson Mays plays the role of James Madison.

And although props and backdrops may not be period pieces, Allan said, actors' lines are mostly the Madisons' own.

"The actors are performing from [film subjects'] own words, taken from all kinds of written sources we were able to find," Allan said.

In some cases, local historians and scholars like Montpelier's Director of Education Beth Taylor provided vital details for producers, along with access to personal writings, letters and journals of the Madisons'. In addition, Virginia Center for Digital History's Dolley Madison project at UVa, under the direction of Holly Schulman, provided innumerable facts about the first lady.

A couple of written accounts in particular proved to be a veritable gold mine of first-person memories and recollections of Dolley Madison, Allan said. One of those was the memoirs of Paul Jennings, an African-American slave who lived for years with James and Dolley Madison; the other was a biography of Dolley Madison written by her niece. Expert perspectives of the Madisons, their time in Washington, and the politics of the day

were achieved through filmed interviews with Catherine Allgor, Richard Norton Smith, Carol Berkin, Cokie Roberts and Carl Sferrazza Anthony.

Meyer said fundraising for the film began almost six years ago. The film's total production costs will range from \$50,000 to \$100,000, she estimated. Financial support for the Dolley Madison film project has come from many directions, she added. "Everyone from the film commission up to the governor," Meyer said, "could not have been more cooperative."

Production will continue next month at a studio in New York, when film editors set to work trimming the hours of footage down to a 90-minute program.