



Faithfully Yours
Frank Leslie



Extra Edition

NEW YORK, JULY 8, 1881.

[Price 10 Cents]

EMPRESS OF JOURNALISM

Mrs. Frank Leslie, the glamorous, diamond-studded owner of a publishing empire, earned her reputation as the 'best newspaper man' in New York by **Nancy Rubin Stuart**

When Frank Leslie, founder of the Leslie Publishing House and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, died in January 1880, he left his wife, Miriam, with crushing debts and lawsuits. But the 44-year-old widow vowed to "take up the work and redeem his reputation." Sixteen months later, she stunned Publisher's Row in New York by winning the lawsuits, repaying the creditors and expanding circulation of the Leslie publications from 30,000 to 200,000.

Miriam had long prepared for a literary life. She was born in New Orleans, probably out of wedlock, on June 5, 1836, to Susan Danforth and the twice-divorced Charles Folline. Her scholarly father tutored her in the classics as well as in French, Spanish, Italian, German, Latin and history. He insisted she spend her days studying, and Miriam later observed, "I never had any childhood, for the word means sunshine and freedom from care. I had a starved and pinched little childhood, as far as love and merriment goes." By 1850 her parents had moved to New York City. There, just after her 14th birthday, young Miriam displayed her knowledge and linguistic skills

Miriam Leslie, who legally changed her name to that of her late husband, Frank Leslie, reversed the declining fortunes of the Leslie Publishing firm with her innovative coverage of the assassination attempt on President James Garfield in July 1881 (above).

and "dipped into ink" with an uncredited "memoir" extolling the heroism of the exiled Venezuelan patriot General José Antonio Páez in the *New York Herald*. It marked the beginning of Miriam's lifelong interest in journalism.

As a teenager Miriam blossomed into a beauty, with blue-gray eyes, a mane of strawberry-blonde hair, a Roman nose and an hourglass figure. At 17 a dalliance with David Charles Peacock, a 27-year-old jewelry clerk who lent her diamonds from the store, caused a stir when Miriam's mother accused him of "carnal connection" with her daughter and insisted he marry her or face criminal charges. He agreed, but two years later the marriage was annulled. It was an early lesson for Miriam about young love and unrealistic expectations. She opined years later that "we have thrown a great deal of romantic drapery and pretty sentiment" around the natural impulse men and women have toward each other, "have buried it in thickets of roses and lilies...have called upon the stars to witness its loftiness and the moon to admire its purity" till it becomes "some sort of impossible creation quite unfit for this mundane sphere."

But Miriam was not one to shrink from notoriety, and her next move put her, literally, in the spotlight. In 1856-57 she toured East Coast playhouses with the free-spirited actress Lola Montez, former mistress of King Ludwig of Bavaria and lover of Miriam's late half-brother Noel. Billed as "Minnie Montez," Miriam and her "sister," Lola, played to sell-out crowds. Miriam's favorite role was that of a rich, beautiful widow who drove men wild. It was one she would emulate in real life. During her brief stage career, Miriam charmed a married senator from



E.G. Squier (left) had a varied career as a teacher, civil engineer, poet, social reformer and newspaper editor before he married Miriam Folline Peacock in 1857. He called their divorce proceedings "rotten from the core" and was devastated by Miriam's marriage to Frank Leslie (right).

Tennessee who bought her a house in New York. Another beau was Ephraim George Squier, an archaeologist specializing in Central America who was smitten with the young actress. Fifteen years Miriam's senior, the handsome, bearded Squier had impressive credentials: chargé d'affaires to Central America, negotiator of a treaty between England and Honduras, recipi-

'That is one of the few drawbacks to being a woman: you are to be conjugated and conjugal-ated in the passive and not in the active voice'

—Mrs. Frank Leslie

ent of an honorary degree from Princeton and founder of the Honduras Inter-oceanic Railway.

On October 22, 1857, Miriam wed Squier in Providence, R.I., a location chosen, according to Miriam's biographer Madeline Stern, "to avoid any unpleasant talk or trouble which



might be brought up in New York." The newlyweds returned to the city and their respective writing projects. Squier expanded his *Notes on Central America* into a second edition while Miriam translated Alexandre Dumas' French play *The Demi-Monde* into English. A satire on déclassé women whose "pasts invite closer inspection than they will bear," it seemed an oblique reference to her own life.

