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YET ANOTHER LOOK AT THE FERGUSONS OF TEXAS

By Jane Bock Guzman

Texas politics and politicians have always been interesting, and James E. (Pa) and Miriam A. (Ma) Ferguson were among the most engaging characters in Texas political history. They both were elected governor, although most observers believed at the time that only one of them, Pa, actually performed the duties of the office. He was the only Texas governor ever to be impeached; she was the first woman elected to the highest office in the state.

James Edward Ferguson was born on August 31, 1871, near Salado in Bell County. His father died when he was four years old. After being expelled from school for disobedience, he left home at sixteen and wandered through the West, working as a miner and on a railroad gang. He returned home two years later to study law, and was admitted to the bar in 1897. His law practice was not lucrative enough, so he turned to real estate, insurance, and banking. He married Miriam Amanda Wallace on December 31, 1899.

Miriam and Jim had probably known each other all their lives. Her mother, Eliza Garrison Wallace, was a widow with two daughters when she married Joseph L. Wallace. Her first husband was Wesley G. Ferguson, the brother of James Edward Ferguson, Sr., and the uncle of James Jr. The two daughters from her first marriage were his first cousins, as well as Miriam's half-sisters; therefore, Miriam's mother was Jim Ferguson's aunt. Miriam was born on June 13, 1875, in Bell County, four years after Jim. Unlike her future husband, she had the benefit of higher education; she attended two colleges, Salado College and Baylor Female College at Belton, although she did not graduate from either.

The Fergusons held an interest in the Farmers State Bank of Belton for several years, and Jim, who managed the concern, was a member of the Texas State Bankers Association. In 1907 the Fergusons sold their share of the bank and moved to Temple, where Jim organized the Temple State Bank and became its president. He became involved in local politics, opposing prohibition even though he was a teetotaler. His position on this, one of the most pressing political issues of the era in Texas, put him in direct opposition to the Ku Klux Klan, a powerful force throughout the state that was promoting prohibition. Not only did Ferguson's stance distance him from other Texas politicians, it gained him the support and friendship of Texas brewers, who stood to lose their businesses if prohibition became law.⁷

In 1914 Jim Ferguson decided to run for governor. Although never before holding elective office, he won the Democratic nomination when other "wets," or anti-prohibitionists, withdrew from the race to avoid dividing the vote. Ferguson found his calling in politics, employing a time-honored practice of appealing to the "common man." He wore a frock coat and deliberately used poor grammar, despite the fact that he was well read, to appeal to his "boys at the forks of the creek," as he called the tenant farmers. He frequently criticized

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“city slickers” and “educated fools who know nothing of the farmer’s problems.” Building on this populist theme, he usually added that he “warn’t no college dude, and durned glad of it.” This tactic – portraying himself as one of the people – was quite a leap, considering his presidency of a bank, his financial interest in ten others, and his ownership of 2,500 acres of black farmland – but it worked. Ferguson called for state regulation of rental fees landlords charged their sharecroppers and opposed bonus payments attached onto customary rent charges. He proposed laws limiting the amount of rent that landlords could demand from tenants, one-fourth for cotton and one third for grain crops. Ferguson insisted that by improving the lot of tenant farmers, the entire Texas economy would be strengthened. He also supported organized labor, which made him unpopular among business owners, and apologized for the fact that his mother had been educated by Ursuline nuns, explaining that she had been orphaned at an early age and that the nuns had taken her in. He added that she had married a Methodist minister and had never set foot inside a Catholic church. Fergusons appeal to tenant farmers succeeded; after capturing the Democratic nomination in the primary, he easily defeated his Republican opponent in the general election and took office.³

Ferguson’s apparent disdain for education was not universal, nor was it apparent in his early policy decisions. He often asserted his desire to improve the condition of rural schools in Texas, and during his first term in office textbooks were supplied free for the first time to children enrolled in Texas public schools. Despite his rhetoric to the contrary he also supported higher education, urging generous appropriations for colleges and making provisions for eight new ones. In fact, during his first term, the legislature authorized agricultural colleges at Stephenville and Arlington, appropriated funds for West Texas A&M, and established colleges that later became East Texas State University, Stephen F. Austin State University, and Sul Ross College.⁴

