



HARRIET LANE

Portrait bust by William Rinehart in the National Gallery, Washington.

HARRIET LANE—MIRROR OF AN AGE

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IN OUR day, the role of First Lady of America has assumed new proportions. The President of the United States introduces himself by saying, "I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Europe," a prominent biographer, Ishbel Ross, chooses to review the decade of the 1920's through the eyes of Grace Coolidge, and a leading publishing house initiates a series of biographies of the wives of the Presidents. But in many ways the First Lady who prepared the way for our era, in many ways the first of the modern First Ladies to capture the imagination of her contemporaries, was Harriet Lane, the highly intelligent and lovely golden-haired, violet-eyed niece of James Buchanan. As the current First Lady is credited with changing the fashions by upping the hemlines, so Harriet Lane was responsible for lowering the necklines and introducing lace berthas. She was the first to have a song ("Listen to the Mocking Bird") dedicated to her and a revenue cutter (*U.S.S. Harriet Lane*) named in her honor. In addition, she rates the distinction of having been the first American to turn an academic procession at Oxford into a whistle session, completely stealing the show from her uncle and Alfred Lord Tennyson, both of whom were recipient of honorary degrees. While these facts have become a part of Presidential lore, the greater significance of Harriet Lane has passed unnoticed. This is an important historical oversight, for her life and work provide an excellent mirror in which to view the shaping of American tradition.

Early in childhood Harriet Lane displayed the charm, humor, and vivacity which were to make her the toast of two continents. Alternately she amused and outraged Buchanan by her clever mimicry of his political colleagues. Her athletic skill, particularly

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her fine horsemanship, delighted him, while her keen, inquiring mind astonished him.¹

At the age of nine, several years after the death of her parents, Harriet Lane came to Wheatland to live permanently. Buchanan, discovering her passion for politics, permitted her to attend his conferences. He encouraged her love of history by allowing her free access to his library. Every day he set aside time to discuss current events and literature with her. Considering this background, it is not surprising that she longed to share her uncle's political world.

However, Buchanan had definite ideas about the education of young ladies. In 1847 when he served in James K. Polk's cabinet as secretary of state, he decided that his niece needed "finishing" and selected the Convent of the Visitation at Georgetown for that purpose, hoping that she would absorb some of the discipline and gentility for which the nuns were famous.

The years at the convent had a tremendous impact upon the development of Harriet Lane. She showed a real aptitude for scholarship, with history, astronomy, and mythology her particular fields of interest. She became an accomplished musician. When the sisters recognized her musical ability they encouraged her to play the harp, which they believed was the instrument best suited to display feminine charms. But Harriet preferred the piano, and it was as a pianist that she excelled. More important, however, than her intellectual achievement was her spiritual growth.

Before he sent her to the school Buchanan asked her if she thought she would become a Roman Catholic. "I can't promise," his niece replied. "I don't know enough about their faith."² She did not become a convert; but the exposure to Catholicism affected her greatly. It gave her a sense of tolerance while awakening her own deep religious feeling. But more significant, she experienced the spirit of humanitarianism for the first time. The philanthropic work of the sisters left an indelible mark upon Harriet Lane. The nuns encouraged her inherent interest in their activity. Perhaps it was at Georgetown that she learned first about the plight of the American Indians, whom later she did so much to aid.

¹Laura C. Holloway, *The Ladies of the White House* (New York, 1872), 535-536.

²*Ibid.*, 538-539.

