

# Harriet Lane Johnston

May 9, 1830 - July 3, 1903



*John Henry Brown, Harriet Lane Johnston 1878  
Smithsonian American Art Museum  
Bequest of May S. Kennedy*

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# Harriet Lane Johnston

*Joan C. McCulloh*

Harriet Lane's education, both formal and informal, prepared her well for the responsibilities that lay ahead of her.

Harriet Rebecca Lane, later Harriet Lane Johnston, niece of President James Buchanan, was hostess in the White House during her uncle's Presidency from 1857 to 1861. The daughter of Elliott Tole Lane, whose family was from the area of Charles Town, Virginia, now West Virginia, and Jane Buchanan Lane, she was born in Mercersburg on May 9, 1830, in a large brick house across the street from what had been her Grandfather Buchanan's store and home.

She was baptized on June 10, 1830, in the local Presbyterian Church of the Upper West Conococheague by the Reverend David Elliott who had officiated at the marriage of her parents on May 10, 1813. Next to the youngest of seven children, four of whom lived to maturity, she spent her early years in Mercersburg in which she attended Mrs. Sarah Young's Female Seminary in a house called Locust Grove on Main Street, now the site of the MMPW Fire Company. According to tradition as recorded in *Old Mercersburg* she was a "merry, mischievous girl, never so happy as when ring-leader of schoolgirl pranks."

In 1830 when Harriet Lane was born in what was probably the most elegant house in town and into a prominent family, the town with its six or

seven hundred residents was busy. In addition to her father, who had a dry goods store but seems to have left that business about the time of her birth, several other merchants had stores. The town was busy with cabinetmakers, shoemakers, wagon makers, carpenters, chair makers, saddlers, coopers, blacksmiths, a potter, weavers, silversmiths, and others, a little self-reliant community.

Her father, Elliott Lane, was important in the affairs of the town. When the German Reformed Church placed an advertisement in area newspapers in search of a place to move its high school and seminary then located in York, Elliott Lane was one of the local men who signed a letter indicating that men in Mercersburg would offer \$10,000 to the church if it moved its school here. The church accepted the proposal of the local men so that what became Marshall College, named for the late Chief Justice John Marshall, was founded here in 1835 with a charter granted in 1836. Mr. Lane became one of the trustees and was the chair of the committee to construct the first building.

Little is known about Harriet's first nine years, the years she spent in Mercersburg. But some of the experiences she must have had are known. When Harriet was born, her uncle, James Buchanan, a Democrat and supporter of President Andrew Jackson, was serving in the House of Representatives. Since in 1831 Jackson had appointed Buchanan to become minister to Russia, to which appointment he was confirmed in 1832, the family had a further personal tie to current events that would continue as Buchanan was appointed to the Senate in 1834 and elected to the Senate in 1837. Since during all of Harriet's early life Buchanan was active in national politics, she surely would have seen at times and heard much of her uncle.

She would have known about death. Certainly when she looked out the windows in the front rooms of her home, she would have known that her Grandfather Buchanan nine years







**The Lane House on North Main Street in Mercersburg**

before her birth had died from injuries he sustained when his horse bolted and threw him out of his carriage in the alley adjacent to his store and home. She would have known about other deaths as one brother had died at age two before her own birth, another brother, William, died when she was about four years old, and a third brother, eighteen year old Thomas, died when Harriet was aged five leaving two brothers and one sister, James Buchanan Lane (1814 - 1850), Elliott Eskridge Lane (1823 - 1857), and Mary Elizabeth Speer Lane (1826 - 1855).

She also would have experienced some local events. One of the most exciting, it seems, was the Fourth of July celebration in 1836. On that day the citizens first went to the local Methodist Church, heard a sermon, then formed a parade, consisting of the president of the day, the vice-presidents, one of whom was Elliott Lane, the secretaries, orator and reader, the committee of arrangements, faculty of Marshall

College, ladies, students, citizens, and Captain Bowles' Light Infantry, and went to a picnic. After the meal the men proposed forty-five toasts, thirteen regular toasts and thirty-two impromptu toasts, one of which was to "James Buchanan, one of Pennsylvania's brightest sons," then a United State Senator. Elliott Lane's toast was to "Marshall College, the intelligence and urbanity of the professors; the moral deportment and assiduity of the students give high promise of its future usefulness as a nursery of science in our country." This seems to have been a most exciting day.

But not all was festive in this time in Mercersburg and the surrounding area. This was a time of tensions over slavery not just elsewhere but also in south-central Pennsylvania. In 1837 when at the end of July Jonathan Blanchard, a young worker in the American Anti-slavery Society, which had been founded in 1833, came to town, a riot, in which Marshall College students were predominant, occurred in front of the Methodist



church after an evening service there. Young Blanchard, who could not obtain a room in the local hotel or a room in which to lecture, was able to rent a room from Daniel Kroh, a Marshall College student, who ran a boardinghouse for students. Kroh was helpful to Blanchard and offered him protection from the mob. A few days after the incident Elliott Lane brought charges in a faculty meeting at Marshall College against Daniel Kroh as follows: "of having disturbed the peace of the Town by entertaining a Mr. Blanchard at his house, a lecturer on Abolition, secondly of having permitted him to lecture in his house..." Lane's actions at the time of this event imply that he was opposed to the work of abolitionists. Again exactly what the Lane children knew of these occurrences is unknown, but these local events were a part of their world.

