The careful education and training of Harriet Lane were directed principally toward the social graces and toward the art of political maneuver. Her perceptive mind, her close association from childhood with her uncle and his political friends, her observations in England and on the Continent, living with her uncle during his “Front Porch” campaign for the presidency, and her qualities of leadership and her devotion to Buchanan seem naturally and logically to indicate that she would advise him ably on political matters, especially during his last year in the White House, when he urgently needed advice.

With her numerous contacts in the highest echelons of the Democratic party Harriet Lane could not help but arrive at some of her own conclusions on matters such as slavery and secession. Such contacts would help almost anyone to recognize and analyze the broad issues of the day.

Ten years of correspondence between James Buchanan and Harriet Lane, from 1847 to 1857, clearly indicate a mutual respect and admiration of each for the other. In such an atmosphere advice...
is sought, given, and accepted. Their minds were one on many matters.

J. Montgomery Forster, who knew Buchanan and visited him at Wheatland after Buchanan left the White House, gives us the impression that on only one subject Buchanan and Harriet did not agree, church membership. He was a Presbyterian and she had become an Episcopalian. Forster’s “Recollections of James Buchanan” were published in the Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, Journal and were reprinted many years later in that same newspaper, in the issues for June 18 and 25 and July 9 and 16, 1954. The installment in the issue for July 9 is the one that leaves the impression of almost complete agreement between uncle and niece.

Buchanan, stemming from the eighteenth century, did not relish the idea of women taking an active part in politics. He objected to the Territorial constitution of Kansas for various reasons, among them the authorization of women to vote for school superintendents. He had an aversion to “petticoat government.” Nevertheless, Harriet’s relationship to him was so intimate that her advice was something entirely different to the President than the thought of woman suffrage and women in elective office.

Harriet Lane was cosmopolitan rather than provincial. From girlhood she travelled extensively for her time. She associated with persons of large mind, in the United States, in England, and in France. As a cosmopolitan person she had the ability to see political situations in broad perspective. Naturally, she had an interest in and an understanding of the political issues of her day. Her schooling in politics and public affairs by her uncle was useful when she came to the White House. During the four years in Washington she knew the leading public figures of the day, and in many instances, their families. She knew the strengths and weaknesses of Secretary of State Lewis Cass of Michigan, Secretary of War John B. Floyd of Virginia, of Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, Senator John Slidell of Louisiana, Senator James M. Mason of Virginia, Jefferson Davis, Senator from Mississippi, and others. In numerous cases she knew what kind and how much influence their wives had on them. As an alert, outgoing First Lady she could not help but have her ear to ground that was trodden daily by those who made national policy, or kept it in a state of confusion.

Mrs. Virginia Clay-Clopton stated that Harriet Lane had “a perfect knowledge of Mr. Buchanan’s wishes” during the time he was President. (Page 114, A Belle of the Fifties, Memoirs of Mrs. Clay, of Alabama, 1904. Compiled and edited by Ada Sterling.) How Mrs. Clay-Clopton could have been certain of this statement is difficult to determine. However, being on the scene and in the center of political activity in Washington during the Buchanan Administration, she probably was as well qualified as nearly anyone, except the President, his private secretary, James Buchanan Henry, and Harriet herself, to make such a remark. It is
possible that the remark contained a great deal of truth. Harriet Lane certainly knew to a large extent what her uncle’s wishes were in political matters and this knowledge was of value to her in the giving of advice to him.

Mrs. E. F. Ellet, in her book The Court Circles of the Republic, published in 1869, infers that over a period of years Harriet Lane spent a great deal of time reading to James Buchanan from newspapers and discussing with him current political matters. Mrs. Ellet does not give the source of her information but writes as follows:

At Wheatland she [Harriet Lane] entertained her uncle’s friends and foreign visitors, with lady-like courtesy and cordiality. She was in the habit of reading the newspaper to her uncle, and afterwards discussing with him the political and literary subjects of the day. (Page 507).

The next year Laura Carter Holloway said almost the same thing and in 1901 Virginia Tatnall Peacock stated the same thought. Both Holloway and Peacock, like Mrs. Ellet, gave no source of the information. In speaking of Harriet Lane at Wheatland, Virginia Tatnall Peacock wrote: “There she had possession of her uncle, it being their custom to spend their mornings together, usually in reading the newspapers, she incidentally absorbing his statesmanlike view of the political questions of the day.” (Pages 165-166, Famous American Belles of the Nineteenth Century).

Perhaps at about the time she was completing her book Mrs. Ellet interviewed Mrs. Harriet Lane Johnston and thus procured first-hand information. Two of Mrs. Ellet’s letters to Mrs. Johnston are preserved in the HLJ Papers in the Library of Congress. One states “Your favor enclosing the corrected sketch, arrived today.” Written from New York it is merely dated April 16, probably 1869. (Page 2204, HLJ Papers).

Holloway, too, may have interviewed Mrs. Johnston on this very subject. It is likely that Virginia Tatnall Peacock interviewed Mrs. Johnston in Mrs. Johnston’s later years, but it is a bit unlikely that Mrs. Virginia Clay-Clopton or Ada Sterling would have interviewed Harriet Lane after she left the White House.