Ferguson did, however, have personal issues with administrators at the University of Texas. Rumors abounded that the UT appropriations bill of 1915 had a number of items that would be vetoed. Ferguson, however, signed the bill without a veto after having discussed it with the University’s acting president, W. J. Battle, and several members of the Board of Regents. But because of a recent change in administration at the state’s flagship school, there had been no time to prepare a proper itemized budget. Therefore, what Ferguson and the legislature authorized was a proposed budget for the preceding biennium, with an addendum requesting that they be permitted to make such changes as might prove necessary. This was explained to Ferguson and to members of the legislature; the bill specifically stated that the regents might make necessary “changes and substitutions within the total” – in other words, shift money around – as long as they did not exceed the amount appropriated.⁵

Changes were made, which the governor protested. He sent a letter to the regents asserting that Battle was not qualified to be president of the University. Although Battle was assured by the regents that he had their support, he withdrew his name for consideration after Ferguson challenged his ascension to the leadership position. Ferguson insisted that an auditor be appointed for the

University, and the auditor found a few minor accounting errors. The governor used these as evidence of a widespread pattern of wrongdoing.⁶

The Board of Regents elected R.E. Vinson to serve as president of the University in 1916. Ferguson, however, had his own candidate in mind, and was displeased with their decision. He believed that, as governor, he should have been consulted about the filling of such an important office, and he made his views plain to several of the regents. Shortly before Vinson's inauguration, he visited the governor along with Regent George W. Littlefield. During this meeting, Ferguson restated his opposition to Vinson and told the two men that he had inflammatory information about five faculty members. In September Vinson, now the President of the University, asked Ferguson to share this information so that he might submit it to the Board of Regents for evaluation, but the governor declined. He added that in the future, it "would be better for us to remain in our respective jurisdictions and no good purpose can be served by any further relation between us."⁷

Ferguson decided that what he needed was a Board of Regents whose members would follow his wishes. He had already appointed Maurice Faber, a rabbi living in Tyler and the first clergyman to serve in such a capacity, to the board. Ferguson now demanded either Faber's complete support or his resignation. Faber refused to comply with either choice, so Ferguson wrote that he "did not care to bandy words with him, and that if Faber wanted Ferguson to remove him from office, he could rest assured that he (Ferguson), would not shrink for the task."⁸

Apparently changing his mind about involving himself in university affairs, Ferguson attended a Board of Regents meeting in October 1916 to present his evidence against five faculty members and to show the extent of the graft he claimed infected the University. The governor's case was weak, but he insisted that Vinson and the board members should remove these faculty members. After investigating Ferguson's charges they refused to act. Their report was made public and led the governor to declare that the entire issue was "becoming more clearly defined as to whether the University shall run the people of Texas or the people of the state run their own University."⁹

Ferguson must have been surprised at this turn of events: he had just removed three members of the San Antonio State Hospital and encountered only token resistance in replacing a member of the staff at Prairie View A&M College. As a result, he believed that he had more power than he actually did as governor. Ignoring the advice of his wife, who pleaded with him to drop the matter, he pressed onward with his vendetta. Meanwhile, during the legislative session of 1917, several legislators introduced resolutions asking that Ferguson be investigated, and several legislative committees censured the governor for misdeeds.

When the special session of the legislature adjourned in 1917, Governor Ferguson had to decide whether or not to sign the generous appropriations authorized for different state institutions, including the University of Texas. He asked the UT Regents to meet in his office on May 28. Rumors abounded that the gov-

ernor would demand the removal of five faculty members and the expulsion of fraternities from the university. Fraternities were a favorite target of Ferguson, the populist; he declared that they drew a line between wealth and poverty at the university, and that their members lived in "stately mansions," while the poorer students lived in "crowded boardinghouses." He added that the university as a whole was an institution "of fads and fancies, grossly mismanaged."¹⁰

The regents realized that if they followed the governor's wishes, the appropriations bill would be signed. The Ex-Students' Association issued a statement saying that it would be better to close the university rather than submit to the governor's demands. Ferguson vetoed the university appropriation on June 2, saying that he thought the bill was excessive. He made no mention of an injunction issued by a district court in Austin that had intended to prevent Dr. Fly of Houston, a new Ferguson appointee to the board of regents, from taking his seat. The district court also granted an injunction that enjoined the regents from removing any members of the faculty.

