

First Ladies Jane Pierce, Harriet Lane
April 15, 2014

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): She's probably the most tragic of all of our first ladies.

(UNKNOWN): She hated politics, hated it with a passion.

(UNKNOWN): She did not move in to the White House with Pierce.

(UNKNOWN): This couch is one piece that they took to the White House. They had eight rooms that they had to furnish with their personal furniture.

(UNKNOWN): When she did arrive, she basically holed up and spent much of her time writing letters to her dead son.

(UNKNOWN): In her great grief, she calls him, "My precious child, I must write to you, although you are never to see it or know it." A very poignant letter written by a grieving mother.

(UNKNOWN): They were on a train from Boston to Concord and there was a terrible accident.

(UNKNOWN): The train ride was very devastating for the family. An axle rod broke on the train and Benny did not survive the crash.

(UNKNOWN): She concluded that this was God's judgment, that the loss of her son was God's punishment.

(UNKNOWN): The house was too much for Jane to take care of. I don't think she was interested in housekeeping particularly. She just wasn't capable of taking care of a house.

(UNKNOWN): Most would regard that Pierce himself as a failure in the office, and she was glad to leave the place. It was probably the unhappiest of all presidencies.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SUSAN SWAIN, HOST: Good evening and welcome to CSPAN's "First Ladies: Influence & Image." On this program, we learn about the final first ladies of the Antebellum Era.

First up, we meet Jane Pierce, whose tenure in the White House was defined by overwhelming loss. By the time she and her husband, Franklin Pierce, arrived at the executive mansion, they have lost all three of their young sons, and this reluctant first lady first herself crippled by grief.

For the next 45 minutes, we'll delve into Jane Pierce, and to help us understand more about this first lady, meet our guest, Ann Covell, who is the author of a new biography of Jane Pierce called, "Jane Means Appleton Pierce."

Good evening and welcome.

ANN COVELL, AUTHOR: Hello.

SUSAN SWAIN: We'll set the stage for this conversation; 1852, what are the issues that bring Franklin Pierce to the White House?

ANN COVELL: The political situation was dire at that time. Everything was in turmoil. There were problems between the North and the South and the slavery issues. The Democratic Party to which he belonged was split and there was a situation where they were having to find a nominee for the presidential election, but they didn't want anybody from the South, obviously because of the slavery situation.

Franklin Pierce appeared to them to be the best bet as a nominee at that time. And mainly because of his reputation as a marvelous raconteur, et cetera, but he had remained popular with the South and it was felt that there was a good chance that he would be able to win that nomination.

There was a great deal of politicking, I have to say, round about that time. But eventually, he was nominated at the 48th ballot. That was the situation that he found himself in at that time.

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, despite the 48 ballots to get him the nomination, he won the White House in an overwhelming landslide.

ANN COVELL: He did, indeed, yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: So the Pierces came in popular. But tell us about this - the woman we described as a reluctant first lady.

ANN COVELL: Yes. She was very reluctant, yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: What were her greatest influences?

ANN COVELL: I don't - well, if she had any influences, they were negative, I have to say. She came in to the White House. She was a 47-year-old lady who, it is well known, hated politics. She was obviously deeply depressed at the death of her last surviving son, especially under the terrible circumstances in which he died.

Her influence within the White House at the time -- well, she didn't -- she didn't come to the White House for at least a fortnight after the inauguration. She didn't even attend the inauguration. But when she came, she immediately said, "I will have mourning bunting to surround the house." And such was her influence with her husband that he agreed to it. He accepted that it would only last for a year. In fact, the mourning periods lasted for over two years.

As far as influencing is concerned, he did manage to influence the powers that be that she needed a new bathroom, a new luxurious bathroom on the second floor where the family lived. So, yes, she influenced that. But as far as any other influencing is concerned, I find that they were all negative and they -- well, they made the White House a morbid place.

SUSAN SWAIN: A morbid White House at the time when the country is...

ANN COVELL: Absolutely.

SUSAN SWAIN: ...deeply divided.

ANN COVELL: Absolutely.

SUSAN SWAIN: So how did this woman who hated politics with a strong father who was the president of Bowdoin College...

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: ... a well-known preacher in his time...

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: ... she was deeply fundamentalist herself -- how did she ever get matched up with a politician?

ANN COVELL: I don't really know. I think they just fell for each other. My research does tell me that they really did think a lot about each other. Opposites attract, I suppose. They were opposite completely and utterly.

My theory about her not liking politics is something that happened in her childhood -- well, not in her childhood -- when she was 17 years old and she just finished her education at the Fiske's School for Girls. And she came home much more confident than she'd ever been. And she'd gone visiting her uncle and aunt in Boston, the Lawrences, with her mother, and she was showing a different Jane to them.

And she was talking to them about a man who should have been made mayor in their town and hadn't been. And she said, "I think it's awful." She just didn't like it. And then she said to her Uncle Amos, who was very, very important to her, "Why don't you stand for mayor? I think you'd make a jolly good mayor. Why don't you stand?"

And the whole family laughed at her and said how, "Oh, how ridiculous." And even her Uncle Amos laughed at her. And I think -- my personal opinion is that a 17-year-old girl is stepping out into the world and using her newfound confidence, was suddenly put down by all these people she loved best in the world, laughing at her. I'm sure -- I'm not a psychologist, obviously, but I'm sure that that could have had a lasting impression on her, and maybe she thought to herself, "I'm never going to talk politics again."

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, before we get to our first video, I want to ask about your own interest in Jane Pierce. You're British.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: And how did this most reluctant and shy of first ladies, who spent her first two years essentially hibernating in the top floors of the White House, attract your attention?

ANN COVELL: She attracted me because I felt when I first heard about this lady that she was a very selfish person. That she -- she didn't help her husband in any way, shape or form, and I thought there must be a reason behind all this. What on earth is it?

I also felt for her because she lost three of her sons. She was someone I found, during my research, who was extremely fond of young children and she was made to be a mother. And here she was, a mother without a child to love. And that got to me.

And I decided that I'd like to know more about this lady. There must be more to her, I thought, than this apparent selfishness that she displayed toward her husband and his work.

SUSAN SWAIN: So in the end, did you conclude that she was or was not selfish?

ANN COVELL: She was to a certain extent. But there were extenuating circumstances, I believe.

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, to learn more about the story of Jane Pierce, we're going to learn more about this tragic death of their third son. The first two died early in life, and Benny, she doted upon. We're going to travel to her sister's home in Andover, Massachusetts, where we learn about the summer White House, and, more importantly, the death of their beloved son, Benny, which takes place as they travel to Washington for the inauguration and just a few miles outside of town.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): This is Andover, Massachusetts. It was home to John and Mary Aiken. Mary was Jane Pierce's sister. They were very close friends throughout life and Mary was there for Jane at all of her most important times in her life.

Jane and Franklin came to Andover to visit the Aiken Family. They came here with their son, Benny, to visit the cousins. Mary and John had children and Franklin and Jane become very close and attached to those children after their son passed away.

The family stayed at 48 Central Street which, is referred to as the summer White House. It's called that because Franklin Pierce would come visit his wife in Andover. Jane would stay with her sister, Mary, at 48 Central Street and he would come visit them in the summers in particular. It's believed that the administrative staff stayed at 47 Central Street just across the road from them.

Jane and Franklin were staying in Andover because there had been a death in the family. Jane's uncle, Amos Lawrence, had died, and so they went to Boston to attend that funeral. They returned to Andover so they could pack their things and head to Concord where they could get ready to move to the White House.

Unfortunately, the train ride was very devastating for the family. They were about a mile outside of Andover. An axle rod broke on the train and it slid down an embankment. And as I understand it, Benny was a child. He was moving about but this was within five minutes of the train ride beginning, and when the train rolled down, he was hit in the back of his head very severely, and Benny did not survive the crash.

The services for Benny took place at Mary Aiken's house. They went to Concord to bury Benny but Jane did not attend. She was very grief-stricken and could not make it to the final procession of the funeral.

Jane was very sick most of her life. She's been referred to as tubercular, and she probably died of a lung disease or tuberculosis and she died in Andover at 48 Central Street.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, the extenuating circumstance you describe, her beloved only surviving child dying right in front of her eyes...