Squier became a partner in the Spanish-American Printing Company, which churned out a twice-weekly Spanish-language newspaper, *Noticioso de Nueva York*, timed to the departure of steamers bound for the Antilles. Miriam immediately pitched in with her literary and translating skills, and the paper elicited the *Herald's* praise for its "sharp look-out for the news and a keen attention to business." The couple soon became friends with Frank Leslie, the publisher of popular periodicals that boasted a circulation of 200,000. After a visit to Leslie's yacht in the summer of 1859, the publishing magnate invited the archaeologist to contribute articles on

South America to his flagship publication, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. The Squiers returned the favor, offering Leslie—a married father of three sons who was separated from his wife, Sarah Ann—a vacant room in the East 10th Street house where the couple and Miriam's mother then resided.

FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED

NEWSPAPER

No. 879—Vol. XI

NEW YORK, MARCH 23, 1861.

[Price 6 Cents.]



Mrs. M. B. D. ... Mrs. W. H. ... Mrs. J. ... Mrs. P. ... Mrs. S. ... Mrs. T. ... Mrs. U.



Mrs. V. ... Mrs. W. ... Mrs. X. ... Mrs. Y. ... Mrs. Z. ... Mrs. A. ... Mrs. B.

ILLUSTRATED BALL AT WASHINGTON, MARCH 6, 1861.—MRS. M. B. D. ... MRS. W. H. ... MRS. J. ... MRS. P. ... MRS. S. ... MRS. T. ... MRS. U.

Miriam Squier (bottom row, third from left) at Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural ball in 1861. The *New York Times* reported that the "toilettes of ladies are noticeable," with thousands of dollars' worth of laces and jewels.

assassinations. A front-page story on Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural ball in the March 23, 1861, edition included an image of Miriam exquisitely gowned and ablaze in diamonds and opals. "This lady's personal attractions, youth and graceful manner, made her the acknowledged belle of the ball, while her sprightly and intellectual conversation, and her knowledge of various languages, placed all who came within her sphere perfectly at their ease," gushed Leslie. Another sign of Leslie's admiration was his appointment of E.G. Squier as editor of the *Illustrated News*.

The Civil War was a boon to illustrated papers like *Leslie's*, which competed head to head with *Harper's Weekly* to cover the latest from the battlefields. But the publisher did not abandon his other interests. In late 1862 Leslie named Miriam editor of *Frank Leslie's Lady's Magazine*. To woo female readers, she declared 1863 "the year of fashion" with articles on what was in and what was out. She also added advertisements from dress and bonnet makers. Before long the *Lady's Magazine* was turning an annual profit of \$39,000. For all of Leslie's technical ingenuity, Miriam quickly proved the better marketer, and she turned her next assignment, editor of the new magazine *Chimney Corner*, into another moneymaker that grossed

Born in Ipswich, England, under the name Henry Carter, Leslie had studied engraving as a youth, and he would revolutionize the newspaper industry. Pictures were the main attraction in *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, but with photography still in its infancy, printers depended upon woodcuts of images that were inked and printed on paper. The complexity of the process made timely illustrations of the news rare. Leslie ingeniously shortened the process by dividing an artist's original drawing into sections; engravers simultaneously carved their respective sections into wooden blocks. Once completed, the blocks were screwed together to create a woodcut for the huge double-page pictures that appeared in the next morning's edition.

A champion of the common man, Leslie exposed corruption, railed at the shenanigans of Tammany Hall and ran sensational stories of murders, executions, prize fights, wars and

\$72,000 a year. But beneath her winsome appearance and mellow Southern voice was a hard-driving manager who worked her artists and reporters relentlessly, an editor reputed to be filled with "hell and hot water."

