

# Katharine Gibbs & Her School

## Beyond White Gloves



From the 1945 *Carbon*, the yearbook of the Boston Katharine Gibbs School, p. 48.

An NEHGS member asked me, “Wasn’t Katie Gibbs a finishing school?” when I was researching the history of the world’s most famous secretarial school. My experience and research taught me otherwise.

Finishing schools prepared women for a life of leisure, while Gibbs prepared graduates for lives of financial and emotional independence. My challenges were learning where Katharine Ryan Gibbs (1863–1934) fit in the history of business education, separating the myths from the truth and presenting a history of the institution’s hundred years, 1911 to 2011.



**Rose A. Doherty** is a former faculty member and academic dean of Katharine Gibbs School in Boston and former chair of the board of trustees of Gibbs College–Boston.



The Academy of the Sacred Heart, class of 1882. Katharine Ryan is in the middle row on the right. Image courtesy of the Manhattanville College Library Special Collections.

My history with Gibbs began when I was in the sixth grade. I distributed bridge cards and matchbooks at an alumnae bridge night in Providence, Rhode Island. I had never met professional women before; their elegance, poise, and confidence were amazing to me. I grew up to be a faculty member, academic dean, and later chair of the board of trustees at Gibbs in Boston. When I began teaching at Gibbs in Boston in the late 1970s, everyone still referred to Mrs. Gibbs as if she would be back in a moment, although she had died decades earlier. After realizing in this century that the story of Gibbs was being lost, I resolved to write about this remarkable woman and her institution.

My book, *Katharine Gibbs: Beyond White Gloves* (2014), shows that the institution went beyond its dress code image to prepare women and men to succeed. The taglines “Stand above the crowd” and “Excellence in *all* you do” were more than marketing slogans. Those philosophies encapsulated the high standards set by Katharine Gibbs and her institution.

The history of the Katharine Gibbs Schools falls into three eras. The founding era, which began in 1911 and saw

the organization’s early success, ended with Katharine Gibbs’s death in 1934. Subsequently, the school and the legend of Katharine Gibbs grew under the leadership of Gordon and Blanche Gibbs, her son and daughter-in-law, until the family sold the school in 1968. In the final era, the schools had several corporate owners. The single curriculum governed by the central office gave way to a new Gibbs that offered degrees, was coed, and had multiple programs, each responsive to local market demands. Each era is an important part of a story that lasted 100 years—and required my use of specific research skills.

School founder Katharine Mary (Ryan) Gibbs was the granddaughter of Irish Catholic immigrants James M. and Margaret Ryan, who settled in Galena, Illinois, with their family in 1846.<sup>1</sup> The 1847 *Galena Directory* lists James Ryan, Sr., and his unmarried sons William and James, Jr.<sup>2</sup> The latter, Katharine Gibbs’s father, married Catherine McNulta of St. Louis in October 1854.<sup>3</sup>

The couple’s second daughter, born in Galena on January 10, 1863, was baptized Catherine Mary.<sup>4</sup> In the 1870 federal census she was Catherine, and by

1880 she was Katie. On her high school records she was Kate, and her 1882 graduation picture from Academy of the Sacred Heart in New York City was marked Katharine, the name she used for the rest of her life.<sup>5</sup> After graduation Katharine Ryan visited her two brothers in Helena, Montana, and was recorded as Kittie Ryan in the Helena directory for 1889. William Gibbs, a jeweler from Medford, Massachusetts, lived in the same building as the Ryan brothers.<sup>6</sup> Katharine Ryan, a Midwestern Irish-Catholic, and William Gibbs, a New England Protestant whose American ancestry can be traced to the early eighteenth century, married in New York City in 1896, when he was 41 and

**THAT DAUGHTER OF YOURS**

Now that she is eagerly anticipating her first contact with the world via “a job,” how can you best help her?

Katharine Gibbs secretarial training is the choice of thoughtful fathers anxious to see their daughters fortunately placed in the business world. Among the secretaries-in-training now at Gibbs are girls from forty states—combining happy away-at-school experiences with thorough preparation for secretarial careers.

