



<< Portrait of Elizabeth Kortright Monroe, aged 26, painted by Swiss artist Louis Sene in Paris in 1794.

Elizabeth accompanied her husband when he served as U.S. Minister to France, where her sophistication and ease with European society endeared her to the French. She also played an instrumental role in rescuing the wife of Marquis de La Fayette from the guillotine during the closing days of the Reign of Terror.

Serving as first lady from 1817–1825, she played a role in the “Era of Good Feelings” and assisted when the White House was substantially increased in size and redecored. Yet Elizabeth holds a somewhat damaged legacy as first lady, with critics accusing her of being aloof and detached. What they didn’t know was that she suffered from severe illnesses during the last two decades of her life. Though very little primary source material exists on Elizabeth—James burned their correspondence after her death in 1830, possibly in a grief-stricken state—she deserves closer attention as an important supporter of her husband during his 40-year career as a diplomat and politician.

### Early Lives

Born in Westmoreland County, Virginia, on April 28, 1758, Monroe entered the College of William and Mary in 1774. After Lexington and Concord ignited the War for Independence, the 18-year-old Monroe joined the Continental Army as a lieutenant. At the pivotal Battle of Trenton, on December 26, 1776, Lieutenant Monroe was shot in the chest; the bullet passed into his left shoulder and severed an artery.

He survived his battle wound and was then promoted to captain. Monroe fought in key battles including Harlem Heights, Brandywine, Germantown and Monmouth. In 1780, Virginia Governor

### James and Elizabeth Monroes’ Supportive Partnership

By Daniel S. Marrone

# Promoting The Era of Good Feelings

Though not as much is known about Elizabeth Kortright Monroe in comparison to her husband, fifth U.S. President James Monroe, their strong and steadfast partnership helped them skillfully navigate life in Europe and at the helm of an expanding nation.

Thomas Jefferson promoted Monroe to a full colonel in the Virginia militia.

Three years later, Monroe was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates, representing the state in the Continental Congress sessions from 1783 through 1786. In early 1786, while in the nation’s capital in New York City, Monroe was introduced to Elizabeth Kortright. Born on June 30, 1768, Elizabeth was from a New York family that could trace its background to the Dutch settlers of Nieuw Amsterdam that later would become New York City. Elizabeth’s father, Lawrence Kortright, became wealthy as a privateer during the French and Indian War. Although he took no part in the Revolutionary War, Kortright’s sizable fortune from international trade diminished after the war when many former business associates shunned him for his loyalty to the Crown. Nevertheless, the Kortright family was still well off. Exceptionally bright, Elizabeth received a formal education—rare for women during her time—and excelled in playing the pianoforte. James, 10 years older than Elizabeth, was immediately smitten with this pretty, petite, blue-eyed 17-year-old.

After a brief courtship, they married on February 16, 1786, at Trinity Church on Wall Street. They honeymooned on Long Island—at the time a bucolic, heavily forested isle surrounded by Long Island Sound to the north and the Atlantic Ocean to the east and south. One of James’ friends commented: “Monroe d’camped for Long Island with the little smiling Venus in his Arms.” (A portrait of Elizabeth that captures the essence of that remark is displayed at their Highland home, which abuts Jefferson’s Monticello estate in Charlottesville, Va.)



The earliest preserved portrait of James Monroe as Minister Plenipotentiary to France in 1794.

The newlyweds first lived in a large Manhattan mansion with Elizabeth’s widowed father. (Elizabeth’s mother, Hannah Aspinwall, died in 1777.) As soon as his term as congressman ended, Monroe planned to bring his new bride to Virginia and earn a living as an attorney. By fall 1786, Elizabeth was pregnant and didn’t want to leave her father, but in a letter to Thomas Jefferson, Monroe wrote: “She left her state and her family and became a good Virginian.” As a Continental Army war hero and with close connections to Jefferson, Madison and Washington, Monroe quickly established a thriving law practice.

In April 1787, voters in Fredericksburg elected him to the Virginia Assembly in Richmond. Devoted to his family (baby Eliza was born on December 5, 1786), Monroe returned to his Fredericksburg home as often as possible. After the December 1787 legislative debate over ratification of the

Constitution, Monroe voted against ratification, but the Virginia Assembly as a whole voted in favor.