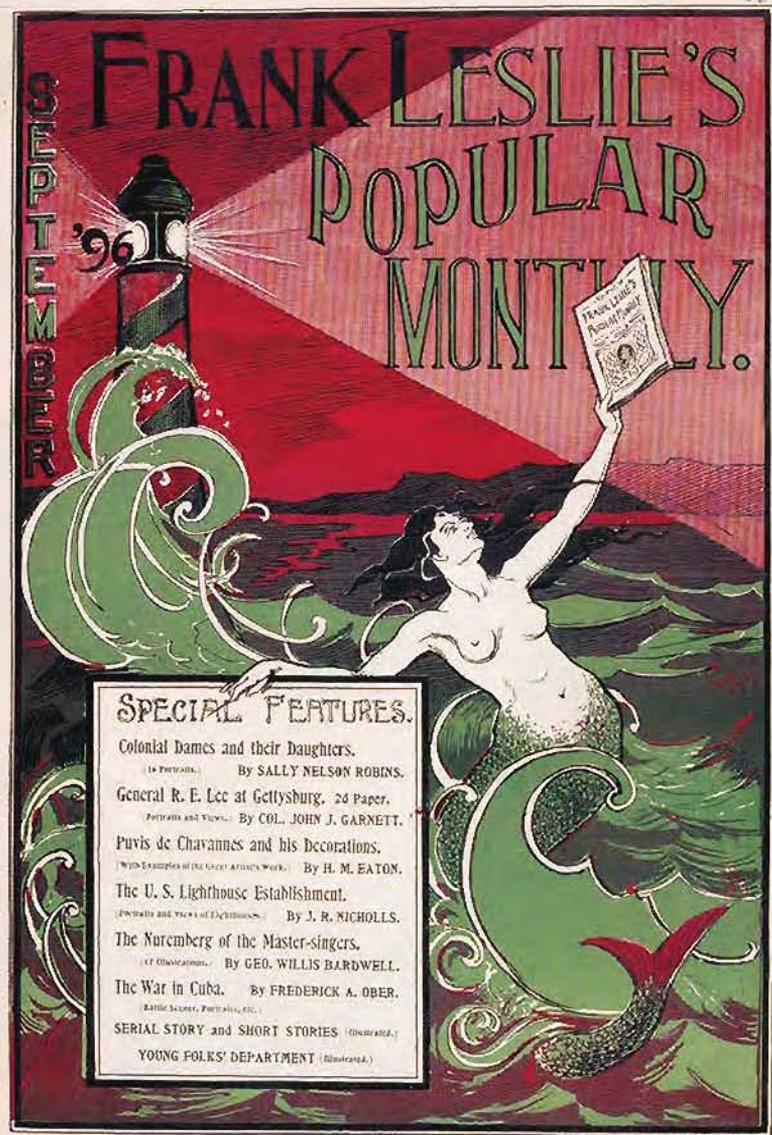
In 1867 the 47-year-old Leslie hatched a plan that suggested his admiration for 32-year-old Miriam transcended her editorial talents. Leslie invited the Squiers to join him on a trip to Europe, knowing that Squier owed £350 to a Liverpool creditor. During a stopover in Queensboro, Ireland, Leslie secretly sent a dispatch alerting the creditor that Squier would soon be disembarking in Liverpool. When he left the ship there, Squier was immediately arrested as an "absconding debtor" and imprisoned in Lancaster Castle. Leslie and Miriam went on to London, where the wealthy publisher inexplicably claimed he had to borrow bail money from his sister, Mrs. Mary Ann Jubber. According to Jubber, Leslie was "living with Mrs. Squier

as his wife." Two weeks later, however, Leslie and Miriam coolly returned to Liverpool and bailed Squier out, after which the threesome traveled to Europe with Mrs. Jubber.

When they returned to New York, the three continued as though nothing had happened, working long hours at the publishing house and attending galas, banquets and balls. On March 4, 1871, however, Miriam appeared in the Court of Common Pleas of New York to sign an affidavit in *Frank Leslie v. Sarah Ann Leslie* refuting accusations that she had committed adultery with the publisher. Leslie's estranged wife testified that "Frank Leslie has since January 1, 1867, committed adultery with and had carnal connection with and carnal knowledge of one Miriam Florence Squier." Miriam's husband retorted the charge was "malicious...designed to disturb my domestic peace and break up the close, friendly and business relation existing between myself and Mr. Frank Leslie." Miriam was less circumspect, penning a provocative essay for the April 15 edition of Leslie's *Once a Week: The Young Lady's Own Journal* titled "Is Marriage a Lottery?" (later reprinted as "Is Marriage a Failure?"): "It is an old, old saying that marriage is a lottery...for neither man nor woman can possibly know what card he or she has drawn from the pack, shuffled, cut, shuffled again by a mocking and inscrutable fate."

While Leslie's divorce suit played out over the next 10 months, Squier grew so disturbed over the accusations of his wife's adultery that he threatened violence. Miriam filed for divorce and, on May 31, 1873, won her case at a special session of the Superior Court of the City of New York. Despite their denials of a romantic relationship, Leslie and Miriam wed a year later, on July 13, 1874, at St. Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue. In August, a New York City court deemed Squier "a lunatic incapable of the government of himself." In an odd coincidence, Miriam's first husband, David Charles Peacock, had also been confined to an asylum. Before long reporters began linking Miriam's past to Squier's descent into madness.

