

First Ladies of America



Harriet Rebecca Lane played a unique role in the history of America's first ladies because of her youth and the circumstances under which she came to the White House.

Born in 1830 in Mercersburg, Pa., Harriet Lane was the daughter of Jane Buchanan Lane and Elliot Tole Lane, a successful Pennsylvania businessman. As a child, she was lively and energetic, and was described as a tomboy who enjoyed reading, "but only if she could climb a tree to do it."

Education was important in the Lane home, and Miss Lane and her brothers and sisters had the best education available in southeastern Pennsylvania.

After the death of her mother, she went to live with her uncle, future president James Buchanan, in Pennsylvania. His rise through the ranks of state and national politics provided the background in which she acquired the necessary attributes to serve as a first lady.

She finished her education at the Visitation Convent School in Georgetown, graduating in 1848.

Under her uncle's guidance, Miss Lane had the advantage of informal training in the world of politics. When Buchanan was appointed envoy to Great Britain in 1853, she traveled abroad with him. In London, she was received by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who were impressed by the gracious and refined young woman.

By the time Buchanan, a lifelong bachelor, was elected to the presidency in 1856, his 27-year-old niece was fully prepared to take on the duties of hostess at the executive mansion. Miss Lane presided over formal receptions that gave the White House an almost royal feel. Her elegant fashion made her a role model for

women across the country. After the gloomy White House during the Pierce administration, Miss Lane's vivacity swept through the White House — and America — like a spring breeze.

Although her girlish innocence and frivolity occasionally caused the president some awkward moments, Miss Lane was so popular that the press and public tended to overlook any missteps. But she had a serious side and worked hard to be a credit to her uncle's administration.

A passionate collector of art, Miss Lane transformed the White House social scene by inviting accomplished artists to visit. She believed in balancing political activities there with culture, and after pushing for the establishment of a national gallery of art, she eventually donated her own private collection of paintings to the gallery.

Although she fulfilled her social obligations with pleasure and ease, perhaps the greatest achievement of her tenure as first lady was her humanitarian work. Miss Lane was especially moved by the plight of Native Americans. She abhorred America's treatment of them, believing it unjust and inhumane, and she became an outspoken advocate for their welfare during a time when few people considered it a worthy cause. Grateful Native Americans responded with the heartfelt gesture of naming many of their daughters Harriet.

After leaving the White House, Miss Lane married banker Henry Johnston and had two sons. Tragically, they all died, and she never remarried, instead devoting the rest of her life to charitable work.

James Buchanan Administration, 1857-1861

Harriet Rebecca Lane Johnston

Born: May 9, 1830, in Mercersburg, Pa.

Education: Visitation Convent School, Georgetown

Marriage: 1866 to Henry Elliot Johnston

Children: James Buchanan Johnston (1866-81); Henry Elliot Johnston (1869-82)

Died: July 3, 1903, in Andover, Mass.