ANN COVELL: Mm-hmm.

SUSAN SWAIN: Anyone can appreciate how devastating that would be.

ANN COVELL: Yes, indeed.

SUSAN SWAIN: So what -- how did she take this grief to the White House? How did she approach her responsibilities there?

ANN COVELL: Well, she cast aside her responsibilities, really. But fortunately, Franklin had a good secretary, Sidney Webster, and she also had a mentor that was her aunt, Abigail Kent, who took over her duties. I really...

SUSAN SWAIN: But the White House was in mourning and we've learned in this series how incredibly social Washington is.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: And how politics gets done in social interactions.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: So here we have a critical time in the country...

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: ...and a White House in mourning. Does that have a political impact? It would be difficult for Franklin Pierce to romance members of Congress, for example, with it...

ANN COVELL: Yes. I was just going to make that point. He had appeared to have great difficulty informing his cabinet at that time.

My -- perhaps the attitude within the White House at that time and the fact that he didn't have Jane around him to comfort him as he had done -- as she had done in previous problems they've had together, and also he was mourning deeply, grieving deeply for Benny himself. And the feeling is that he didn't get -- he could not put his whole heart and soul into the job of being president of the United States, and that a lot of people do feel that that delayed the establishment of his cabinet. As it happened, when he did establish the cabinet, it ran for the whole term, which was the first time that a cabinet had run for the whole of the four years. So he did work well in the end by getting the best team together. But it's that sort of situation that did upset his way of working, to a large extent.

SUSAN SWAIN: When you read about her religious views, she believed, as I understand it, in a punitive God, that there were retributions for actions.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: How did she process the death of their child?

ANN COVELL: I don't know -- what do you mean?

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, did she blame herself? Did she blame Franklin Pierce for it? How did she put that into perspective with her own religious views?

ANN COVELL: Well, she thought that it was God sort of punishing them for some misdemeanor. I think she did tend to blame Franklin in the first instance because he had not kept her aware of the circumstances of his nomination. When he did eventually inform her of the nomination, she -- he reassured her that he wouldn't get elected, you know, he said, "I'm a dark horse nominee. I won't get elected."

And I think she felt that he was being punished through the death of Benny and she drew away from him and that made things completely worse. I think that if both of them had come together during that time and talked it through, they would have saved themselves a lot of unhappiness.

SUSAN SWAIN: And we should tell people that Pierce had walked away from politics because of his concerns for Jane. He resigned his Senate seat, he went back to the family home and essentially turned down appointments for post-presidency.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: So she felt that he had left politics for good.

ANN COVELL: Yes, except for the local politics. She accepted that he needed to continue with his politics and so he did when he went back to New Hampshire. She didn't mind that because she saw him every night.

SUSAN SWAIN: Now, one interesting aspect of this is that she was up on the second floor, the family quarters of the White House, but she was trying to seek some understanding of this. I understand that there was a burgeoning spiritualist movement in the United States around the time and that she, in fact, really sought out some spiritualist along the way. What can you tell us about that?

ANN COVELL: My understanding is that she did not seek them out, they sought her out. And I am aware from research that the letters that she wrote to Benny were not in any way mystical or spiritual and under the influence of these spiritualists. They were really a way for her to express her great grief and she wrote the letters. And I think modern psychologists would agree with that action because they do say nowadays if you are grieving or you've got some terrible trouble, write it down, you know, and it helps. And it does. It's a proven fact nowadays.

I don't know who suggested it to her, if anybody did, that she should write out these thoughts about her sorrow and his passing. But whoever did, and even if she thought it out herself, it was good because it must have helped her.

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, this is an interactive program. If you've been watching us along the way on this series, you know that. There's several ways to get involved. You can send us a tweet, make sure you use the hashtag firstladies. You can also post a question or a comment on our Facebook page -- we've got a conversation already started there -- or you can phone us, and here are our phone lines.

If you live in the Eastern or Central time zones, 202-585-3880. If you live out West, Mountain, Pacific or farther West, 202-585-3881. And we'll mix in your comments and questions in just a couple of minutes.

But first, our guest referred to letters written to Jane Pierce's dead son. We're going to learn about that next. We're going to travel to Concord, New Hampshire, to the New Hampshire Historical Society, which holds the papers of the Pierce family, and see two important letters in understanding the story of Jane Pierce.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

PETER WALLNER, AUTHOR: This letter was written by Benny Pierce who was 11 years old, from Andover, Massachusetts, where he was visiting with his cousins in June of 1852, at the time that Franklin Pierce was nominated for president at the Democratic National Convention in Baltimore. Franklin and his mother had been in Boston waiting for news of the nomination, and Benny was staying with relatives in Andover.

Benny, knowing how much his mother disliked politics, wrote in the letter that, "I hope he won't be elected, for I should not like to live in Washington and I know you would not like to either." So this is

an indication of the problems that Franklin Pierce is going to have with his wife and child as he ran for president in 1852.

This is the most famous letter that Jane Pierce wrote. It was written to her dead son. He had died in January of 1853 in a train wreck in Andover, Massachusetts. And sometime after that, she was in her great grief. She sat down and penciled this letter to her dead son in which she calls him, "My precious child, I must write to you, although you are never to see it or know it."

As you can see, it's written in pencil. It wasn't sent anywhere, obviously. And it survives today, a very poignant letter, written by a grieving mother who had lost all of her children.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SUSAN SWAIN: So you agree with that analysis, because of the use of pencil in writing the letter...

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: ... that it was not really meant to be published?

ANN COVELL: It wasn't, no, or seen by anybody else. She was just expressing her grief.

SUSAN SWAIN: In general, as you did your research, was she much of a letter writer? Did she write a lot to relatives at times?

ANN COVELL: Oh, she did. But increasingly, her writing became worse and worse, and they were hardly legible in the end. But, yes, she was a prolific letter writer, particularly to her mother.

SUSAN SWAIN: And what portrait can you help us understand in reading her letters and doing your research? Put up a little bit more contour into this woman as you came to know her through the research that you did.

ANN COVELL: I've already expressed an opinion that I thought she was very selfish. And she seemed hooked on being ill. And they were never serious illnesses. They were usually colds. And she would have a cold at the drop of a hat, actually.

If she didn't want to do anything, she would say, "Well, I'm sorry, I've got a cold coming on," or "I have a cold" or "I'm going to have a cold." She didn't like to mix with people, and she used her supposed ill health when she didn't want to go and visit or do anything.

She was very fond of her mother and of her sister Mary, but she didn't seem to write very much to her sister, Frances, for some reason. Neither did Frances write to her. They used to mainly get in touch with her through letters to their mother. "Will you tell Frances this" or "Don't forget to tell Jane that." For some reason, there wasn't a good relationship as far as letter writing was concerned.

But Jane -- why she had this peculiar need to control her family, which is what she was doing, by referring to her decreasing health, I can't fathom. Nobody has been able to fathom that out, unless it was just a prop that she had not to do things she didn't want to do. And she simply controlled her family in almost every family letter, and, indeed letters to friends. There was always a concern about Jane. "How is dear Jane? Is her cold any better?"

And there was never any -- and although she had treatment like bloodletting, which was a favorite treatment in those days, there was never any diagnosis made, and she lived to quite a good age in her 60s, which was a good age in the 19th century. And it was at that stage where she was diagnosed as a consumptive. But prior to that, no diagnosis had been made at all. So the impression I have got of

Jane is that she used the illness to get her own way, and she was going to have it her own way whatever happen.

SUSAN SWAIN: We have a question from Phillip, (ph) who's watching us in Long Beach, California.

Hi, Philip (ph). You are on the air. Welcome.

QUESTION: Hi. Good evening, everyone. Thank you very much for putting me on the air.

We talked -- you guys are talking about how gloomy things were in the White House, right? And didn't Pierce's vice president die during his administration, as well?

ANN COVELL: Yes, he...

QUESTION: His last name was King?

ANN COVELL: Yes, he -- Rufus King, yes. He died within three months of being elected as vice president, and they didn't have another vice president appointed after that. So, yes, you're quite right, Phillip (ph). He died, which added, may I say, to Jane's depression. She thought that doom and gloom and death was all around them. She was very unhappy about that.