The regents met in Austin on June 5, hoping to compromise since the governor's veto had not been filed with the secretary of state. However, Ferguson then took an even stronger stand and demanded that nine members of the faculty, as well as all lawsuits and injunctions, be dismissed. No compromise was reached, the veto was filed, and the university was allowed the use of its available money and the salary of only one dean.¹¹

In July 1917 the injunctions were lifted, and six of the faculty members mentioned by the governor were removed. Ferguson believed he had won, and continued to ridicule the school in a speech he delivered at an Old Settlers' picnic at Valley Mills on July 13. He took a number of swipes at the university, ending his diatribe by declaring "I say that not only are too many people going hog wild over higher education, but that some people have become plain damn fools over the idea that we ought to have an army of educated fools to run the government."¹²

This speech aroused the wrath of Will C. Hogg, secretary of the Ex-Students Association and the son of former governor James S. Hogg. The Ex-Students Association had been organizing opposition to the governor, encouraging former students to monitor the governor closely for any indication of misdeeds – which they soon discovered. Ferguson was indicted by a Travis County Grand Jury and later impeached by the Texas House of Representatives, meeting in a special session on August 1, 1917. The House impeached him on twenty-one charges of misconduct: these included findings that Ferguson juggled state accounts to serve his private financial interests; that he lied to the legislature earlier concerning the bad state of his personal finances; that he had secured a mysterious personal loan for \$156,500, (rumored to have come from Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany – this was, after all, the early days of American involvement in WWI – but later found to have been made by San Antonio brewers); that he tried to become the dictator of the university; that he tried to bribe government officials; and finally, that he had intermingled his own and the state's accounts at the Temple State Bank to

make money for himself. Ferguson excused himself on the last day of the trial before members of the Texas Senate and went to Fort Worth to attend a livestock show. The vote was twenty-five to three to convict Ferguson and remove him from office. William P. Hobby, the president of the senate, succeeded Ferguson as governor and called a special session of the legislature to appropriate new monies for the university, and things returned to normal. As a result of the conviction, Ferguson lost all his civil rights, including the right to hold office. He claimed that he was a martyr, put to death by the university clique and the newspapers.¹³

Jim and Miriam Ferguson left Austin in disgrace and moved back to Temple, where the former governor started a weekly newspaper, *The Ferguson Forum*. He liked to call it "my little Christian weekly," and used it to communicate with his supporters, especially in East Texas, who waited eagerly for their papers every Friday. Ferguson used his paper to launch a diatribe against the Ku Klux Klan and the University of Texas, to lobby for repeal of the prohibition laws and elimination of the poll tax, and occasionally to slur Jews. He endorsed Henry Ford for president in 1924, saying, "He is the living personification and perfection of the principle of a dollar's worth of services for a dollar paid," and even sold subscriptions to the *Dearborn Independent* in his newspaper. Ferguson ran for governor again in 1918, against Hobby, despite being legally barred from doing so, and lost by a landslide. In 1920, he left the Democratic Party to run for president on the American Party ticket.¹⁴

Ferguson's main political thrusts were against the Ku Klux Klan and prohibition. The Klan was founded after the Civil War by Confederate veterans, as a means of keeping former slaves "in their place." It collapsed early in the 1870s but was revived in 1915 by Dr. Hiram Evens, a Dallas dentist. In its early years the new Klan was an object of ridicule to some; invitations to a party honoring an engaged couple, Beatrice Wertheimer and Herbert Mallinson, asked guests to dress in Klan attire, which the society columnist of the local paper described as "grotesque." Despite such derision, the organization's membership grew in strength, especially in Dallas: October 24, 1923, was Ku Klux Klan Day at the State Fair of Texas. The Fergusons moved to Dallas briefly in 1923, but were unhappy there and soon moved back to Temple. One reason could be the fact that *The Ferguson Forum* did not flourish in Dallas. A lack of advertising from Dallas merchants led Ferguson to print his most infamous column in the March 15, 1923 issue. "The Cloven Foot of the Dallas Jew" was a diatribe listing the evils of the Jewish merchants of Dallas. This column was so extreme that Klan editors reprinted it in their paper one week later to expose Ferguson as an anti-Semite. The gist of his complaint was that the "Big Jews," i.e. Alex Sanger, Herbert Marcus, etc., refused to advertise in *The Ferguson Forum*. The fact that these same individuals did not advertise in either the local Jewish paper or the Klan paper was a fact Ferguson either chose to ignore or deemed unimportant. Frustrated, and finally acknowledging that he was ineligible for state office himself, Ferguson decided to run his wife for governor in 1924. Miriam Ferguson was, by all accounts, a private person who was mainly interested in her home and family,