In Rebel Rose, published in 1954, Ishbel Ross writes about the period immediately following Buchanan’s election to the Presidency in November 1856, and about Mrs. Rose Greenhow, Ross states, “For the time being she had become the most powerful woman in Washington, since Harriet Lane, handsome, tactful and gracious, refused to involve herself in political affairs.” (Page 58). This statement can be misleading. Harriet Lane was not a political conniver. She was not a Mrs. Greenhow. Nevertheless, the First Lady was very much aware of the political currents of the day and because of her training, active mind, and official position and her personal relationship with the President, could not escape having some influence on his public policies.

Dr. Lloyd C. Taylor, Jr., states: “People believed that Buchanan
listened to her [Harriet Lane's] opinions and that she had his full confidence . . . 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 a contemporary opinion.” (“Harriet Lane—Mirror of an Age,” Pennsylvania History, April 1963, pages 215 and 216).

Harriet Lane was consulted by various people and was used as a pipeline to the President’s ear. She advised him at times and he listened to her. However, there is no positive proof that he gave greater weight to her ideas than to ideas presented to him by Members of his Cabinet. By the summer of 1859 Buchanan was already speaking disparagingly of his Cabinet. Late in 1860 and in January 1861 several Southern members of the Cabinet deserted him completely, scurrying off like rats from a sinking ship. Buchanan was now forced to listen to anyone close to him.

Since Harriet Lane did not write an autobiography, did not leave a diary, and was not in the habit of writing articles, for publication, and since relatively few of her letters are extant, it is difficult to know exactly how she stood on slavery, secession, Lincoln and his policies, and the like. From 1856 to 1861 some of her distinguished friends wrote to her about the folly of hasty emancipation of the Negro, and about the wisdom of conciliation, with the possibility that the North and the South might be able to reach an agreement.

Dr. Lloyd C. Taylor, Jr., takes the view that Harriet Lane consistently held opinions that reflected humanitarianism—she could not countenance war, she could not accept the principle of slavery, she opposed immediate emancipation of the Negro because she felt it would produce still more widespread slavery and would increase both poverty and disease, and she felt conciliation was possible. (Pages 220-221, “Harriet Lane—Mirror of an Age”).

Hostess With Political Sensitivity

As Hostess of the White House, Harriet Lane exercised a great deal of political discretion at social functions. She skillfully avoided clashes between powerful Northern and Southern figures. She bridled her emotions of disgust, disdain, and anger, in turbulent times.

On March 6, 1857, two days after Buchanan's Inauguration, the Dred Scott decision was announced by Chief Justice Taney. The decision made the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional. To make matters still worse for Buchanan, every President pro tempore of the Senate during his administration, until June 12, 1860, was from the South—from Virginia, Texas, and Alabama. From Inauguration until February 1, 1860, a Representative from South Carolina was Speaker of the House.
HARRIET LANE, FROM A PAINTING

This likeness, by an unknown artist, was probably made during the time she was First Lady, 1857-1861, during the Administration of her bachelor uncle, James Buchanan, 15th President of the United States. — From the Collections of the Library of Congress.
A hostess with little perceptivity and restraint would have soon placed the President in embarrassing situations. Because of her good judgment a number of Buchanan's opponents admired the way in which social functions were conducted at the White House during his Administration.

"Mr. Jones" Would Like A Position In The Government

During her White House years Harriet Lane met many people. Quite a few of her new and former acquaintances appealed to her for political favors for themselves or for their relatives or other friends. So soon after the Jacksonian spoils system and nearly a century before the merit system in government became fairly well established in this country, one can easily see that the affable queen of the Executive Mansion would be asked to assist in obtaining employment in the Federal government. Even today, with a reasonably good civil service system at the Federal level, many positions in government are obtained through intercession by someone with a great deal of authority. When procurement of talent, rather than payment of a political debt, is the object, this by-passing of the merit system can be productive, but is rather dangerous.

The requests that came to Harriet Lane concerning Federal employment helped her to understand current political situations and enabled her to relieve the President of some details, and to advise him about appointments.

Various kinds of requests for employment came to Harriet Lane. Here are a few diverse samples.

Henry A. Wise, Governor of Virginia, had been offered a Cabinet post by Buchanan, but Wise declined. Later the Governor wrote to Harriet as follows, transmitting a letter from a famous writer and actress who was recommending a young lady for a government position in Washington.

Richmond, Va.
Apl. 14th 1857.

To Miss Lane
At the Presidents Mansion

Will you please allow me to endorse this kind letter of a lady, Mrs. Ritchie (Mrs. Mowat that was) to you for Miss Johnson. Miss Johnson is known to me as a most excellent person, who is dependent upon a good head to comfort a good heart by her literary labor. You see what she wants & I beg you to intercede for her with the Prest. & Heads of Departments. She will, I hope, present this in person & I am

Yours Most truly

Henry A. Wise
Mrs. Ritchie’s letter was as follows:

Richmond April 13th 1857

His Excellency Gov Wise

Dear Sir

Will you allow me to bespeak your kind offices in behalf of a friend whom I highly value? I refer to Miss C Johnson, with whom you are acquainted. She desires to be employed in copying M. SS. for some of the Departments in Washington. Miss Johnson is a young lady of cultivation and excellent natural abilities; very estimable in all respects. She is wholly dependent upon her own exertions to obtain a livelihood. She writes a clear hand and her punctuality in the discharge of her duties (a very important qualification, I presume, where Government writing is concerned) can be implicitly depended upon.

She resides, at present, at Miss Harrover’s school in Washington. A letter addressed Miss Christie Johnson, Washington, will reach her safely.