But all of this changed as when Harriet was nine years old, her mother, aged forty-six, died; when she was ten, her father, aged fifty-six, died. Sometime after the death of her father, James Buchanan, exactly when is unknown, took her into his care as he at various times cared for several other nieces and nephews. It is believed that Harriet first lived with some of her Lane relatives for a brief time. When she went to Lancaster, perhaps he first sent her to a day school there. By this time she had

become a fun-loving, mischievous, independent minded girl, probably a bit of a challenge for her bachelor uncle. The account is that one day when Buchanan was returning to his home on East King Street in Lancaster, he saw young Harriet pushing a wheelbarrow filled with wood. When asked what she was doing,

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**"When she went to Lancaster, perhaps he first sent her to a day school there. By this time she had become a fun-loving, mischievous, independent minded girl, probably a bit of a challenge for her bachelor uncle...."**

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she replied that she was taking the wood to a black servant, Old Aunt Tabitha. She seems to have been spirited in school also. It has been asserted that Buchanan warned her that, if her deportment in school became faulty, he would send her to another school in Lancaster, operated by two unmarried sisters, the Misses Crawford. He did send her to the school in which the strict discipline of the Misses Crawford interfered with her mischievous, fun-loving spirit, so that she was less than happy there and complained of "early hours,

brown sugar in tea, restrictions in dress, and stiff necks and cold hearts." Exactly how long she attended the school is unknown.

It was during this time at the school run by the Misses Crawford that James Buchanan and Harriet began their long correspondence that lasted until his death in 1868. Although she later destroyed much of the correspondence, many letters remain. On his side the letters were characterized by deep concern for her education, her deportment, her growth as a young lady, and her written sentence structure and punctuation and are alternately affectionate, didactic, sometimes a bit humorous, sometimes censorious, sometimes severe. All, though, show a deep commitment to her upbringing and reveal not only his commitment to her growth but also his love and concern for their other family members. As she grew older, she became his confidante as he shared both political news and his deeper thoughts with her. The importance of this correspondence to both of them cannot be overly estimated.

On February 16, 1842, during the time she attended the Miss Crawfords' school Buchanan wrote to her from Washington: "My Dear Harriet, Your letter afforded me very great pleasure. There is no wish nearer my heart than you should become an amiable and intelligent woman: and I am rejoiced 4

to learn that you still continue at the head of your class. I expect to be in Lancaster for a week or ten days about the first of April when I hope to see you in good health and receive the most favorable reports of your behavior" with a postscript "Remember me affectionately to your brother James, Miss Hetty, and the Miss Crawfords and believe me to be your ever affectionate uncle. May Heaven bless you. James Buchanan."

What she learned in this school or the next school she attended is unknown, but two essays attributed to her, one about George Washington and the other about Eskimos, obviously the work of a young student, are impressive in their knowledge and in their expression.

Buchanan next sent her, aged about twelve, and her older sister Mary to a school in Charles Town, Virginia, now West Virginia, a school, it is believed, run by one of her Lane relatives, a school much more to her liking. In a letter to her in March 1843 from Lancaster Buchanan wrote:

"My dear Harriet: It affords me sincere pleasure to receive your letter. It is one of the first desires of my heart that you

should become an amiable and a good girl. Education and accomplishments are very important, but they sink into insignificance when compared with the

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**"You are perfectly acquainted with Harriet's peculiarity of temper and must know that indulgence is subversive of all discipline where she is concerned, one gratification excites a wish for a second until the exactions become totally unreasonable...."**

*-Mary E. Merritt*

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proper government of the heart and temper.

"How all our relatives and friends would love you--how proud and happy I should be to acknowledge and cherish you as an object of deep affection, could I say, she is kind in heart, amiable in temper, and behaves in such a manner to secure the affection and esteem of all around. I now cherish the hope

that ere long this may be the case. Endeavor to realize this ardent hope.

"What a long list of studies you are engaged upon. The number would be too great for any common intellect, but it would seem that you manage. As mythology and history seem to be your favorites, I shall expect when we meet you will have all the gods and heroes of Greece and Rome at your fingers ends. [sic] At a dinner table in Washington during the last Session a wager was made that no person at the table could name all the Muses; and the wager was won. Had you been one of the company, the result doubtless would have been different. I presume that the Muses and Graces are great favorites with you. Attend diligently your studies; but above all govern your heart and conduct.

"Your friends, the Misses Crawford, are about to move to a much more comfortable home. I presume your partiality still continues for these good ladies; but to be serious you must acknowledge that you did not treat them as they deserve."

Little is known about the female seminary in Charles Town, its location, or its program of

*Harriet Lane Johnston*



**On the South Portico of the White House Probably in the 1840s. From left to right, James Buchanan, Secretary of State; Harriet Lane; Joanna Rucker, the Polks' niece; Cave Johnson, Postmaster General; Mrs. Sarah Childress Polk; Thomas Hart Benton, Senator; President James K. Polk; Mrs. Dolley Madison; Mrs. Sarah Maury  
Courtesy of Fendrick Library, Mercersburg**

studies, but it is believed that she spent about three years there. In October 1845 Buchanan wrote: "My Dear Harriet: I regret to say that I was sorry I had given you permission to go to Bedford. You are now at the age when the seed of future responsibility and usefulness must be sown by diligence and attention to study: and when at the same time the allurements of pleasure are the most powerful.... I felt from my observation at Bedford that your keen relish for enjoyments there would for a season unsettle your mind and render it unfit for serious application...." He wrote more and ended "from your sincerely affectionate uncle."

In the same month in which Buchanan wrote that letter another letter was in the mail. It seems that Harriet had run afoul of the rules of that school. Mary E. Merritt, headmistress, wrote a very long letter to Harriet's brother James in which she noted with disapproval Harriet's independence and high spirits.

"I wish to consult you with regard to your Sister Harriet. She has just recovered from the usual dissipation of thought caused by the last vacation, and after much serious admonition is once more interested in her studies.... You are perfectly acquainted with Harriet's peculiarity of temper and must know that indulgence is subversive of all discipline where she is concerned, one gratification excites a wish for a second until the exactions become totally unreasonable...." Miss Merritt then noted that Harriet had become friendly with a young man when she last visited Bedford Springs, that Harriet had answered his first letter, and that she, Miss Merritt, had intercepted the young man's second letter. Miss Merritt went on to say: "I must in justice to H.{arriet} say that her conduct to me is always affectionate and she seems easily influenced by my advice, but she needs a guiding hand and a watchful eye."