The Gibbs catalog may help you and your daughter to decide that she, too, ought to go to Katharine Gibbs this year! Address Dean’s Secretary.

**KATHARINE GIBBS**  
 NEW YORK, 230 Park Ave.  
 Boston, 90 Marlborough Street  
 Providence, R. I., 155 Angell Street

An ad from the May 1941 *Rotarian*, p. 62.

she was 33.<sup>7</sup> They moved to Providence, Rhode Island, where sons William Howard and James Gordon were born in 1897 and 1900.<sup>8</sup> The family later moved to Cranston, Rhode Island, and there William Gibbs fell from the mast of his yawl at the Edgewood Yacht Club and died intestate April 20, 1909.<sup>9</sup>

Katharine Gibbs was suddenly a 46-year-old widow with two sons to support, a high school education, and no income. She even had to apply to become the guardian of her sons. The first evidence of her employment is the listing for Katharine M. Gibbs in the 1911 Providence city directory as manager at a business school.<sup>10</sup> The funding for the enterprise may have come from Brown University friends or the undocumented selling of her jewelry. The Gibbs century had begun.

When Katharine Gibbs founded her school in 1911, she accepted both men and women. At that time, only men were secretaries, and most working women were domestics or factory workers. If women were hired in offices, they were called “typewriters” after the machines they used. Katharine Gibbs was an entrepreneur in an era when that term was not applied to women, and she educated women for business when they were not welcome. The times were hostile enough for women that a Harvard Medical School doctor could claim that higher education could cause the uterus to atrophy!<sup>11</sup>

Although Katharine Gibbs never took a course in marketing, a *Providence Journal* writer noted that her “sense of sell” was infallible.<sup>12</sup> Katharine first used the Gibbs name in a newspaper advertisement on September 7, 1914, and the text, for the Gibbs Private School for Secretaries, set the tone for the enterprise. Gibbs was “especially adapted to meet the needs of those to whom attendance at a large commercial school would be distasteful.”<sup>13</sup> She implied that students at the large commercial schools, her most formidable competition, might have to attend class

with people who were not well brought up, establishing the idea that her school catered to a better class of student.

In order to support her family, Katharine Gibbs needed students who could pay tuition. She advertised in publications read by the prosperous and the aspiring, such as *Dau's Blue Book* and *Harper's Bazar*.<sup>14</sup> She offered correspondence courses in Providence, which produced income but incurred no expense for class time or space. After the United States entered the First World War and men were no longer available as students, she confidently changed her focus to women. She was so successful that the public later assumed she had begun with only women's education.

Katharine Gibbs invaded Boston in 1917 and New York in 1918. She was CEO of three schools two years before women could vote. To attract paying students, she now carefully chose to advertise in the *Barnard Bulletin*, *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, *Radcliffe News*, and *The Woman's Journal*, published by the League of Women Voters. She knew that college-educated women who could not find jobs were her perfect audience. Mrs. Gibbs promoted the school by publishing names of colleges and private preparatory schools that sent young women to Gibbs. Listing the Seven Sisters (elite women's colleges with parallels to the Ivy League), the Sorbonne, Miss Porter's School, and Milton Academy added prestige.

Almost immediately, Gibbs graduates thrived. Allegra Maynard, a 1919 graduate of the Providence Gibbs School, became the second headmistress of the Madeira School in

McLean, Virginia. She was the first in her family to graduate from Gibbs but not the last—her grandniece was a Gibbs student in Piscataway, New Jersey, in the 1980s. Family connections could be found among a number of Gibbs students and alumnae. For instance, four sisters attended Gibbs in the 1920s, and in the 1980s one of them gave tuition there to her granddaughter as a college graduation present.

In the 1920s the school was incorporated, the alumnae association began, and the first alumnae magazine was published. In each issue of *The Gibbsonian*, Mrs. Gibbs wrote about her vision of the world and what her former pupils could accomplish. Graduates of the 1920s include Katharine Towle, Mary Sutton Ramsdell, and Mary Carr. Katharine Towle was the first director of women Marines. In 1930 Mary Ramsdell was one of two women appointed to the Massachusetts State Police force, making them the first state policewomen in the nation. Mary Carr was the secretary of Alfred E. Smith—the former New York governor, America's first Catholic presidential candidate, and head of the construction program for the Empire State Building, from the late 1920s until his death in 1944.