but declared that she was running for office "for the vindication of our family name." When asked about her qualifications for office, she replied, "I know I can't talk about the Constitution and the making of laws and the science of government like some other candidates, and I believe they have talked too much, but I have a trusting and abiding faith 'that my Redeemer liveth,' and I am trusting to him to guide my footsteps in the path of righteousness for the good of our people and the good of our State."¹⁵

The Ferguson campaign slogan was "Two governors for the price of one." Because Mrs. Ferguson had spent her first forty-nine years as a housewife and mother of two daughters, Dorrace and Ouida, and because her initials were M and A, she soon became known as Ma Ferguson. After finishing among the leaders in the Democratic primary, her campaign began to attract national attention. Reporters wanted human-interest stories, so Ouida Ferguson persuaded her mother to let the press photograph her peeling peaches in the kitchen of her birthplace, the Wallace family farm eleven miles outside of Temple. She was also photographed feeding a flock of white leghorn chickens, hoeing her garden, and standing beside a brace of mules. The caption of the picture showing her peeling peaches called her "Ma" Ferguson, and her husband automatically became "Pa." Pictures showing her wearing a bonnet were circulated widely, and led to her campaign song, sung to the tune of "Put on Your Old Grey Bonnet."

Get out your old time bonnet
 And put Miriam Ferguson on it
 And hitch your wagon to a star
 So on election day
 We each of us can say
 Hurrah, governor Miriam, Hurrah.

Mrs. Ferguson won the Democratic run-off election in August of 1924, and easily defeated her Republican opponent in November. Posters and stickers appeared claiming "Me for Ma ... and I ain't got a durned thing against Pa!"¹⁶

Mrs. Ferguson was elected for several reasons. The Klan, though strong in membership, aroused fear in many due to the appearance of its hooded members. One of Mrs. Ferguson's first campaign promises was to see that an anti-mask law was enacted (which the State Supreme Court soon found unconstitutional). Klansmen inspired terror by beating, whipping, and tar-and-feathering individuals they deemed immoral, including pimps, murderers, child-molesters, straying husbands and wives, abortionists, bootleggers, and gamblers, as well as African-Americans who did not "keep in their place." In addition, the Klan newspaper, *The Texas 100 Per Cent American*, was a continuous diatribe against the evils of Roman Catholicism. Many of Mrs. Ferguson's supporters were those who were weary of the constant fear the Klan inspired. Texas had a considerable Catholic population, as well as a number of those wishing an end to prohibition. They were among her voters, as were feminists who voted for her because she was a woman. Prominent business and political leaders around Texas endorsed her candidacy, including John Nance Garner,

the vice-presidential candidate, who promised that a Democratic victory would mean a return to state and national prosperity. In an August 17, 1924 editorial, George Dealey, the editor of the *Dallas Morning News*, stated that Miriam Ferguson's election would "sound the death knell of the Klan as a political power base in the State." He was correct.¹⁷

The Fergusons returned to Austin in the same 1917 Packard Twin-Six in which they had driven away in disgrace. Since Jim had never learned to drive, Miriam was at the wheel. When they had departed Austin several years earlier, Miriam had declared that a brighter day would dawn for them, and that they would return in the same Packard. It had been stored in a Temple garage until the governor-elect remembered her prediction and had it repaired, polished, and fitted with new tires for the triumphal return. As she pulled the car under the *porte cochere*, she exclaimed, "Well, we have arrived!" While walking around the old familiar grounds, she was aghast to discover that her name had been removed from a block of concrete at the threshold of the greenhouse she had built during her husband's administration. She immediately called a concrete worker to restore her name and date to the greenhouse.¹⁸

