

Who Was Harriet Lane?

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With sincere apologies to my colleagues at Johns Hopkins University and in the Greater Baltimore area, I have to admit that I never knew much about Harriet Lane, other than the fact that her name is on the little book that for years has been my go-to resource when I'm looking for a comprehensive drug formulary or the latest diagnostic and therapeutic information. Being a bit of an armchair history buff, I recently heard that a woman named Harriet Lane served as the White House hostess for bachelor President James Buchanan before the Civil War, and I thought, could they be one and the same?

Yes, indeed. Harriet Rebecca Lane was born on May 9, 1820, in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. Having lost her parents at a young age, she became the ward of her uncle, James Buchanan. Theirs was a close relationship. He provided her with a good education, and she became his closest confidante. She called him "Nunc," and he called her "Hal."

When Buchanan became the American Minister to Great Britain, Harriet joined her uncle in London and became popular in court circles, as she was known for her cheerful and generous spirit and her love of dancing and music. She developed a life-long love of art and began collecting works of art, particularly Native American pieces.

When James Buchanan, who never married, served as the 15th President of the United States from 1857 to 1861 just prior to the Civil War, Harriet became highly visible and well regarded in her role of First Lady. She established popular clothing styles (having lowered the neckline of her inaugural gown), and the popular song "Listen to the Mockingbird" was dedicated to her. She continued to speak out on behalf of Native

Americans and was known for her popularity and her advocacy work, even as sectional tensions increased between the Northern and Southern states.

After leaving the White House, Harriet married Baltimore banker Henry Elliott Johnston. She continued to live in Washington, DC, but within the next 18 years she had lost her uncle, her husband, and her two young sons. Upon her death in 1903, Harriet bequeathed her sizeable collection of European art to the U.S. government, which formed the nucleus for the National Gallery of Art, part of the Smithsonian Institution. The terms of her will also helped to create the prestigious St. Albans School for Boys at the Washington National Cathedral.

Perhaps because of the death of her two sons within a year of each other as a result of rheumatic fever, Harriet also dedicated a large sum of money to endow The Harriet Lane Home for Invalid Children. This institution was the first pediatric hospital affiliated with an academic research institution, Johns Hopkins University. That center has evolved into a renowned pediatric facility, and the name Harriet Lane has now become synonymous with state-of-the-art pediatric health care, research, and education.

To learn more about this amazing woman, you may want to investigate the biography by Milton Stern, *Harriet Lane: America's First Lady*, which I have added to my reading list. And when I now pull up the handbook that bears her name on my smartphone or computer (having replaced the little book that used to reside in my lab coat pocket), I have a greater appreciation for the lasting legacy she has left us and her positive impact on the arts, education, social welfare, and the health care of children. Thanks, Hal.

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