



# Happy Birthday, James Madison! From Last Rites to Bill of Rights

James Madison was born at midnight between March 16 and 17, 1751. James' mother was away from her own home, paying a visit to her mother's house, when the anxiously awaited hour of her son's delivery arrived. James' grandmother's house in Port Conway was some 55 miles from his mother and father's own house in Orange County, Virginia.

Nelly Madison was not yet 19 years old when her eldest son and firstborn child was born, so it was likely her youth that accounted for her desire to be with her own mother when it was time to deliver her first baby.

James finally arrived, his mother and grandmother were so worried that the sickly looking infant would not survive the night that they called a priest to attend them at the house, just in case the worst should happen and James should perish.

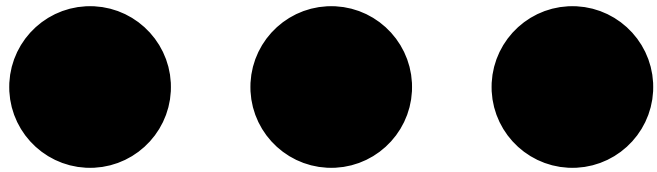
James did survive those first few years, and, although notoriously frail — Washington Irving described him as a “withered little apple-john” — would grow up to be one of the most influential men of all the Founding Generation and a man who was generally considered by his contemporaries to be the smartest man in the room, no matter which room he was in.

Like so many of our Founding Fathers, James Madison came from a large family; he was the oldest of 12 children: eight boys and four girls. Three of his brothers died as babies, including one who was stillborn. A sister, Elizabeth, and a brother, Reuben, both died as children as a result of drinking contaminated water.

Of his siblings that survived into adulthood, his brothers and sisters all lived to earn sound public reputation.

His brother Ambrose was a captain in the Virginia militia, a successful planter, and overseer of the family's landholdings in Orange County, Virginia. Madison's youngest surviving brother, William (nicknamed “Willey”), also served in the state's military. He went on to become a lawyer, was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates, and achieved “high rank and distinction in the War of 1812” (*White House History*, No. 36, Winter 2014).

As for Madison's sisters, his friend and first biographer, William Rives, wrote, “His [Madison's] sisters, superadding accomplishments and solid instruction to natural charms, married gentlemen of the highest respectability and intelligence, and adorned with their virtues and graces the spheres of life in



James Madison



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on March 16, 2024

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which they moved.”

Everybody likes birthday parties, and because of a lucky law change, James Madison could have had two! Madison was born in the very year that England adopted a new calendar — the so-called Gregorian calendar. Basically, the Gregorian calendar is the calendar we (and the rest of the world) currently use.

It is called the Gregorian calendar because it was introduced in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII. The calendar improved the accuracy of the Julian calendar, the system of counting days adopted in 45 B.C. during the administration of the Roman ruler Julius Caesar.

In fact, the Gregorian calendar was so obviously superior to the centuries-old Julian calendar that it was quickly adopted by most of Europe. England was not, however, among those who switched their official means of marking the passing of the months. It took over 160 years for England to pass a law officially codifying the Gregorian calendar.

The adoption of the new calendar caused a sort of stutter stop in the numbering of the days. Under the old calendar (the dates of which are called Old Style, or O.S. for short), March 25 was the first day of the year. Under the Gregorian system, however, January 1 was New Year’s Day, thus the day after March 24, 1749 was March 25, 1750, as the new year (1750) had retroactively begun on January 1!

That’s a lot of confusing math, but James Madison was born on March 5, 1750 (Old Style), the year the English parliament passed the law switching measuring methods and changed all legal dates, including birth, marriage, and death dates. James Madison’s *official* birthday is March 16, 1751!

Regardless of what label the law put upon the day of her eldest child’s birth, Nelly Madison would never need to be reminded of that fearful night her tiny, sickly son survived his first tenuous hours on Earth. Nor would the world forget Nelly Madison’s son, for her son who was so often laid low with illness would outlive all his healthier colleagues and go on to earn the title “Father of the Constitution.”



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