

Personal Life of a Political Family

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The Monroe Family

By 1816, James Monroe had gained in national recognition and popularity, and his personal life revolved increasingly around his political career. At the time of the election, the Monroe nuclear family consisted of:

- James Monroe (58 years old)
- Elizabeth Monroe (48 years old)
- Daughter Eliza Monroe Hay (29 years old)
- Son-in-law George Hay (51 years old)
- Granddaughter Hortensia Hay (7 years old)
- Daughter Maria Hester Monroe (14 years old)

It had been sixteen years since Mr. and Mrs. Monroe lost their son James Spence Monroe, who died of illness before the age of two.

Although James Madison, Monroe's close friend and occasional rival, initially excluded him from his presidential cabinet in 1809, Madison asked Monroe to be Secretary of State in 1811. After the Capitol was burned by British forces, it became obvious that the current Secretary of War, John Armstrong, was not prepared to lead the army in the War of 1812. James Monroe took unprecedented action and filled two cabinet positions at once, acting as both Secretary of State and Secretary of War. From 1814 to 1815, his cabinet efforts cost him a great deal of family interaction and wore down his health. It was clear that Monroe needed to recover and restore his energy, and see his family. During the summer of 1815 the Monroe family travelled across Virginia, visiting various hot springs in an attempt to revitalize a weary James Monroe.

The family respite came to an end as James Monroe stepped forward as a presidential candidate; soon the family would have to adjust to life in the perpetual spotlight. As described by Ellen W. Randolph, Thomas Jefferson's granddaughter, "even the most idle and indifferent" would "think and talk a good deal about [the presidential election]."¹ George Hay, Monroe's son-in-law took on the role of campaign manager.² The Monroe women did not take an active role in his 1816 campaign, but they contributed to his image; while his political success made him respected and liked as a politician, his charming family made him respected and liked as an individual. Elizabeth Kortright Monroe was the ideal wife of the era; she was well composed, a good mother, and she never made her political opinions public. She wore the latest Parisian fashion, as did her daughters Eliza and Maria; these women were idolized by much of America.