According to the 1930 federal census, Katharine Gibbs lived on Park Avenue in New York City with her sister, two sons, and three live-in servants, and enjoyed



Gibbs graduate Mary Carr taking dictation from Alfred E. Smith. Image from the author's collection.

an income of what would be over \$1.1 million today.<sup>15</sup> The school weathered a devastating loss of enrollment in the Depression and adopted a plan to make Gibbs known for its excellence. Publications in the 1930s included the codified requirements and qualifications of an executive secretary and the first Gibbs style manual. This manual was the basis of the school's famous English course, which Gordon Gibbs later called the best in the United States.

In 1934 the school survived the suicide of elder son Howard Gibbs<sup>16</sup> and the death of Mrs. Gibbs two months later.<sup>17</sup> Gordon Gibbs assumed the presidency and made two immediate changes. He married Gibbs graduate Blanche Lorraine and began a winter campus in Bermuda, decades before study abroad was part of the college experience. Gordon and Blanche Gibbs fostered the memory of Katharine Gibbs as a symbol of excellence. Publications proudly stated how many executives asked for the small number of Gibbs graduates. Businesses were willing to wait (and pay more) for their graduates because they were so good. General William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan said that the perfect wartime OSS office worker "was a cross between a Smith College graduate, a Powers model, and a Katie Gibbs secretary."<sup>18</sup>

War work demanded many hands, and great numbers of office workers were poorly trained. In 1943 Chicago businessmen asked Gibbs to open a campus in their city. Its alumnae kept meeting and supporting the school long after the Chicago branch closure in 1953. The first suburban school opened in Montclair, New Jersey, in 1952 with an amazing 140 students—the goal had been 100. The Montclair facility was followed by one in Huntington, New York, in 1972. Later campuses were at Norwalk and Farmington, Connecticut; Philadelphia, Valley Forge, and Norristown, Pennsylvania; Piscataway and Livingston, New Jersey; Vienna, Virginia; and Rockville, Maryland.

For decades Gibbs was the leading secretarial school in the world, with student residences at the Barbizon Hotel in Manhattan and in Boston's

Back Bay. Gordon Gibbs made sure that every time the school was described, the adjectives "swanky," "elegant," and "genteel" were used. National magazine stories included "How a Secretary Trains" in *Good Housekeeping* (1942), "School for Super Secretaries" in *Newsweek* (1943), and "How to Educate a Secretary" in the *Saturday Evening Post* (1949). Commentators began comparing Gibbs to the Ivy League schools, and these parallels were drawn through the 1980s. *Business Week* ran a cover story about Gibbs in 1961 to commemorate fifty years of excellence. The cover headline read, "Katharine Gibbs School goes back to the basics—typing, shorthand, spelling—to turn out that rare product: a good secretary."

Students became lawyers, CIA operatives, and university faculty. The list of alumnae includes writers, a judge, a college president, an award-winning geographer, a bank president, the first female editor of *People* magazine, a United States ambassador, an assistant secretary of agriculture, and public figures such as Meredith Vieira and actress Loretta Swit. Famous faculty included Pulitzer Prize winner Mark Van Doren and Joseph Wood Krutch. Lazlo Moholy-Nagy taught art appreciation and Olga Samaroff Stokowski music appreciation. Employers represented every area of American life, from presidents of the United States and major corporations to famous personalities such as Julia Child, Barbara Walters, Charles Lindbergh, Margaret Mead, Aristotle Onassis, and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

After being sold by the family in 1968, the good press continued. In 1982, *Cosmopolitan* announced that Katie Gibbs was "Seventy-one and Still Typing Strong." On April 16, 1986, the *New York Times* noted "Top Secretarial School, at 75, Trades White Gloves for Computer." The first non-family owner was Macmillan Publishing, which increased the number of campuses to eleven from Boston to the Washington, D.C., area. The curriculum expanded to include word processing, hotel and restaurant management, and travel and conference planning. Later programs included criminal