SUSAN SWAIN: And was she a woman of letters? I mean, what was she doing on the second floor of the White House all of this time? Do we know? Was she reading? I mean, how did she occupy her time?

ANN COVELL: She was very fortunate in that her family, her whole family rallied, and much to her husband's pleasure, they did come and see her -- they did come and see Jane and spent time with her, particularly her sister Mary's children, of whom they were both very fond.

But Franklin hardly went to see her. So he was grateful that the family visited. So he didn't have that torment, dare I say, of having to go into a morbid environment. He had enough to think about.

So, yes, she wrote letters. She didn't have many friends, unfortunately. But she did have this wonderful family who kept her going, and there always seemed to be somebody there. As far as reading, I don't think she did very much, which is a shame because she was a very intellectual women, highly educated. And, you know, that intellect and that wonderful education seemed wasted in some ways.

ANN COVELL: Next question comes from Bonnie, who's watching us in Cincinnati.

Hi, Bonnie. You're on the air.

QUESTION: Hi. Hi. Thanks for taking my call.

This is a most intriguing subject. I do collect albums from the 1840s and 1850s of the Central United States, and I do own a journal that was written by a family member of William Henry Harrison, the Harrison family, coming from Cincinnati after his death. Frequently, the letters and albums that I do have -- I'm not a member of that family. However, I do have several of the letters and albums handwritten, journals. And frequently similar to Mrs. Pierce in the older women, elders of the family, there is the serious concern and doom and gloom of just a general attitude toward who has deceased of what, who has succumbed to that. And of course, consumption or tuberculosis, as we know, was a very common ailment in Cincinnati, quite that. And I find that the prompting that she may have had to write about her deceased child may have come on her own.

I have seen only one but do see a letter from Mrs. Harrison, the daughter in law who went to the White House with William Henry, one of her sons did die upon coming home after being shortly in the White House. And she had written a small letter. It is in the family papers here in the historical society.

SUSAN SWAIN: Bonnie (ph), I'm going...

QUESTION: I'm going to read it.

SUSAN SWAIN: Bonnie (ph), thanks. I'm going to jump in because we understand to your comments here which is writing to the deceased relative would have been somewhat common at the time.

ANN COVELL: Yes, yes. She's made a very good point.

SUSAN SWAIN: And a related question from John Coleman (ph) on Facebook, he wants to know was Jane Pierce criticized for her connections with spiritualism even if they may not have been of her own choosing?

ANN COVELL: Not to my knowledge.

SUSAN SWAIN: So the public was kind of intrigued by spiritualism at this time period?

ANN COVELL: Yes. Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: So she was in the fashion in that regard?

ANN COVELL: Yes. I suppose so but I haven't seen any criticism except the only criticism I did find out about was against spiritualist for actually making themselves known to her. She could have done without that.

SUSAN SWAIN: C.B. (ph) is watching us in Danville, Virginia, and is on right now.

Hi, C.B. (ph).

QUESTION: Hi. Just - thank you for taking my call and a comment. I have a friend that sits in the same mold as Jane Pierce. We call her a convenient invalid.

But I also wanted to comment on the fact that I do arrange for the rentals at our local museum and we have a hospice group that is going to be having a workshop for telling - walking people through the process of keeping a journal, writing to their deceased ones or their family members that are in hospice care. So I thought it was kind of interesting that that something that was done, you know, a 150 years ago and people are still doing it today.

SUSAN SWAIN: Thank you so much.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: Would you agree to convenient invalid with that discussion?

ANN COVELL: Yes, I think that was a very good description.

SUSAN SWAIN: Now, before we go to our next video, you mentioned that Abby Kent Means helped out as the official hostess while in the White House.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: Who was she?

ANN COVELL: She was - well, she had been a friend of Jane during their childhood and teenage years. She was at the same generation but Jane's uncle, Thomas, married her and so she became not just a friend but her aunt, that's who she was. And they were very close.

SUSAN SWAIN: For our next video, we're going to take you to Concord, New Hampshire. State capital once again, this time to the Pierce Manse, as it's called, to see some of her White House artifacts, learn a little bit more about her life there and the loss of another of her sons, Franklin Robert.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): Franklin Pierce had just finished serving in the Congress. He had served two terms in the House and a full term in the Senate. He resigned from his seat in the Senate about a year earlier than his term was up to move back to Concord to be with Jane and to raise their two children here. This is the only house in Concord that they ever owned and they bought that, moved in in late May 1842.

(UNKNOWN): We're in the dining room here at the Pierce Manse. Typically, the family would have their main meal at noon time. Jane Pierce was kind of a shy reclusive person. She didn't entertain a lot in her private home.

This couch belonged to Jane Pierce. This is one piece that they took to the White House. They had eight rooms that they had to furnish with their personal furniture and so this was one of the pieces they took to the White House with them. This table was known in Jane's sister family as the White House table. They had to borrow some furniture to take to the White House with them so this was one piece that they borrowed from Jane's sister, Mary. They also took the little writing desk and chair that belonged to Franklin Pierce.

OK. This room would had been used as a guest room. However, the bed that's in this room is a small bed and we think this belonged to Betty Pierce. It's been refinished in latent so it fits an adult.

OK, this is the master bedroom of the Pierce Manse. This is the room that Franklin and Jane would have used. This is the room where their second son, Frankie, died of typhus when he was four years old. This was a great blow to both Jane and Franklin. He was the apple of their eye, quite an interesting little character according to her letters and they were devastated by his death and Jane was in mourning for quite a long time over Frankie's death.

(UNKNOWN): I think - I think a house, a big house, especially with only one child now, was too much for Jane to take care of. I don't think she was interested in housekeeping particularly. And I just think she just wasn't incapable of taking care of a house.

Pierce went off to fight in the Mexican War in 1847 and they sold the house when he came back in 1848 and then they lived in a boarding house, again in Concord, and they lived in the boarding situation for the rest of their lives.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, we return to Washington in the story of the White House. Because a fairly amazing thing, at least to my ears, seem to happen which is two years into this darkness and mourning and reclusive life on the second floor of the White House, she comes out of it.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: How did that happen and what was this new Jane Pierce like?

ANN COVELL: It happened because that was the end of the mourning period. Normally, as I said earlier, it would have been just a 12 months' mourning but Jane being Jane, she took two years to get over the problem that she had over Benny's death. And she wasn't exactly a new Jane because she had, in spite of what people had said, she had participated in some of the events within the White House during the first years.

For instance, the meetings that the first ladies had every Friday, afternoon tea, I think it was, when people could come in and see her and speak with her, anybody, you know, could go. She did attend most of them.

And this is evidenced by a man called H. Hoover who was the marshal of the District of Columbia during that time and he wrote to an author called Mary Whitton who'd written about the first ladies and she actually lived during the time of Jane Pierce. And it is evidenced that she did in fact attend these Friday meetings as much as she could and from time to time, she attended some important dinners that Franklin Pierce had to have.

But when the mourning period finished, perhaps it was a relief to her, I don't know. But she did attend more and more and she even attended the president's levees which he had on a Thursday afternoon. So it wasn't a certain new Jane that appeared. It was - she just appeared more than she did.

SUSAN SWAIN: Next is a question from Tony (ph) in Shaker Heights, Ohio. Hi, Tony (ph).

QUESTION: Yes, hi. Thank you for taking my call. I'm curious. I know that Franklin Pierce was a good friend of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the writer, and I think Hawthorne wrote his campaign biography. I'm curious, what was Hawthorne's relationship with Jane Pierce since Hawthorne himself could be kind of moody and reclusive as well.

SUSAN SWAIN: Great. Thanks for the question.

Tony (ph): Thank you.

SUSAN SWAIN: And timely because certain biographies suggest that it was Nathaniel Hawthorne and also Varina Davis who we'll learn more about who are two of the very well known characters who helped with her reintroduction to society in Washington.

ANN COVELL: Yes, yes. She didn't have a very good relationship with Hawthorne, really, because he didn't like her and he felt that she was holding Jane back and he wrote a biography for Franklin's election and he was heard more than once, I wish we could change his wife.