I assure you that your interest could hardly be enlisted by one in all respects more worthy of kind consideration and patronage.

If you can serve her, by obtaining this writing, you will do a good action, (such as we all know you find happiness in performing.) and truly oblige.

Yours with highest respect

Anna Cora Ritchie

Mrs. Ritchie was Anna Cora Ogden. She married James Mowatt in 1834. He died in 1851. She married William Foushee Ritchie in 1854. She wrote in a wide range of subjects. Her works include plays and novels and books on cooking and etiquette. She was on the stage from 1845 to 1854. As Mrs. Ritchie she was a founder of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, the organization which purchased and preserved George Washington’s Mount Vernon estate. Mrs. Ritchie’s letter reproduced above, and the transmittal letter by Governor Wise, are both preserved in the Library of Dickinson College.

Mrs. Delia P. Clymer, Reading, Pennsylvania, wrote on February 1, 1858, asking “Dear Harriet” for a place in the government for her husband, Daniel Clymer. Mrs. Clymer had a sad story. She said that her husband, through “deception in others, & the pressure of the times, has failed—everything is taken from us, & we are left penniless—literally penniless. Daniel knows not where to look for a situation, where he can earn bread to feed our four little ones.” Nevertheless Mrs. Clymer was choosy. She wanted a “permanent situation” for her husband, at the hand of the President, “not one that would have to be given up when three years are past.” She suggested to Harriet “a purser ship in the Navy, or pay Master in the Army.” Mrs. Clymer’s letter comprises pages 1172 and 1173 in the Harriet Lane Johnston Papers in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

And of course, during the White House years Harriet was asked
to intercede for persons aspiring appointment to high political positions. A letter of March 12, 1858, marked “(confidential)” was addressed to her at the Executive Mansion. It was as follows:

My dear Hattie,—

Mr. Van Dyke [J. C. Van Dyke, a District Attorney and a Democratic party worker during the Buchanan election in 1856] urges me to write to you in his behalf, and hopes you will not hesitate to say a kind word for him to the President. He wishes me particularly to repeat a conversation I had with [H? (Hon?)] George Tucker Campbell, last evening, about him, which I shall do to you, and, if you think proper, you can tell to the President.

Mr. Campbell, in speaking of the fitness of different members of the bar, for the vacant Judgeship, said that Mr. Van Dyke was a much stronger and abler Lawyer than the bar generally gave him credit for. That he was already a complete Admiralty and Criminal Lawyer, and that he had a Mechanical turn of mind, which, with a little practice, would enable him to be a good Patent Lawyer.

The President, however, knows Mr. Van Dyke so well himself, that it would almost amount to impertinence in any one to endeavor to add to, or detract from his just merits; and if he thinks Mr. Van Dyke's appointment a proper one to make, I am sure, such are his kindly feelings towards him, that he will not hesitate to do it.

And then the letter continues on the lighter side, concerning things which probably were of much interest to Harriet.

Sophie has just received your parcel by Mrs. Baker. Mrs. Craig is coming to us tomorrow. Last night we were at a nice party at Mrs. Humphrey's, to meet Mr. Everett,—where I saw dear Katie and [Silby?], both of whom won my heart by saying sweet things of you. How I do miss your—smile!

The letter concludes by referring to a romance which by this time had probably been virtually forgotten by Harriet because of her varied and tedious duties as First Lady.

Your Fitz, I see, is in the [British] Cabinet and has an income, the papers say, of $100,000 per ann.—making $75,000 by his practice, and adding $25,000 by his office of Attorney General. Quite a comfortable income, I admit, but not enough to entice an American Princess from her home!

God bless you, my dear Hattie, and believe me,

Yours devotedly,

George [Plitt]

March 12, 1858

Miss Lane.

The original of this letter is preserved as pages 1180-1182 in the Harriet Lane Johnston Papers in the Library of Congress.

Josephine Guest [wife of a naval officer?] wrote “My dear Harriet,” from Philadelphia, under date of April 24, 1858, asking for a shore station at the Philadelphia Navy Yard or the Philadelphia Naval Asylum for her husband upon his return from England. The letter is preserved in the Harriet Lane Johnston Papers in the Library of Congress, pages 1186 and 1187.
A letter of almost a year later indicates that Harriet was still receiving requests to help people obtain jobs.

Philadelphia
March 8th/59.

I well know Dear Hattie That you are as much gratified as Aunt Sophie and I, at the unlooked for app’t of my dear boy, and I hasten to thank you for your kind interest and influence in his behalf. Indeed my heart is so full of love and gratitude to you all, that I could not as I would, tell you all I think of in thanks.

signed Carrie [?]


Miss Lane’s Intuition Saves The Day

Midway in the Buchanan Administration, on February 27, 1859, a tragic event took place within sight of the White House. According to a clipping, reprinted from the *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette* (which came into being in 1877), Harriet Lane’s advice to the President prevented him from being implicated. Had Buchanan not taken her advice he might have been finished at once in the public eye, and all his public policies would have been discounted. The clipping is found on page 9 of a scrapbook of clippings on Washington, D. C., preserved by the Columbia Historical Society. The scrapbook was presented to the Society via letter of October 14, 1911, by Marcus Benjamin, a distinguished editor who served the U.S. National Museum, Smithsonian Institution, from 1896 to 1931. The clipping was probably printed and reprinted in the period 1881-1886. It is as follows.