If the academic and philanthropic interest of Harriet Lane pleased the nuns, her charm and social finesse captivated Washington officialdom. Buchanan wrote her:

They [the Polk family] have given you somewhat of a name here . . . and have urged me to permit you to come and pass some time with them. I have been deaf as the adder to their request, knowing to use a word of your grandmother that *you* are too "outsetting" already. . . . Your time will come.³

Indeed her time was not long in coming. When Buchanan retired as secretary of state in 1849 Harriet returned to Wheatland with him. He soon realized that the precocious child had matured into an astute young woman, an opinion which other politicians corroborated. As the Whig administration of Millard Fillmore took on more and more the aspects of an opera buffa, the Pennsylvania Democrats pushed Buchanan for the Presidency in 1852. Harriet desired to campaign actively; this her uncle refused to allow.⁴ However, he did permit her to participate unofficially. During the winter of 1851 she went to Pittsburgh for a visit of several months. Buchanan requested her to meet Mayor David Lynch, who ruled the Western Pennsylvania Democrats.⁵

Lynch, an extremely shrewd politician, recognized her grasp of affairs, and she appreciated his devotion to her uncle. This first meeting resulted in a firm friendship.⁶ Perhaps Buchanan wanted Lynch's endorsement of her; in any case after her introduction to Mayor Lynch, Harriet Lane emerged as an acknowledged figure in the political world. People believed that Buchanan listened to her opinions and that she had his full confidence.⁷

Although Buchanan lost the Democratic nomination to Franklin Pierce in 1852, the triumph of the Democrats led to his being selected as minister to England. His appointment thrilled Harriet. He promised her she could act as his hostess as soon as he found a house; as the months passed awaiting the summons she viewed

³ James Buchanan to Harriet Lane, July 3, 1846, James Buchanan-Harriet Lane Johnston Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as B-J).

⁴ George Plitt to James Buchanan, June 13, 1851, B-J.

⁵ James Buchanan to Harriet Lane, November 4, 1851, B-J.

⁶ James Buchanan to David Lynch, September 21, 1855, B-J.

⁷ Harriet Lane to James Buchanan, February 6, 1853, B-J.

the English trip as "the future realization of a beautiful dream." When she sailed in April, 1854, she faced her first challenge in public life with confidence and pleasure.

From her first appearance Harriet Lane won the wholehearted admiration of the British as few Americans have ever done. Her knowledge of literature and politics combined with her aristocratic good looks and superb horsemanship dazzled them. At her formal presentation at court she charmed Queen Victoria by the grace with which she curtsied and handled her long train, a feat most Americans found virtually impossible. The Queen decreed that she should have the status of ministerial consort rather than the lower position of daughter or niece. Besides Victoria, she gained the respect of Prince Albert and the friendship of the Princess Royal. The praise of the royal family assured her social success. Such instantaneous adulation might have turned the head of the average young woman of twenty-four; but Harriet Lane was in no sense an average young woman.⁸

Social function delighted her. Yet at the same time she used them cleverly and advantageously. In her conversations with government and social leaders she never neglected the opportunity of presenting the American point of view. Seldom has the United States been better represented abroad than by this team of the elder statesman and his fascinating niece. From the English mission she became so closely identified with Buchanan that any evaluation of his policy which overlooks her influence most definitely disregards the weight of contemporary opinion.

Perhaps the boldest stroke executed by Harriet Lane in England to promote America was her introduction of the arts and crafts of the American Indian. At a time when Oriental art and primitive African sculpture were beginning to receive critical attention, the work of the American Indian was virtually unknown in London. Harriet Lane ranks as one of the first serious collectors of art in America, and especially as one of the first to be seriously interested in Indian art. Her introduction of this art to the British

⁸ James Buchanan to Harriet Lane, October 14, 1853, B-J.

⁹ James Buchanan to Harriet Lane, November 2, 1855; Sir Travers Twiss to Lady Chantrey, April 5, 1856; Lady Chantry to Harriet Lane, June 16, 1856, B-J.

reminded them that there existed a native American culture, and thus did much to create a fresh image of America.

On the other hand, nothing influenced Harriet herself more than her English experience. For one thing, she fell in love. Soon after her arrival in London she met Sir Fitzroy Kelly, distinguished jurist, legal reformer, and attorney general in the Palmerston ministry. He was one of the wealthiest men in England, a widower whose morality varied with one's source of information, and about forty years her senior. Romance came to him and Harriet despite their difference in age. The Queen urged the match, because she stated quite candidly that she wished Miss Lane to live in England. Harriet's friends encouraged it. Only Buchanan opposed it.