Guiding hands and watchful eyes were



# *The Life & Times of James Buchanan*

**April 23, 1791**

James Buchanan born at Stony Batter, two miles west of Mercersburg

**1814-1815**

James Buchanan serves as member of the PA State Assembly

**May 9, 1830**

Birth of Harriet Rebecca Lane in Mercersburg, daughter of Elliott Tole Lane and Jane Buchanan Lane

**1834 - 1843**

Buchanan serves as United States Senator from Pennsylvania

**1845-1846**

Buchanan serves as Secretary of State

**1800s**

**1809**

James Buchanan graduates from Dickinson College and begins to study law with James Hopkins in Lancaster

**1821-1832**

James Buchanan serves as member of the United States House of Representatives

**1832 - 1833**

Buchanan serves as minister to Russia with appointment by President Andrew Jackson

**1840s**

Harriet moves into home of her uncle James Buchanan after the death of her parents. Studies at the Misses Crawford's School and school in Charles Town, VA (WV)

## *Significant Events Occurring During the*

**1856-1858**

Trouble in Kansas over slavery



**1857**

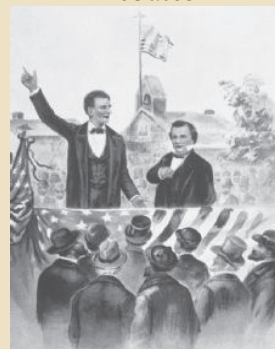
Dred Scott Decision



*Image Credit: Digital image ©1998 Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis*

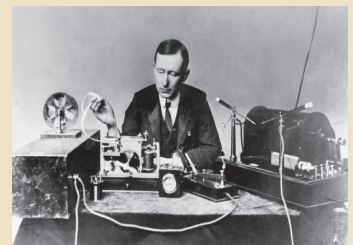
**1858**

Lincoln-Douglas Debates

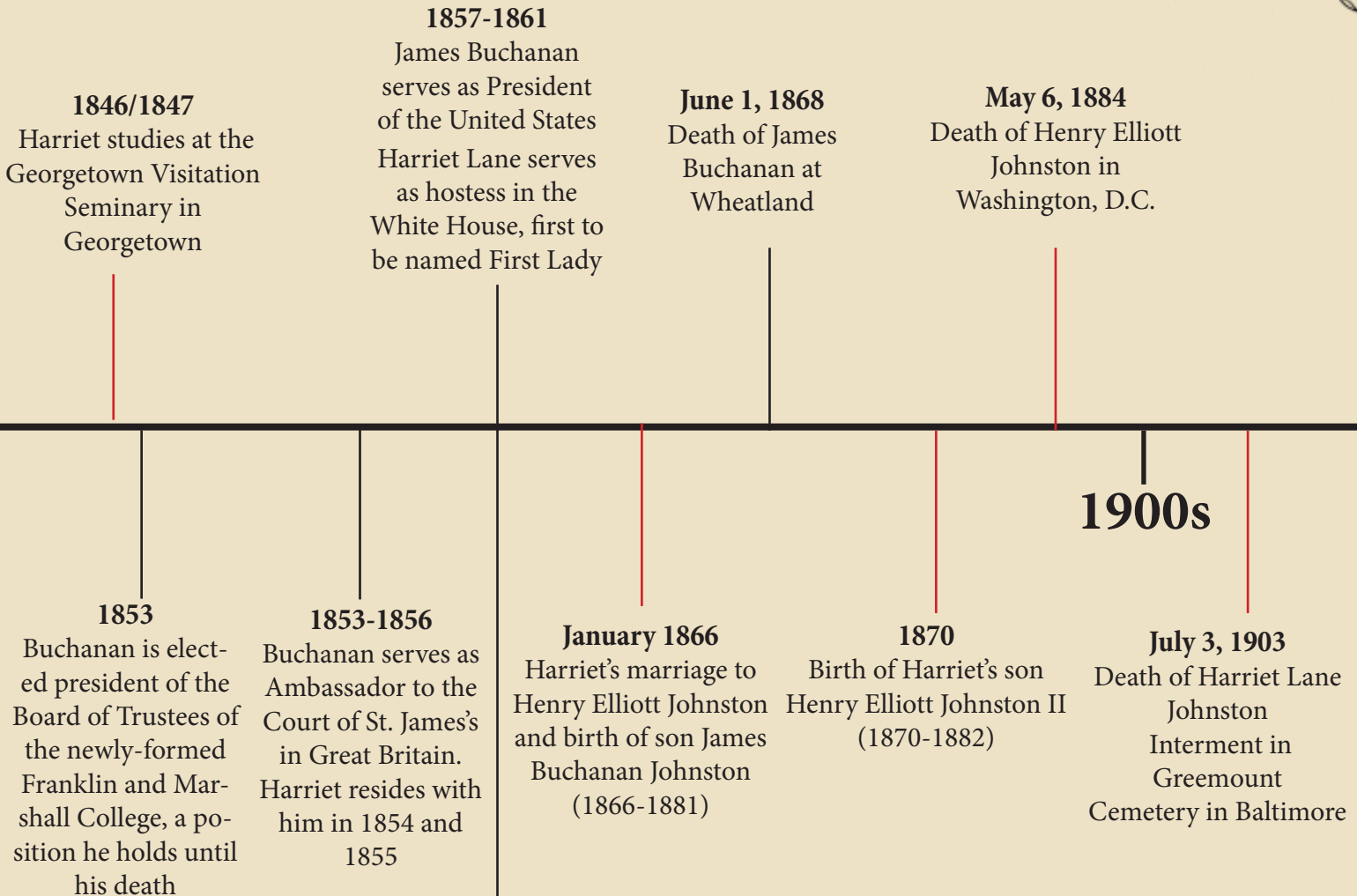


**1858**

First Trans-Atlantic Telegraph Message, one sent from Queen Victoria



# *and Harriet Lane Johnston*



## *Presidency of James Buchanan*

**1858**  
Attack by John Brown and his men upon Harpers Ferry



**1860**  
Election of Abraham Lincoln as president



**1860**  
Secession of South Carolina from the Union



not missing from Harriet's young life.