Her administration operated smoothly at first. In addition to the anti-mask bill targeting the Ku Klux Klan, the chief legislation passed was a tick eradication bill crucial to the cattle industry of the state. However, controversies arose, usually centering around the governor's husband. For the most part, she governed in name only. Jim Ferguson's desk was next to hers (similar to those of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert), and everyone knew that he was the real power. He attended meetings of state boards, commissions, and agencies, with or without the governor, and received personal callers.¹⁹

Jim's "little Christian weekly" was still going strong. There was no standard rate for advertising during this period, but those wishing for favorable attention from the Ferguson administration paid exorbitant prices for the privilege of promoting their concerns. For example, a special edition of the paper appeared on December 18, 1924, just before Miriam's inauguration. It contained more than twice as much advertising space as editorial copy – 2,674 inches v 1,246 inches – and all but nineteen inches of advertising space were for firms wanting favors from the new administration. As a result, contracts were awarded for the building of highways to individuals or firms that had never built or maintained roads, including doctors, ranchers, politicians, and lawyers. The one thing they all had in common was that they either were loyal friends of the governor's husband or they had advertised in *The Ferguson Forum*.²⁰

The Ferguson's older daughter, Ouida Ferguson Nalle, had worked in the insurance business before her mother's inauguration. She then became an agent for the American Surety Company and wrote surety bonds for road and other contractors. Her clientele was strictly limited to those seeking business with the state. She was also a partner in a real-estate firm that promoted development at the Colorado River Dam near Austin. Her husband, George S. Nalle, promoted stock in a company that had a twenty-year lease on land containing lead ore. Nalle corresponded with friends of the administration, including sev-

eral legislators, inviting them to buy stock and to send their checks to him in care of the governor's mansion in Austin.²¹

Controversy also surrounded textbook contracts. Jim Ferguson was elected clerk of the Textbook Commission, and one of the pending state contracts was with the American Book Company. It called for the state to purchase thousands of copies of a spelling book at a price a nickel a copy more than it would have cost in Ohio, but the State Supreme Court found the contract valid. The biggest controversies, however, stemmed from the number of pardons criminals received during Mrs. Ferguson's administration. Rumors abounded, but no proof has ever surfaced that pardons were sold, although it seems unlikely that anyone who bought one would ever admit it.²²

During his wife's administration Jim Ferguson continued his law practice, and was counsel and advisor to several railroads. The newspaper prospered as well; a *Ferguson Forum* was launched in Austin, for which Jim solicited advertising on the governor's official stationery, and state employees were among the subscribers.²³

The proudest moment for the Ferguson family was the Amnesty Act for James E. Ferguson that Miriam signed into law with a gold pen on March 31, 1925. In the fall of the same year, however, several members of the House of Representatives began an abortive attempt to impeach Mrs. Ferguson, citing several irregularities in her administration. But the legislature was not sitting, and the governor would have had to call a special session, so nothing came of this.

Miriam Ferguson had declared she would only seek one term, but either she or her husband had changed their mind as her term neared its end. She lost to fellow Democrat Dan Moody in the primary, then completed her term. The Fergusons remained in Austin afterwards, living first in the Driskill Hotel, then a rented house, and finally settling into a home on Windsor Road they had built for them. While Miriam lived quietly, Jim kept up his opposition to Moody through his newspaper. In 1928, for the first time since 1914, no Ferguson name appeared on the ticket of any political party. However, with the coming of the Great Depression, the Fergusons saw an opportunity, and Miriam ran again in 1932, becoming the first Texas governor elected to two nonconsecutive terms. Miriam was not a candidate for re-election in 1934, but she ran, unsuccessfully, against W. Lee (Pappy) O'Daniel in 1940, an old enemy of her husband. She came in fourth in that race, her last.²⁴

On June 13, 1955, the Austin Junior Chamber of Commerce held a dinner in honor of Miriam Ferguson's eightieth birthday. Approximately 300 people attended the event at the Driskill Hotel, including former governor James V. Allred and Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson. Governor Allen Shivers served as Master of Ceremonies. President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent his felicitations, and as a salute to her, the entire gathering sang her old campaign song, "Put on Your Old Gray Bonnet." Jim had died more than a decade earlier, in 1944, and Miriam Ferguson passed away in 1961 and was buried next to her husband in the state cemetery in Austin. There is no doubt that their administrations were colorful. However, together they were responsible, more

than any other politicians, for offering Texans a viable alternative to the Ku Klux Klan. While some of their actions may have benefited themselves or special interests more than the state or its residents, they never encouraged the violence and hatred that the Klan endorsed. Considering the climate of the day, Texas could have easily been governed by worse people.²⁵

NOTES

¹*Temple Daily Telegram*, March 18, 1911.