Miriam's third marriage was said to be her "one happy matrimonial experience." Leslie showered her with gifts: a baronial country house in Saratoga, dresses by the famed designer Charles Frederick Worth, an account at Tiffany's, a box at the opera and lavish entertainments. Despite the gossip surrounding her, Miriam was accepted as one of New York's most "fashionable ladies." She dedicated herself



Miriam Leslie merged the *Lady's Magazine* (opposite) into the *Popular Monthly* (above) in 1882 and cultivated a readership of both women and men. The revamped *Monthly* still carried stories aimed at a female audience but also included current world affairs, domestic politics and even a regular literary department called "Men, Women and Books."

to the inner workings of the Leslie Publishing House, serving as literary critic and translator for its dozen periodicals as well as editor in chief of *Frank Leslie's Lady's Journal*, the former *Once a Week*. No longer writing just about fashion, Miriam explored the idea that women were the secret architects of many historical events. She asserted in "Woman's Mission" that when Columbus set out for the New World, "it was the white hand of a woman that fitted him for his...voyage."

Determined to collect fresh material for the *Illustrated Newspaper*, the Leslies boarded a well-appointed Pullman car for a two-month railroad tour of the West, from Chicago to California. As usual, Miriam took copious notes. Appalled by the depravity she observed in Virginia City, Nev., with its

saloons, opium dens and prostitutes, Miriam called it a "God-forsaken town where an innocent evening walk required a police escort," a comment included in her subsequent travel book, *California: A Trip From Gotham to the Golden Gate*.

Rollin M. Daggett, the incensed editor of Virginia City's *Territorial Enterprise*, vowed revenge. A July 14, 1878, front-page headline blared OUR FEMALE SLANDERER. MRS. FRANK LESLIE'S BOOK SCANDALIZING THE FAMILIES OF VIRGINIA CITY—THE HISTORY OF THE AUTHORESS—A LIFE DRAMA OF CRIME AND LICENTIOUSNESS—STARTLING DEVELOPMENTS. A 24-page pamphlet, *Territorial Enterprise Extra, Containing a Full Account of Frank Leslie and Wife*, also appeared, exposing details of the couple's \$15,000 trip west and their unconventional personal lives. An incensed Leslie bought up all copies of the *Extra* he could find. He also hired a detective to uncover the source of the information. It is not known if Leslie ever received positive proof, but some of the details were so intimate and malicious he concluded that Squier was responsible.

Meanwhile, the Leslies faced more pressing problems than bad publicity. With \$355,555 in debt, the publishing house had gone into receivership in September 1877. Newspaper circulation fell during the nationwide financial crisis of the 1870s, yet the company was on the hook for a payroll of more than 300 employees and \$70,000 for a new printer, to say nothing of the Leslies' lavish lifestyle. There was also ongoing litigation with Leslie's sons, Frank Leslie II and Alfred A. Leslie, over use of the family name for the sons' rival publications. By 1879 the Leslies' financial affairs were slowly improving, and Frank was about to win his lawsuit against his sons. But the publisher had developed a cancerous growth in his throat. On December 27, he bequeathed to his "dearly beloved wife" his property, trademark and interest in his publications. On January 10, 1880, the legendary publisher died.

Miriam showed her mettle. Once ensconced in Manhattan's most luxurious homes and hotels, the beleaguered widow now rented an attic room lacking wallpaper and a fireplace and containing a hard bed and a window so high she had to stand on a chair to see the sky. Dressed in widow's weeds, she defended ownership of the Leslie trademark and won a lawsuit from Frank's sons contesting the will. She was living the mantra she would later write about: "Do something! Spend yourself and get something for it! Make your mark and achieve success, or if need be, die in the attempt!"

Still, she remained deeply in debt. "Oh, if only I could find a woman with 50,000 to lend!" Miriam (who quietly approved of the rising movement for women's rights) lamented to her creditors. Mrs. Eliza Jane Smith was such a woman, a wealthy Brooklyn widow who admired Miriam's tenacity in court. Smith presented the editor with a \$50,000 check and took her diamonds as collateral. Miriam agreed to repay the loan in sums of \$5,000 starting in November 1881. She paid all her creditors, and during a special session of the Court of Common Pleas, she legally changed her name to "Frank Leslie" to secure her rights to all Leslie holdings.