Later, when Buchanan was Secretary of State in the administration of President James Polk, he continued to take charge of the education of both Harriet and Mary and in 1846 or 1847 sent them to a convent school run by the Sisters of the Visitation in Georgetown, a prestigious school attended by the daughters of many prominent people. Although the Buchanans were Presbyterian, Buchanan chose this Roman Catholic school because of its high academic reputation. How long Mary was as student there is unknown, but Harriet seems to have been there for about two years.

When she attended the convent school in Georgetown, she spent a weekend each month with her uncle in Washington. This was a period of education for her as she learned to know people in both the government and society in Washington.

By the time she left the school for good, she had become an accomplished young woman who now became more of a companion and confidante of her uncle. Her sister Mary with whom she had always been close married George Baker of Lancaster and moved to California. For approximately the next six years Harriet lived in her uncle's home, which in 1849 became

Wheatland west of Lancaster. However, during

these years she spent much time away from home with visiting various people and at times traveling to the beach. About this time one of her friends described her in the following manner: "Miss Lane was a blonde.... Miss Lane's proportions were of the most perfect womanliness. Tall enough to

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**"We have dined with the Queen. The Queen was most gracious and talked a great deal to me. Uncle sat on her right hand, and Prince Albert was talkative, and altogether we passed a charming evening...it was a little like fairyland in its magnificence."**

***-Harriet Lane***

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be commanding, yet not high enough to attract observation - light enough to be graceful but so full as to indicate the perfect health with which she was blessed" and mentioned her deep violet eyes.

Sometime after James Buchanan had moved to Wheatland, Harriet and Blanche Nevin became friends. Buchanan's land and the property of Blanche's father were adjacent so that the friendship had the

benefit of proximity. These two young people also had the benefit of a shared past as both had been born in Mercersburg and had Mercersburg connections. Blanche was the daughter of John Williamson Nevin, who with Philip Schaff had developed the Mercersburg Theology. It has been asserted that this friendship stimulated Harriet's interest in art and was one of the reasons she later collected it. Although Blanche Nevin is known primarily as a sculptress, she painted a portrait of Harriet Lane, which is now in Lancaster.

The correspondence between Harriet and Buchanan continued when they were apart. Buchanan still showed his deep concern for her future. In a letter written when she was almost nineteen Buchanan stated: "I wish now to give you a caution. Never allow your affections to become interested or engage yourself to any person without my previous advice. You ought never to marry any man to whom you are not attached, but you ought never to marry any person who is not able to afford you a decent and immediate support. In my experience I have witnessed the long years of patient misery and dependence which fine women have endured from rushing precipitously into matrimonial connections without sufficient reflection. Look ahead and consider the future and act wisely in this particular."

When she was at home at



Wheatland, she was the hostess and helped to entertain Buchanan's many guests. These visits became a large part of her education. When there were no visitors, she read the newspapers to him, and they discussed the articles. As this sharing of news and ideas became a tutorial in government and politics, this was a period of growth for her.

However, the lives of Harriet and her uncle were to be disrupted as in April 1853 President Franklin Pierce appointed Buchanan as the ambassador to the Court of St. James's. In the month preceding his appointment Buchanan wrote a letter to Harriet in which he spoke of the rumors of his appointment: "Personally I have not the least desire to go abroad as a foreign minister. But 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' I really would not know where to leave you were I to accept a foreign mission and this would be one serious objection." Harriet wanted to accompany him, but the decision was made that she could travel to England in the following year. During that year at home she visited friends and relatives and attracted admirers. One young man, signing his Valentine Abelard, sent a valentine of nine stanzas.

Just before he left for England on August 6, 1853, he wrote her a letter and upon his arrival in Liverpool on August 26 wrote another as he had promised. Her uncle continued to write to her and in a letter written in October had the following to say: "I am sorry, truly sorry that you look upon your trip to England as 'the future realization of a beautiful dream.'" Like all other dreams, you will be disappointed in the reality. I have never yet met an American, gentleman or lady, who whatever they may profess, was pleased with London. They all hurry off to Paris as speedily as possible unless they have business to detain them here. A proud American who feels himself equal at home to the best does not like to be shut out by an impassable barrier from the best or rather the highest society in this country. My official position will enable me to surmount this barrier, but I feel that it will only be officially...." He continued

to confide in her about his reaction to this society and his unwillingness to appear in Court in elaborate court dress and his intention to wear a plain black suit as the Secretary of State had advised. Buchanan said that he did not mind the criticism for himself but that "it would mortify me very much to see you treated differently from other ladies in your situation."

In April 1854 Harriet Lane sailed from New York to Liverpool, England. This time of residence in England was an unforgettable and formative experience for her. Here she along with her uncle met and dined with the Royal family, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert and their children. After one occasion in March 1855 she wrote to her sister Mary: "We have dined with the Queen. The Queen was most gracious and talked a great deal to me. Uncle sat on her right hand, and Prince Albert was talkative, and altogether we passed a charming evening. The Princess Royal {their daughter, Victoria,} came in after dinner and is simple, unaffected, and very childlike - her perfect simplicity and sweet manners are charming. Everything, of course, was magnificent at the table with four candles each ... with mirrors and candles all around the room, a band of delicious music playing all the time, it was a little like fairyland in its magnificence."

In May of that same year she wrote again to her sister Mary: "London is looking up in the way of gaiety, though the war {the Crimean War} is still a sad weight upon many hearts. Yesterday I attend-



ed the second drawing room of the season.... it was a very full and brilliant one. I wore a pink silk petticoat, over-skirts of pink tulle, puffed and trimmed with blonde and apple blossoms, and so was the body.... Her Majesty was very gracious to me yesterday, as was also the prince. On Wednesday there is to be a ball at Buckingham Palace which we shall of course attend....”