²Ralph W. Steen, "Governor Miriam A. Ferguson," *East Texas Historical Journal*, XVII, Fall 1979, p. 4.

³Norman D. Brown, *Hood, Bonnet, and Little Brown Jug* (College Station, 1984), p. 97; Jack Lynn Calbert, "James Edward and Miriam Amanda Ferguson: The Ma and Pa of Texas Politics," Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 1968, pp. 6, 7; Mary Nelson Paulissen and Carl McQueary, *Miriam: The Southern Belle Who Became the First Woman Governor of Texas* (Austin, 1995), p. 65; Ouida Wallace Ferguson Nalle, *The Fergusons of Texas or 'Two Governors for the Price of One!' A Biography of James Edward Ferguson and his wife Miriam Amanda Ferguson, Ex-Governors of the State of Texas by Their Daughter, Ouida Ferguson Nalle* (San Antonio, 1946), pp. 73-74.

⁴Mary Nelson Paulissen and Carl McQueary, *Miriam: the Southern Belle Who Became The First Woman Governor of Texas*. Austin: Eakin Press, 1995, p. 65.

⁵Steen, "The Ferguson War," p. 356.

⁶Steen, "The Ferguson War," p. 357.

⁷Steen, "The Ferguson War," p. 357.

⁸Hollace Ava Weiner, *Jewish Stars in Texas: Rabbis in Their Work* (College Station, 1999), pp. 39, 192.

⁹Steen, "The Ferguson War," p. 358; *Dallas News*, December 17, 1916.

¹⁰Steen, "The Ferguson War," p. 359.

¹¹Steen, "The Ferguson War," p. 360; Calbert, "James Edward and Miriam Amanda Ferguson," p. 39.

¹²*Dallas News*, July 14, 1917.

¹³Frank M. Stewart, "Impeachment in Texas," *American Political Science Review* (August, 1930), p. 653; Calbert, "James Edward and Miriam Amanda Ferguson," pp. 57-58; Steen, "The Ferguson War," p. 362; Frank Strother, "The Governors Ferguson of Texas," *The World's Work*, September 1925, p. 492.

¹⁴Brown, *Hood, Bonnet, and Little Brown Jug*, p. 97; *The Ferguson Forum*, July 26, 1923.

¹⁵*Dallas News*, June 5, 1920, October 25, 1923, June 18, 1924; *The Texas 100 Per Cent American*, March 23, 1923, October 26, 1923; *The Ferguson Forum*, April 10, 1910, March 15, 1923; Kent Biffle, "When Pa Called the Kettle Ma," *Dallas Morning News*, August 18, 2002.

¹⁶Brown, *Hood, Bonnet, and Little Brown Jug*, pp. 227-228; Nalle, *The Fergusons of Texas*, pp. 175-176.

¹⁷Brown, *Hood, Bonnet, and Little Brown Jug*, p. 56; *The Texas 100 Per Cent American*, 1922-1924; *The Ferguson Forum*, October 27, 1932.

¹⁸Nalle, *The Fergusons of Texas*, p. 185.

¹⁹Brown, *Hood, Bonnet, and Little Brown Jug*, p. 269; *The Ferguson Forum*, March 19, 1924.

²⁰Brown, *Hood, Bonnet, and Little Brown Jug*, pp. 278-283; Steen, "Governor Miriam A. Ferguson," p. 10.

²¹*Austin American*, November 10, 1925; Brown, *Hood, Bonnet, and Little Brown Jug*; Calbert, "James Edward and Miriam Amanda Ferguson," p. 119.

²²Brown, *Hood, Bonnet, and Little Brown Jug*, pp. 274-276; Steen, "Governor Miriam A. Ferguson," pp. 10-12.

²³Calbert, "James Edward and Miriam Amanda Ferguson," p. 555.

²⁴Steen, "Governor Miriam A. Ferguson," p. 13.

²⁵Paulissen and McQueary, *Miriam*, p. 292.