James Madison and Monroe ran against each other in the first U.S. congressional election representing northern Virginia. Though Madison won, the two remained friends. An unfortunate death in Monroe’s extended family created a potential opportunity for him. William Grayson, Monroe’s cousin, was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1788 and served until his sudden death from a heart attack on March 12, 1790. The Virginia legislature voted for Monroe to complete Grayson’s term, and the 32-year old lawyer was sworn in on December 6, 1790.

The U.S. capital was by now located in Philadelphia. From here, Elizabeth would frequently travel 90 miles to New York City to care for her father, who had become ill. By this time, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe were leading a political movement deeply opposed to Federalist policies. These breakaway anti-Federalist politicians were called “Jeffersonian Republicans” and the political body they formed was called the Republican Party. Beginning in 1799, the political entity was renamed the Democratic-Republican Party.

### The Monroes in Paris

Some idealistic individuals such as Jefferson and Monroe believed that the French Revolution would follow the American Revolution paradigm. In this vision, the oppressed French people would overthrow the unpopular Bourbon monarchy and form a democracy. Instead, a rebellion commenced in July 1789 that lasted a decade and resulted in the beheadings of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette.

In September 1789, Jefferson vacated his post as U.S. Minister to France, and President Washington proposed that a Federalist colleague, Gouverneur Morris, fill the vacant post, even though Morris was stridently pro-British. After his appointment in 1792, Morris continued his ultraconservative rhetoric and



Elizabeth and James Monroe married on February 16, 1786, at Trinity Church in what is now the Financial District of New York.

publicly denounced the 1793 executions of the French king and queen. By 1794, the insurrectionists gained control of the beleaguered French government. One of their first actions was to demand the recall of Morris. Morris had no wish to remain and hurriedly evacuated his post.

Washington then offered the post to James Monroe, who quickly said yes. James, Elizabeth and 7-year-old Eliza landed in France on July 31, 1794. Here they heard the shocking news that three days earlier a coup d'état resulted in the executions of Reign of Terror leaders Maximilien Robespierre, Louis Antoine de Saint-Just and other leaders of the radical clique known as the Jacobin Club.

The French *citoyens* then formed a broader-based governing body. The French were at first suspicious of the newly arrived U.S. Minister based on their experience with Morris. Unlike the pro-British Federalist, though, Monroe was ardently pro-French, as was his wife. Stylish, beautiful and fluent in French, Elizabeth was quickly adored by the French public.

Young Eliza was sent to a Parisian finishing school run by Madame Campan, where she was inculcated in aristocratic manners. According to Monroe biographer Harry Ammon (1990): “Unfortunately, this aristocratic polish was accompanied by a large measure of snobbery. Her pupils, including Eliza Monroe, tended to develop exaggerated notions of their own importance, whatever their origins. Eliza, at this time an only child much indulged by her parents, emerged from Mme. Campan’s school a vain young lady who never forgot (and gladly reminded all and sundry) that Hortense de Beauharnais [later the mother of Napoleon III] had been a school friend of hers. Such open snobbery made her

highly unpopular with her contemporaries.” Years later when she was married to George Hay, Eliza named her daughter “Hortensia” after her illustrious friend. Unfortunately, Eliza would affect a similar regal attitude when she later substituted for her ailing mother as first lady. In doing so, Eliza engendered enmity toward the Monroes, especially Elizabeth.



Elizabeth Monroe helped rescue Madame Marie Adrienne Françoise de Noailles, wife of Marquis de La Fayette, from execution.

### A Smooth Diplomatic Move

Under the Monroes, a growing friendship developed between the United States and France. Adored by Parisians, 26-year-old Elizabeth was named *La belle Américaine*. In 1794, Marie Adrienne Françoise de Noailles, wife of American military general Marquis de La Fayette, was

imprisoned in a Paris jail. Awaiting the guillotine, the fate that befell her sister, mother, and grandmother, the French noblewoman had given up hope of being rescued. Adrienne’s uncle, diplomat Emmanuel Marie Louis de Noailles, asked Monroe to intercede.

Fearing that Monroe’s direct intervention in her release would cause an international incident, Elizabeth volunteered to go to the prison where Adrienne was being held.