So it wasn't a very good relationship but he was never rude to her. He helped her as much as he could. He took her on out on outings during the two-year mourning period. So he did his best to maintain the relationship simply because she was the wife of one of his best friends.

SUSAN SWAIN: And of course, as we said earlier, the country was coming apart at the seams.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: The Republican Party was beginning to emerge in reaction to the politics.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: And we have just some of the key events of the Pierce administration to show you some of the issues that the president was grappling with while he had these family issues at home. And they include an 1853, the Gadsden Purchase; 1854, the Treaty of Kanagawa, the Kansas-Nebraska Act which we'll learn more about and the Canadian Reciprocity Treaty, 1854 and '56, something called Bleeding Kansas and as we mentioned the first Republican Party National meeting happened that year in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in response to the national politics.

So it's interesting that Jane Pierce became very involved in the slavery issue and in fact got -one of the discussions over the Kansas-Nebraska Act, she became very vocal in advising her president. What can you tell - her husband the president? What can you tell us about that?

ANN COVELL: I think what you're referring to is the situation where Nancy Mason, her aunt, whose husband was dead by then but he had a relative - just forgotten his name now - but he had - she had a relative. He was the leader of the anti-slavery movement in the Kansas area. And he had been hold in front of a court and found guilty of a misdemeanor because that, you know, was a very proslavery area were at that time.

And he was threatening to take this man, Robinson, that's his name. Robinson, Dr. Robinson, and he was threatening to take Robinson to court and if found guilty which was likely in that state at that time, he would be hanged. And so Nancy had written to Jane to make a plea to try and save Dr. Robinson from this fate.

By then, she was beginning to see Franklin a little bit more. They met two or three times a day by then and she had an opportunity to speak to him about it. He listened very carefully and then he telegraphed to the appropriate person and Dr. Robinson was freed.

That is the incident that I know about. I don't know of any other incident where she might have been useful and persuasive within - with regard to the situation.

SUSAN SWAIN: Do we know that her husband and she had differing views on slavery and abolition?

ANN COVELL: He was anti - well, they were both anti-slavery but he saw the sense of having slaves in the south. That was the difference between them.

SUSAN SWAIN: Let me take a call next from Carl (ph) in San Diego. Hi, Carl (ph). You're on.

QUESTION: Thank you. I've read that Franklin Pierce had a drinking problem. I don't know whether it was just during his presidency or after or what. But if so, how much of an influence due the loss of his children and his wife's supposed illnesses, frequent illnesses, contribute to the drinking problem if that's true.

SUSAN SWAIN: Thank you.

ANN COVELL: Well, we can never answer that truly, can we? At one state, after he'd left the Senate and came back to live in Concord, he gave up alcohol. When he went down to the Mexican War, we hear that he probably took up alcohol again.

It wasn't a new thing for Franklin. He'd always drunk. He's father, of course, had been a tavern keeper and had - he's spent a lot of time with his father so that was probably where he took up the drinking habit.

I think that after the Mexican War, he didn't let Jane see him drink but I think he kept on drinking. So I think it got heavier at his most unhappy times but I don't think that it was as a result, particularly, of those circumstances. I think that he'd been drinking anyway.

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, this unhappy White House was doomed to be a one-term presidency. Can you tell us anymore about why Franklin Pierce lost the White House?

ANN COVELL: It was - he'd sign the Kansas-Nebraska Act and that was a very unpopular thing to do. It was Douglas - he didn't draw it up. Douglas drew it up.

SUSAN SWAIN: That's Stephen A. Douglas?

ANN COVELL: Yes, yes. Sorry, Stephen A. Douglas.

But Franklin signed it. If he hadn't have signed it, I don't think he would have lost the popularity - his popularity because he was still deemed to be a very good politician but he did that. She shouldn't have done perhaps.

As a result of that, a James Buchanan and also Stephen A. Douglas put their names forward as nominees for the presidency which meant that Franklin wouldn't have had the two-thirds majority that he needed to be renominated and he knew that with the three nominees like that and on the 17th ballot, James Buchanan won the nomination and the election for president.

SUSAN SWAIN: Next up is Mary (ph), Louisville, Kentucky. Hi, Mary (ph). You're question?

QUESTION: My question is my name is Mary Means (ph) and I believe that Jane Pierce's mother's maiden name was Means.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

QUESTION: And she was born, Jane was, in Hampton, New Jersey. Can you tell me if that's where the Means were from?

ANN COVELL: No. They weren't. The Means Family, to which Jane belonged, originated from an island, would you believe, when Means - I think it was Frederick Means immigrated to America. And alongside him came his son, Robert Means.

And Robert was a weaver. He brought his loom over with him and became quite famous for making very good quality Irish cloth. As a result of that, he made a little bit of money and decided that he would set up a business in New Hampshire and just by sheer luck chose on this and went to New Hampshire and became very rich, very famous as a very good entrepreneur and that's how - that's where the Means Family came from.

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, with the loss of the White House for the Pierces, how did they spend their post White House years?

ANN COVELL: The first six months, they stayed with the former secretary of state and then James Buchanan, who liked Franklin Pierce, although he didn't like his politics, but he liked him very much, respected him, also felt very sorry for the situation of Jane's deteriorating and illness.

And so he said, would you like a trip over to Madeira? And if you do, you can go for six months and you can go on the cutta (ph) Powhatan. So Jane and Hamden (ph) had and she wasn't going to go but her aunt, Mary, decided that she must go.

So they got her to go. So off they went to Madeira on Powhatan. Unknown to her and together with Sidney Webster, Franklin had also organized a European trip which happened to take two years but they first went to Madeira and left it. And Jane improved dramatically and even went horse riding and hardly ever had a cold and she, from being 85 pounds in weight, rose to 100 pounds in weight. She loved every minute of it and she wrote a letter to her sister during that time to say "I can't believe of who I was when I was in the White House. I'm a completely different person."

So that's where they went for the first six months and Jane improved tremendously as did Franklin because he didn't have the worries of the state then they set off on their wonderful European tour. Towards the end of that tour, she started being ill again. And she was disappointed. She said it's disappointing after such a long time of being well.

When they eventually got back to Concord in New Hampshire, Franklin bought a farm but she became so ill that she went to live with her sister in Andover, Mary, where Benny had been taken after the accident and she died there at 63.

SUSAN SWAIN: And where is she buried?

ANN COVELL: She's buried in the - she's in the same cemetery - I've forgotten the name of it.

SUSAN SWAIN: On New Hampshire, it's the Pierce Family gravesite.

ANN COVELL: Yes, it is...

SUSAN SWAIN: Yes, we have the video of it right now.

ANN COVELL: Have you?

SUSAN SWAIN: So the whole family is all together.

ANN COVELL: Yes. The whole family is all together. Yes, that's right.

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, that ends our story of Jane Pierce. But as we hear that the incoming president Buchanan was fond of them and in our next segment of "First Ladies: Influence & Image" we're going to learn more about the Buchanan administration.

We're going to you to Harriet Lane who which at the age of 27 joined her uncle, James Buchanan. He was our only bachelor president in the White House to serve as his official hostess. She was well educated and well traveled. Harriet became a popular figure in an otherwise tenuous time in a country on the brink of civil war and we'll tell you more about her in this video.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): Harriet Lane is a unique figure. She was 27 years old and the niece of our only bachelor president, James Buchanan.

(UNKNOWN): We have a small doll that was not a plaything owned by Ms. Lane but rather created to look just like her when she was the first lady.

(UNKNOWN): She had been well trained. She had learned discretion from her diplomat uncle and one of Harriet's great admirers was Queen Victoria.

(UNKNOWN): This is actually a gift that the queen gave Harriet. It's a beautiful scrolled gold bracelet and inside, it has her name, Harriet Lane and the date of 1857 when she received the gift.

The Japanese delegation came to the White House in 1860 and they came bearing all types of gifts, beautiful little shoes, paper folded objects, origami, a little dictionary. Ms. Lane and her friends found all of these things very intriguing.

(UNKNOWN): The great social triumph of the Buchanan administration would be the first visit by Prince of Wales, the future Edward VII and Harriet presided over that.