Queen Victoria was impressed with her and named her a ministerial consort. The result was that many doors were opened to her. Buchanan, ever watchful of her deportment, remarked to her after one occasion: “Well, a person would have supposed you were a great lady to have heard the way you were talked of today. I was asked if we had many such handsome ladies in America; I answered yes and many much handsomer. She would scarcely be remarked there for her beauty.”

Despite her uncle’s deprecating statement to her he was proud of her and concerned for her happiness. A young man from Philadelphia, Job Tyson, had been persistent in his attentions to her. Buchanan in a letter to her brother wrote about Tyson’s attentions: “I have repeatedly told Harriet I shall neither influence her one way nor the other but shall be quite satisfied with her determination whatever that shall be.”

She also met the Emperor  
11 of France, Napoleon III,  
and the Empress Eugenie



**Harriet Lane**  
Courtesy of St. Albans School

and dined with them at an event in Windsor Castle. When her uncle was awarded a doctorate of civil law from Oxford University, she also attended the ceremony and received cheers from the student body. She seems to have made some conquests in England as she wrote to her sister: “I have made another conquest, who comes in true American style every day. He is rich and keeps a yacht, which costs him two thousand pounds a year. Beaux are pleasant, but dreadfully troublesome.” One persistent suitor was Sir Fitz Roy Kelly, who was very wealthy

but more than double her age. Buchanan was dubious about the disparity in their ages, but Harriet made her own decision.

But her time there was not just a social time but a learning experience. In mid-nineteenth century England ideas of reform were everywhere - reform in government, reform in economics, recognition of and reform in social problems. The revolutions of 1848 that had disrupted several nations on the Continent had not reached England, but reform-minded British people were well aware of the dangers of revolution.

Harriet in addition to associating with royalty associated with free-thinking and liberal-minded people. She associated with and upon her return home corresponded with Margaret, the Dowager Duchess of Somerset, who worked for the good of rural people, Henry Holland, the royal physician who was interested in the new science of psychosomatic medicine, and Sir Edwin Twiss, who was an expert in international law. The Crystal Palace in London that showcased new inventions and methods that had been developed in countries throughout the world occurred in 1851, and it was a stimulating time for a young, independent-minded American girl with both means and connections to be in England. As at this time people began to become interested in other ethnic groups, she developed an interest in the Native Americans. She, accompanied by people of ideas and culture, traveled into Scotland and throughout the Continent. Upon her arrival back in London after a European tour in 1854 she wrote to a friend in the Philadelphia area: "I was glad to be again in London - people are free to think and act and speak here which is not always the case in some of these continental governments. People are so free here as with us and it is a glorious privilege, which we must travel and see others deprived of before we can appreciate the blessing it is to us." She was learning. In this

time she developed a cosmopolitan outlook that never left her.

After her return to the United States in 1855 after Buchanan was satisfied that she would not be on board ship during a stormy winter crossing he

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wrote to her about her days in England: "Every person I meet has something kind to say of you. You have left a good name behind and that is something; but not more than you deserve" and reminded her "not to display any foreign airs." When she arrived home, she brought with her not only her trunks but also, and more importantly, acquired knowledge, recognition of new and varied experiences, social skills, and wisdom which she would be called upon to use very soon. But a deep sorrow soon entered her life as her dear sister

Mary, who lived in California, died soon after Harriet's return.

When the nation in 1856 elected Buchanan as its fifteenth President, Harriet at age almost twenty-seven became the hostess in the White House. To the Inaugural Ball the new young hostess wore a white dress with artificial flowers and a necklace of many strands of pearls. During her four years in the White House she filled her role with aplomb and graciousness. After the somber tone of the White House during the Pierce administration the White House became alive. Buchanan permitted her to choose items for the White House and, being frugal, warned her early in his term of office not to spend all of the money allotted for purchase of items for the White House. He wrote to her in May 1858: "My dear Harriet, Learning that you were about to purchase furniture in New York {for the White House} I requested Dr. Blake {commissioner of buildings} to furnish me a statement of the balance of the appropriations unexpended. The balance is \$8,369.92. In making your purchases, therefore, I wish you to consider that this sum must answer our purpose until the end of my term. I wish you, therefore, not to expend the whole of it, but to leave enough to meet all contingencies up till 4 March 1861. Any sum which may be expended above the appropriations I shall most certainly pay out of my own pocket. 12



I shall never ask Congress for the Deficiency.” One of the sets of china they used was Harriet’s china which, it is believed, she bought in Paris. During this time of tension she was adept at seating arrangements at dinners that would not offend either a person from the South or one from the North. *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* called her “the First Lady,” a term in use ever since. She christened the battleship *Lancaster* with a bottle of wine made from grapes grown in Lancaster County. In 1857 the United States Revenue Marine, now the Coast Guard, launched a cutter, a ship that can sail in either shallow water or on the high seas, and named it the *Harriet Lane*, a ship that served both before and during the Civil War. In subsequent years two additional cutters have been named the *Harriet Lane*.

Even at this time she was under the watchful eye of Buchanan. In 1859 he scolded her in a letter because she had taken the cutter, the *Harriet Lane*, on a trip to West Point. He wrote: “I am sorry to find that your excursion to West Point on the *Harriet Lane* has been made the subject of newspaper criticism on yourself .... The practice, however, of employing national vessels on pleasure excursions ... is a fair subject of public criticism.”