## How to order

*Katharine Gibbs: Beyond White Gloves* by Rose A. Doherty was published by the author in 2014. It can be purchased from Amazon.com as either a soft-cover book, 233 pp., or as a Kindle eBook.

justice, visual communications, fashion merchandising, and computer networking operations. A hostile takeover of Macmillan in 1988 resulted in the sale of Gibbs to Phillips Colleges, then the largest profit-making school owner. When scandal forced Phillips to sell, former Macmillan executives bought Gibbs. The fourth and final owner was Career Education Corporation. In the end all the Gibbs schools were degree-granting and coed, with multiple curricula responsive to each local economy. Unfortunately, the public image of Gibbs remained fixed as the white-glove secretarial school, and in a much-changed marketplace Gibbs was simply no longer profitable. Career Education announced its intention to sell the schools in 2008, but no buyer could be found. The last campus, Gibbs College in Boston, closed in 2011.

Because *Katharine Gibbs: Beyond White Gloves* was the first book about the institution and its founder, I had to start from the beginning and find biographical information about the Ryan and Gibbs families and put Katharine Gibbs's achievements in the context of women's history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. NEHGS's resources were my first very fruitful stop. Internet research made the work in archives, probate offices, historical societies, and libraries in Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, New York, Massachusetts, and



From the 1945 *Carbon*, the yearbook of the Boston Katharine Gibbs School, p. 16.

## The Katharine Gibbs School Records

The Gibbs archive is housed at the John Hay Library at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. The first Gibbs School was in Providence and, from 1922 to 1962, Gibbs was in Churchill House on the Brown campus, now the home of Brown's Africana Studies department. Mrs. Gibbs employed faculty from Brown and used her school's proximity to Brown as a selling point.

Gibbs closed in 2011, but, fortunately, Career Education Corporation, the last parent company of Gibbs, had gathered extant archival material from all of the campuses at its headquarters in Illinois. The collection was transferred to Brown in 2011. The archive includes historical materials dating from 1900 through 2008, such as yearbooks, the alumnae magazine, marketing materials, curricula, silver typing trophies, and the Wilbur Fiske Noyes portraits of Katharine M. Gibbs, but does not contain any student records. The collection is available for research, and those wishing to access the archive should first consult the online finding aid: <http://riamco.org/render.php?eadid=US-RPB-ms2011.019&view=title>. The John Hay Library website is [library.brown.edu/hay/index.php](http://library.brown.edu/hay/index.php).

Rhode Island more productive. Copies of the *Gibbsonian* and on-line newspaper databases helped me find articles about Gibbs and information about the tens of thousands of graduates. I used social media to ask graduates to complete a questionnaire. More than 275 graduates from 1939 to 2011 responded with an-

swers, phone calls, and warm, well-written essays about their Gibbs experience. Research of the Gibbs era after the founder's death was made easier because of the school's public presence in American business and society. The leads generated by the many magazine and newspaper articles about Gibbs were easy to follow.

Jill Lepore writes in *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin* (2013)

