

War of 1812: The Burning of Washington

A classroom play by Team HOPE

Cast List

James Madison (MAD).....President of the United States

Dolley Madison (DOLL).....First Lady of the United States

George Gleig (GLEIG).....Soldier in British Army

Elijah Lovejoy (ANCH).....anchor of “The History News Report”

Margaret Fuller (R1).....reporter for “The History News Report”

Nellie Bly (R2)reporter for “The History News Report”

Ernie Pyle (R3).....reporter for “The History News Report”

TEACHER NOTES

SETTING: A contemporary classroom. It is advised to set up the anchor in the front of the room facing the class, in front of some sort of background with “The History New Report.” You may choose to set up the different reporters conducting the interviews around the classroom and have the historical figures come to them. This way it gives the appearance of different locations. A name plate in front of each cast member is highly recommended. A 5x8 index card folded in half works great for this purpose.

COSTUMES: Although not necessary, any period costumes for the historical figures are a great addition. Even a simple hat or wig is excellent.

MASKS: Masks are an easy addition that will add to the drama and make the entire event more fun for the students. First, go to www.google.com and click on “image search.” Type in the historical figure’s name and find an image of the person. Copy and paste the picture in a Word document. You may need to crop and then enlarge the photo so you get a picture large enough to be used as a mask. Portraits obviously work best for this use. Print out the picture and paste it onto a cardboard backing. You can tape a plastic spoon or popsicle stick to be used as a handle. You may decide to make masks for the student correspondents as well, using pictures of television news personalities for the masks.

Note: If there is a historical person you cannot find a picture for, don’t despair! Almost any random “period” person’s picture (as long as it not someone easily recognizable) would work as a mask.

ROLES: Encourage students to act out the roles with as much energy as possible. Do not be too terribly concerned that the sex of the historical figure matching with the sex of the student.

The teacher may decide to take a part in the play, role-modeling one of the historical figures. It is recommended that five copies of the scripts are specifically set aside for each character in the play. For each character, *highlight all their lines* in order to facilitate a faster pace of dialogue. All other students should receive an unmarked copy of the play to read as the play is performed.

ANCHOR AND REPORTERS: In order to facilitate the historical discussions that exist in the plays, actual famous journalist names have been used in the plays. Teachers should point out that these journalists come from different times in American history and do not necessarily reflect the period they report on. It is as if they can travel in time to deliver “The History News Report.” A teacher may also decide to substitute the names given in the script for student names if desired. A brief description of the journalists is as follows:

- **Elijah Lovejoy** (1802-1837) A minister and journalist for the *St. Louis Observer* and later editor of the abolitionist newspaper the *Alton Observer* of Alton, Illinois. In 1837, pro-slavery forces attacked his warehouse in order to destroy his printing press and he was murdered on the scene.
- **Margaret Fuller** (1810-1850) An early woman rights activist, Margaret was the first female journalist to work on the staff of a major American newspaper, *The New York Tribune*. She was a widely read literary critic who was also sent on overseas assignments to Europe.
- **Nellie Bly** (1864-1922) After a writing a fiery rebuttal to a sexist column in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, Nellie was hired by a very impressed editor at the newspaper. She went on to become a famous investigative journalist on the plight of working women, and gained further fame for having faked insanity in order to investigate the treatment of the mentally ill.
- **Ernie Pyle** (1900-1945) An American journalist who was a roving correspondent for Scripps Howard newspaper chain. His articles were read in over 200 newspapers. He is most famous for having been a war correspondent during World War II. He led the charge for Congress to give soldiers “battle pay” while in combat. He died under heavy fire from a Japanese machine gun nest in the Pacific on April 18, 1945.

DISCUSSION: Use the accompanying worksheet to facilitate discussion before and after the play. Students who are not directly involved in the play can attempt to write preliminary answers as the play is performed. The audience should be told that they will be the primarily responsible for the discussion questions at the end of the lesson.

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NOTE: All responses by historical figures reflect actual events and beliefs as closely as possible.

CAST ABBREVIATIONS

James Madison.....MAD
Dolley MadisonDOLL
George GleigGLEIG
Elijah LovejoyANCH
Margaret Fuller..... R1
Nellie Bly.....R2
Ernie Pyle.....R3

Note to readers: The “Executive Mansion” was the original name given to what we know as the White House.

ANCH Welcome to the History News Report, I am your anchor Elijah Lovejoy. We are just reporting breaking news out of Washington D.C.: Apparently, the British have just invaded and burned Washington! Of course, HNR News is giving you cutting edge coverage with reporters on the ground. We are going to cut to Ernie Pyle who is near the battle front in Maryland with an exclusive interview with President James Madison. Ernie?

R3 Thanks Elijah. I am here with President Madison who just rode out to the front in an attempt to organize the resistance to the British invasion. Mr. President, how did we get to this point? Why are the British invading our nation’s capitol?