When the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, visited Washington for five days in 1860, the first visit to



**Harriet Lane c. 1860**

**Courtesy of St. Albans School**

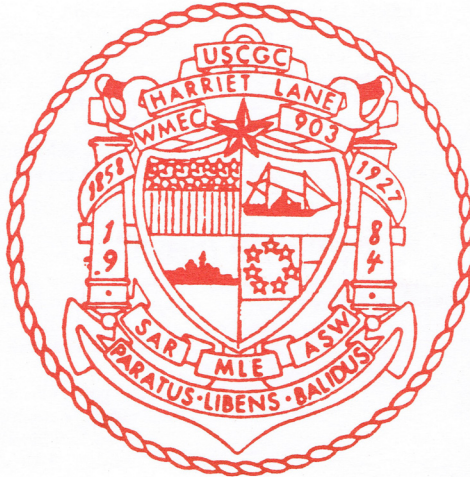
the United States of an heir to the British Crown, she was the hostess. These five days were filled with festivities including a trip to Mt. Vernon where they danced. Buchanan did not permit dancing in the White House. After the visit Harriet wrote about the Prince of Wales to one of her cousins: “He is a charming little fellow, full of fun and jokes, and wonderful in the admirable manner of conduct-

ing himself upon all occasions and seemed happy as possible here.” About the visit the Prince of Wales wrote to his mother, Queen Victoria: “I thought Miss Lane a particularly nice person and very pretty.” These comments in a sense reveal the disparity of their ages; at the time she was thirty, and he was eighteen. As their friendship remained, she was invited to his coronation as Edward VII in

1902.

However, not all of her activities were ceremonial. People, both strangers and family friends and acquaintances, wanted her to intercede with her uncle for favors. For example, the governor of Virginia wrote to her to ask that she recommend a young lady for a government position. A lady in Reading, Pennsylvania, asked for a permanent position for her husband either as a purser in the navy or a paymaster in the army. A wife of a naval officer asked that her husband once he came from Europe be stationed in the United States. In addition, she took great interest in the plight of the Native Americans; for instance, a member of the Chippewas complained to her that a gov-

ernment agent was selling liquor to his people. She intervened to end abuses by unscrupulous government agents and pleaded for better medical treatment and educational opportunities for



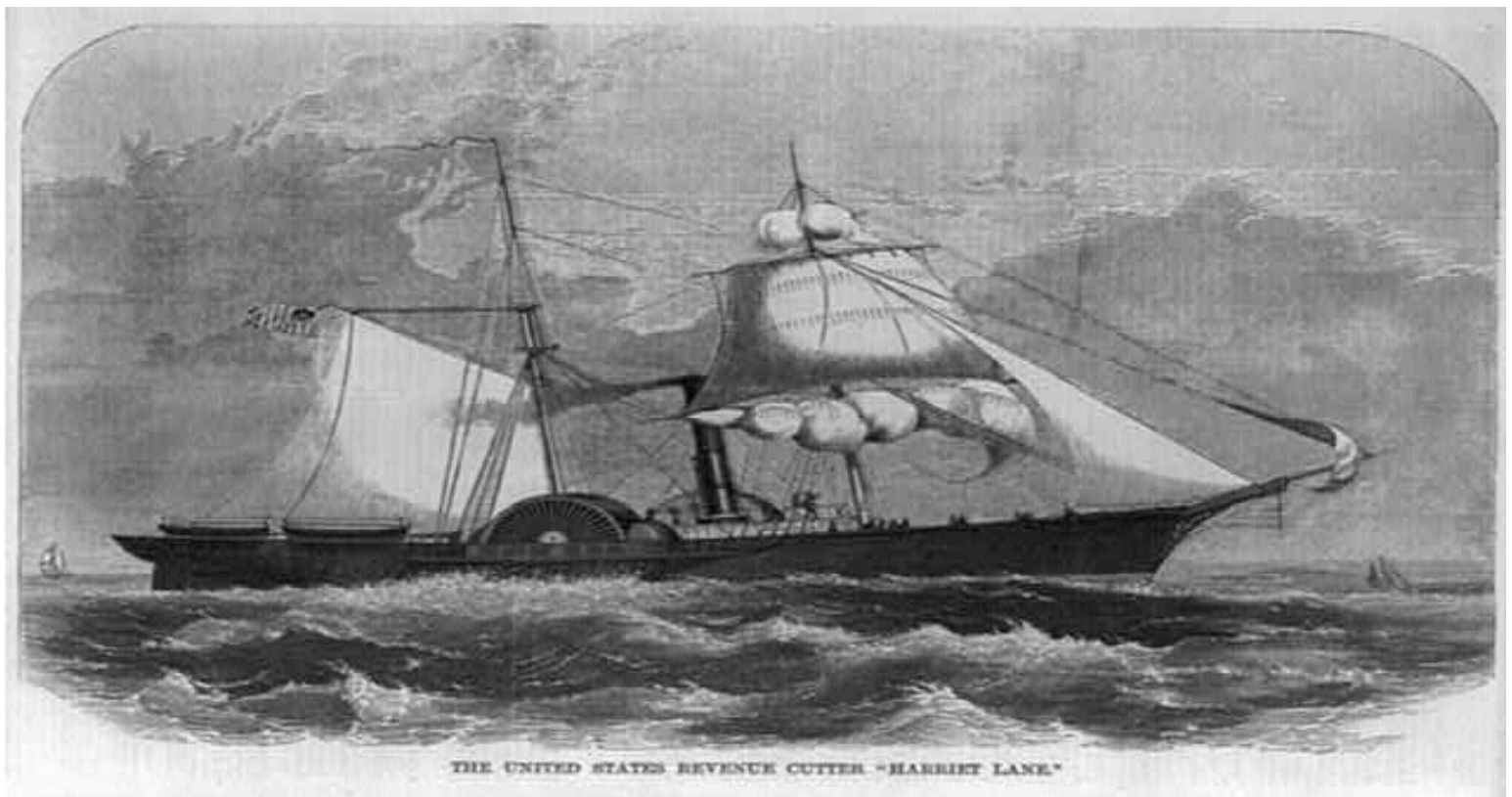
them and, therefore, was known as the "Mother of the Indians" by the Chippewas. Importantly, she frequently invited artists, both

in music and the visual arts, to the White House and in 1857 supported a move to found a national gallery of art.

