

# Chapter 1

## *All Eyes Upon Her*

On the evening of March 4, 1857, the invited guests, politicians, and Washington elite were gathered under the great tent, erected at Judiciary Square for the Inaugural Ball. The weather was perfect, and there was a large military presence to welcome the newly sworn-in chief executive. The crowd was milling about and alternating between dancing and enjoying the fine cuisine, which included 3,000 quarts of champagne, 400 gallons of oysters, 500 quarts of chicken salad, 500 quarts of jelly, 60 saddles of mutton, 16 sides of beef, 75 hams, and 125 beef tongues. It was all topped off with 1,200 quarts of ice cream. Three thousand dollars was spent on the wine alone.<sup>1</sup>

A few of the Washington society matrons, surprised at the extravagances, whispered behind their imported fans, but some of their peers informed them that fine dining and exquisite entertaining were to be expected from the new administration. The women were all too happy to see Jane Appleton Pierce return to New Hampshire as she had become known as the "Shadow in the White House." They were recalling how poor Mrs. Pierce had watched in horror as her son Benjamin was crushed in a train accident just weeks before her husband's inauguration. He was the last of her three children, and she blamed her husband's political ambitions for the deaths of all of them. Mrs. Pierce spent her four years in her rooms praying for her husband's soul, while he drank away his sorrows, much to the consternation of the *beau monde*, who were clamoring for any

kind of White House entertaining. But that was not to be, for there were no receptions, luncheons or afternoon teas. These refined women were more than eager to dust off their seldom worn evening attire and fine bone corsets to return to a busy Washington social season.

At approximately 11:00 pm, the forty-piece orchestra playing under the swaying chandeliers struck up "Hail to the Chief." America's Bachelor President, James Buchanan, the fifteenth individual to hold the highest office in the land, made his entrance, escorted by a commission headed by Senator Albert J. Brown of Mississippi and Assistant Secretary of State John Appleton. He wore a Lancaster suit of black satin lined with the coat of arms of the then 31 states. While most eyes were on the tall, heavy-set, white-haired, 65-year-old President, they were quickly averted as they noticed the strikingly beautiful figure behind him. Robert, the chief usher, announced her name, and the guests parted like the Red Sea as the President's unmarried, 26-year-old niece made her Washington society debut.

Wearing a dress of white satin and lavender tulle that rivaled the latest fashions from Paris, with her hair adorned with lavender silk flowers that cascaded to the bodice of her gown, she was truly a sight to behold. She floated into the room and commanded the attention of the gentlemen and even the ladies. Exuding the style, flare and grace of a woman twice her years, she instantly established herself as their "Democratic Queen." The royalty that the founding fathers had so adamantly rejected had finally conquered the capital. All eyes were upon her beautiful, smiling face and exquisite gown, but they were soon averted by something even more breathtaking. A few jaws dropped as the guests soon found themselves staring at her décolletage, for the young hostess instructed her seamstress to lower the neckline on her inaugural gown an unheard of two and half inches. Her voluptuous endowment was presented for the world to admire. The men stood taller, and all the women, with the exception of the hostess herself, blushed with embarrassment for Washington society's newest arrival. How scandalous!

Fans were raised as the women covered their busy mouths, whispering and pointing. But when the earth refused to open up and swallow the offending bosom, the women realized they

were witnessing something even more astonishing. For the first time in their young country's history, the White House had a hostess who was a fashion leader, establishing a style all her own.

The next day and over the course of the next few weeks, as stories and pictures of the Inaugural Ball appeared on the front pages of every major newspaper, there was not an idle dressmaker in Washington, or the rest of the country. Women from Maine to Florida, Pennsylvania to the Oregon Territory, instructed that the necklines be lowered on their own dresses to imitate the style of the most admired and beloved woman in the country, America's First Lady, Harriet Lane.