

# Who's Harriet? An Oral History of the Lancaster League of Women's Voters

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## Abstract

*A key goal of the League of Women Voters since its founding in 1920 was to help voters become more informed. This history of voter education through lectures may explain the presence of the mysterious "Harriet Kenderdine" Lecture that takes place at Millersville University. Some authors have theorized that lectures were a tactic that helped the political education of the members of the League. As a result of their advocacy women became more politically active within their communities. This advocacy, it should be noted, is regardless of what political ideology that League members personally subscribed to. This research is historically important because it proposes building knowledge on the lack of academic research and historical information available on our local League of Women Voters – Lancaster County (LWVLC). It is also justifiable morally with respect to the generous lecture series contributed to our institution. Even if identifying Harriet Kenderdine is unfruitful, our research aims to develop local knowledge about the efforts of women helping other women in our community.*

## Background

The centennial anniversary of the 19th Amendment and the foundation of the League are to be celebrated in 2020. Back in 1920, the League of Women Voters was founded as a civic organization designed to help women become more informed voters following the suffrage movement.

Recently, the League has struggled with dwindling national membership and a tarnished reputation of historical segregation in southern chapters. As more and more of the league dies out, younger members are not joining the cause. This is due to what Black (1983) claims is the biggest threat to the league, "not adapting to stay relevant to their

younger audience." The Harriet Kenderdine Lecture Series at Millersville is held annually and typically focuses on public affairs, policy, government, or politics. This generous lecture is wonderful, but who was Harriet Kenderdine?

## Literature Review

After reviewing the literature on the League of Women Voters, we compiled an annotated bibliography then located three themes inductively from our summaries. Of those themes the most common was the make-up of membership, local histories, and criticisms of the League. These perspectives

helped in our understanding of the impact of the league nationally.

It's important to note that although the "Leagues" were part of a national chapter, they often worked regionally with the help of volunteers. The local Leagues were the true activists of many civic causes, particularly women's voter registration and education.

### **Method**

For our primary research method, we plan to use oral history interviews to reach out to current and former members of the Lancaster branch of the League. Recognizing that a lifecycle limits any conclusions we can draw on the past, we looked at current or past members only up to available living memory. For our secondary method, we will use archival research to help inform us of any pre-living-memory insights, that may not be otherwise available. Using a predetermined set of questions, we encouraged living members to share their experiences and give context surrounding the impact of the organization on their personal life, the local community and the identity of Harriet Kenderdine.

### **Findings**

Harriet Webb Kenderdine was born on December 15, 1899, in Holtwood, PA. She attended Vassar College, University of Minnesota and later the University of California at Berkeley. During her eight years with the LWVLC Kenderdine was Chair of the Committee on International Relations, Chair of the Campaign for a new Pennsylvania Constitution and chapter President from 1954-1958. Afterword, Kenderdine was State Board Director from 1958-1962 and later National Level as Vice

President of the United States Board of Directors from 1962 to 1965. Prior to retirement she served as Chair of the United States League of Women Voters Study on the United Nations in 1965. Upon her death in 1982, she left a bequest to the local League which now funds this annual international affairs lecture series at Millersville. At the time of this publication we were only able to answer 1 of 3 research questions. More research is needed to help understanding the effect of the LWVLC to the people of Lancaster county as well as its membership.

### **Conclusion**

To date, we have discovered the story of Harriet Kenderdine and her connection to Millersville University. In addition we have conducted two interviews with former presidents of the LWVLC, Kirsten Bookmiller and Fran Rodriguez. Both regarded their time at the League as professionally important and transformational personally. What we began to unearth through these interviews were that the Lancaster league provided a place for women to debate politics and platforms which suited our communities' specific needs. The make-up of the membership in the local league is primarily white upper-middle-class, however large steps were taken in recruiting a younger and more diverse membership.

Still, many more interviews are needed to complete this narrative. All our current archival research and interview transcripts are available at the Millersville University achieves for anyone who wishes to continue this important work.

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