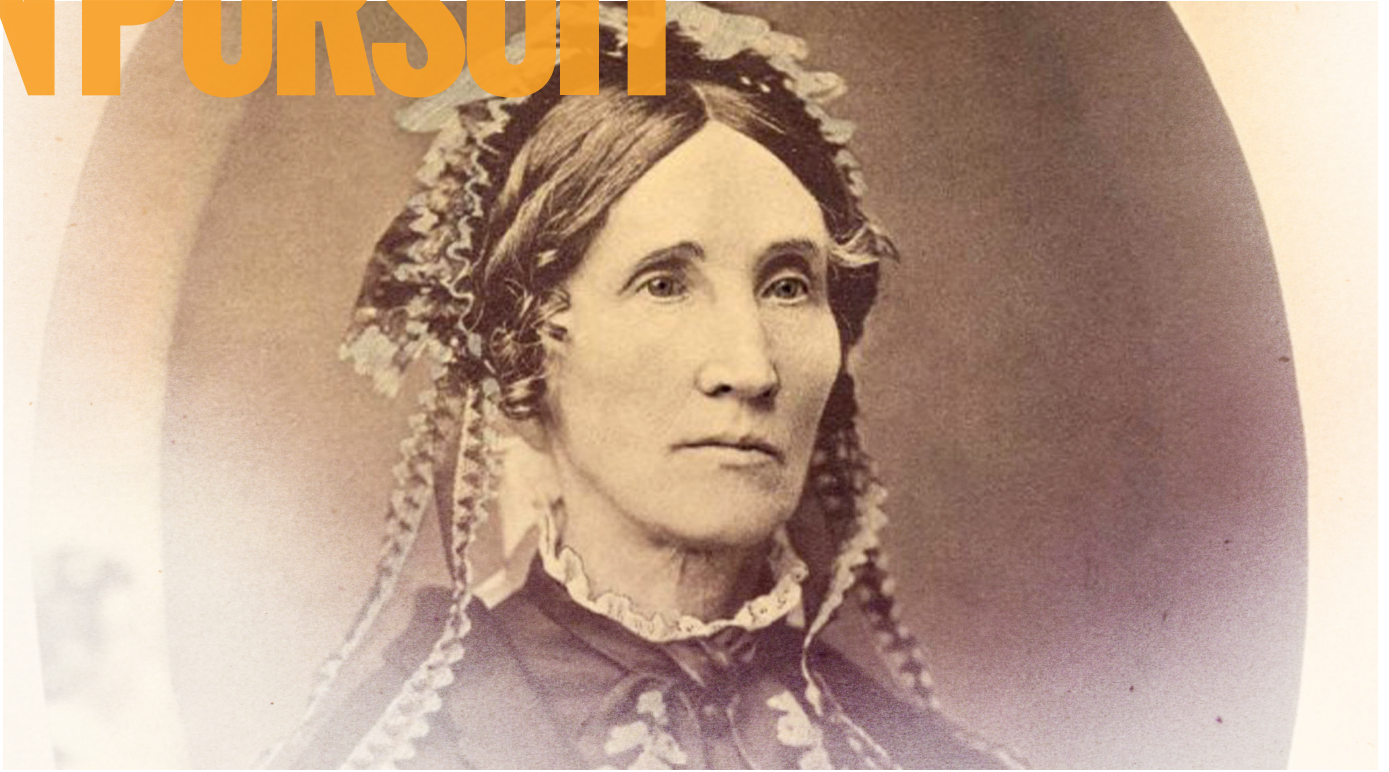




LESSON #20 • FROM JANE PIERCE

MISREADING A NATION'S MORALS CAN TURN CATASTROPHIC



by Diana Bartelli Carlin

Jane Pierce entered the White House in deep mourning. In January 1853, just weeks before her husband Franklin's inauguration, their son, Benjamin, was killed in a tragic train accident. He was their third and last child. The couple had lost their first son, Franklin, Jr., three days after his birth, when his father was away serving in Congress, and their second, Frank Robert, to typhus when he was only four. Now "Bennie," age eleven, was gone as well.

When she became first lady, Jane understandably avoided events in a White House shrouded in black bunting, but her personal losses and dislike of politics have cast her as an absent first lady who harmed her husband's political prospects. What history has largely missed is how, even in grief, Jane Pierce quietly shaped one of the most consequential struggles of the antebellum era. Too often, accounts of her tenure as first lady focus narrowly on her long-term ill health, depression, unusual behaviors, and emotional detachment. Grief narrowed Jane Pierce's public presence, but it sharpened her moral clarity.

Jane Means Appleton was born in New Hampshire in 1806, the third child of a Congregational minister – later president of Maine's Bowdoin College – and a mother from a wealthy New England textile-manufacturing family. Raised in a strict Calvinistic environment, Jane was often told not to mourn losses because they were

God's will. After her father's death when she was thirteen, the family relocated to her mother's home in Amherst, New Hampshire, where she later met Bowdoin graduate and lawyer Franklin Pierce in 1826. She was twenty; he was twenty-two. Her family opposed the relationship because of Franklin's political leanings and his affection for alcohol. The son of a New Hampshire governor, Pierce was drawn to political life and soon served in the New Hampshire legislature, later spending nine years in Congress.