Since she did not write an autobiography or her memoirs, did not, it seems, keep a diary revealing her thoughts, and destroyed much of her correspondence, little of what she thought or felt about political issues of the day is known.

In March 1861 just before the end of Buchanan's troubled presidency Buchanan and she held a reception in the White House which four thousand people attended. In those perilous times Harriet, known for her tact, had the band play alternately "Yankee Doodle" and "Dixie."

In 1861 at the end of Buchanan's term as President she went



United States Revenue Cutter, the *Harriet Lane*  
Courtesy of St. Albans School



with him to his home, Wheatland, just as she had ridden with him in his carriage from Wheatland into Lancaster to take the train to Washington in March 1857 to his inauguration.

In 1863 she became a member of the Episcopal Church, being confirmed in that denomination by the President's youngest brother, the Reverend Edward Buchanan, a rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in the Philadelphia area. Many years later in an interview Buchanan said that her choice of denomination had been the only difference in their thinking.

While visiting Bedford Springs, a resort that her uncle favored, she met Henry Elliott Johnston, a lawyer and banker from Baltimore, Maryland. When Buchanan learned that they planned to marry, he, who through the years had given her much advice about marriage, wrote with approval of her desire to marry Johnston. He wrote: "I believe you say truly that nothing would have induced you to leave me, in good and evil fortune, had I wished you to remain with me.

15 Such a wish on my part would be very selfish" and

added "I wish for you a happy marriage." On January 11, 1866, they were married at Wheatland with the Reverend Edward Buchanan as the officiating minister. James Buchanan issued the



**Harriet with Hat and Henry Elliot Standing at Bedford Springs in the 1860s**  
Courtesy of St. Albans School

invitations: "Miss Lane requests me to invite you in her name to her wedding on Thursday, the 11th inst. The ceremony will be between 12 and 1 o'clock. It is to be a private affair. No cards or invitations have been issued. I hope you will not fail to countenance us with your presence. Your friend, very respectfully, James Buchanan." On that same

day in writing to Henry Elliott Johnston he said that Johnston had his "entire approbation of the marriage" and later in writing to her when she and her husband were in Havana, Cuba, on their wedding trip wrote: "May a kind Providence protect and bless you and may you return in health to settle down contented and happy in domestic life." After the wedding trip to Havana they settled in Baltimore with summers at Wheatland. They had two sons, James Buchanan Johnston and Henry Elliott Johnston II, but sadly both died as a result of rheumatic fever as young boys, James at fifteen (1866 - 1881) and one year later Henry at twelve (1870 - 1882) while the family was vacationing in Nice, France.

After the death of James Buchanan in 1868 Harriet Lane Johnston

did much to defend him and to perpetuate his memory. Importantly, she responded to baseless charges brought against him and his administration and refuted them. With his brother, the Reverend Edward Buchanan, she preserved many of his papers. When confusion and controversy over the ownership and disposition of these papers



occurred, she took the lead in determining who should control them and what should be done with them. In a letter written to one of the trustees of Buchanan's estate she stated that he should accept the responsibility of working with Buchanan's papers as "I consider it essential for you to do so in order to carry out my dear Uncle's cherished wish to place before the public a truthful statement of the events connected with his administration of the government. It is the most sacred obligation upon me and having been so near and dear to him as he was to me and his fame is now a cherished object of my life." She then added: "Suppose they were to fall into the hands of the Republicans who would pervert truth to falsehood and try to condemn the pure and upright statement by perversion of the evidence that show his lofty patriotism." She also commissioned the historian, George Ticknor Curtis, to write a two-volume biography of James Buchanan, which was published in 1883. In addition, she attempted to purchase the site of James Buchanan's birthplace at Stony Batter, now Cove Gap, two miles west of Mercersburg, but the owner, a local Mercersburg merchant, D. M. B. Shannon, refused to sell it to her.

In 1884 after the death of her husband she moved to Washington, D.C. Her diary of social engagements is impressive. At that time she had inscribed upon a brass plate upon the wall by the

memorial window she and her husband had placed in St. James Episcopal Church in Lancaster after the death of their first son, a window that has as its theme the Christ Child in the Temple, the words, "Give them eternal rest, O God, and let light perpet-

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**"Kings and queens in the  
movie news  
sometime disappoint.  
Harriet Lane never  
disappointed...."**

***-John L. Finafroch***

---

ual shine upon them." It is said that the face of the Christ Child is the face of her older son. She also continued her longtime interest in collecting works of art and in promoting the idea of the establishment of a national gallery of art. However, she became ill and frequently consulted physicians in Europe and especially seems to have liked those in Germany.

Her last visit to Mercersburg occurred on Tuesday, June 4, 1901, the day on which a portrait of James Buchanan by the American artist, William Merritt Chase, that she had commissioned was unveiled and formally presented to the Mercersburg Academy in a ceremony in Keil Hall, then the newest building on the campus,

in which it still hangs. For this festive occasion, in which the Harrisburg Orchestra played and the Mercersburg Academy Glee Club and the Mercersburg Choral Society sang, a special train brought relatives, including first cousins, friends, and other guests, from the Philadelphia area to Mercersburg. The ceremony itself was held on the morning of the day of the Academy's commencement before the commencement itself. In the ceremony after the unveiling of the portrait by young James Buchanan Ewing, a great-nephew of the President, the Honorable Rush Gillan, Judge in Franklin County, spoke of the high character of Buchanan, and Dr. William Mann Irvine, headmaster of Mercersburg Academy, noted that Mrs. Johnston had "all the graces, charms, and attributes of the highest order of American womanhood." According to a Mercersburg Academy publication Mrs. Johnston was so impressed with this portrait that she commissioned another by William Merritt Chase, this second one now in the White House collection. Later that afternoon Dr. and Mrs. Irvine held on the campus in front of North Cottage a garden party that eight or nine hundred people, including many local residents, attended and for which local girls served the refreshments.

