

# Elizabeth Kortright Monroe and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Women's Rights

By Audrey Parks

Monticello High School, Class of 2017



Elizabeth Kortright Monroe

Image courtesy of <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

While the election of 1816 awarded James Monroe a rightful spot in the limelight, little was recorded of his wife Elizabeth Kortright Monroe. Upon her death, James Monroe burned their letters. History paints a stately picture of Mrs. Monroe as a great contributor to Mr. Monroe's success, to which John Quincy Adams attested when he wrote that "she accompanied him on all his journeying thro' this world of care."<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Kortright was born on June 30th, 1768, to Lawrence and Hannah Kortright of New York. She first appeared in the eyes of Americans upon her marriage to Congressman James Monroe at the age of seventeen; James was twenty-seven at the time. The forty-four year union of James and Elizabeth proved close and harmonious. While James Monroe shared proudly that Elizabeth "left her state & her family, & became a good Virginian,"<sup>2</sup> his friend William Wirt felt otherwise and remarked Elizabeth was the "very model of a perfect matron" but in a manner that still had "a little too much of New York."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dan Preston and Heidi Stello, *Quotations of James Monroe* (Charlottesville: Ash Lawn-Highland, 2002), 85.

<sup>2</sup> Monroe, James. *James Monroe to George Campbell, September 6, 1815*. Letter. From *The Papers of James Monroe*. <http://academics.umw.edu/jamesmonroepapers/searchable-database-of-correspondence/> (accessed April 27, 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Harry Ammon, *James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), 163.

After getting married in February of 1786, the Monroe's first daughter, Eliza, arrived ten months later in December. In a letter to neighbor and friend Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe remarked that "Mrs. Monroe hath added a daughter to our society who though noisy, contributes greatly to its amusement."<sup>4</sup> In the course of the year 1786, Elizabeth Kortright Monroe left her home, became a wife, and had a child.

In 1794, George Washington appointed James Monroe to be the Minister of France. As the wife of an American diplomat in France during the French Revolution, Elizabeth used her influence to save the wife and daughters of the Marquis de Lafayette. In his autobiography, James Monroe recorded how Elizabeth Monroe visited Madame Lafayette in prison, where she awaited the guillotine under the order of the Committee of Public Safety. Monroe added that "the liberation of Madame Lafayette soon followed" due to the effect of this emotional visit on public opinion.<sup>5</sup>

While in France, Elizabeth Kortright Monroe befriended Mary Pinckney, the wife of French Ambassador Charles Pinckney. The letterbook of Mary Pinckney provides a portrait of Elizabeth, the Monroe's French estate, and upper class society and ethics preceding the election of 1816. Elizabeth Monroe's youthfulness was proven by the vivid descriptions in Pinckney's letters. Unlike many women of the day, Elizabeth Monroe did not wear wigs while in France, and instead teased her curly brunette hair in the "à la grecque" fashion, that is, pinned curls, as seen in her portrait by Louis Sene at age twenty-six.



*Elizabeth Monroe by Louis Sene, 1796*  
Image courtesy of <http://www.firstladies.org>

---

<sup>4</sup> Monroe, James. *James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, July 27, 1787*. Letter. From *Founders Online*. <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-11-02-0556> (accessed April 27, 2016)

<sup>5</sup> James Monroe, *The Autobiography of James Monroe*, ed. Stuart Jerry Brown (Syracuse University Press, New York, 1959), 71.

While in France, Elizabeth created and preserved a remarkable Rococo home known as La Folie de Bouexière. Pinckney wrote in a letter to Manigault that “Their house is a little temple.”<sup>6</sup> Upon returning to the United States, the Monroes incorporated French aesthetics into their home design and lifestyle, perpetuating the moniker of “la belle américaine,” a name ordained by the public while in France. The introduction of European style into the American political scene provided a sophisticated air for the election of 1816. Elizabeth Monroe’s greatest footprint is seen in her French infusion into the Era of Good Feelings. Original objects purchased in France passed down by Monroe descendants show evidence of Elizabeth’s apparent flair.

In 1799, Elizabeth Monroe gave birth to the Monroe’s only son, James Spence Monroe. He would die a year and a half later. Following the death of her father in 1794 and her son in 1800, Elizabeth Kortright Monroe became increasingly frail and participated less often the affairs of the public. Historians suspect that Elizabeth Monroe may have always suffered from epilepsy, or, “the falling sickness,” though vague references in letters do not provide enough evidence to truly diagnose the cause of her illness. Elizabeth took a less active role as a hostess due to her poor health. Two years after the birth of James Spence, Maria Hester, her second daughter, was born in 1802. Her absence of societal appearances due to poor health contributed to her perceived aloofness and political detachment.