In his autobiography, James Monroe said he “procured a carriage of his own as soon as he could, had it put in the best order, and his servants dressed in like manner. In this carriage Mrs. Monroe drove directly to the prison in which Madame Lafayette was confined. ... Inquiry was made, whose carriage was it? The answer given was that of the American Minister. Who is in it? His wife. What brought her here? To see Madame Lafayette.” When the mobs learned the identity of the visitor, Elizabeth was permitted to proceed.

Her brave visit swayed public opinion. The French Committee of Public

Safety released the French noblewoman from prison on January 22, 1795.

### An Encore to France

On July 4, 1796, Monroe celebrated the United States’ 20th birthday amid much symbolic fanfare in Paris. But a brawl between opposing American political parties—the Federalists and the anti-Federalist Republicans—at the celebration embarrassed Washington, who was already displeased with Monroe for being too pro-French. Washington favored strict American neutrality between France and Great Britain. Shortly after news of the riot appeared in American newspapers, Monroe was recalled as minister.

The Monroe family arrived in Philadelphia on June 27, 1797, and left sometime after July 25 for their Albermarle farm, now known as Monroe Hill, on the grounds of the University of Virginia. Jefferson lived nearby, so he and Monroe often visited. By late summer 1797, Monroe reluctantly resumed his legal career but politics was still foremost on his mind. He ran for and was elected governor of Virginia and served at the state capital in Richmond beginning in December 1799.

In May 1799, Elizabeth gave birth to their son, James Spence Monroe. His life was short: He contracted whooping cough and died on September 28, 1800. The Monroes’ third child, Maria Hester Monroe, was born April 8, 1802. The end of 1802 signaled the conclusion of Monroe’s third year as Virginia governor.

On January 10, 1803, Monroe received a note from President Jefferson urging him to accept an assignment to purchase the port of New Orleans and secure navigation rights to the Mississippi River. Rumors were circulating, later proven to be accurate, that Spain had ceded the vast Louisiana Territory to France. With France continually at war with Great Britain and its European allies, Napoleon required additional cash to continue his conquests across the continent. As timing

was critical, Jefferson pleaded with Monroe to immediately sail to France.

The Monroes visited Kortright family members in New York City before setting out on their ocean journey. Crossing the Atlantic during the winter of 1803 took 29 days and was particularly difficult, with ice storms and squalls rendering all members of the Monroe family seasick. Elizabeth was also suffering from rheumatism, an ailment that would plague her for the rest of her life.

### Diplomatic Deadlock

The Monroes arrived in Paris in April 1803. James found the French ready to sell the entire Louisiana Territory, an offer he instantly accepted. In return for a land area larger than France, Great Britain, Portugal and Spain combined, the United States paid 80 million francs (the equivalent of \$15 million in 1803 dollars) for 828,000 square miles. Monroe was also assigned to purchase West Florida, but he faced intractable resistance by the Spanish to sell their Florida territories.

In mid-1803, James Monroe was ordered to report to London, where he expected to be shunned for his widely known anti-British sentiments. Much to his surprise, the British welcomed him and his family. The British also revealed to Monroe their pleasure in knowing that the Louisiana Territory was now out of the control of their archenemy France. However, there were problems festering between America and Great Britain. The most egregious issue was the forced impressments of American citizens into the British Royal Navy.

The cold, smoggy London air adversely affected Elizabeth's rheumatism, and baby Maria Hester also experienced respiratory trouble. Stymied diplomatically in London in acquiring West Florida from the Spanish, Monroe and his family returned to Paris. On December 2,

1804, the Monroes attended the sumptuously staged coronation of Napoléon I, Empereur de France. A week later, Monroe set off to Spain and arrived in Madrid on January 1, 1805.

After months of fruitless negotiations, Monroe wrote to Secretary of State James Madison that the only way to obtain West Florida from Spain was through military force, an action that Madison said Congress would never approve. Monroe returned to Paris in June 1805. Shortly thereafter, he reluc-



1904 line engraving after a drawing by André Castaigne of the signing of the Louisiana Purchase. Left to right: Marquis François de Barbe-Marbois, Robert Livingston and James Monroe in Paris, April 30, 1803.

tantly returned to London with family for continued negotiation attempts to end disputes between Great Britain and America. Again, Monroe met intransigence by the British. Worse still, Elizabeth was having fainting episodes from the onset of what has been speculated to be epilepsy.

