

Distinguished Women of Past and Present

[First Page](#)[Name Index](#)[Subject Index](#)[Related Sites](#)[Search](#)

Kate Gleason

(1865-1933)

Kate Gleason, the first woman to be president of a national (U.S.) bank, as well as the first woman member of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, was born in Rochester, New York, U.S., on November 25, 1865. Her father was the owner of Gleason Works (located at 1000 University Avenue in Rochester), a machine-tool factory. Kate started working Saturdays at her father's factory at the age of twelve.

In 1884, she was admitted to Cornell University in Ithaca, New York to study mechanical arts. She also studied part-time at Sibley College of Engraving and Mechanics Institute (now the Rochester Institute of Technology) in Rochester, New York. By 1893, she reportedly helped her father design and perfect a machine that produced beveled gears quickly and cheaply. Henry Ford credited Kate, rather than her father for this invention when he said it was "the most remarkable machine work ever done by a woman". From 1890 to 1901, she was the secretary-treasurer of the firm and perhaps the world's first female seller of machine tools. As a result of her business leadership, Gleason Works became a leading U.S. producer of gear-cutting machinery.

By 1913, she decided to branch out on her own and restored another machine-tool company to financial solvency. From 1917 to 1919, Kate Gleason served as the first woman president of the First National Bank of Rochester after the male president resigned to join the military forces fighting in World War I. While at the bank, she promoted large-scale development of low-cost housing.

In 1918, she was elected the first woman member of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME).

Following her tenure at the bank, Gleason went to California with plans to build low-cost homes in Sausalito. This was abandoned, however, when the state of California condemned part of the tract of land to be used for this project. In 1920, she bought land on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina to be used for building a resort for artists and writers. The resort was finished after her death and under supervision of Gleason's younger sister.

In 1921, she started selling low-cost concrete box houses in East Rochester, New York, after developing a method of pouring concrete. These became a model for many future suburban developments. She also became the first woman member of the American Concrete Institute. In 1930 she served as the ASME's representative to the World Power Conference in Germany.

Kate Gleason died January 9, 1933 in Rochester, New York. She left an estate of \$1.4 million, of which a large portion was used to set up a Kate Gleason Fund for charity and education. One of the beneficiaries was the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Contributed by Danuta Bois, 1996.

Bibliography:

1. *The Book of Women's Firsts: Breakthrough Achievements of Almost 1,000 American Women* by Phyllis J. Read and Bernard L. Witlieb, Random House, 1992
2. *Susan B. Anthony Slept Here. A Guide to American Women's Landmarks* by Lynn Sherr and Jurate Kazickas, Random House, 1994
3. *Women's World: A Timeline of Women in History* by Irene M. Franck and David M. Brownstone, HarperCollins Publishers, 1995

[First Page](#)

[Name Index](#)

[Subject Index](#)

[Related Sites](#)

[Search](#)