Ostensibly he based his opposition upon the disparity in age, while paradoxically advising her only to marry an older man. Perhaps closer to the truth lay the fact that at this critical state of his career, when he was considering the possibility of the Presidential nomination in 1856, he could not bear to face the Presidency without her support. One observer of the Washington scene believed:

In her [Harriet Lane's] affection he [Buchanan] found the only solace of his lonely life. For her sake he condescended to unbend in public. . . . She was his confidante in all matters political and personal.¹⁰

Whatever Buchanan's reasons, Harriet bowed to his wishes and broke her engagement.

Of more permanent importance was the outlook of Harriet's English friends. The circle in which she moved, though wealthy and fashionable, attached great importance to public service and intellectual endeavor. Among her close friends were Sir Henry Holland, physician to the royal family, author of experimental treatises on psychosomatic medicine, and unofficial diplomat; Sir Travers Twiss, authority on international law; Richard Cobden, of the Anti-Corn Law League; Marianne, Dowager Marchioness of Wellesley, who had aided her husband Richard Marquis Wellesley in his campaign for Catholic Emancipation and the Reform

¹⁰ Sara A. Pryor, *Reminiscences of Peace and War* (New York: Macmillan, 1904), 39.

Bill of 1832; Margaret, Dowager Duchess of Somerset, who shared her husband, Edward Seymour, the eleventh Duke's interest in rural housing projects and repeal of the Corn Laws; and Baroness Angela Burdett Coutts, the philanthropist and patron of Charles Dickens. Harriet sought consciously to emulate their example when she became First Lady in 1857.

The Presidency of Buchanan marked the zenith of Harriet Lane's public career. In responding expertly and gracefully to the challenges which confronted her she deserves to rank among the important figures of the pre-Civil War period. A contemporary considered:

Miss Lane's reign at the White House was one of completest charm. Nature, education and experience were combined in the President's niece in such a manner as eminently to qualify her to meet the responsibilities that for four years were to be hers. Miss Lane possessed great tact, and a perfect knowledge of Mr. Buchanan's wishes. . . . The charms of young womanhood still lingered about her but to these were added an *aplomb* rare in a woman of fifty so that, during her residence in it, White House functions rose to their highest degree of elegance. . . .¹¹

Harriet Lane came to the White House with a decided sense of purpose. She wanted to initiate at Washington the same cultural and social standards that existed in European capitals. Her own personal interest prompted her to include representatives of the arts on her guest lists. Her patronage in fact stimulated a group of artists to launch a drive in May, 1857, for the establishment of a national gallery.¹² Harriet supported the movement enthusiastically and continued to do so after she left the White House.

Her knowledge of international affairs combined with her social assurance permitted her to move easily among members of the diplomatic corps. Lord Lyons, the British minister, thought her "fascinatingly accomplished."¹³ Visiting foreign dignitaries, such

¹¹ Virginia Clay-Clopton, *A Belle of the Fifties* (New York: Putnam, 1905), 114.

¹² Mary Jan Windle, *Life in Washington* (Philadelphia, 1859), 147.

¹³ Lord Newton, *Lord Lyons: A Record of British Diplomacy* (New York: E. Arnold, 1913), 24.

as the Prince of Wales and the Prince de Joinville, delighted in the sophisticated and cosmopolitan air she gave the White House. But in her striving to attain European standards she never forgot her American heritage, and she tried to arrange to entertain each guest from abroad once at Mt. Vernon, despite the dilapidated state of that house.

But to remember Harriet Lane only as a charming socialite and patroness of the arts omits her most outstanding contribution. She came to the White House with a real concern about social welfare. If as First Lady she sparkled as hostess and patroness, she distinguished herself for her work on behalf of the Indians.