**BUCHANAN’S NARROW ESCAPE.**

James Buchanan, when President, had a very narrow escape from being mixed up in the Sickles-Key scandal. When Buchanan was Minister to England Sickles was his Secretary of Legation. Mrs. Sickles was from Pennsylvania, and was one of Buchanan’s pets. He thought as much of her as he would of his own daughter. When he became President, Buchanan was very intimate with the Sickles family. Whenever he was tired he had the habit of slipping out of the White House and walking through Lafayette Park for a chat with General Sickles and his wife. The day before Key [Philip Barton] was shot was Saturday. Saturday morning Mrs. Sickles came over to the White House and called upon the President. Buchanan was very fond of buckwheat cakes. Mrs. Sickles called on him to tell him that she had received some very nice buckwheat flour from Pennsylvania, and that she was going to have some hot cakes for their Sunday breakfast at the Sickles residence. She invited the President to come over to breakfast. He, beguiled by his love for the heated slapjack, rapturously consented. Harriet Lane was then mistress of the White House. When she heard of the invitation she advised the President not to go. At that time Washington Society understood fully the nature of the intrigue being carried on between Key and Mrs. Sickles. General
Sickles and Buchanan were the last two men to learn of the scandal. Miss Lane was asked by the President to give a reason for declining to go to the breakfast. Said she: "I do not care to give my reason. Act upon my judgment and you will decline." Buchanan was more impressed by her manner than by her words. When the tragedy took place Buchanan fairly shuddered at his escape. If he had been at the breakfast he would have been with Mrs. Sickles at the time of the shooting of Key. The world would have believed him one of Mrs. Sickles' lovers, and he would have been dragged into the scandal beyond all hope of escape.—[Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette.

The short article which comprises this clipping was probably written by James W. Breen, a reporter who was being sent as far as Atlantic City in 1873. He may have been in Washington in 1859 when the Key shooting occurred. In Breen's book, If, Turning Points In The Careers of Notable People &c, substantially the same account is given. It appears under the title "President Buchanan's Lucky Escape," on pages 70-71. The book was published in Pittsburgh in 1901 by the Pittsburgh Printing Company.

How much confidence can be placed in the above clipping and in the account in Breen's book is a matter of conjecture. Buchanan liked Daniel E. Sickles but in London found Sickles to be worthless as his Secretary of Legation. Sickles occasionally placed Buchanan and the United States in an embarrassing position. Simultaneously, Sickles' enthusiasm for Buchanan waned. Buchanan asked Sickles to resign and Sickles followed the suggestion. The friendship probably continued, at least of sorts. Sickles visited Buchanan at Wheatland in February 1857, just before Buchanan's inauguration as President. As late as February 22, 1861, less than two weeks before the end of the Buchanan Administration, Sickles still had influence on the President. On that day he obtained from Buchanan a reversal of a rather minor decision, that there should be no Federal troops in the Washington Birthday parade in the Capital. Buchanan wanted to avoid a show of Federal military might at that critical time. Also, it should be mentioned that Mrs. Sickles was the daughter of a famous musician, Antonio Bagioli, who was born in Bologna, Italy, and who came to New York in 1832 and settled there permanently.

Sickles, a Democrat from New York, was a member of the United States House of Representatives during the four years of the Buchanan Administration and had a distinguished career as a Union general during the Civil War. No doubt Buchanan discussed matters with Sickles frequently during 1857-1859, as Buchanan needed all the support in Congress that he could muster.

The shooting incident and the events leading up to it are described in chapter XVI of Edgcumb Pinchon's Dan Sickles, Hero of Gettysburg and "Yankee King of Spain."
From the time he was United States Minister to the Court of St. James, Buchanan continued to confide in Harriet the political matters of the day. How could he do otherwise? Politics and the law were his life. Harriet was close to him and was an intelligent protege. Thus we find him discussing the implications of the recent election in Pennsylvania when writing to Harriet under date of October 15, 1858. She seems to have been visiting at the Plitts in Philadelphia at that time. He wrote:

This likeness of the First Lady was distributed by a commercial photographer, in the form of a printed card two inches wide and three inches high. —Photograph courtesy Miss Kate Boyd, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.
Well! we have met the enemy in Pennsylvania & we are theirs. This I have anticipated for three months & was not taken by surprise except as to the extent of our defeat. I am astonished at myself for bearing it with so much philosophy.

The conspirators against poor Jones [Jehu Glancy Jones of Reading, Pennsylvania] have at length succeeded in hunting him down. Ever since my election the hounds have been in pursuit of him. I now deeply regret—but I shall say no more. With the blessing of Providence I shall endeavor to raise him up & place him in some position where they cannot reach him. [Jones was appointed Minister to Austria by Buchanan, December 7, 1858, and served in that position from December 15, 1858, to November 14, 1861.]

Judge Black, General Anderson of Tennessee, Mr. Brenner, & Mr. Van Dyke dined with me yesterday, & we had a merry time of it, laughing among other things over our crushing defeat. It is so great that it is almost absurd.

We will present a record of success at the meeting of Congress which has rarely been equalled. We have hitherto succeeded in all our undertakings. Poor bleeding Kansas is quiet & is behaving herself in an orderly manner; but her wrongs have melted the hearts of the sympathetic Pennsylvanians or rather Philadelphians. In the interior of the State the Tariff was the damaging question, & in defeating Jones, the iron interest have prostrated a man who could render them more service than all the black Republican Representatives from Pennsylvania. He will be a loss to the whole Country in the House of Representatives. (Moore, X, 229-230.)