(UNKNOWN): She would wear full gowns with many layers of ruffles, white berthas at the neck. She was also known for her low neckline, that was something that was not quite in fashion in America yet but people started copying her. Some of her garments created a bit of a scandal because she was showing quite a bit of skin.

(UNKNOWN): Harriet was young and stylish. She became a celebrity. She is, in some ways, a woman of her time, in other ways, a precursor to the modern first lady.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SUSAN SWAIN: And to tell us more about Harriet Lane, we have two women at our table who had both been students of the American First Ladies. Meet Feather Schwartz Foster. One of her books is called "The First Ladies: An Intimate Portrait of the Women Who Shaped America" and Ann Covell is with us, she has another book, "Remembering the Ladies: A Century of U.S. First Ladies."

Feather Schwartz Foster, we just had a gloom and doom White House and in comes the Buchanans. What was the atmosphere in the Buchanan White House?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER, AUTHOR: The atmosphere, the political atmosphere was just terrible. It really was. Buchanan got to be president. Personally, I think he had been a contender for about 12 years. He was very well known. He'd been in politics for like 40 years. He was old man by the time he got to be president.

SUSAN SWAIN: How old was he?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: About 65.

SUSAN SWAIN: So he's in the ranks of older presidents, yes.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: He was -- he is definitely an older man and I think that he got elected president because he had been out of the country for four years during the Pierce administration so he didn't get tainted with a lot of the politicking and the ugliness and the divisiveness that had been going on.

SUSAN SWAIN: Were they looking again for a compromise candidate?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: They were looking for somebody who was a - they used the word available a lot. And I don't -- that not mean that he had nothing better to do. It meant that he would be acceptable all the way around.

SUSAN SWAIN: And what was the spirit of his White House? Even with all the strife in the country?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: I think the best way to put it is that politically he was a dud. He ranks down at the very bottom of the barrel. But socially, it was brilliant. The whole White House, the atmosphere in the White House was brilliant. I don't think there had been anything like it since Dolley Madison. Well, you had a little flurry with Julia Tyler but she was only around for eight months and past that, the White House didn't really sparkle. Under Buchanan, it sparkled.

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, the woman responsible for coordinating this social life in the White House was Harriet Lane. Who was Harriet Lane?

ANN COVELL: Well, she was the niece of James Buchanan. She'd been orphaned at an early age and he took her under his wing. When her father died, I think that he was -- made her guardian, I believe.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes, Buchanan was the guardian.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Both her parents died, I think, by the time she was about nine or 10.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: And he was her guardian.

ANN COVELL: Her legal guardian.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: He took care a bunch of - he took care a bunch of nieces and nephews. He was a bachelor.

SUSAN SWAIN: For the Pennsylvanians out there, we should mention, he was Pennsylvania's only president.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes. From Lancaster.

SUSAN SWAIN: Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and we will be visiting the home that he built in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, as the segment continues and a reminder that we'd like you to be involved. This is more fun when you ask questions. So you can do that by calling us, 202-585-3880; mountain and pacific time zones, the number is 202-585-3881, and you can tweet us using the hashtag first ladies or you can post on Facebook. We'll take your questions.

So there was a sort of reading about this, a Pygmalion kind of approach between the uncle and the niece. He was determined to shape her into a proper kind of woman.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: He took very good care. He had very affectionate relationship with her. He loved her dearly. She's loved him dearly. He was like a father figure to her and he sent her to the best schools. She had the best of really everything.

Buchanan did very well for himself. He made a lot of money and so money was not an object. She could have just about anything that she wanted and he saw it to her that she was trained to be exactly what she was: a brilliant social success.

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, one of the influences on her education was when her uncle was appointed ambassador to Great Britain, your own country, and she in fact, met the queen.

ANN COVELL: She did.

SUSAN SWAIN: Tell us what you know about her experiences there and why she's so charmed Queen Victoria?

ANN COVELL: Well, it's unusual that somebody should charm Queen Victoria in such a way but she certainly did. I think it was her youth and her effervescence and she was such a change in this rather stiff royal court. And I know, you know, having read about her, she -- you know, she was a very happy girl, wasn't she?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: She was a delightful lady.

ANN COVELL: Delightful girl, yes. And, you know, even the Prince of Wales and he was only 18 years old fell under her spell.

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, they were somewhat contemporaries, I would think at that point. Age was...

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: She was 10 years older than him.

SUSAN SWAIN: Ten years older.

ANN COVELL: Yes, she was. She was about 28 by then. But certainly, Queen Victoria, thought she was wonderful. And she gave her the official title of -- an official title which wouldn't normally be given to a niece. It would only be given to the wife of an ambassador.

SUSAN SWAIN: And is it true that the Queen Victoria was taken that she tried to make a match with a British subject so she would stay in the country?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: I think I'm not sure that that is a true or that's just apocryphal. But Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, both of them, thought very highly of Harriet and Harriet enjoyed her time on the continent a lot. She learned a lot. She really grew over there.

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, the home that James Buchanan built in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, he was quite a successful lawyer and made a lot of money and he built a big house which he named Wheatland and we are going to visit to the Wheatland Mansion next. Explore her life there, as well it see some of the items from the White House that were brought there as we learn more about her style and her approach to being the White House official hostess.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): Here we are in Harriet Lane's bedroom at Wheatland and this room is furnished in a way that is very similar to the way that it might have been furnished when she was living here. The furnishings that you see today are actually pieces that she owned after her marriage in 1866.

So behind me, you'll see her original wardrobe and this is a piece where she would have stored her beautiful gowns, her European gowns that she purchased from Paris. She was well known throughout the country for fabulous clothing. She had a penchant for European fashions. Most of her clothes were handmade for her in Paris and the dress here was actually designed by the fashion House of Worth of Paris and worn later in life.

But her signature style as first lady differed fairly radically from this dress here she would wear were full of gowns with many layers of ruffles, white berthas at the neck. She was also known for her low neckline. That was something that was quite in fashion in America yet but she brought it to the forefront of fashion and people started copying her.

Now some of her garments created a bit of a scandal because she was showing quite a bit of skin. But it caught on and all of the ladies adopted this fashion. They copied her hair, her jewelry and her general fashion sense.

Now, over to the right here, we have a small doll that was not a plaything owned by Ms. Lane but rather created to look just like her when she was the first lady and the doll is wearing her signature style of gown with the white bertha and lots of twill and lace.

In front of me is a beautiful rosewood mahogany bed that she actually had specially made to accommodate her uncle, James Buchanan. Now this bed is rather long for the time. He was a very tall man so she wanted to make sure that he was comfortable, so this was something that she commissioned specifically with her beloved uncle in mind.

We also have many pieces in the room that are both American made and European made reflecting not only her pride of country but also her interest in European pieces as well. We have her prayer bench which is hand embroidered and holds her mother's book of common prayer which Ms. Lane used throughout her life and also a small writing desk that she would use to sit and write letters to friends and luckily, it's a portable writing desk as she spent much of her time traveling to friends and family throughout the country.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SUSAN SWAIN: Feather Foster, on Twitter -- excuse me -- on Facebook. Rachel Schmoyer (ph) asked. Was Harriet Lane truly more fashionable than previous first ladies or was it merely the development of photography that made her a fashion trendsetter?

ANN COVELL: No, I think, well, photography of course helped because it was able to be reproduced rather than just a portrait, you know, but she was a fashion trendsetter. Absolutely. She looked good in clothes. She had a nice figure. She was buxom but she wasn't fat. She made a lovely appearance.

I think the only detrimental thing I ever read about Harriet Lane is that some people thought she was a little stiff or maybe a little too formal. But with the political situation, being what it was during those times, I think she needed to be.

SUSAN SWAIN: I want to explore this topic a little bit more because in the first ladies we've learned about today, they were either enormously popular in Washington or not. I mean, this locus was Washington D.C. Harriet Lane, as I understand it, was popular across the country.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: She was popular.

SUSAN SWAIN: So this suggests the rise of media coverage of the White House. Is that, in fact, what was going on?

ANN COVELL: Yes, I think so. Previously, first ladies, were never mentioned in the press because it wasn't protocol to talk about and give ladies names and so many first ladies remain unknown to this day, really, simply because nobody knew who they were in those days and the press certainly didn't feature them in any way.