One of the many petitions she received was sent by a member of the Chippewa tribe, imploring her to stop the illegal liquor trade and the expulsion of missionaries from the reservations by unscrupulous government agents.¹⁴ She intervened to correct these abuses and sought to improve the Chippewas' educational and medical facilities. Possibly her greatest contribution sprang from the fact that she was one of the first people of influence to plead their case in official circles. In grateful appreciation they hailed her "the great mother of the Indians," and Harriet Lane became an honored name for their daughters.¹⁵

The philanthropic interest of Harriet Lane as well as her effort to foster the English aristocratic spirit of public service had a considerable impact upon America. Her closest companions belonged to the wealthiest and most fashionable society; but they, like her, displayed high intelligence and a social conscience. Cornelia Van Ness Roosevelt of New York, the daughter of Cornelius Van Ness, former governor of Vermont and minister to Spain, and wife of Judge James Roosevelt, spent much time at the White House. Besides having wide intellectual and political interests, she played a major role in civic affairs in New York, particularly in the development of Roosevelt Hospital. Two of Harriet's greatest admirers were Job Tyson of Philadelphia and Augustus Schell of New York. Tyson served in the House of Representatives and was an advocate of prison reform, an early participant in the colonization movement, and an excellent historian; while Schell, a leading New York Democrat, founded the New York Institute for the

¹⁴ Wingematum to Harriet Lane, September, 1858, B-J.

¹⁵ James Buchanan to Harriet Lane, May 14, 1859, B-J.

Blind and the New York Historical Society. Another intimate was Nahum Capen of Boston, who established the Massachusetts State Board of Public Education, pioneered in the field of social service by conducting a comparative study of American and European welfare institutions, and wrote the *History of American Democracy*, one of the first scholarly works on American political theory. The association of these philanthropists with the popular First Lady helped popularize their causes. During the Buchanan administration, under the sponsorship of Harriet Lane, there began to emerge an intellectual, politically minded patrician group, who wished to further social welfare. Associated with pre-Civil War reform movements, this group was also to help generate movements for reform in post-Civil War industrial America.

While Harriet Lane contributed to every aspect of the Buchanan administration, the last tense months tested her ability to the utmost. Years later Buchanan stated that the support he had received from her then had eased his burden considerably.¹⁶ Her tact and political acumen made her the perfect spokesman for the President. Everyone praised her superb diplomatic ability, for despite the tension of the times and the frayed nerves of the leaders, she wove her way through the intricate web of politics expertly, making no enemies and being drawn into no entangling alliances.¹⁷ As the one person whom Buchanan trusted completely and one of the few whose judgment he valued, she had a great deal of responsibility.

Her opinion toward the issues remained consistent and reflected her humanitarianism. Nothing could make her countenance the horrifying crime of war. On the other hand, her deep religious feeling could not accept the principle of slavery. The more she pondered the question and weighed the views of her many correspondents the more she became convinced that immediate emancipation would end in more widespread slavery. To hurl the Negro into the whirlpool of society totally unprepared for freedom would increase the rate of poverty and disease, which not only would cripple the Negro but could devastate the nation as a whole.¹⁸ She

¹⁶ Holloway, *Ladies in the White House*, 557.

¹⁷ Pryor, *Reminiscences*, 53.

¹⁸ Sir Travers Twiss to Harriet Lane, January 19, 1856, June 28, 1858; Sophie Plitt to Harriet Lane, May 7, 1861; Catherine Toucey to Harriet Lane, October 9, 1862, B-J.

upheld the President's policy of conciliation, firmly believing that given the important element of time the moderates in North and South could formulate a course of action to eclipse the emotionalism of the extremists.¹⁹

The Janus-like idealism implicit in Buchanan's conciliatory attitude explains much about his failure. The President clung to the original tenets of the American Democracy, which belonged to a bygone generation; while Harriet Lane, the one person close to him who might have presented him with a contemporary, realistic view, held an opinion which only the future would sustain.

During those last months in Washington Harriet Lane looked forward to the tranquility of Wheatland. Only the extravagant praise of the diplomatic corps made her sad to leave the capital. Even when she did return to Wheatland, the outbreak of war and the abuse heaped upon Buchanan permitted her little peace of mind.