The next June, 10th, Buchanan wrote to Harriet about his “utmost reluctance” in removing a man, saying, “I have known him long, and can say with truth that I know not a more unprincipled man in the United States.” Buchanan also said he had wished to “avoid the publication of Mr. Holt’s [Postmaster General’s] report, but that two men had made secrecy impossible.” (Moore, X, 324.)

Even after leaving the Presidency, Buchanan confided political matters, on those somewhat rare occasions when she was away from Wheatland and was receiving letters from him. In letters from Wheatland dated December 2 and 19, 1861, and January 3, 1862, to Harriet, he discussed the then current delicate international question, the “Trent Affair,” involving the Confederacy and British neutrality early in the Civil War. In the letter of January 3 Buchanan gave his views about an indiscretion of William H. Seward, then Secretary of State, in publishing under authority of the government a letter of November 30 bearing on the case. These three letters are reproduced by Curtis, volume II, 569, 571, 576-577. In the first of these three letters to Harriet, in which he discusses the Trent Affair, he is replying to information furnished by her. In the second he responds to her query, “You ask my opinion on the Slidell and Mason affair, and whether there is danger of a war with England.” [John Slidell and James M. Mason, aboard the British mail steamer Trent, sailing from Habana to England, were seized by a U. S. naval officer, Captain Wilkes, on November 8, 1861, to prevent these two Confederate commissioners from securing assistance for the Confederacy from England and France.] Writing to her from Wheatland on January 16, 1862, he discussed Edwin M. Stanton’s appointment as Sec.
retary of War, pointing out some of Stanton’s strengths and weaknesses. (Curtis II, 522-523.)

After Harriet Lane married she continued to be interested in politics. Buchanan wrote to her from Bedford Springs, Pennsylvania, on July 30, 1866,” . . . You inquire, Is there any chance of Clymer’s [Hiester Clymer] election [as Governor of Pennsylvania]?” In four sentences Buchanan replied stating that he did not pretend to give his opinion on this question but that he believed that a Republican would be elected United States Senator and that Simon Cameron would have the best chance to be elected. (Moore ,XI, 422.) Cameron was elected to the Senate. Clymer lost to John W. Geary in the 1866 gubernatorial race, receiving 290,096 votes as compared with 307,274 cast for Geary.

Through the years, especially from 1854, Buchanan and Harriet had much in common, particularly politics and public affairs—in the United States and on the international horizon.

A Contemporary’s Estimate

Mrs. Roger A. Pryor states that Harriet Lane was Buchanan’s “confidante in all matters political and personal.” (Reminiscences of Peace and War, page 39.) It is rather doubtful, however, that much reliance should be placed on this particular statement. Mrs. Pryor was living in Washington during the Buchanan Administration, was the wife of a Congressman, and was attending many social functions in the city. Even so, how could she speak with accuracy on such an intimate subject? Buchanan was a forceful individual who made his own decisions. He kept a firm hand on his Cabinet. On the eve of the Civil War he may have faltered but until then he was, in many ways, a strong personality, contrary to public opinion. Nevertheless, he probably sought Harriet’s advice more and more as the months rolled by while he was in the White House, except during the times he became irritable in the closing months of his Administration.

The following comment by Mary Clemmer Ames probably supports Mrs. Pryor’s statement that Harriet Lane was Buchanan’s “confidante in all matters political and personal.”

During the last troubled months of Mr. Buchanan’s administration, he always spoke with warmth and gratitude of Miss Lane’s patriotism and good sense. Neither he nor her country ever suffered from any conversational lapse of hers, which, in a day so rife with passion and injustice, is saying much. (Page 235, Ten Years in Washington, 1874.)

Errand Girl For Political Friends?

For twenty years Harriet Lane had been meeting Presidents,
their wives and children, Cabinet Members, and political henchmen who published newspapers, raised funds for the Democratic party, and gathered votes for Buchanan. Furthermore, she had lived in Philadelphia with Mr. George Plitt and his wife Sophia at various times while Buchanan was away from Lancaster on Federal business. Harriet was fond of Sophia Plitt and carried on an intimate correspondence with her for more than ten years. Almost anyone can come under obligation to another if not careful. George Plitt was a politician who was looking for a greater return than a polite “thank you” from the head of his party. Did he try to take advantage of his friendship with Buchanan and Harriet? Was she asked to run many high-level errands during her uncle's administration? In a letter of November 17, 1859, George Plitt said to her:

* * *

What does our good friend Gov. Floyd [John B. Floyd, Secretary of War in Buchanan's Cabinet, and Governor of Virginia 1849-1852] say about the additional order to Knorr? Would it be too much to ask him to write me a line upon the subject? I would sooner cut my hand off than trouble so good a man unnecessarily, and therefore leave it all to you; but it would be of great benefit to

Your old friend

George [Plitt]

(From the original letter in the Harriet Lane Johnston Papers, Library of Congress, page 1341.)