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *The History of Jo Daviess County, Illinois* (Chicago: H. H. F. Kett & Co., 1878), 649.
- <sup>2</sup> *The Galena Directory and Miner's Annual Register, for 1847-8* (Galena, Illinois: E. S. Seymour, 1847), 27.
- <sup>3</sup> *The History of Jo Daviess County* [note 1], 649.
- <sup>4</sup> St. Michael's [Catholic] Church, Records of Baptisms, 1848–1889, Reel #1, Alfred Mueller Historical Collection Room, Galena Public Library, Galena, Ill.
- <sup>5</sup> Class of 1882 photograph, Academy of the Sacred Heart, image courtesy of the Manhattanville College Library Special Collections, Purchase, N.Y.
- <sup>6</sup> Helena, Montana, Directories, 1889-91. Viewed at Ancestry.com May 29, 2010.
- <sup>7</sup> No record has been found for this marriage. In 1896, the *Galena Gazette* reported that the "marriage of Miss Catherine Ryan, second oldest daughter of Mr. James Ryan, deceased, took place in New York Saturday." Barbara Jean Tousey, comp., *Index of Marriages & Deaths, 7 Volumes of Newspaper Clippings [from the Galena Gazette]*, vol. 6. (n.p.: n.d.), 69. "In Appreciation of Mrs. Katharine M. Gibbs," *The Gibbsonian*. 5.3 (1934) 3 confirmed the 1896 marriage date.
- <sup>8</sup> William was born October 8, 1897 and James was born January 17, 1900. Providence, RI: Alphabetical Index of Births, Marriages and Deaths, 1636-1930. (Online database. AmericanAncestors.org, NEHGS, 2003. Originally published as: *Alphabetical Index of the Births, Marriages and Deaths Recorded* in Providence, Rhode Island, 25 vols. City of Providence, 1879–1945.)
- <sup>9</sup> A death certificate for William Gibbs is in his probate file in the Cranston Town Clerk's office.
- <sup>10</sup> *Providence City Directory and Rhode Island Business Directory for the Year commencing May 1, 1911* (Providence: Sampson and Murdock Company, 1911), 742.
- <sup>11</sup> Edward H. Clarke, M.D., *Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for the Girls* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1873), 84.
- <sup>12</sup> Phyllis Meras, "45,000 Girls Are Glad Katie Sold Her Jewels," *Providence Sunday Journal*, March 23, 1969.
- <sup>13</sup> Classified Advertisement, *Providence Journal*, September 7, 1914, 5.
- <sup>14</sup> The magazine was known as *Harper's Bazar* from its founding in 1867; the spelling was changed to *Harper's Bazaar* in 1929.
- <sup>15</sup> Katharine M. Gibbs household; 1930 U.S. Census; Manhattan, New York, N.Y.; roll 1559; p. 15B; viewed on Ancestry.com.
- <sup>16</sup> "Dies in Park Av. Leap: W. H. Gibbs, Son of Educator, Had Suffered Ear Ailment," *New York Times*, March 29, 1934, 46.
- <sup>17</sup> "Katharine Gibbs, School Head, Dies: Educator Noted for Methods of Training Young Women for Business Careers," *New York Times*, May 10, 1934, 21.
- <sup>18</sup> Elizabeth P. McIntosh, *Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 14.

that history that is not written down is lost. The story of Katharine Gibbs and her schools will not be lost because of this book and because Brown University now houses the Gibbs archives. And Katharine Ryan Gibbs's reputation continues to grow. She received the National Women's History Project award in 2014 as a woman of character, courage, and commitment.

The Gibbs program was not easy, but the education gained for careers and life experience was excellent. When an NEHGS member asked me if Katie Gibbs was a finishing school, I replied by relating the undocumented but often repeated story of the father who thought he was sending his daughter to a finishing school but learned that he had instead sent her to a business boot camp. ♦

# Katharine Gibbs Connections

In November 2014, we asked our Facebook and *Weekly Genealogist* newsletter readers whether they had connections to the Katharine Gibbs School. (For many years, the Boston Katharine Gibbs School was a block from NEHGS at 126 Newbury.) Forty-three

respondents attended Katharine Gibbs School/College and 215 had at least one family member who did. Some of the comments are below:

Karen Sullivan of Newburgh, New York: "I'm an Army brat from the old generation, and my father was a lieutenant colonel from an even older generation. He told me that there were only three appropriate careers for women: nurse, teacher, or secretary. So even though I was offered several college scholarships and an opportunity to attend the stewardess school at Pan Am, off I went to secretarial school. Little did he know that I would end up as a high-level computer specialist at West Point. I'm happily retired now, but I wish he could have seen my success."