Then suddenly from the depths of despair she discovered great happiness. At thirty-five she found herself in love with Henry Eliot Johnston of Baltimore, a delightful gentleman, who had pursued her since the summer of 1849 when they had met at Bedford Springs.

Although genuinely in love with Johnston, she had difficulty in making up her mind to marry him. First and perhaps foremost, she felt she could not leave her uncle, whose health was failing, to combat alone the slanderous imputations levied against his Presidency. Furthermore, marriage to Johnston would remove her from the world of politics, for which she had been trained so carefully and which had absorbed her for so long. Confronted by this decision, Harriet questioned her ability to bring happiness to her fiancé.²⁰ At last she overcame her fears, and they were married at Wheatland on January 11, 1866.

Her marriage proved wonderfully happy. The birth of James Buchanan Johnston in 1867, followed by that of Henry Eliot, Jr., two years later, overjoyed her. But in no sense did Harriet Johnston submerge herself in the pleasures of motherhood alone. Johnston encouraged her interest in art, and she began to collect seriously. Her receptions in Baltimore became a favorite meeting

¹⁹ T. Bailey Myers to Harriet Lane, December 28, 1860, January 3, 1861; Sir Henry Holland to Harriet Lane, July 12, 1861, B-J.

²⁰ Annie Buchanan to Harriet Lane, January 16, 1866, B-J.

place for leaders of the social and artistic worlds. She produced one of the few salons in America.²¹

Yet her happiness was short-lived. Her first blow came with the death of Buchanan in 1868, which though not unexpected, affected her deeply. The publication of his own account of his administration had done nothing to allay the vilification of him. After his death Harriet Johnston carried on his cause and strove unceasingly to restore his reputation.

Soon after her uncle's death her older son Buchanan fell ill. At first he seemed to recover; but it became obvious that he would remain a semi-invalid. The Johnstons took him to all the recommended specialists, but to no avail. On March 25, 1881, he died at Baltimore.

Shortly after his death their other son Henry developed similar symptoms, perhaps rheumatic fever.²² Hoping against hope that a warm climate might help, they journeyed to the French Riviera. But Henry, Jr., died at Nice on October 30, 1882.

In her great sorrow Harriet Johnston had only one thought: she must assist in the medical search for knowledge of children's diseases. Henry Johnston agreed with her desire, and in December, 1883, they incorporated the Harriet Lane Home.

Harriet Johnston wished to establish a pediatrics hospital in which there would exist a constant interchange of ideas and interaction of services so as to provide a coordinated program of therapy, research, and specialized training. By using the word "Home" she did not mean a custodial institution; rather, she realized that often the children would require a long period of hospitalization, so she wanted the physical plant to have as much of a homelike atmosphere as possible.

Throughout the initial planning of the Harriet Lane Home, Henry Johnston had shared her enthusiasm. She thought of it as very much of a joint effort. But once more fate intervened. On May 5, 1884, Johnston died at New York while undergoing medical treatment.

His death shattered her physically and mentally. She retired to

²¹ "The Childhood Home of Harriet Lane Johnston," *Baltimore Sun*, n.d. Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.

²² Dr. Alan M. Chesney of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine believes that possibly both boys died of rheumatic fever.

Manchester, Massachusetts, for the summer. Slowly, as she regained her health and her composure, she began to think of her grief as excessive self-indulgence. When she left Manchester in the autumn, Harriet Johnston was determined to make it possible for other Americans to know some of the same fullness of life which she had experienced.²³ To break all ties to the past she decided to sell Wheatland and her house in Baltimore and went to live in Washington.

Since her years in the White House, she had worked to achieve the establishment of a national art center at Washington. Feeling that her own art collection might act as a stimulus, she made frequent trips to Europe to improve and enlarge it. At her death in 1903 she left it to the Corcoran Gallery unless the government should found a national gallery. Her bequest forced the issue, and in 1906 the Supreme Court declared the Smithsonian Institution as the National Gallery. Thus Harriet Johnston activated the movement for federal sponsorship of the arts.