Adding to James' troubles were the actions of warring France and Great

Britain. Both countries were fearful that the United States would take the opposing side in this war that was rapidly spreading across Europe. As a consequence, the navies of both countries were escalating the seizures of American cargo vessels. Monroe tried tirelessly to resolve some of the contentious issues between America and Great Britain, but the resulting 1806 treaty did not end the policy of impressing American sailors. President Jefferson rejected the Monroe-Pinkney treaty, and in late June 1807, Secretary of State Madison recalled Monroe from his post.

Arriving in Norfolk, Va., Monroe immediately traveled to Washington to meet with Jefferson and Madison. Jefferson offered Monroe the position of governor of the Louisiana Territory, which he declined. His Virginia friends had no other job or task for him. Given this cold-shoulder treatment, Monroe left Washington deeply hurt. Jefferson later wrote to Monroe explaining his actions, but Monroe remained angry with Madison.

George Hay, a prominent Virginia attorney, was a frequent caller at the Monroes' Highland home. He and Eliza were married in October 1808. On December 7,

1808, Madison easily won election as the nation's fourth president. At the same time, Monroe had won a seat in the Virginia legislature. In September 1809, James and Elizabeth welcomed their first grandchild, Hortensia Monroe Hay, to the family. Being elected again to the Virginia legislature and the joy of becoming a grandfather did not alleviate Monroe's anger toward Madison. Whether for political reasons or simply to re-unite former colleagues, Jefferson made repeated efforts to rekindle the friendship between the two men, a feat that was accomplished by 1810.

## Mounting Health Issues

In January 1811, President Madison appointed Virginia Governor John Tyler to a vacant federal judgeship. The Virginia legislature then elected Monroe to complete Tyler's term as Virginia governor. Two months later, Madison wrote to Monroe urging him to resign and accept the position of U.S. Secretary of State. Within weeks of assuming the new role, Monroe launched verbal attacks against the British and French for seizing American cargo ships. The French agreed to release ships trapped in French ports. However, the British continued to seize American sailors and ships.

Adding to Monroe's problems at his new post was a family crisis. Elizabeth was experiencing mounting health ailments, which James described as "indisposition." Ill to the point of incapacitation, Elizabeth asked Eliza to assume some of the social duties required of the wife of the U.S. Secretary of State, but she was ill-suited for the task.

## The War of 1812

By 1812, America was divided by political party affiliation. The Democrat-Republicans had strongholds in the U.S. south, west and in cities with burgeoning immigrant populations such as New York City, Philadelphia and Baltimore. The Federalists favored continued trade with Great Britain and were adamantly opposed to war; the Democrat-Republicans favored expanding the power and size of the new nation; and the "War Hawks" led by Henry Clay Sr. of Kentucky were pushing for war with Great Britain. After negotiations with the British failed, President Madison went to Congress on April 1, 1812, and obtained a 60-day reinstatement of a complete trade embargo. In quelling rapidly worsening relations with the United States, the British Parliament voted to end the impressments of American sailors on June 23, 1812. It was too little, too late.



Illustration by Joseph Boggs Beale of Washingtonians fleeing the city during the burning of the White House and the Capitol by the British on August 24, 1814.

Five days earlier, at Madison's urging, Congress declared war on Great Britain. The United States had a small standing army and navy compared with the British. By spring 1813, British ships were blockading Charleston, New York City, Point Royal and Savannah, as well as the mouth of the Mississippi River that flows into New Orleans. Though the U.S. Navy won several key battles at sea, the American armies, composed mainly of state militias, were almost always routed with catastrophic casualties. Secretary of State Monroe suggested to Secretary of War Brigadier General John Armstrong that he strengthen land and naval forces defending Washington. Armstrong refused, arguing that the threat of a raid on the nation's capital was only a strategic ruse by the British, and he neglected the defense of Washington.

On August 18, 1813, the British armada landed on Maryland's southern shore, targeting Washington for invasion. Six days later, the British invaded Washington and torched many government buildings, including the Executive Mansion. Fortunately a massive, overnight thunderstorm with deadly winds disrupted the British marauders. The heavy torrents of rain doused fires preventing many buildings from burning to the ground.