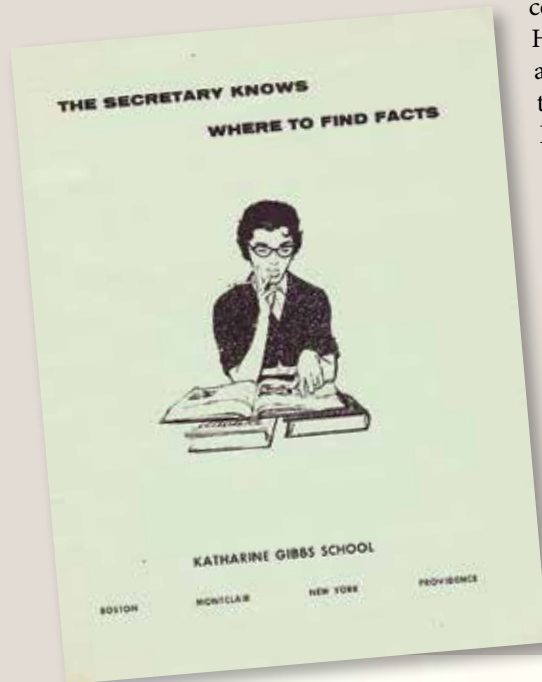
Anne Crockett of Woburn, Massachusetts: "My mother was at American University in Washington, D.C., until World War II started. Her parents wanted her home in Newton [Massachusetts] so she moved back and went to Katy Gibbs in Boston."

Nan Lauder Eckfeld of Columbus, Ohio: "My mother, Lois Kathryn Hayes Lauder, graduated from the Katharine Gibbs School in New York City on June 17, 1927, and her first job was secretary to Gordon Gibbs, Katharine's son. She commuted by train, first to the school and then to her job there, from South Norwalk, Connecticut. All throughout our childhoods, Mom would make out her Christmas list in shorthand and leave it out where we kids could see it. But her secrets were

totally safe since none of us could read shorthand. It was our annual Christmas joke."

Janet Malenfant of Cambridge, Massachusetts: "My grandmother Marilyn (Leach) Schmid attended Katharine Gibbs in Providence and it qualified her for a job at a bank in that city at the beginning of World War II. Later, she and my grandfather started their own business, a marina in southern Rhode Island. She was a shrewd businesswoman and attributed her ability to run the office like a tight ship to the education she had at Gibbs."

Susan B. Strange of Potomac, Maryland: "After graduating from junior college in 1966, I attended Katharine Gibbs in Boston, taking the 'Special Course for College Women.' The course work was more difficult than one might expect, especially the class in grammar and punctuation called 'Business Communications and Report Writing.' While half my class of approximately 100 girls (the common term then for women in their early 20s) was in shorthand class, the other half was in another room learning to type. There were perhaps ten electric typewriters, much in demand by classmates, lined up along the walls where there were electrical outlets, but most of us were stuck using clunky manuals. The names of our teachers have been lost to time, but I remember the typing teacher as a round, friendly woman. The shorthand teacher was tall, angular and a stickler for rules. There was to be NO talking as the classes shifted between the shorthand room and the typing room, where we would transcribe the shorthand we had just taken. The instructors would stand in the hallway watching us closely. We were silent. We knew the rules. We were Gibbs Girls in the making." ♦



*Katharine Gibbs School*

Name Susan Strange

Report for period ending January 22, 1967

**SPECIAL COURSE FOR COLLEGE WOMEN**

Shorthand	A
Transcription	
Typewriting	B
Accounting Essentials	B
Filing and Indexing	
Secretarial Procedures	
Spelling	B
Business Communications and Report Writing	B
Business Orientation	
Placement Project	
Attendance	
Absence	1
Tardiness	0
<input type="checkbox"/> Certified	<input type="checkbox"/> Certified by Special Action
<input type="checkbox"/> Certified with Merit	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Certified
A=Excellent B=Good C=Fair D=Condition F=Failure C+=Credit Inc.=Incomplete Absence: 1 day=1 1/2 day=1/2	
The School reserves the right to withhold the Certificate from students who are unaccountably absent or tardy.	

*Quia Houghton*  
Director

Left: A Katharine Gibbs School booklet, "The Secretary Knows Where to Find Facts," and Susan Strange's January 1967 Gibbs report card. Images courtesy of Susan Strange.