Her desire for a national gallery sprang from the belief that the American cultural standards should equal the European. Similarly she wanted the educational institutions of the United States to provide the same academic opportunities as those of Europe. The opening of Johns Hopkins University in 1876 with its emphasis upon advanced study and research had aroused her enthusiasm. To advance the growth of American scholarship Harriet Johnston initiated a trust fund for Johns Hopkins, which enabled the university to offer fellowships for graduate work and independent research in the liberal arts and sciences.

But closer to her heart and more vital than any of her other philanthropic projects was the Harriet Lane Home. It posed a dilemma for her, because she could not decide the best means by which to transform the idea into actuality. The organization of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in 1893 ended her uncertainty. She wanted the Harriet Lane Home to form the pediatric unit of the medical center.

In recording her objectives for the Harriet Lane Home she enumerated few specific goals, for she recognized the danger of hindering future development through ties to the past. However,

²³ Blanche Nevin to Harriet Lane Johnston, August 23, 1884, B-J.

she did state explicitly that the Home should admit children of all races, creeds, and nationalities, and that the service should stress research, specialized training for medical students and graduates, and undergraduate and graduate work for nurses. Harriet Johnston established a landmark in medical history by creating the first medical center for pediatrics.²⁴

Perhaps as important as the actual accomplishment was the vision of Harriet Johnston. She appreciated from the beginning the significance of the clinical approach to medicine. Without research and without the opportunity to learn and to apply new techniques, she realized, medicine could not win in the battle against disease. Furthermore, she recognized that the success of the medical clinic hinged upon the assurance of continuous support in order to build constantly for the future. Harriet Johnston set up many trusts for friends, relatives, and retired servants; however, in each case she stipulated that the principal should revert to the Harriet Lane Home. In addition, she supported several social service agencies to supplement the work of public welfare institutions; but she declared that when their activity became unnecessary or duplicated by the expansion of public welfare their funds should be transferred to the Harriet Lane Home. Through her farsightedness and constructive planning the Harriet Lane Home received supplementary grants during its formative period.²⁵

As Harriet Lane Johnston's career as First Lady reflects the shaping of American tradition, so her philanthropic activity mirrors the culmination of that tradition. Beginning around 1880 and continuing until the outbreak of World War I, there surged forth a fresh wave of humanitarianism in the United States. Many women assumed leadership in this movement, built upon the unfulfilled ideals of the pre-Civil War reformers. Like Harriet Johnston, they moved in the top echelon of society. Also, like her, they admired the English aristocratic ideal of public service. If these leaders, such as Lila Meade Valentine of Virginia; Josephine Shaw Lowell, Louisa Schuyler, Grace Dodge of New York; and

²⁴ Edward A. Parks to Alan M. Chesney, March 6, 1939, William Welch Library, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Baltimore.

²⁵ Carroll T. Bond, *Minutes*, Harriet Lane Home, December 16, 1914, William Welch Library, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Baltimore; Lawra-son Riggs, *ibid.*, November 29, 1915; George B. Pelton, *ibid.*, May 9, 1923, November 24, 1925, April 12, 1928.

Pauline Agassiz Shaw of Boston, seem like still, small voices when compared to the strident harshness of robber baron, populist, and dollar diplomat, their accomplishment looms large. Through their work America rose to unprecedented heights in education, medicine, and social welfare.

Since history has tended to pass over the patrician reformer, it has neglected Harriet Lane Johnston. Yet her faith lives in the achievement of the Harriet Lane Home, which has eliminated the scourge of scarlet fever and measles, given hope to sufferers from rheumatic fever, and offered life to the victims of congenital heart defects.

General Lawrason Riggs of Baltimore caught the spirit of Harriet Johnston in his inscription for the dedicatory plaque at Johns Hopkins Hospital:

In the memory of the founder of this home Harriet Lane Johnston . . . and in perpetual witness of the love and the sorrow of the wife and mother which quickened and deepened her devotion to the relief of the sorrowings of childhood.