MAD Well, Ernie, there are several causes of this war. First, the British have been in a fight with Napoleon Bonaparte for years and they passed the “Orders of Council,” which punished neutral shipping, especially the United States, for trading with France.

R3 What was the specific punishment that we faced?

MAD The Royal Navy not only blockaded French ports, thus ruining our trade, but it also forced impressments on American sailors.

R3 Can you explain impressments for our audience?

MAD Basically, the British would board American merchant ships and grab any man that they thought was an English sailor. Of course, they basically took any man and insulted us by doing it right under the flag of the United States.

R3 So the British have interfered with our neutral shipping rights and impressed our sailors into the British Navy. What else?

MAD The British have also stirred up the Indians on the western frontier. Many in Congress are motivated to take Canada and end the British threat once and for all.

R3 And we did invade Canada, but it has not gone very well has it?

MAD No, the Canadians remained loyal to the British crown much to our dismay. However, we have had success holding off the British invasion from the Great Lakes region.

R3 But not in the Chesapeake Bay area obviously?

MAD No, a powerful British force has raided Maryland's coastal towns until they landed a large veteran force that has now invaded Washington.

R3 How has the defense of Washington gone?

MAD Quite poorly. I rode out here to Maryland try to organize the resistance only to witness the British winning victories in Blandensburg and Upper Marlboro, Maryland today – August 24, 1814. Most of our militia forces broke and ran when the British fired their new Congreve rockets.

R3 You left the First Lady behind at the Executive Mansion?

MAD I did, but I have sent her a message to flee the city now that I know that the British will meet little resistance entering the city.

ANCH (*cutting off Madison*) I hate to cut in Mr. President, but you'll be happy to know that we just received word that Mrs. Madison has left the city and our correspondent Margaret Fuller is standing by with the First Lady! Margaret?

R1 Yes, Elijah, I am here and the First Lady, Dolley Madison has just escaped Washington D.C. Mrs. Madison, I understand that you rescued something from the Executive Mansion?

DOLL I did. I received my dear husband's letter and immediately began to evacuate. I knew what I had to save: the famous Gilbert Stuart portrait of General Washington. I had our fifteen year old servant, Paul Jennings, help me cut down the portrait so that it could be carried to safety. I have it with me now.

R1 Were others fleeing with you?

DOLL Almost all of the 4,000 citizens of Washington evacuating, many like us, just as the British arrived.

R1 What about our other historical documents?

DOLL Fortunately, Secretary of State James Monroe ordered Stephen Pleasanton, a clerk, to save the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. We all crossed the Potomac to safety in Virginia.

R1 Thank you Mrs. Madison. Back to you in the studio Elijah!

ANCH What an amazing story Margaret! HNR News correspondent Nellie Bly is now standing by in Washington D.C. somewhere near the Capitol. Nellie, where exactly are you?

R2 Elijah, I am standing in between the recently completed Capitol building and the Executive Mansion. The site is horrid...both are ablaze after the British troops ransacked both buildings. Every major government building is on fire: The Treasury, the Library of Congress, and even some private residences.

ANCH Have you spoken to anyone?

R2 Actually, I have with me Ensign George Gleig, a soldier in the British detachment that just entered the Executive Mansion. Ensign Gleig, can you give us a description of what you just took part in?

GLEIG Certainly! Well, we are burning everything we can find! We had hardly entered this city when someone fired upon and killed our General Ross from the window of a local building. We were so outraged by this that we immediately put to the sword everyone in the offending house and then burned it to the ground. Then without a moments delay we burned any building even remotely associated with the government.

R2 (*disgusted*) Including the Executive Mansion!

GLEIG Absolutely! When the detachment sent out to destroy Mr. Madison's house, we entered his dining parlor, they found a dinner table spread and covers laid for forty guests. Several kinds of wine, in handsome cut glass decanters, were cooling on the sideboard; plate holders stood by the fireplace, filled with dishes and plates; knives, forks, and spoons were arranged for immediate use; in short, everything was ready for the entertainment of a ceremonious party.

R2 You didn't eat the food did you!

GLEIG You will readily imagine what these preparations looked like to a party of hungry soldiers! An elegant dinner was a luxury to which few of us had been accustomed, and which, after the dangers and fatigues of the day, appeared peculiarly inviting. We sat down to it, therefore, not in the most orderly manner I might add (*laughing*)! When we satisfied our appetites and partaken pretty freely of the wines, we finished by setting fire to the house which had so liberally entertained us! (*laughing and walking away*)

R2 (*sadly*) With the sky red from the burning of flames throughout the city, back to you Elijah...

ANCH (*serious tone*) The second war with Britain has taken a very terrible turn; our leaders have fled and our capitol now lies in ruins. For History News Report, I am Elijah Lovejoy reporting.

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Colbert, David, *Eyewitness to America*, "Dolley Madison Saves Washington's Portrait," Random House, New York: 1997, p. 133-34.