A Special Channel From The Cabinet To The White House

Buchanan was a poor delegator of authority. He subordinated his Cabinet, had relatively little confidence in his Cabinet Members at times, inquired endlessly into details he should have left to them and kept the Cabinet in fear. For nearly thirty-five years he had done an excellent job of running his political affairs personally—meeting with individuals and small groups, writing letters incessantly, and making speeches. Administration of a large organization,

* * *

HARRIET LANE, FROM A BRADY PHOTOGRAPH

This likeness, on a glass negative, was made by Mathew Brady or by a member of his Staff. This portrait of Buchanan's niece is in a collection of photographs of eminent Americans made between c a 1855-1865, preserved by the Library of Congress. The maturity indicated in this photograph suggests that it might have been made after the White House years, and even as late as 1866, the year in which Buchanan's book about his Administration was published, a work in which Harriet no doubt assisted. — From the Collections of the Library of Congress.
through the directing of a high-level, capable staff was not his cup of tea. Consequently, during the White House years he spent an incalculable number of hours reviewing correspondence and documents that should have been handled only by others. Frequently he kept the Members of his Cabinet at bay instead of giving them wide latitude to operate and then holding them responsible to attain his objectives. Sometimes he hovered over Cabinet Members, as for example, Howell Cobb of Georgia, Secretary of the Treasury. In other instances he remained too aloof.

As poor delegators of authority often do, Buchanan probably confided in someone outside of the official staff. No doubt he discussed numerous political matters with Harriet throughout the four years of his administration as President.

Buchanan's First Lady was on intimate terms with the Cabinet Members and their wives. She saw them at many receptions, dinners and other parties. As many of us know, when one cannot get to the boss, directly, one gets to him the best way he can, perhaps through someone who has the boss's ear, or through a chain of several individuals. People tried to get to Buchanan through Harriet Lane. To approach Harriet was one successful way to get the President's ear. Cabinet Members complimented her. No doubt many of those compliments were sincere. Undoubtedly some of them were mere flattery. Calling at the White House to see Miss Lane was not an unusual act for a Cabinet Member. Early in the Buchanan Administration Attorney General Black wrote to the Secretary of the Treasury, on April 25, 1857, saying "Last night I called at the Ex. Mansion with Mrs. B. to see Miss Lane." (Howell Cobb Papers). Miss Lane handled many of the arrangements for dinners at the White House for Cabinet Members and their wives. In turn she attended dinners and parties given by Cabinet Members. On at least one such occasion there was a matter of protocol. On December 22, 1857, Buchanan and Harriet Lane dined with the Secretary of State and declined an invitation to have dinner with the Secretary of the Treasury on that same evening. (Letter of December 27, 1857, by Mrs. Cobb to her brother Col. John B. Lamar, in Howell Cobb Papers.)

At the beginning of his Administration Buchanan held Cabinet Meetings each day except Sunday and reception days. No doubt such an ambitious program of meetings soon wore itself out, for Cabinet Members later found it difficult at times to see the President when they needed to see him.

Even though Jeremiah S. Black, Attorney General, was somewhat of a favorite of Buchanan's, he had difficulty in seeing the President. Black wrote a private note to Harriet, on paper without a letterhead, intimating that he would like her to arrange an appointment with Buchanan, and forgiveness for skipping out of a social engagement, apparently arranged either by Buchanan or Harriet. The Attorney General wrote as follows:
Most Excellent & Thrice Illustrious

I do very much desire to go out to the Soldiers Home that I may see the Commander in Chief. But I am literally afraid. The mere imagination of a frown on your free approval [of] me, cows my better part of man, drains me of strength and courage [.] If I have even done wrong your displeasure is too severe a punishment. It is more than I can bear and therefore more than ought to be inflicted [.] But think of my defence [.] I had written to my wife that I had not time to visit here and if I had gone to Old Point Comfort what would I have said? I have thus given an example of conjugal fidelity which you will find it useful to cite when you get a husband of your own. Besides I thought that in the absence of so many others, I might be useful to a great good woman whom I was unwilling to see altogether deserted. Do set these things down to my credit and see whether the balance & finding against me is so large that I cannot be forgiven upon the strong assurance which I am willing to give of future devotion to your wishes and interests. Be so good as you are beautiful, as generous as you are brilliant, and I shall have no fear. In making up your judgment don't forget that I am

The most devoted of your friends
The most humble of yr. servants

J. S. Black

Miss Lane

(From the original letter in the Harriet Lane Johnston Papers, Library of Congress, pages 1218, 1219 and 1220.)

In 1859 things were not going well with Buchanan. The Democratic Congress which adjourned on March 4 was parsimonious. The Republicans were gaining strength. His attitude toward his Cabinet was not an attitude of pride. The Chief became irritable and still more dictatorial. Things were not getting better for Cabinet Members. Most of them probably relied on Harriet Lane at least occasionally to secure information from the top, to transmit a message to the President, or to make peace with the Chief.

Press Secretary For The President

The following formal note in Harriet Lane's unmistakable handwriting indicates that as early as her White House years she was on guard to modify and correct unfair or careless statements about and biographical sketches of her uncle.

Miss Lane returns the proof to Mr. Childs [probably George William Childs or Cephas Grier Childs], having made all the corrections she deems essential:—she hopes while Mr. Childs is making these corrections that he will also have the portrait changed, which Miss Lane has seen on another copy—& which she considers a serious libel against The President. Miss Lane begs to return thanks to Mr Childs,
for all his kindness—and wishes him every success with his new, & interesting publication.

Executive Mansion
Saturday, Nov 19, 1859.