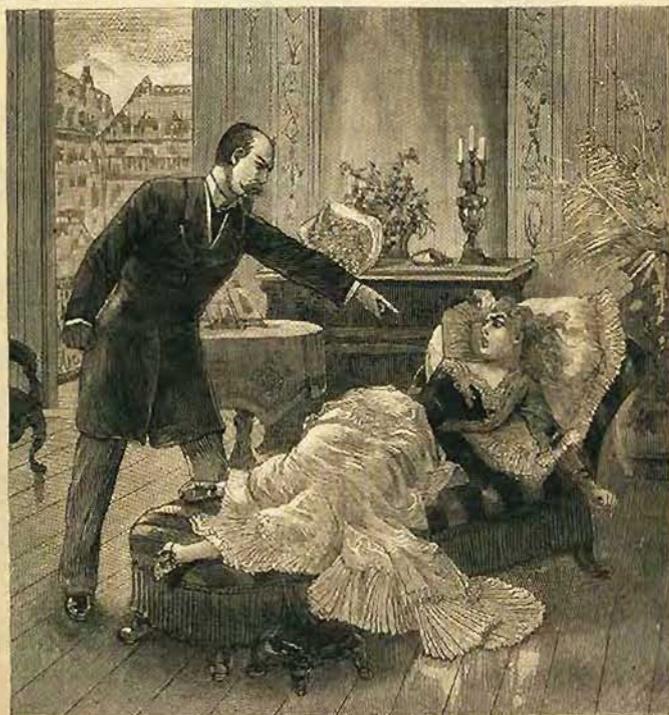
The attempted assassination of President James A. Garfield on July 2, 1881, precipitated a turnaround for the Leslie Publishing House. As soon as Miriam heard about the shooting, she dispatched two artists to Washington, D.C. One of them returned on the midnight train with sketches of the event, enabling the *Illustrated Newspaper* to include pictures in the next morning's edition. Subsequent editions contained still more details and images, and circulation skyrocketed from 30,000 to 200,000. For the next two months, as Garfield lingered between life and death, Miriam oversaw a host of new stories. When

FRANK LESLIE'S Lady's Magazine

Vol. L.

FEBRUARY, 1882.

No. 2.



WITHOUT MERCY.—PAUL DE MENDAC LOST ALL SELF-COMMAND. "WOMAN," HE CRIED, "I AM DEAD I PUT AN END TO YOUR WHETTERED ALEN BEFORE YOU DRAGGED MY NAME INTO INFAMY."—SEE NEXT PAGE.

Vol. L.—No. 2.—

the president died on September 19, she sent 30,000 copies of the paper to Garfield's hometown of Cleveland. They immediately sold out. With one stroke, Miriam's debts to Mrs. Smith were erased. Several days before her first payment was due, Miriam flabbergasted New York by repaying the full \$50,000.

Publisher's Row was stunned by the widow's brilliance. Hailed as a "commercial Joan of Arc" and the "Empress of Journalism," Miriam soared to national and international acclaim with glamorous public appearances. Each morning between 9 and 9:30 Miriam arrived at the Leslie Publishing House fashionably dressed in black silks or cashmere, her hair artfully styled, her feet nestled in Spanish slippers, looking much

'Indulge...my friend, if your conscience, your doctor and your purse do not forbid, but don't bore us with your successes and don't scandalize us with your failures'

—Mrs. Frank Leslie

younger than her 45 years. She vigorously applied herself to restoring the publishing house to its former glory. Determined that "the public shall have the latest news," Miriam shrewdly condensed the dozen Leslie publications with low circulation into two weeklies and four monthlies. Among them was *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, which she promoted as "the cheapest and best magazine in the World." Before long, New York's "best newspaper man" was turning an annual profit of \$100,000.

Having regained her wealth and status, Miriam resumed her former lifestyle. At 4 each afternoon, she left her Park Place office to attend social events. An engaging and entertaining conversationalist, Miriam hobnobbed with members of New York society at the Knickerbocker Club. She commanded "universal attention" at the Old Guard Ball in her Worth gown and the "jewels of an empress," noted biographer Stern. Miriam also opened her stylish room at the Gerlach Hotel on Thursday nights for her salons. Even New York's haughty social scandal sheet, *Town Topics*, conceded that Miriam was a respected figure, despite a story, "From Puddle to Palace" of March 27, 1886, that alluded to a shady past. She romanced European aristocrats, including the so-called Marquis de Leville and the authentic Russian prince George Eristoff de Gourie.