Elizabeth Monroe became first lady during the elections of 1816 at the age of 48. Her daughter, Eliza Monroe Hay, acted as her social substitute when she experienced bouts of poor health. Throughout the campaigning and election process, Elizabeth Monroe supported her husband and family in her grace and elegance, following the social protocol of the 19th century. Elizabeth Kortright Monroe passed away the year before her husband on September 23rd, 1830. John Quincy Adams gave a tribute at her funeral, praising the manner “that with the external beauty and elegance of deportment, she united the more precious and endearing qualities which mark the fulfillment of all the social duties, and adorn with grace and fill with enjoyment, the tender relations of domestic life.”<sup>7</sup>

### **19<sup>th</sup> Century Women’s Rights**

The stereotype of women in the 19th century was largely standard. As the first lady and the wife of a diplomat, Elizabeth Monroe led a life of privilege though she upheld and represented the ideal American woman. Stereotypes of women in the 19th century barred many women from actively participating in public life, as a woman’s role was in the home. Society tasked women with domestic roles such as childbearing and child rearing.

The opportunity for self-improvement and education did exist for women, and James Monroe supported female education. The Monroes sent their daughter Eliza Monroe Hay to the Parisian school of Madame Campan, an elite academy of female education. Female education was mainly limited to wealthy families who had the financial ability to hire tutors or pay tuition to female

---

<sup>6</sup> James Wootton, *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe* (Charlottesville: Ash Lawn-Highland, 2002), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Preston and Stello, *Quotations of James Monroe*, 85.

schools. Geographically, the origin of American education existed in New England; Boston established the first public school in 1820. In a speech to the Virginia General Assembly, Monroe argued that “in such a government education should be diffused throughout the whole society, and for that purpose the means of acquiring it made not only practicable but easy to every citizen...”<sup>8</sup> Education remained largely restricted on the basis of gender, race, and wealth until the 20th century, liberated due to the crucial kineticism of the 19th century. James Monroe did not believe in the exclusion of women in education, and once remarked “I take a deep interest...in the success of female education; and have been delighted, wherever I have been, to witness the attention paid to it.”<sup>9</sup>



*Sarah and Angelina Grimke*

Image courtesy of <http://www.citadel.edu/root/images/WHM/grimkesisters.jpg>

The beginning of modern feminism gained a voice in the 19th century with the words of the Grimke sisters. In 1837, Angelina Grimke remarked “Whatever it is morally right for man to do, it is morally right for women to do.”<sup>10</sup> The sexes were separated in daily life, and largely in issues of morality during the presidency of James Monroe. Sarah Grimke juxtaposed the reality of women to that of slaves in her essay “The Legal Disabilities of Women” when she remarked “Here now, the very being of a woman, like that of a slave, is absorbed in her master. Any contracts made with her, like those made with slaves by their owners, are a mere nullity.”<sup>11</sup> Women, like slaves, were recognized as property. Antebellum divorce was uncommon, but not unheard of. Women lacked the legal power to annul a marriage, but (the era of good feelings) ushered in a change. In the mid nineteenth century, Sarah Grimke exhibited the limited social positions of women when she wrote “The courts of law will still permit a husband to restrain a wife of her liberty, in case of any gross misbehavior.”<sup>12</sup> Women lived most of their lives on an

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>10</sup> Angelina Grimke, “Human Rights Are Not Founded On Sex” in *Letters to Catherine Beecher* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah M. Grimke, “Letter XII: Legal Disabilities of Women,” in *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Woman* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Grimke, “Letter XII: Legal Disabilities of Women,” 3.

uneven playing ground, beholden to the stereotypes expected and perpetuated by their families. While men were expected to be bold, independent, rational, and brave; women were expected to be weak, irrational, dependent and content. The moral foundation of family was built on the backs of womankind, as society praised women who showed meekness and purity instead of ankles and petticoats. The public sphere belonged to men, while women controlled the domestic domain. Not many couples in arranged marriages were as fortunate to find the love and care of the Monroe's union.

### **Works Cited:**

Ammon, Harry. *James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990.

Black, Allida. "Elizabeth Kortright Monroe." *The First Ladies of the United States of America*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/first-ladies/elizabethmonroe> (accessed April 28, 2016)

Goodheart, Adam. "Divorce, Antebellum Style." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), March 18, 2011.

Grimke, Angelina. "Human Rights Are Not Founded On Sex" in *Letters to Catherine Beecher*. Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838.

Grimke, Sarah M. "Letter XII: Legal Disabilities of Women," in *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Woman*. Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838.

McElroy, Wendy. *Freedom, Feminism, and the State*. New York: The Cato Institute, 1982.

Pinckney, Mary. *Pinckney: Letterbook: 1796-1797*. New York: The Grolier Club of New York, 1946.

Preston, Daniel and Heidi Stello. *Quotations of James Monroe*. Charlottesville: Ash Lawn-Highland, 2002.

Radek, Kimberly M. "Women in the Nineteenth Century." *Women in Literature*. Last modified April 21, 2008. [http://www2.ivcc.edu/gen2002/women\\_in\\_the\\_nineteenth\\_century.htm](http://www2.ivcc.edu/gen2002/women_in_the_nineteenth_century.htm)

Wootton, James. *Elizabeth Kortright Monroe*. Charlottesville: Ash Lawn-Highland, 2002.