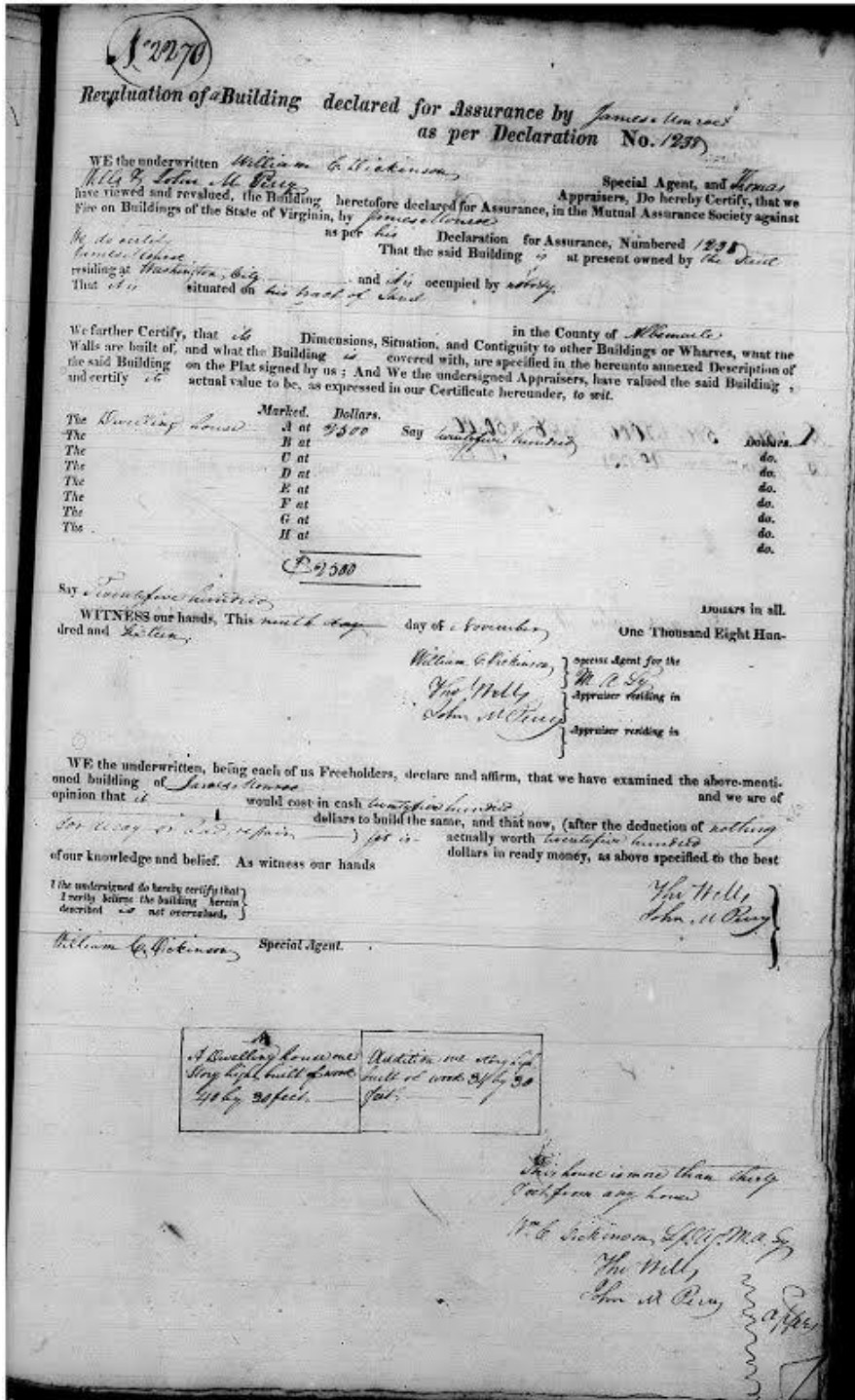
¹ Randolph, Ellen Wayles. *Ellen Wayles Randolph to Thomas Jefferson*, March 19, 1816. Letter. From Founders Online. <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-09-02-0399> (accessed March 31, 2016).

² Harry Ammon, *James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), 353.

However, Elizabeth was not liked unanimously, and the discussion of the reserved nature of the first lady made the Monroe presidency all the more publicized.

Highland in 1816

Monroe made an addition to the main structure at Highland and filed a new, and what would be his final, claim with the Mutual Assurance Company:



Mutual Assurance Claim #1238 for James Monroe
 Image courtesy of James Monroe's Highland

Interestingly, Monroe had not picked out the name "Highland" yet in 1816. When Attorney General Richard Rush visited Monroe at his house in August, the two discussed names for what the property should be called. Rush was still mulling over names after returning to Washington, and after initially suggesting to Monroe he name it "Holland-wood," in honor of the friendship of Lord Holland in England, Rush went on to share several other options:

*"If you reject this, I have another. It is in unison with the motto on your seal; or, more strictly, with your toast last 4th of July. Call it "Seventy Six"! There is a district in South Carolina called ninety six; and why not "Seventy Six" for a country seat? In a little while it would sound as well as any thing else. How would Chippewa do? combining rather a pretty Indian name with one of our victories. For a choice under the Indian head, I refer you to all our Indian treaties! If nothing else will do, I would stick to "La Chaumière". Thus you may gather my dear sir, that my little trip to the mountains was so pleasant that it keeps running in my head still."*³

The Baron de Montlezun also visited Monroe at Highland in September. The traveling Frenchman commented during his visit:

*"Mr. Monroe's residence is a charming retreat: the house is nothing more than improvised; it should be rebuilt on a hill in front, where the situation will be very advantageous."*⁴

Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe

In the beginning of 1816 Jefferson and Monroe were in close contact about their neighboring properties. Jefferson wrote with a question regarding Monroe's vineyard:

*"I have an opportunity of getting some vines planted next month under the direction of M. David, brought up to the business from his infancy. will you permit me to take the trimmings of your vines, such I mean as ought to be taken from them the next month? it shall be done by him so as to ensure no injury to them."*⁵

Monroe also asked Jefferson to mediate a boundary issue with his neighbor William Short between Highland and Short's property called Indian Camp. Monroe was still serving as Secretary of State in Madison's cabinet when Jefferson sent him the costly outcome from the survey:

Monticello Feb. 28. 16.

