



HISTORICAL NOTES

on the

DISTAFF SIDE

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HARRIET LANE

The most famous of Lancaster County women was Harriet Lane, niece of President James Buchanan, who was born in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. She was the daughter of Jane Buchanan, James' favorite sister, and Elliot T. Lane, descendant of an old Virginia family. Jane's father, the elder James Buchanan, was a merchant, who had acquired wealth in trading at the Mercersburg stop on the great highway from east to west. Elliot Lane was also a merchant and his father-in-law transferred much of his trade to this son-in-law, Jane's husband. However, Mr. Lane died when Harriet was seven and two years later her mother died, leaving another girl and two boys as orphans. Her uncle and guardian, James Buchanan, invited her to come to live with him at his house in Lancaster. He also gave a home to another sister's orphan son, James Buchanan Henry, and to Harriet's younger brother, Elliot Eskbridge Lane.

In reading letters written from Washington to Harriet in Lancaster the then Senator Buchanan shows his deep attention to Harriet's welfare and education. She attended a small private school for three years, probably Miss Young's. Later she was sent to a boarding school in Lancaster kept by the Misses Crawford. Here she complained in letters to her uncle of "the strict rules, early hours, brown sugar in the tea and restrictions in dress." Here she was not very happy, as she was a mischievous and high spirited girl, who loved to play practical jokes and made many friends, but resented the school's strict disciplines. Uncle James wrote letters of fatherly advance to her regularly. He sent her next to a girls' school in Charles-town, West Virginia and when she was older and he was Secretary of State, took her to Washington where she attended, with her sister Mary, the Convent at Georgetown for two years, thus completing their education. While there Harriet went to Washington every month for a week-end with her uncle. She was about seventeen at this time and Mr. Buchanan was much pleased when she graduated with high honors.

In 1849, James Buchanan purchased the country estate, Wheatland, a mile west of Lancaster. Here he lived anything but a lonely bachelor's life, for with him lived Harriet and two orphan nephews. Seven other orphaned nephews stayed there from time to time, as well as his brother and sisters, numerous cousins and friends. Miss Hetty, who was more a companion than a servant, assumed the duties of housekeeper at Wheatland, as she had in the Lancaster home on East King Street. There was a coachman, other household servants and men to attend to the grounds and gardens. The mansion was large and commodious, set in the midst of fields with the orchard of apple and peach trees behind it on the right. The wide lawn that stretched down to the road was shaded by oaks, elms, larches and evergreens. There was a large willow tree near the spring. The brick mansion was covered with English ivy and the back porch had wistaria vines shading almost its entire length.

As time went on Buchanan entertained his political friends here and Harriet met many important people. When Buchanan went to London as Ambassador from the United States to Great Britain he sent for her after a few months and she acted as his hostess during his years of residence. She was received with great favor by Queen Victoria and presented at Court. During her stay in England she became well acquainted with the greatest men and women of the time. She met the statesmen, writers, artists, scholars and some philanthropic great ladies of the day. Due to her charm and beauty she was admitted to the finest society and had several offers of marriage from men in the nobility. Her uncle was justly proud of her deportment and popularity but insisted that a fine character was his highest wish for her.

After returning from his post in England, Buchanan came back with Harriet to their Lancaster home, among old friends and neighbors. Before long, however, the campaign to nominate Buchanan as Democratic candidate for the presidency began. The big house and grounds of Wheatland welcomed delegations and politicians there until his inauguration in 1857 as President of the United States.

As mistress of the White House, Harriet Lane possessed charm, tact and experience which enabled her to carry out her uncle's wishes. "She entered the White House with a sense of purpose" says Dr. Lloyd C. Taylor, Jr., who presented a paper on "Harriet Lane, Mirror of an Age" at the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association in Allentown, Pennsylvania, October 19, 1962. This article is printed in the April, 1963, issue of the Pennsylvania Historical Association's Quarterly Journal. In this work Dr. Taylor, who holds the chair as assistant professor of History at the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, presents much new material about Harriet Lane. His work is scholarly detailed and authentically verified with many references to people and events of this period. He states (quote) "Of great permanent influence was the outlook of Harriet's English friends upon her development. The circle in which she moved, though wealthy and fashionable, attached great importance to public service and intellectual endeavor" (end quote). She wanted to initiate in Washington the same culture and social standards she had observed in the capitals of Europe. Her guest lists included representatives of the arts. She supported in 1857 a movement for the establishment of a National Art

Gallery. She entertained foreign dignitaries with a sophisticated and cosmopolitan manner. But she never forgot her American heritage. It was her plan to entertain each guest from abroad at least once at Mt. Vernon. Jacqueline Kennedy a hundred years later had the same idea when she gave at Mt. Vernon a party for foreign guests.

Then, too, Harriet Lane had a real concern for social welfare. She worked in behalf of the Indians. She intervened to correct the abuses by unscrupulous government agents. She sought to improve their medical and educational facilities. One of the first people of influence to plead the Indians' cause in official circles, they hailed her as the "great mother of the Indians" and many named their daughters for her. Harriet Lane's closest companions and friends belonged to the wealthy society group. They admired greatly her high intelligence and social conscience. Her frequent guest was Cornelia Van Ness Roosevelt, wife of Judge James R. Roosevelt, who played a major role in civic affairs in New York and developed the establishment of Roosevelt Hospital. Two of Harriet's admirers were Job Tyson of Philadelphia, an advocate of prison reform and an historian, and Augustus Schell of New York who founded the New York Institute For The Blind and the New York Historical Society. Another admirer was Nahum Capen of Boston who pioneered in the field of Social Service and founded the Massachusetts State Board of Public Education. So, due to Harriet Lane's sponsorship, there began to emerge an intellectual, politically minded, patrician group, which helped, after the Civil War, to form movements for reform in industrial America.