Just over two weeks later, the British launched an attack on Baltimore. They met stiff resistance at Fort McHenry. After two days of unrelenting bombardment, the British observed a giant garrison flag being raised over the fort, signifying unyielding defiance by the stalwart Americans.

On September 14, 1813, thwarted in the attack on Baltimore, the British

departed. Also on this date, Madison appointed James Monroe to replace the dishonored Armstrong. Now Monroe wore two hats: Secretary of State and Secretary of War. With these enormous responsibilities before him, Monroe feared that his nation was woefully unprepared to fight the British. Accordingly, he drew up a plan to build a standing army of 100,000 soldiers. Thankfully, the war officially ended on Christmas Eve 1814, at Ghent. On February 18, 1815, the U.S. Senate ratified the treaty. The United States gained no new territories in the war, but proved that it could ably defend itself.

### In the White House

On March 4, 1817, Monroe was inaugurated the fifth U.S. president. During the first years of his administration, the nation remained at peace, experienced a minimum of partisan turmoil and continued to expand in size. Spain ceded its Florida territories to the United States, and the western U.S. boundary with Spanish-held territory was established.

However, much of the Era of Good Feelings euphoria ended with the Panic of 1819 that lasted for two years. In 1820, Monroe signed into law the Missouri Compromise, temporarily defusing the threat of war between the North and South over the issue of slavery. Americans were also flexing power on a global basis. Based on a principle that the European powers must not interfere in the Western Hemisphere and the United States must not become entangled in European disputes, Monroe declared that the nation would hereby protect the newly independent, former colonies of Spain against any aggression by European powers. This landmark principle of a hemispheric shield of protection became known as the Monroe Doctrine.

While James was achieving major success in his presidency, Elizabeth was suffering from progressively worsening illnesses. Now in her 50s, she attempted to fulfill her first lady responsibilities,

but could not match the social élan of her celebrated predecessor, Dolley Madison. Whereas Dolley would doff elaborately feathered, turbaned hats and joyously intermingle with constituents, Senate wives and foreign diplomats, Elizabeth was more restrained in her dealings with guests in the newly repaired Executive Mansion. Unable to participate in some social functions due to illness, Elizabeth's absence was often linked to her being aloof and detached.

Eliza added to her mother's problems when she substituted as first lady. She limited politicians or foreign diplomats from attending her 17-year old sister Maria Hester's March 9, 1820, wedding to Samuel Lawrence Gouveneur. The New York City-born lawyer was Monroe's nephew and also served as the president's private secretary.

Though no longer young, she is still a very handsome woman."

After Monroe ended his second term as president, the couple faced financial troubles and were forced to sell their Highland home in Albemarle County and retire to their Oak Hill home in Aldie, Va. On December 29, 1826, Monroe wrote to nephew and son-in-law Samuel L. Gouveneur that Elizabeth "had a convulsion, which was attended with the most painful consequences." She suffered a seizure, collapsed near an open fireplace, and was burned over much of her body.

Elizabeth lived only a few more years, dying September 23, 1830. James was devastated by the loss of his wife of 44 years. He moved in with daughter Maria Hester Monroe Gouveneur and her husband in New York City. After Elizabeth



At their last major event in the White House, Elizabeth's appearance was described:

*“Her dress was superb black; neck and arms bare and beautifully formed; her hair in puffs ... Though no longer young, she is still a very handsome woman.”*

Eliza's autocratic actions spoiled Maria Hester's wedding, the first event of its kind in the White House for a sitting president. Louisa Catherine Johnson Adams, the European-raised American wife of John Quincy Adams, referred to Eliza in her diary as being "so proud and so mean I scarcely ever met such a compound."

### Final Years

On New Year's Day 1825, James and Elizabeth Monroe held their last major event in the White House. Elizabeth's appearance was described: "Her dress was superb black; neck and arms bare and beautifully formed; her hair in puffs and dressed high on the head and ornamented with white ostrich plumes; around her neck an elegant necklace.

died, James told family and friends that he would not live long, which proved true: He died less than 10 months later, on July 4, 1831.

For her courage in facing down Paris mobs and saving the life of Adrienne de La Fayette, for her unwavering support to her husband while he served in a wide array of elected and appointed positions during a four-decade-long political career, and for doing it all while suffering chronic and misunderstood illnesses, Elizabeth deserves more respect as first lady and contributor to our nation's beginnings. 🙏

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