SUSAN SWAIN: So now they began featuring them and people liked to read about them.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: They began -- they began -- and she was good copy. She liked to dance. She was supposedly a good dancer. She gave a lot of parties. She was an elegant hostess. And she dressed well and she had a lot of friends.

SUSAN SWAIN: Bethany Johnson (ph) on Twitter asked, did Harriet Lane play an instrument? If so, which?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: I believed she played the piano or the piano forte or something that she did.

SUSAN SWAIN: Now, were these parties -- and I understand that the Buchanans, because of his wealth, they got an appropriation from Congress to throw them but he supplemented this because they like to entertain so much and...

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: I don't even know if he got an appropriation. I know that there was a not a budget for entertainment.

SUSAN SWAIN: They used it from their salary, though?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: They used it from their salaries.

SUSAN SWAIN: So he supplemented that salary...

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Most of the presidents did.

SUSAN SWAIN: So but did he used these for politicking? Was it fact he was trying to bring together the north and the south?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Absolutely.

SUSAN SWAIN: Was that successful?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: I don't think anything was successful in those days.

SUSAN SWAIN: Attentions were too hard.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: At that - tenor of the time. The tensions were so high that it was very, very difficult. But he used it as affectively and as efficiently as just about anybody else could. It really -- it really was. The White House really glittered.

SUSAN SWAIN: Next is a caller, Marjorie (ph) in Vancouver, Washington.

Hi, Marjorie (ph). You're on. Welcome to the conversation.

QUESTION: Thank you. Comment and question. Last September, my daughter and a family friend and I visited the James Buchanan house and among the things we learned was about Harriet Lane and her endowment so that a handbook for a Manual for Pediatric House Officers could be used. My daughter, a pharmacist, like "My gosh, I've been rustling for years as for a first lady." So that was kind of fun.

It was obvious from the tour why Harriet Lane was interested in so many things. It wasn't clear why she had such an interest in empathy and advocacy for Native Americans. I wonder if your guests might shed light on that.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: It is kind of an unusual to -- I don't think that before she got to the White House she showed any particular interest. But I think there were some Indian chieftains who came to the White House to visit and I think they made a great impression on her and she became interested in Indian welfare and she was interested in their education and she was interested in their medical well being and health which was a very -- it was a proper thing for her to be interested in. Nobody is going to be objecting to educating children or taking care of people who were sick. So it was certainly a good thing for her to be. The Indians did -- they thought of her as their great white mother.

SUSAN SWAIN: You responded when a caller talked about visiting the Buchanan house and seeing a manual for being first lady. Is that something you know about?

ANN COVELL: Well, yes. It refers to her donations to the John Hopkins Hospital and the pediatric unit that she set up.

SUSAN SWAIN: OK. We'll talk more about that later because that happened after she got out of the White House.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: In a mark of how popular she became, a ship was named after her. A question from Jenny Weber. Harriet Lane had a U.S. Navy ship named after her. That was Coast Guard, actually, I think.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Coast Guard. It was at Revenue Cutter.

SUSAN SWAIN: How did she get this honor given only two other first ladies have every had any naval equipment named after them and also she writes, I heard she gone into trouble for throwing a party on the ship and question is that true?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: All right. Tell us the story.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: How they named the ship after her, I do not know. But her uncle was president of the United States, he may have been able to swing it. But he did, she invited some friends of hers to have a party on the ship and Nunc, as she called her uncle, got wind of this and he hollered at her, not for having a party, he was perfectly happy that she had a party but the ship was public property and he felt that she was -- she should no abuse public property.

He's very straight-laced about her not accepting gifts other than like flowers or a box of candy or something but he didn't want her to accept any kind of gifts.

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, this is a nice segue to our next video which is, again, traveling to Wheatlands. And here, we'll learn more about the parlor and learn about Harriet's entertaining style.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): Here we are at Wheatland, in beautiful Lancaster, Pennsylvania. This is the home of President James Buchanan and his niece Harriet Lane. In the spring of 1848, just a month before

Harriet's birthday, they moved here and this is the place that she would call home until the age of 36 when she married and moved to Baltimore.

We're entering the parlor here at Wheatland and this room is a very special room because this is the social hub of the home. This is a place where Harriet Lane, as a hostess for her uncle, James Buchanan, might serve tea to friends and guests, write letters to her friends, that's the room where the family lives, where they spend time together, play games, sing, just enjoy each other's company. Very much like we would use a family room today.

Well, we have Harriet Lane's piano. This was a gift from her uncle James Buchanan. It's manufactured by the Chickering company of Boston and this was probably purchased sometime in the mid to late 1860s.

Now, as you see, we have her music book here and this is embossed with her name on the front and this book contains a number of her favorite pieces including Italian classics and we also have some patriotic songs in here. And one of her uncle's favorite things to do was to sit in this parlor on a Sunday afternoon and listen to his niece play the religious hymns. He was a very devout Presbyterian and to listen to those hymns was something that brought a great amount of joy to him.

Well, Harriet Lane was very enthusiastic about all things European and when her uncle was selected as Minister Plenipotentiary in the court of St. James, she was simply over the moon about the idea that she might get to accompany him as his companion. Now, upon presentation to Queen Victoria in the Court of St. James, Ms. Lane made a great impression. She had manners, poise, dignity and the queen was very impressed with her. As a result, the two of them formed a very interesting friendship that would continue throughout both of their lives.

Now here, I have this bracelet and this is actually a gift that the queen gave Harriet. It's a beautiful scrolled gold bracelet and inside, it has her name, Harriet Lane and the date of 1857 when she received the gift. And behind me here, we have a lithograph of Queen Victoria and also her husband, Prince Albert, and these were a diplomatic gift presented to President James Buchanan and his niece, Harriet Lane, his first lady, during their time in the White House. And what's special about these is that they actually hung in the White House and then were brought back here to their home at Wheatland.

So Harriet Lane spent quite a bit of time traveling with her uncle, James Buchanan. They also entertained international visitors during their time in the White House as well. One of the most interesting groups that they had visit them was the Japanese delegation and the Japanese delegation came to the White House in 1860 and they came bearing all types of gifts. So what we see here are some of the little things that they brought. Beautiful little shoes, paper folded objects, origami, this is a little dictionary in Japanese and Ms. Lane and her friends found all of these things very intriguing.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SUSAN SWAIN: While we're learning about diplomatic visits, Patricia Coniglio on Facebook asked, is it true that Harriet Lane hosted then England's Prince of Wales, the future king, Edward VII at the White House? This visit by the Prince of Wales was described as one of the great successes of the administration.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Huge.

SUSAN SWAIN: So...

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Huge success.

SUSAN SWAIN: Why?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: It was the Prince of Wales. It was the son of the reigning Monarch. They hadn't had anybody over here and he was, I guess, the highest ranking foreign person that ever came here. Everybody knew Queen Victoria. They all knew about the Prince of Wales and he came here. Actually, he went to Canada and Buchanan knew Queen Victoria and said, listen, as long as he's in the neighborhood, come on down.

ANN COVELL: Yes.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: So he did and they invited him and he stayed at the White House.

ANN COVELL: And she beat him at bowls, didn't she?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: She beat him at what?

ANN COVELL: Bowls.

SUSAN SWAIN: Like bowling?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: They went (inaudible) of 10 pins. Yes. She beat him.

SUSAN SWAIN: And is that protocol to have the Prince of Wales be vanquished in a competitive game?

ANN COVELL: Not really.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: He probably just didn't play very well at all.

SUSAN SWAIN: Probably the first time he lost at anything.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: Let's take a call from President Buchanan's hometown, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Caroline (ph) is watching us there.

Hi, Caroline (ph). Caroline (ph) you are on the air, welcome.

QUESTION: Thank you. I would like to know how Harriet's name is his niece. In what realm is it his brother's? Wife's? His sister's? Daughter?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Sister.

SUSAN SWAIN: His sister's daughter.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes. Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: And in fact, over the course of his lifetime, it seems that he took care of a lot of children.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: He did. He, I think, he had one brother and about 4 million sisters. He came from a very large family and he did very well in life and he managed to support in some way or other, I think, maybe about 15 or 16 different nieces and nephews. But he had a lot of sisters.