Eight years after meeting, Jane stood her ground and married Congressman Franklin Pierce, moving with him to a boarding house in Washington, DC. She did not adjust well to Washington's political and social world and returned home during her first pregnancy. She later wrote, "Oh how I wish he was out of political life! How much better it would be for him on every account!" And, unwritten but understood, how much better it would be for her.

After the death of their second son, Jane convinced Franklin to leave politics and devote himself fully to his growing law practice and their remaining child. She believed New Hampshire was a far better place to raise a family than Washington. When the Mexican War broke out, Franklin left his young family for two years to serve, returning to a hero's welcome. Jane opposed his service, but Franklin believed he had a duty to protect the country. Franklin did accept the position of U.S. Attorney for New Hampshire, but at



Mrs. Franklin Pierce | John Chester Buttre

Jane's urging he declined the cabinet post of attorney general in the Polk administration. After telling Jane that he was finished with politics, unbeknownst to her, he allowed his name to be placed in nomination at the deadlocked Democratic convention of 1852. He won on the forty-ninth ballot, and Jane promptly fainted when the news was delivered. Franklin reassured her that he would not win the presidency, and Jane prayed that he would lose.

Franklin, however, won a landslide victory over Winfield Scott, and Jane reluctantly prepared to return to Washington. Bennie's death sent Jane into a deep depression. Both parents grieved their loss, but Franklin was called to duty to prepare his administration. Jane later met him in Baltimore where they were to proceed to Washington for the inauguration. A disagreement ensued, and Jane delayed her arrival by two weeks, asking out-going First Lady Abigail Fillmore to represent her at the ceremony.

Jane remained in mourning for two years. Her religious beliefs taught her to interpret Bennie's loss as necessary to allow Franklin to concentrate on the weighty matters of the presidency without distraction, though she confided to family members that she missed time with her husband. When she learned that Mrs. Fillmore was taken ill after the inauguration, Jane, despite her own despondency, wrote to Millard Fillmore offering to send a White House servant who had been close to Abigail to comfort her. President Fillmore declined the offer, expressing appreciation for her concern. Soon after Mrs. Fillmore's death, Franklin's vice president, William R. King, also died. Jane, it seemed, could not escape death.

Many biographical sketches describe Jane as not leaving her room, writing letters to her deceased children (in fact, she wrote just one written shortly after Bennie's death), and appearing detached and despondent



Jane Pierce and her son, Benjamin

at events. The women in Washington social circles despaired of the gloom over the White House that robbed the social season of its frivolity.

More recent examinations of correspondence and journals suggest a different picture. Jane hosted weekly teas in the tradition of Martha Washington and occasionally participated in dinners during the first two years of the administration. On New Year's Day 1855, she attended the White House open house and began to loosen the hold of her strict mourning attire. She attended Senate debates on the issue of slavery, discussed national and world politics at dinners and receptions, and spent time with Franklin's friend, author Nathaniel Hawthorne. Jane's mourning did not erase her convictions; instead, it reshaped how and where she chose to act.

By the mid-1850s, national debates over slavery's expansion into the western territories rocked the Union. In 1854, President Pierce signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which allowed for the legality of slavery in those territories to be decided based on popular vote. Jane, at the urging of family

members, unsuccessfully attempted to convince him to veto the bill. Pierce's decision cast a large shadow over his administration. The result of the Act was "Bleeding Kansas," marked by border skirmishes between abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates, John Brown's massacre of slavery supporters, illegal voting by pro-slavery Missourians, and the burning and looting of towns in both Kansas and Missouri.

In 1856, Dr. Charles Robinson and other free state leaders opposed to slavery in the Kansas Territory established a rival government with Robinson as governor. President Pierce declared the actions as sedition, imprisoned Robinson and the free state leaders, and threatened their execution.

Jane's aunt, Nancy Means Lawrence, and Sara Robinson wrote to Jane, asking her to intercede. Aunt Nancy was stepmother to Amos Adams Lawrence, founder of the New England Emigrant Aid Society, which sent abolitionists to settle Kansas Territory, and Amos was also Sara Robinson's cousin. Jane interceded, and Franklin ultimately relented. While it is impossible to say what would have happened if Robinson and other leaders were executed, Jane's actions likely helped secure Kansas's eventual admission to the Union as a free state in 1861, with Robinson as its first governor. Jane was emboldened to be a more public abolitionist and personally supported a school for former enslaved women by visiting regularly, teaching a class, and using her own funds to keep it open. Though criticized by pro-slavery members of the administration, she remained true to her beliefs.

When Topeka, Kansas's founders laid out north-south streets named after presidents, they excluded Franklin Pierce, opting to place Clay Street between Fillmore and Buchanan. Henry Clay had negotiated the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had prohibited slavery in Kansas. Animosity toward Pierce was understandable: he had signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which led to the death of Clay's accommodation.

Jane Pierce was a tragic and, in many ways, flawed figure. Yet even within her grief and illness, she showed a strength of character – both in her role as first lady and in her resolve to influence her husband on matters of conscience. Perhaps Topeka's current leaders should reconsider Clay Street and rename it Jane Pierce Street instead.