Despite the tension of Buchanan's last years in the White House, Harriet Lane carried on with great diplomatic ability and sustained her uncle with constant support and good judgment to the end of his administration.

After Lincoln's Inauguration and their return to Wheatland Harriet was saddened by the abuse heaped upon her uncle. He was blamed for events over which he had no control. Dr. Philip Shriver Klein in his biography — "President James Buchanan" — states: By the fall of 1862 he accepted the inevitable. "The spirit to do me injustice still prevails in the Republican party" Buchanan wrote. "They will at last, without the least just cause, endeavor to throw the responsibility of the war on me." Although this is simply ridiculous in itself, they will endeavor to make it a reality." From the day of the startling news from Fort Sumter, Buchanan outspokenly supported the war effort. Lincoln's Administration had no alternative but to accept the war initiated by South Carolina, Buchanan stated. History looks upon Buchanan now in a different light as his motives become clearly understood. His fine qualities are given greater recognition and in many ways his reputation has improved as time goes on.

Home again to the quiet life at Wheatland after all the glittering experiences of her life in the public eye, Harriet was glad to be free from the cruel criticisms endured by her uncle. She undoubtedly expected to live on quietly at Wheatland. But in 1865, she fell in love and became engaged to a Baltimore gentleman, Henry Elliot Johnston, a lawyer and friend of years' standing. Buchanan loved her unselfishly enough to give his hearty consent to her marriage. Even though she worried about leaving him alone, in declining health, she made her decision. The wedding took place at Wheat-

land on January 11, 1866. Her uncle, the Rev. Edward Buchanan, the rector of the Oxford Episcopal Church of Philadelphia, performed the ceremony before a small gathering of relatives and close friends. In Baltimore the happy couple lived a full life in domestic affairs, society and foreign travel. Mr. Johnston encouraged Harriet's interest in art collecting. Two sons were born to the Johnstons.

James Buchanan had the joy of visiting them in Baltimore and holding his namesake, James Buchanan Johnston, in his arms. Two years later in 1869, Henry Elliot Johnston II was born. Their summers were usually spent at Wheatland. In 1868, to Harriet Johnston's deep grief, her guardian, companion and Uncle James Buchanan passed away. That was a sad time. Then in 1881, the older son died of rheumatic fever, and a year later the younger son, whose health they thought would be improved in a warm climate, died in Nice on the Riviera of the same disease. With both sons gone, Harriet had one great desire:—to establish a hospital for curing children's diseases. Her husband agreed with her and in 1883 they incorporated the Harriet Lane Home in Baltimore to provide an institution with a program of therapy, research and specialized training.

Tragedy again struck Harriet's life and her husband Henry Johnston died in New York in 1884, while undergoing medical treatment. After his death she sold Wheatland and her home in Baltimore and moved to Washington. Here she worked to achieve a National Art Center. At her death in 1903, she left her art collection to the Corcoran Art Gallery, "unless the government should found a National Gallery." Then her art collection should go there. In 1906 the Supreme Court declared the Smithsonian Institution a National Art Gallery. Thus Harriet Johnston activated the movement for a federal sponsorship of the Arts.

She is buried in Baltimore with her family. At the Harriet Lane Home on the Johns Hopkins Hospital grounds she had stipulated that children of all races, creeds and nationalities could be treated there. This institution has achieved widespread results in the battle against children's diseases. It has eliminated the scourge of scarlet fever and measles and given hope to victims of rheumatic fever. It also offered life to victims of congenital heart disease.

On the dedicatory plaque of Johns Hopkins Hospital, General Lawrence Riggs caught the spirit of her life. It reads—

In the memory of the Founder of this House

Harriet Lane Johnston

and of her husband

Henry Elliot Johnston

and her two sons

James Buchanan and Henry Elliot Johnston, Jr.

And in perpetual witness of the love and sorrow
of the wife and mother which quickened and deepened
her devotion to the Relief of the Sufferings of
Childhood.

A fund was left in her will to found in 1904 the St. Alban's Choir School on the west side of the Cathedral Close in Washington. This is a memorial to her two sons. Half of her legacy saw the construction of the Lane-Johnston Building, which houses dormitories, the refectory, upper school, study hall and classrooms. Twenty Lane-Johnston scholarships for Cathedral choristers and two crucifers are partially provided by the income of the other half.

Harriet's deep religious faith must have served her well in the many sorrows of her lifetime. She was a loyal member of St. James Episcopal Church in Lancaster and gave two stained glass windows to this beautiful old edifice in memory of her husband and sons.

Harriet Lane Johnston was internationally known for her beauty and charm. The popular song "Listen to the Mocking Bird" by Septimus Winner was dedicated to her.

In her old home at Wheatland there still stands her well worn petit-point prie-dieu, used constantly during her lifetime for her private devotions. Surely her Uncle James Buchanan's wishes for her to "grow up to be a fine and good woman" were more than fulfilled.

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