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, we're talking about President Buchanan's personal life, there's a story about why he is a bachelor. He did have a great love interest in his life?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: They say that when he was a young man that he was engaged to a woman and it didn't work out too well. It depends on what book you read, it didn't work out for a lot of -- you know, and the engagement was broken and she later -- not all that much later -- died and some suspect that she committed suicide. And the relationship between Buchanan and his former intended's family really was very bad. They wouldn't let him come to the funeral or anything else like that. Just how much he loved her, how much was true, how much was embellished, we probably will never know.

SUSAN SWAIN: Do you have anything more to add to that story?

ANN COVELL: Not really. She was called Anne Coleman, wasn't she?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes, she was.

ANN COVELL: Yes. And my understanding is that her father discovered -- he had apparently been thrown out of college for some misdemeanor and my understanding is that her father discovered the reason for his being thrown out of college.

SUSAN SWAIN: This was Buchanan?

ANN COVELL: Buchanan. Yes. And tackled him about it then told his daughter, Anne. Anne sort of had a few words with Buchanan about it and we can only guess...

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: We can only guess.

ANN COVELL: ...of what it -- of what the secret was. And they split up and it's upset her so much that she apparently did commit suicide.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes, she committed suicide.

SUSAN SWAIN: And so he devoted himself to politics and raising his many nieces and nephews.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: And his nieces, yes.

ANN COVELL: There were -- may I? There was a rumor as well that he had a short fling with Julia Tyler before she became Mrs. Tyler which I find incredible but this is in one of the books I've recently read.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Julia Tyler, when Julia Tyler was in Washington, before she married the president, she was very, very popular.

ANN COVELL: Was she?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes, she was. And she had flings, whatever that means today, with a lot of different men, a lot of different much older men. She seemed to attract a lot of older men. But whatever went on between Julia and Buchanan was really negligible.

SUSAN SWAIN: And ultimately married one 30 years her senior.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: That's right.

SUSAN SWAIN: Who became president.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: The next call was from Barbara (ph) in Brookhaven, Pennsylvania. Hi, Barbara (ph).

QUESTION: Good evening. I, too, remember hearing the story when I visited Wheatland about a brokenhearted Buchanan whose fiancée who lived in Philadelphia jilted him and it had something to do with her family's objection to him. So apparently, he was just so brokenhearted there was never anyone else for him. And I remember hearing that story from a tour guide when I went through Wheatland.

SUSAN SWAIN: Well, thank you very much for that.

Here's a question from Wallace Lee. Please tell the audience that President was originally from Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, born and raised, and he moved to Lancaster as an adult. It's discerning to say he's from Lancaster. They don't wish to recognize his upbringing. Do you have something again Mercersburg, Pennsylvania?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: He was Mercersburg.

SUSAN SWAIN: And chose Lancaster for his law practice?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: He chose it to be his adult home.

SUSAN SWAIN: Now, is it true that as he was setting his stage for this many runs for the presidency that he would use that place as an entertaining spot for members of congress as they would come by?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Sure. It was a lovely home.

SUSAN SWAIN: So on their way to Washington, they'd be invited to Wheatland?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: And he invited people to come to Wheatland and it was a nice piece of property, sure.

SUSAN SWAIN: Lancaster was...

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: They were very social.

SUSAN SWAIN: Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is the site of our next call whose name is Linda (ph). And Linda (ph), you're on.

Linda (ph): Hi. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

I just wanted to ask if you could elaborate on Harriet Lane's wedding. Where that took place and any interesting details that might have been as a result of that?

SUSAN SWAIN: OK. Thank you so much. Harriet Lane did not get married until long after the White House.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: He got married about six or seven years after he left the White House. She was 35 years old or 36 years old when she got married. Buchanan was very happy about it. She married a man named, Henry Johnston. He was a banker.

Some people say he was a lawyer, he may have been a lawyer first and then a banker but he was a banker and he's well to do. She had known him for years. And they always seemed to like each other and I guess maybe by that time, it was time for her to get married. And Buchanan's very, very happy about it because he died a year and a half later so he probably knew that he was getting on in life and this way Harriet would be settled and they moved to Baltimore. And they lived in Baltimore for several years.

SUSAN SWAIN: We'll come back to that too. I don't want leave the White House years because you called it a failed presidency. Obviously, the nation was about to split apart. South Carolina was about to secede. But here's a quick look at America by the 1860s. The population then was 31 million and 33 states, 35 percent growth since the 1850 census. There were 3.9 million slaves, about 13 percent of the population. And the largest cities in the country at that time were New York City, Philadelphia; Brooklyn, New York; and Baltimore, all in the northeast.

Harriet Lane, was she also a political adviser to the president? And if so, it didn't turn out so well.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: You know, it all depends on what you mean by advice? Was she political adviser in the sense of Abigail Adams? No.

I think she was a little bit more in the Dolley Madison vein of the socially helpful to him. She was observant. He trained her to listen well and to observe and to take note of what was going on and to form opinions but she was usually quite quiet about expressing her opinions which was one of the reasons that she was very popular is because she didn't do anything wrong.

SUSAN SWAIN: Here's a question from Christopher Coco (ph). How have the duties and position a first lady evolved from Martha Washington until this day? It sounds like there's a lot of similarities, really, and it depends on the individual first lady as to how involved they get at this point.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: It does. Actually, I think that the first three first ladies, Martha, Abigail, and Dolley were far harder working and more actively involved in their husband's lives and in their careers. And then, my own opinion was that when we stopped being colonies and started being a country, maybe by the 1800s or so, that generation growing up, they were growing to be more -- they were more prominent. They were very prosperous and men wanted their wives to have all sorts of lovely things and they catered to them a lot more. They didn't have to work quite as hard.

And the ladies at that time, they started, I guess, being frailer and they were frailer probably until after the civil war. Well, speaking of the civil war, as we're marching as a nation toward, here are some of the key events of the Buchanan administration, that one term in the White House, 1857 the key Dred Scott Supreme Court decision on slavery; 1858, the Lecompton Constitution owing to westward expansion, the Pony Express was established in 1860. We saw that the first Japanese delegation visited the White House, and in 1861, the creation of the Confederate States of America.

So this White House was dealing with enormous problems but not very effectively. How did the Buchanan administration tried to approach the negotiating using the White House and bringing parties together.

ANN COVELL: I think I'll have to defer to it to your knowledge.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes.

ANN COVELL: Please.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: They entertained a lot. They had two dinners a week for 40 people at each dinner.

SUSAN SWAIN: But how do they keep fights from breaking out? I mean, tensions were at an all-time high.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: They were at a tremendous all-time high and Harriet wore another hat. Not only was she hostess, but she also was very actively involved in the protocol of it and she would spend hours working on the seating plans and I can't sit next to you and you can't sit over there and who's going to be over here because they're not talking to each other. And she worked very, very hard at that and fortunately she knew all the players. She knew all these different senators and cabinet members and congressmen. And so she knew how to put them and where to put them and she worked very hard at it.

SUSAN SWAIN: Did she attend debates in the Congress?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Occasionally.

SUSAN SWAIN: Occasionally?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Occasionally.

SUSAN SWAIN: Next is another Lancaster, Pennsylvania, call. I can see their favorite son is an interesting people to night. This is Chris (ph) on the line. Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: Yes. During the time that Harriet Lane was in the house at Wheatland, can you tell us how many people were in the house? How many family members as well as how many staff were at the house at Wheatland?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: I don't know.

SUSAN SWAIN: Do you know much about their life...

ANN COVELL: Well, they had Miss Millie, I think, who was the housekeeper...

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: That was Miss Hetty.

ANN COVELL: Hetty?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Hetty.

ANN COVELL: Who was the housekeeper. And I do know that they had a steward because when they first went to the White House, Miss Hetty wanted to take control and Harriet didn't want that.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: She makes that pretty well...

ANN COVELL: So Hetty had to go back to Wheatland and they brought over a steward from there. So they had at least two staff.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes, they did have some staff there. I don't know how many of their family members actually lived there. I know he had a couple of nephews that he had at the White House serving as his secretary and aides.

ANN COVELL: He did, yes.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: That was very common among the early presidents to bring in relatives.