Miriam was becoming a grande dame—an attractive and sophisticated older woman of wealth and influence who knew the ways of the world. She supported the early work of the suffrage movement, writing on October 9, 1888, to Susan B. Anthony, "I enclose a little contribution." She continued to reflect on the changes and opportunities opening up for women. "The future of women seems to me to largely embrace the future of the world and of mankind," she wrote in an essay about

"woman's new position in the world." And she kept her shrewd business sense. The rise of daily newspapers and other changes in the industry led Miriam to sell her weekly magazines to the publisher of the satirical *Judge* for more than \$300,000. Retaining only her *Popular Monthly*, Miriam used the rest of her time for other literary endeavors, including the illustrated volume *Beautiful Women of Twelve Epochs*. In early autumn 1890, Miriam staged a Midwest lecture tour, whose managers, she said, "trained me with as much care as is bestowed on a race horse." Dazzled by her jewels and elegant gowns, rapt audiences listened to her introduction, "I am Frank Leslie," which she followed with amusing anecdotes about her life.

A fourth marriage, to 39-year-old William Charles Kingsbury Wilde, Oscar Wilde's older brother, was short-lived. Tall, blue-eyed and handsome, Wilde spouted poetry and espoused literary ambitions, but he rarely put pen to paper. Moreover, he was abusive and an alcoholic. Miriam divorced him within two years and subsequently published a book, *Are Men Gay Deceivers?*, in which she pondered the honesty of calling "an

immoral man 'a gay deceiver'...or whether one might not better say the woman deceived herself and blinded her own eyes."

Just before her 59th birthday in May 1895, Miriam leased her interest in the Leslie publications to a syndicate, then negotiated a deal to convert the publishing house into a stock company in which she held half the stock, served as company president and edited the *Popular Monthly*. Established in her new Fifth Avenue office, Miriam advertised the periodical as "one of the brightest and best illustrated 10 cent magazines in the world." William Dean Howells and Bret Harte were among the contributors, but circulation faltered and ultimately Miriam was ousted as president. By 1905 the Leslie publications were defunct, but Miriam carried on. Although she suffered a stroke in 1902, she recovered sufficiently to make several trips to Europe, returning from one of them listed on the ship's manifest as "Baroness of Bazus," a title she claimed from her French Huguenot ancestors.

The challenges facing women continued to intrigue her. A decade earlier she had donated \$100 to the general fund of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. On November 22, 1910 (or 1911—the date is unclear), she wrote to association president Carrie Chapman Catt, "When I come to die you will find that, like yourself, I am interested in woman's advancement." And when Miriam Folline Peacock Squier Leslie Wilde passed away on September 18, 1914, she proved that statement true, leaving her entire estate, worth \$2 million, to the suffrage association.

Leslie's grandsons contested the will, provoking a lawsuit that dragged on seven years. Other relatives and even Miriam's executor, Louis H. Cramer, filed claims of their own. Nevertheless on February 1, 1917, the Surrogate's Court of New York County awarded Catt and the suffrage association an



New York women—and a few little girls—parade for suffrage in 1906 (above). Carrie Chapman Catt (left) began working with the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1890 and actively supported equal suffrage worldwide until her death in 1947 at the age of 88.



installment of \$500,000 as well as Miriam's jewels, appraised at \$34,785. Legal fees and other expenses for settling the estate were steep. The association would eventually receive less than half the amount Miriam had bequeathed—\$977,875.02.

Catt used the gift to create the Leslie Woman Suffrage Commission and the Leslie Bureau of Suffrage Education. The bureau served as publicity agent for the association, producing 250,000 words a year in news and feature articles circulated through syndicated newspapers that reached an estimated 10 to 20 million readers. A magazine, *The Woman Citizen*, was "published weekly by the Leslie Woman Suffrage Commission in the hopes that it may prove a self-perpetuating memorial to Mrs. Frank Leslie's generosity toward the cause of woman suffrage and her faith in woman's progress." That faith was rewarded in 1920 with the ratification of the 19th Amendment.

Once one of the most famous women in America, Miriam Leslie is nearly forgotten today, despite her professional brilliance and invaluable contribution to woman suffrage. But modern women would do well to rediscover her—and learn from her exemplary courage, intelligence and resourcefulness. ■

Nancy Rubin Stuart wrote about Peggy Shippen in the February 2014 issue of American History. Her most recent book is Defiant Brides: The Untold Story of Two Revolutionary-Era Women and the Radical Men They Married (Beacon).