

Celebrating the life of N.H.'s strange first lady

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HAMPTON — First Lady Jane Pierce might not be the town's most famous daughter, but she could be among its most misunderstood.

She was the child of an outspoken Congregationalist minister who married a Bowdoin-schooled attorney named Franklin Pierce. He would go on to become the nation's 14th president, typically known as much for his drinking and social life outside the White House as Jane Pierce was known for her odd behavior within.

Until recently, she was referred to only in passing as the reclusive, odd wife of President Pierce, but recently, historians have begun to understand some of the sources of her behavior, along with sides never before seen.

Her story begins 202 years ago, today, on the coast of the Granite State.

Jane was born Jane Means Appleton in Hampton on March 12, 1806 — one of three daughters and three sons born to the Rev. Jesse Appleton and his wife, Elizabeth Means.

She was born into the family, described as Congregationalists, in the old, Calvinistic tradition of Protestantism, to which many historians point as the source of her somewhat reticent world view.

"She was driven by that religion to see the world as a place where people were punished for their sins," said Peter A. Wallner, author of several books on Franklin Pierce and president of the New Hampshire Historical Society. "She was a very well-educated woman, and appears to be widely read and was better educated than most women of the time. She's quite unique for her time."

Her family was also exceptionally wealthy, affording her the in-home education customary for women of her socio-economic station, but unheard of for the majority of the populace — male or female.



**Jane Pierce was the wife of Franklin Pierce, our 14th president.
(Courtesy image/National First Ladies Museum)**

A slender, soft-spoken brunette, she was a demure wife and ardent Christian; historians say she shunned public social life and was prone to bouts of depression.

Accused of trying to contact her deceased children with mediums, many historians — both then and now — paint her as the "black cloud in the White House ... capable of sucking the life out of any situation," according to Wallner.

"People tend to have divergent views about her," Wallner said Tuesday. "She's certainly a controversial first lady."

Both Wallner and historian Carl Anthony, consulting historian at the National First Ladies Library, say documents uncovered in recent years cast her story in a much different light.

Rather than a woman who moped about all day, she is now seen as someone who pursued activities quietly.

Although she suffered from bouts of depression, historians recently uncovered letters that show she often shopped in Baltimore while her husband was in office. After Franklin's presidency, the two traveled extensively in Europe, where letters indicate she hiked mountains, embarked on outdoor adventures and joined in social events of the time.

"She went horseback riding, she was hiking mountains during a visit to Europe, so she was trying to be active," Anthony said Tuesday. "I think we, as historians, have attributed her mental health, more than we've been looking at her physical health, as being a defining part of her personality."

Contrary to the picture painted by other historians, this Jane Pierce is a woman at least attempting to overcome a truly tragic life.

The Pierces lost all three of their sons before adulthood. Franklin Pierce Jr., born Feb. 2, 1836, died at 3 days old, while Frank Robert Pierce, born Aug. 27, 1839, died at 4 years old. Most tragically, the Pierce's third son, Benjamin Pierce, died in a Jan. 6, 1853, train wreck near Andover, Mass.

He was 12 years old, dying in an train wreck as he and his parents traveled to Washington, D.C., for his father's inauguration. Neither Franklin nor Jane was injured.

Still, after mourning for one year, she returned to her husband's side at social functions where a first lady was required.

But she never overcame her sincere dislike of politics, which had persisted since before Franklin's term in the Oval Office.

She is famous for fainting upon learning of his nomination, but Wallner says there is

more to the story than the face value knowledge.

"She had no idea (Franklin) Pierce and his cronies were working frantically behind the scenes to win him this nomination," Wallner said. "He had taken her to Boston, because, of course, he knew of this presidential attempt, so on the way down they took a drive through the famous Auburn Cemetery west of Boston."

The move was in part to get away from anyone telling Jane that Franklin was up for the nomination as much as it was to enjoy what was — even then — a well-known cemetery and tranquil setting.

"Of course, they had gone to a cemetery, which is so stereotypically Jane, but as they headed back to Boston, a rider came flying up to the carriage with a message that he had been nominated to the office of president," Wallner said. "She fainted ... quintessential of Jane Pierce."