

Ryan family legacy

Katharine Ryan Gibbs: Daughter of Galena who rose to the world stage



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author

“Stand Above the Crowd” and “Excellence in All You Do” were slogans for Katharine Gibbs School/ Gibbs College. Gibbs, world-renowned in career education for 100 years, was founded by Galena native Katharine Ryan Gibbs. She began life on Franklin Street in Galena on Jan. 10, 1863. Born to James M Ryan, Jr., and Catherine McNulty Ryan, she was baptized at St. Michael’s Catholic Church and enjoyed a childhood as the daughter of a leading Galenian.

Her Irish-born grandparents had arrived in Galena in 1846. The Ryans were part of Galena’s growth and prospered in their wholesale grocery business on the north side of Main Street.

William and James, the Ryan sons, married wealthy and socially prominent Irish Catholic women and began their families in Galena.

During the Civil War the Ryan brothers outfitted Ryans Guards and subscribed \$100 to the bounty for those young enough to join the fighting. James M. Ryan, Jr., Katharine’s father, made Galena a better place.

He was a director of Merchants National Bank, director and vice president of the Galena and Southern Wisconsin Railway, and a director of the Galena Turnpike Company.

In 1876, James Ryan built his 24-room mansion on the newly paved turnpike and moved in with his wife and eight surviving children. Katharine Ryan was the third child and second daughter.



The class of 1882 at the Academy of the Sacred Heart, Manhattanville, N.Y. Katharine Ryan is in the middle row, seated on the right. *Contributed photo*

Her parents believed in educating their daughters as well as their sons and sent Minnie and Kate, the two elder girls, to the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Manhattanville in New York City. After completing a rigorous curriculum of literature, music, art and science, and Katharine graduated in 1882.

Two Ryan brothers went to Helena, Mont., to replicate their family’s success in supplying groceries to a growing mining community.

After high school graduation, Katharine Ryan visited her brothers and met William Gibbs, a jeweler from Medford, Mass. He was a Protestant from an

old Massachusetts family while she was the Roman Catholic granddaughter of immigrants.

Although they were from different worlds, they married in 1896 at ages 41 and 36. They moved to Providence, R.I., where their two sons were born.

She raised her children, cared for her mother-in-law until she died and never expected to work. However, William died in 1909 when he fell off the mast of his yawl in Narragansett Bay. He died intestate and left his widow with 9 and 11 year old sons, no income and only a high school education.

She opened her first secretarial school in

Providence in 1911 during a time when a Harvard Medical School professor said that higher education could cause the uterus to atrophy!

After opening the second Gibbs in Boston in 1917 and the third in New York in 1918. She was the CEO of three schools two years before women could vote.

Her school became the best place for ambitious women to learn business skills when they were not welcome in the office.

Eventually there was a Katharine Gibbs School in Chicago, schools from Boston to Washington, D.C., and even a winter campus in Bermuda before World War II.

Her legacy includes tens of thousands of graduates all over the world including a U.S. ambassador, judge, college president, business executives, public figures, and more.

Employers included people like the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Charles Lindbergh, Frank Perdue and Barbara Walters.

Katharine Ryan Gibbs told her students to follow the Gibbs family motto “Hold to Your Purpose” and to “Distinguish between those things which are best and those which are second best, and . . . choose and hold fast to the best.”

Katharine Ryan Gibbs, a daughter of Galena, played an important role in American business, education and women’s history.

Rose Doherty, the author of “Katharine Ryan Gibbs,” was a faculty member and academic dean at Katharine Gibbs School in Boston and chair of the Gibbs College, Boston board of trustees. In addition to her Gibbs teaching, Doherty has taught writing and literature at Boston College, Boston Conservatory of Music, and Framingham State University. She lives in Massachusetts.