Dear Sir

The arbitrators, surveyor, E^tc met on the 21st. they decided the line in your favor, but divided costs as a tax on you for so careless a designation of the line as to entrap a subsequent purchaser. the disputed

³ Rush, Richard. *Richard Rush to James Monroe, September 4, 1816*. Letter. From Papers of James Monroe. (accessed August 31, 2016).

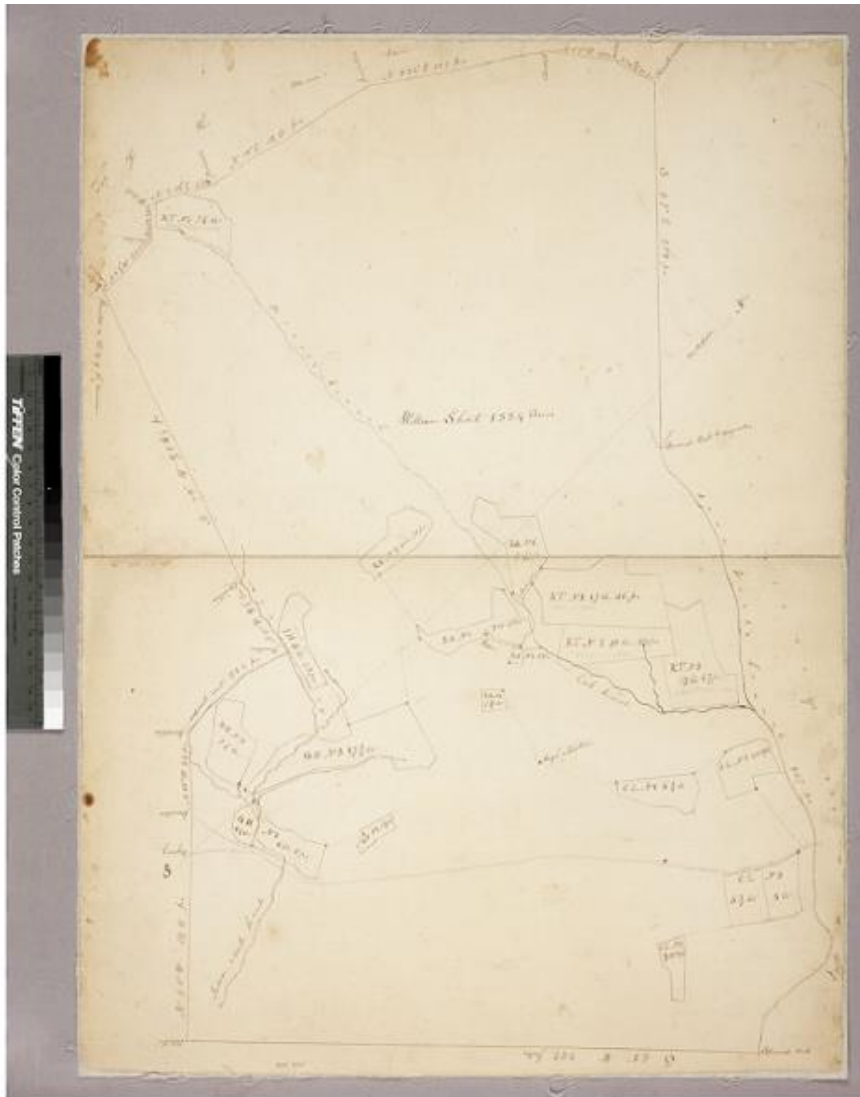
⁴ Eldon F. Wood, Paul A. Sweet and Don A. Swofford. *Ash Lawn-Highland: Home of President James Monroe, Albemarle County, Virginia* (Charlottesville, Virginia: Eldon F. Wood, Paul A. Sweet and Don A. Swofford, ARCHITECTS, no date - probably 1989), 10.