The letter is preserved in the Library of Dickinson College.

Harriet had a sense of the necessary and the expedient in political matters. For the remainder of her life she kept an eye on the political horizon, without engaging actively in politics, and came to the defense of James Buchanan when he was being vilified. Some years later, in 1869, when William B. Reed languished on the project of writing a biography of James Buchanan she quickly sensed the need to recover the Buchanan papers, lest they might fall into the hands of hostile Republicans. She took quick action to see that they would be safeguarded. She seems to have been the only person who was aware of the danger.

In 1876 Harriet Lane, then Mrs. Henry Elliott Johnston, publicly refuted an accusation that Buchanan made it a practice to receive gifts while in office. Her refutation was dated March 14, 1876, and was published in the Baltimore American for March 15, 1876, in the Philadelphia Press for March 18, 1876, and probably in a number of other newspapers. When she felt that an injustice had been done she spoke out. She was then living in Baltimore. The refutation as printed in the Baltimore American is as follows.

PRESIDENT BUCHANAN.

Messrs. Editors of The American:

My attention has this moment been called to an item in your paper of the 13th instant, which reads as follows:

"A DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENT GIFT-TAKER—To show that President Grant is not the only Chief Magistrate who accepted presents the subjoined letter goes to prove:

"Washington September 12, 1860.

"My Dear Sir—I have received the case containing specimens of the birds of America, for which you have my thanks. I hesitated as to whether I would accept them, having acted on the principle since I became President that I would not receive presents of value from any friend. These would come within my rule, but still I shall not return them, but retain them as a token of your personal regard. I have no doubt that Miss Lane will be much pleased with them.

"Your friend, very respectfully.

"(Signed)

James Buchanan.

"The name of the person to whom this was addressed desires that his name be withheld, but if the genuineness of the letter is questioned his name will be given."

The insinuation attempted to be conveyed herein is so unjust that I am sure your sense of propriety will hardly deny me the opportunity of so pronouncing it, over my own signature, in your columns.
My uncle, Mr. Buchanan, has long been slandered and vilified by both Northern and Southern extremists, for no other reason than that his patriotism impelled him to disregard party ties and personal friendships in an honest effort to uphold the Constitution and laws of his country and to avert civil war; but none have yet dared to insinuate aught against his personal honor and integrity.

Not only whilst occupying the Presidency, but during a long life devoted to the service of his country, Mr. Buchanan's invariable rule was to decline all presents. The "gift" to which reference is now made consisted of six or eight small stuffed birds, in a glass case.

My uncle's first impulse was to apply in this case the rule which governed him after entering public life and to return the offered present, trifling as it was; but the thing was so utterly valueless, except as a token of "personal regard" and good will, that, after some hesitation, he decided to retain it rather than wound the feelings of the person sending it.

Fortunately, this "gift", as it is now dignified, is, or was, when I last saw it, at Wheatland, where it has been kept out of a proper regard for the motive which prompted the gentleman to send it to Mr. Buchanan, and it is to be regretted that a similar feeling did not induce the recipient of Mr. Buchanan's letter to hold it sacred, rather than allow it to be used in this unwarrantable manner.

Yours, very respectfully,

HARRIET LANE JOHNSTON.
116 Park Street, March 14, 1876.

The next year Harriet Lane Johnston published a logical and astute political reply to a political castigation in a book by the eccentric Thomas L. Clingman then recently off the press. Buchanan had already been dead more than nine years. Clingman had been a Congressman and then a Senator, during the Buchanan Administration, and a brigadier-general in the Confederate army. In his book Clingman charged that Buchanan had encouraged Jacob Thompson, then Secretary of the Interior, to go to North Carolina about the middle of December 1860, to get that State to secede from the Union. Harriet's reply is as follows, in the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Daily Intelligencer for Monday October 1, 1877, together with an introductory note.

Mrs. Harriet Lane Johnston's Testimony.

The above quoted statement of Clingman having been published in the New Era with editorial comments pointing to it as "but one incident of the many that are daily coming to light showing the criminal participation of Mr. Buchanan in the plans of the traitors," the following note has been addressed to the editor of the Era by Mrs. Harriet Lane Johnston, who it will be remembered was the niece of Mr. Buchanan and his closest confidant "before, during and after his presidency."

J. M. W. Geist, Esq, Editor Lancaster New Era:

Sir: My attention has been directed to an editorial in your paper of this date, in which you refer to a visit to North Carolina, of the Hon. Jacob Thompson, President Buchanan's secretary of the interior, and quote from the writings of Thos. L. Clingman, of North Carolina, to show that while in that position, with Mr. Buchanan's knowledge, approval, and "criminal participation," Mr. Thompson went to North Carolina as a commissioner from the state of Mississippi "to get" the state of North Carolina to secede.
I have a perfect recollection of all the facts connected with this incident, and state of my own knowledge, derived at the time from the president himself, that he assented to Mr. Thompson's visit, only under the belief that his mission was to prevent—not to precipitate—secession, Mr. Thompson being regarded at that time as entirely opposed to any such state action. The president's object was to strengthen the border states in their then undoubted loyalty. To preserve the Union was his supreme desire.

Your article demonstrates that you are entirely misinformed regarding my uncle's true political sentiments—for I cannot believe that you would knowingly circulate false and malicious slanders against the dead.