The *Mercersburg Journal* reported that this event "surpassed anything of the kind ever given in Mercersburg

before.” The *Journal* also noted that Mrs. Johnston had shaken hands with all the guests and that she “has a grace and charm of manner and withal a courtly bearing which delighted every person so fortunate as to meet her. Although she is of advanced age, her appearance does not indicate it, and the years seem to rest lightly upon her.” The town newspaper also recorded that the train taking the guests back to Philadelphia that day had traveled to Chambersburg in thirty minutes. Local residents had pleasant recollections of that special day on which Mrs. Johnston after the ceremony had visited the building that her grandfather had built for his home and store, in 1901 a hotel. John L. Finafrock, principal of the schools in Mercersburg in 1901, recalled: “Kings and queens in the movie news sometime disappoint. Harriet Lane never disappointed....,” and Dr. James G. Rose, pastor of the Presbyterian Church of the Upper West Conococheague, wrote of her expression of interest in the church of her parents and grandparents and her own baptism.

After her death attributable to cancer on July 3, 1903, her will with its several codicils indicated her generous spirit. An important provision of her will was her direction that money be given for the clinic in Baltimore that she and her husband had incorporated in 1883 that would care for children regardless of  
 17 race, creed, or the ability



**Portrait of James Buchanan by William Merritt Chase**  
 Courtesy of Mercersburg Academy

of the parents to pay to be called the Harriet Lane Home for Invalid Children, the first hospital in the nation for children, now the Johns Hopkins Children’s Center. Also because she had enjoyed the singing of boy choirs both in England and in a church in Baltimore, she set aside money to be given to the National Cathedral Foundation of Washington, D.C. for the founding of St. Albans School, a boys’ choir school, adjacent to the Washington National Cathedral. The ground-breaking for the Lane-Johnston Building occurred in June 1905. She also stated in her will

that her art collection should be given to the trustees of the Corcoran Gallery of Art until the establishment of a national art gallery. As evidently Mrs. Johnston did not know at the time of the writing of her will that the Supreme Court had earlier named the Smithsonian as a national art gallery, a decision by a Federal Court in the District of Columbia in 1906 confirmed that the Harriet Lane Johnston collection should be in the care of the Smithsonian and should be placed there. It has been asserted that the value of this collection lies in the fact that



it conveyed the assurance that the federal government can be a faithful repository of art and, therefore, encouraged others to give their collections to a national art gallery. One person influenced by Mrs. Johnston's bequest was Charles Freer who gave to the Smithsonian his collection of Asian art which is now housed in the Freer Gallery on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

In her will she also remembered her family. She stipulated that money be placed into a James Buchanan Monument Fund for the purpose of constructing two monuments in memory of her uncle, one in Washington, D.C. and the other on the eighteen acre tract that she had attempted to purchase at Stony Batter, the birthplace of James Buchanan and his brothers and sisters, with the proviso that the monument at Stony Batter should be enclosed by an iron railing and that the people should enjoy the grounds around the monument marking the President's birthplace. The will also indicated that the monument be "a huge rock or boulder in its natural state, except that proper surfaces or tablets should be prepared or provided for necessary inscriptions." After the death of D. M. B. Shannon his heirs sold the land at Stony Batter for \$3,000 to the trustees of her estate. In 1906 the *Mercersburg Journal* reported that one of the trustees of Mrs. Johnston's estate had come to Mercersburg to meet with Judge



**Keil Hall on the Campus of Mercersburg Academy.  
Courtesy of Mercersburg Academy**

Rush Gillan and one of the sons of D. M. B. Shannon "to arrange for the purchase of the land and other details looking toward compliance with the will of Mrs. Johnston." The *Journal* added: "We hope that this will be the beginning of the improvement of the Buchanan birthplace, and that through time it will become one of the finest summer resorts in the county." This monument, designed by the architectural firm of Wyatt and Nolting in Baltimore and built under the direction of J. N. Forbes of Chambersburg, surrounded by eighteen and one-half acres, came to fruition in the winter of 1907-1908, and in 1911 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania accepted Harriet Lane Johnston's gift as indicated in her will of

what is now the James Buchanan State Park. After various delays the James Buchanan Monument at Meridian Park in Washington, D.C. was unveiled in June 1930. She also provided money for the education of nieces and nephews and for scholarships for students at Johns Hopkins University. She also gave money to the Presbyterian Church of the Upper West Conococheague to be used for care of the graves of her parents, grandparents, and uncles in the Buchanan plot in Waddell Cemetery, now called Spring Grove Cemetery, between Lemasters and Markes.

It is fitting that people in the twenty-first century pay tribute to this remarkable lady who by her graciousness, her dignity, and her gener-



osity was an exemplar in her time and deserves to be an exemplar in our time and whose name lives on. Since 1953 the Johns Hopkins Hospital has published every three years the *Harriet Lane Handbook*, which gives diagnosis, treatment, and medications for children. Also every year on the date of Mrs. Johnston's birth, May 9, nurses from the Johns Hopkins Children's Center, formerly the Harriet Lane Home for Invalid Children, place flowers on her gravesite. It is also fitting that Mercersburg remembers her many contributions. It is appropriate that the Women's Club of Mercersburg has named the award it gives each year to a local graduating high school senior who is outstanding in the study of English the Harriet Lane English Award and that the Borough of Mercersburg grants each year a Harriet Lane Award to a local citizen who has with emphasis upon the welfare of children, arts, and history rendered outstanding service to the Mercersburg area community.



**Harriet Lane Johnston at Age Sixty-Nine.  
Courtesy of St. Albans School**



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## Other Women from the Mercersburg Area

Jane Irwin Harrison (1804 - 1848), daughter of Archibald Irwin II and Wife of William Henry Harrison Jr. - Hostess in the White House During Term of President William Henry Harrison in March 1840

Elizabeth Irwin Harrison (1810 - 1850), daughter of Archibald Irwin II and Wife of John Scott Harrison - Mother of President Benjamin Harrison

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