⁵ Jefferson, Thomas. *Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, January 16, 1816*. Letter. From Founders Online. <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-09-02-0232> (accessed April 27, 2016).

lines were found to contain 68. acres. the costs will be 6. or 7.D. a piece to you. I inclose you the original award & the plat you inclosed to me.

ever & affectionately yours.

Th: Jefferson⁶



Jefferson's survey of the land of William Short, which borders Highland on its NE corner. Image courtesy of Morven Farms (University of Virginia)

Jefferson had great confidence in Monroe as a candidate in the 1816 election and wrote to him "God bless and preserve you for the eight years to come especially".⁷ It is striking this letter was written almost two months before it was certain Monroe had won the election.

James Madison and James Monroe

The summer of 1816 Monroe remained devoted to finishing his last duties in Madison's cabinet as Secretary of State, namely working for the demilitarization of the Great Lakes and managing

⁶Jefferson, Thomas. *Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, February 28, 2016*. Letter. From Founders Online. <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-09-02-0351> (accessed April 27, 2016).

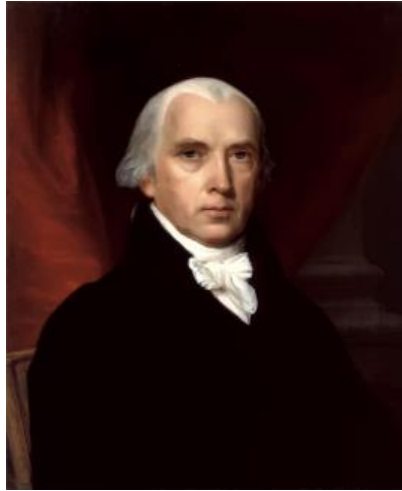
⁷Jefferson, Thomas. *Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, October 9, 2016*. Letter. From Founders Online. <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-10-02-0315> (accessed May 16, 2016).

the fiery temper of the French Ambassador Baron Jean Guillaume Hyde de Neuville, who seemed to take offense with Washington society at every turn. Monroe confided in Madison after a summer of complaints from De Neuville: "If I could be free from this kind of persecution, from these little men, who make great affairs out of trifles and be at liberty to busy myself in my private affairs only...I think I should soon be well."⁸

In 1816 President Madison and Secretary of State Monroe both ordered portraits of each other from artist John Vanderlyn, which they displayed at their homes.⁹



John Vanderlyn



James Madison by Vanderlyn



James Monroe by Vanderlyn

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

During the fall of the year Vanderlyn began seeking patrons to finance an engraving from Monroe's painting, as seen in this advertisement from the Albany Register on November 13:

Mr. Monroe's Portrait.

The genius of VAN DER LYN, as a painter, has been acknowledged in Europe, as well as in his native country. It is with pleasure, therefore, that we present our readers with the following Prospectus, which we trust will be encouraged by every friend to American genius, and the fine arts.

At the suggestion of some friends of Mr. MONROE, Mr. VAN DER LYN proposes to have an Engraving made from a Portrait, lately painted by himself, of that gentleman. The execution of this project in the manner contemplated, will require funds beyond the immediate resources of Mr. Van Der Lyn, and he hopes that the personal friends of Mr. MONROE, and those inclined to encourage the fine arts, will patronize his views by a liberal subscription.

The work will be forthwith commenced; will be executed in a superior style, and, as is expected, will be ready to be delivered in the course of the ensuing autumn. Each subscriber will be entitled to such a number of proof impressions as may be equal to his subscription, at the rate of two dollars each.—*Albany Reg.*

⁸ Ammon, *James Monroe*, 351.

⁹ "The American Revolution," *The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation*, <http://www.ouramericanrevolution.org/index.cfm/object/view/ob0293> (accessed May 16, 2016)

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