Pardon me for recommending to your perusal a little historical book of which the title is "Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion." In this work you will see clearly defined my uncle's position before, during and after his presidency: and in this connection I specially refer you to his message of Dec. 3, 1860, in which he utterly denies the right of secession.

You have also taken occasion in this editorial to refer to President Buchanan's biography and to insinuate that the delay in its publication is, as you express it, owing to some "embarrassment of riches of such incidents" in his career as may reflect upon his character as a statesman and patriot. The publication of Mr. Buchanan's biography, to my own profound grief and the regret of all his friends, has been delayed by the death of the appointed biographer, but you will find the perusal of the history I have named sufficient for the refutation of all such slanders as that of Mr. Clingman to which you have given currency. There is not the slightest occasion to await the publication of any biography, for in the book to which I have directed your attention every statement is verified by authentic documentary evidence to which the reader is in each instance specially referred. In this work the writer has resolutely abstained from the use of private correspondence. When the biography is published you may have the opportunity of reading a number of letters from Republican leaders, which may enlighten you as to their estimate of Mr. Buchanan's true position. Meanwhile let me refer you to an extract from a letter written at the close of Mr. Buchanan's administration by Mr. Holt, afterwards Mr. Lincoln's judge advocate general, from which I feel at liberty to quote, as it has already appeared in print:

"In thus terminating our official relations, I avail myself of the occasion to express to you my heartfelt gratitude for the confidence with which, in this and other high positions, you have honored me, and for the firm and generous support which you have constantly extended me amid the arduous and perplexing duties which I have been called upon to perform. In the full conviction that your labors will yet be crowned by the glory which belongs to an enlightened statesmanship and to an unsullied patriotism, and with the sincerest wishes for your personal happiness, I remain most truly, your friend. J. Holt."

In conclusion I direct your attention to an article published in the Baltimore Sun of this date in which Mr. Thompson, himself, emphatically contradicts Mr. Clingman's statements.

May I rely upon your sense of justice to publish Mr. Thompson's manly denial as fully as you have published the accusation, which I have felt compelled thus to notice?

Very respectfully,

HARRIET LANE JOHNSTON.

Wheatland, Sep. 29, 1877.
Harriet Lane Johnston’s article was commented upon vigorously and favorably by a number of newspapers, such as the Baltimore Sun, the Baltimore Daily News, the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, the Philadelphia Commonwealth, and the Brooklyn Daily Eagle.

In The Darkest Days Of The Union

South Carolina, long eager to secede from the Union, did so on December 20, 1860, soon after receiving the news that Abraham Lincoln had been elected President. December 20, 1860, was a dangerous day for Buchanan and for the United States. December 30, 1860, also was a dangerous day for both. In the ten-day interim many things had happened. A commission of three from South Carolina came to see Buchanan. On December 26 Major Anderson moved his Union soldiers from unfortified Fort Moultrie at Charleston to Fort Sumpter in Charleston Harbor. By December 29 the South Carolina commissioners were in a demanding mood. Buchanan, with more wisdom than generally credited, was stalling for time to placate some of the Southern States and win the assistance of President-elect Lincoln and the newly formed Republican party. Buchanan insisted upon giving to the South Carolina commissioners a fairly conciliatory statement. Two Members of his Cabinet agreed with it, Jacob Thompson of Mississippi and Isaac Toucey of Connecticut. The remainder were opposed. Black inferred that he would resign from the Cabinet. Buchanan argued but finally gave in and asked Black to modify the statement. The details are given by Dr. Philip S. Klein in his biography of Buchanan, pages 377-387.

Buchanan had been pointing out that secession was unconstitutional. In those hectic days of December 1860, and during the months immediately preceding, did Harriet Lane advise Buchanan to lean heavily on Black, and to take a firm stand against secession? Probably so. To great numbers of people such advice was sensible. Furthermore, Harriet’s friendship for Black’s daughter, and probably for Black himself, would no doubt have influenced Harriet to advise Buchanan over a period of months that he give careful consideration to recommendations of this Member of the Cabinet. The cumulative effect no doubt was decisive.

Buffer, Adviser, Defender

Just as Buchanan was always looking out for Harriet Lane’s interests, she was mindful of his needs. During the White House years she was a buffer who relieved him of many details, including correspondence concerning appointments to government jobs.

During his Presidency Buchanan had a rather strong propensity toward being scornful of advice. Nevertheless, Harriet probably
advised him on many political matters but the extent of the advice and the degree to which it was accepted, is, of course, not known. They lived under the same roof and during the years he most needed her advice on political matters there was little necessity to put the questions or the suggested solutions into writing. And, the conversations have evaporated.

No doubt during the Buchanan Administration Harriet, by word of mouth and by correspondence, came to the defense of her uncle. Certainly after his death, when he could no longer defend himself, she went to great lengths to drench calumny with the relevant facts by protecting and making available the voluminous papers of her uncle.

In her activities as buffer, adviser, and defender she reflected good judgment, and thorough schooling as to the ways of politicians.

No one will ever know the extent to which Harriet Lane influenced the public policies of James Buchanan. Nevertheless, it appears to this writer that she was largely inclined to accept Buchanan's political views but that when she foresaw a crisis in political matters she was not hesitant to give him the benefit of her opinions, and that he had come to accept almost any view about which she had a strong conviction.

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A previous article by Dr. Homer Tope Rosenberger entitled Protecting the Buchanan Papers may be found in Vol. 72 No. 3 of the Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society.