



## The Top Sixteen Things That Most Americans Probably Don't Know About James Madison

The Florida Verve

**O**n March 16, 2018, JMI celebrated the 267th birthday of the institute's namesake, James Madison. This Founding Father is well-known far and wide, and rightfully so. After all, he was the principal architect of the U.S. Constitution and its Bill of Rights, he co-authored the Federalist Papers, and he served as the fourth President of the United States. But what about Madison's personality, daily life,

characteristics, habits, and quirks? From captivating to unconventional, here are 16 facts about James Madison that most Americans probably do not know.

James Madison wasn't born at his family's ancestral home, Montpelier. Instead, on March 16, 1751, he was born in Port Conway, VA, at Belle Grove Plantation, the childhood home of his mother, Nelly Conway Madison. The original home where

Virginia Historical Marker is located near the site.

James Madison liked throwing barbecues. Archaeologists at Montpelier have discovered barbecue pits and other related items that date back to Madison's lifetime. Virginians loved their barbecue parties and the festive flair that came with them: good food, good drink, and good or bad dancing. Indeed, the months of spring, summer, and fall were referred to as "barbecue season" by Virginians during the 19th century.

Hand me down my walking cane. Per Thomas Jefferson's will, he bequeathed his favorite walking staff with a handle made of animal horn to James Madison. Of the gift Madison wrote "a token of the place I held in the friendship of one whom I so much revered and loved when living, and whose memory can never cease to be dear to me."

Madison was a bibliophile. His library at Montpelier consisted of over 4,000 books and various ephemera.

Madison was a great storyteller. Despite being an introvert, he was well known for giving entertaining accounts of the Founding Era. Indeed, while enjoying the privacy and comfort of his Montpelier home in his post-Presidency years, Madison captivated visitors with his stories about the most important moments in the formative stages of U.S. history. Visitors often described the flash in his blue eyes as he regaled them with an insider's account of this important period.

He was "The Man in Black" long before that label became attached to other celebrities. Evidently Madison liked to keep it fairly simple in terms of style. In

Paul Jennings' memoir *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*, he describes Madison as dressing "wholly in black." Jennings was born into slavery at Montpelier and accompanied the Madisons to the White House as a young child.

We tend to think of James Madison as the dignified persona we see in artists' depictions of the era, but he had a folksy nickname: "Jemmy." Indeed, among his contemporaries Madison was frequently referred to as "Jemmy" throughout his life. His parents originated the nickname. Apparently, it's an old Scottish moniker that signifies endearment.

The common historical narrative concerning Madison's personality is that he lacked a sense of humor. This is false. According to close friends and family, Madison's humor was brilliant. Indeed, he loved the ludicrous and didn't take himself too seriously at all. One visitor at Montpelier remarked that James and Dolley Madison "...tease each other like two children."

Madison, whose presidency was harshly criticized during the War of 1812, received rare praise from no less than an important contemporary. Although some historians still discount the importance of Madison's presidency, the independent-minded John Adams did not. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson, he wrote that James Madison "...acquired more glory, and established more Union, than all his three Predecessors, Washington, Adams, and Jefferson put together."

Apparently Madison was a huge fan of hats. In fact, he rarely went outside without wearing one. In Lynne Cheney's excellent biography *James Madison, A Life Reconsidered*, she notes that on one

occasion, “Someone took his hat, his only hat, forcing him to stay indoors for two days until at last he managed to buy another one.”

At Montpelier James and Dolley surrounded with themselves with their famous friends in a figurative sense. According to historian and biographer Ralph Ketcham an area inside their home “was sometimes called the ‘hall of notables,’ for the many portraits and busts of the Madisons’ friends, including Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, John Adams, Monroe, Lafayette, Baron von Humboldt, and others.”

The Madisons loved to exercise. Their preferred method was taking long walks on the grounds of the Montpelier estate. However, if the weather was inclement, they would chase each other around the porch of their home.

Madison failed to win a 1777 election to the Virginia House of Delegates because he refused to go along with the Old Dominion’s tradition at the time of giving alcohol to

voters on Election Day.

He might have suffered from epilepsy. Lynne Cheney states that Madison frequently had “sudden attacks, somewhat resembling epilepsy.”

Alexander Hamilton’s infamous rival and dueling slayer introduced Madison to his future wife, Dolley. Indeed, it was none other than Aaron Burr who set up one of the most famous couples in American history.

Madison departed life on his own terms. His last words, “Nothing more than a change of mind, my dear,” are often quoted, but there’s more to the story. While on his deathbed, Madison was advised by his doctor to take some stimulants to keep him alive to see the Fourth of July, the same historical date when his fellow Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, died. Madison, however, declined. Instead, he died on the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution of his beloved home state, Virginia.