SUSAN SWAIN: Just to underscore, the people that worked for them in the Wheatland were paid? They were not...

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: They were not in any sense...

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: No.

SUSAN SWAIN: ...slave holders?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: No. No, no.

SUSAN SWAIN: Donna (ph) in Pocatello, Idaho. Welcome to the conversation. Donna (ph), go ahead please. Welcome.

QUESTION: I have a small world story for you. I taught first ladies for several years in out Elderhostel program here and when I get to James Buchanan, a friend of mine came. And she says "I have something to show everybody," and she showed everybody her ring. She said this belongs to my husband's family. This is the ring that James Buchanan gave his fiancée. It's been reset but this is the original ring.

SUSAN SWAIN: Did she have any proof of that?

QUESTION: Well, only...

SUSAN SWAIN: It's a great story.

QUESTION: It's interesting, though, to go all the way to Pocatello, Idaho.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: Indeed.

QUESTION: And also, I hope when you -- before you close the show, you discuss her tragic family, losing her husband and both her sons and also the legacy she left. A lovely estate and did a lot of good. Thank you so much.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes.

SUSAN SWAIN: Thank you very much.

Yes, indeed. We plan to. So James Buchanan loses the White House to Abraham Lincoln. Next week's program, we promised it will be an interesting one and a full two hours on the Lincoln administration. And as we mentioned South Carolina has seceded.

So what were the post-White House years like for Harriet Lane?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Well, she went back to Wheatland with her uncle for about five years or so and then she married Henry Johnston. And they moved to Baltimore where he was a banker and he was quite prominent and well to do. And they had these two sons. And unfortunately, Harriet had about 15 decent years as Mrs. Johnson. Both her sons died young. They were...

ANN COVELL: Within a year of each other's...

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes. And I think they were like 12 or 13 -- they were young boys. She's another one who lost both of her children too.

ANN COVELL: Yes, indeed. Yes.

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: And she -- and about a year and a half after the boys died, her husband died. So Harriet is now around 50-ish and she is a widow on her own. And she moves back to Washington D.C. and she gets to be a little bit like Dolley. She gets invited to the White House just about every time they're going to be having a big deal. She gets invited and no party is a party unless she's there. And she does a lot of good. She really does.

SUSAN SWAIN: We'll take a call and then we'll talk a little bit more about that. This is Charles (ph) in Wheatland, Pennsylvania. How about that? There's a town named after the estate. You're on the air, Charles (ph).

QUESTION: Excuse me. Good evening. Yes, the town is Wheatland, Pennsylvania. I don't know if you're panel there has heard of it. It's really a suburb with Youngstown right across the state line and it's named after the estate. It was originally an old canal town. The canal going from Pittsburgh through Youngstown area and then to Erie and there's the Wheatland tube company which is a very large producer of tubes and iron, et cetera.

So the only question I have, I'm wondering if there are any other towns named after the estate of a president. I think this is rather unusual.

SUSAN SWAIN: Thanks very much. Now that is a detailed question. Do you know the answer to it?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Well, I know there are couple of Mount Vernons and Montpeliers.

SUSAN SWAIN: That's true. That's true.

We're going to return to Wheatland for our last video of this program and learn more about Harriet Lane's post White House years.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): Unfortunately, Harriet Lane's life was marked by tremendous loss and for such a buoyant and unremarkable woman, it can tell us a lot about her by seeing all of the different tragedies that marked her life beginning early in life with the loss of both of her parents, several young siblings and then when she reached adulthood, the loss of her three siblings who had also reached adulthood with her also followed by the death of her beloved uncle, James Buchanan. And then shortly thereafter, by the deaths of her two young sons and then her husband ultimately.

And as you can see here, I have Harriet Lane's jewelry box which would have held many trinkets and beautiful jewels, lot of them used in happy occasions and parties and galas but some of them used for those more intimate and also very sad occasions when she was grieving. I have some pieces of mourning jewelry here that are very interesting.

This first one is a mourning locket that contains the hair of her mother, her father, and three of her siblings. And it's very unique in that the locket closes into a little ball and as the wheel turns, there are little glass plates and under each plate is the hair of one of her family members and it's engraved with their name and the date of their death.

And this piece here is a locket that is woven with a little pattern of hair from three of her young nieces and nephews and it's a very beautiful little locket and then on the back, we can see more hair and then the engravings of their names and the dates of their death.

This piece is a very interesting locket in that it opens on two sides and in the first side, we can see a daguerreotype of her sister, Mary Lane Baker, who died very prematurely, just as Harriet was returning from England. She came home to the news that her dear sister had died. And then on the other side, we see a daguerreotype of her brother, Elliott Eskridge Lane.

And this is a very artsy photograph taken sometime near the end of his life when he also was a young man who died unfortunately just after President Buchanan's inauguration. He had been set to serve as the personal secretary to the president and then die of an unfortunate case of dysentery that affected many people who had stayed at the National Hotel in Washington.

Now this last piece, is a mourning bracelet that Harriet created to commemorate her uncle, James Buchanan, and it's a beautiful cameo on the front but when you turn it around, you can see a lock of his hair behind the glass plate, ferns cut from the grounds of Wheatland on the day that he died and then within the band are inscribed his last words which were uttered on June 1st of 1868 and it says, "Oh, Lord God Almighty, as thou wilt." And this is a very special piece because the last words and the name are hidden within the band so it's something that she would have kept close to her. But from the outside, it just appears to be a normal ordinary piece of jewelry.

This painting is an image of Harriet Lane's two young sons, James Buchanan Johnston and Henry Elliott Johnston, Jr. Sadly, this is a memorial portrait because both boys died as young teenagers from what we now know to be rheumatic fever. Both boys became ill around the same time. One boy died here in the United States and the other died after Harriet and her husband took him to France to hopefully seek a cure in a better climate with mineral waters.

But as you can see, the boys are portrayed against a rocky seascape to symbolize their death and they're dressed in their best clothes and posed with their favorite possessions to show them as they would have been in life as a memorial for their mother to remember them by.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

SUSAN SWAIN: And as we wrap up our program here, our caller asked us to make sure that we talked about her White House years and the issues she got involved in and there are many. She and her husband together created one of the first homes for invalid children, which is called the Harriet Lane Home for Invalid Children. It is now still part of Johns Hopkins in its current incarnation.

She was quite an art collector and her art collection was donated to the Smithsonian and it became the foundation for the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. She was involved with the creation of St. Albans School, still quite an influential school here in Washington and very involved in the preservation of her uncle's memory through the James Buchanan Memorial. And we have a picture of that. You earlier called it a failed presidency but it's quite a memorial that he has...

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: It probably is.

SUSAN SWAIN: ...here in the Meridian Park area of Washington D.C.

As we close out, a question for both of you. We're trying to understand with each of these ladies their influence on the country and the role that they had and how important it was. Where would you put Harriet Lane in the pantheon of first ladies in terms of her importance? Both of you.

ANN COVELL: Second.

SUSAN SWAIN: Second?

FEATHER SCHWARTZ FOSTER: Yes. I would put her right below -- if she were Mrs. Buchanan instead of niece of Buchanan, I think she'll be second to Dolley in the 19th century.

SUSAN SWAIN: And you say the same?

ANN COVELL: I still think she should be second even though she is Miss Lane and not Mrs. Buchanan.

SUSAN SWAIN: And why is that? Why do you come to that conclusion?

ANN COVELL: Well, the influence she had on people and everybody loved her and she brought tranquility, is the word I think of, to the role of first lady after the last few, the previous three presidencies. She was just a great girl and everybody loved her.

SUSAN SWAIN: I want to say thank you as we close out here to the White House Historical Association, our partners in this series, and for all of their help and research and many of the photographs and other things that you're seeing.

And to our two guests for this program, on Jane Pierce first and Harriet Lane, Ann Covell and remember both of our guests have books available that you can read more about these first ladies, one of hers is "Remembering the Ladies". And Feather Schwartz Foster, who is the author of "First Ladies: An Intimate Portrait of the Women Who Shaped America." I have a copy of it right here. We'll show as we close. Thanks to both of you for being with us and thanks to you for being our audience this evening.

END