

# Rebekah Harkness

**Rebekah West Harkness** (April 17, 1915 – June 17, 1982) also known as **Betty Harkness**, was an American composer, sculptor, dance patron, and philanthropist who founded the Harkness Ballet. Her marriage to William Hale "Bill" Harkness, an attorney and heir to the Standard Oil fortune of William L. Harkness, made her one of the wealthiest women in America.

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## Early life

Rebekah Semple West was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1915. She was the second daughter of three children of a socially prominent stockbroker and the co-founder of the G. H. Walker Company, Allen Tarwater, and Rebekah Cook (née Semple) West.<sup>[1]</sup> Her grandfather founded the St. Louis Union Trust Company.<sup>[2]</sup> Raised primarily by a series of nannies, Harkness took up dancing and ice skating to lose weight and was highly disciplined in both endeavors. She attended the Rossman School and John Burroughs School in St. Louis, then Fermata, a finishing school in Aiken, South Carolina. Harkness was friends with a young Potter Stewart, who she affectionately called "Potsie"; their relationship was written about by her biographer Craig Unger.<sup>[2]</sup>

After graduating in 1932, she and a group of female friends formed the Bitch Pack, a kind of sub-culture of local debutantes who enjoyed subverting society events—lacing punchbowls with mineral oil or performing stripteases on banquet tables.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Career

In the 1960s, Harkness became well known as a philanthropist and patron of the arts.<sup>[4]</sup> Through the Rebekah Harkness Foundation, Harkness sponsored Jerome Robbins and the Robert Joffrey Ballet.<sup>[5]</sup> When the Joffrey Ballet refused to rename their company in Harkness' honor, she withdrew funding and hired most of the Joffery dancers to her new company, the Harkness Ballet.<sup>[6]</sup> In addition to founding the Harkness Ballet, Harkness launched a ballet school and home for the company called Harkness House,<sup>[7]</sup> as well as a refurbished 1,250-seat theater, which presented the Harkness Ballet and other dance companies to New York audiences.<sup>[8]</sup> Through the William Hale Harkness Foundation, she sponsored construction of a medical research building at the New York Hospital and supported a number of medical research projects.<sup>[9][10]</sup>

Later in life, she studied in Fontainebleau, France, with Nadia Boulanger, the Institut Jaques-Dalcroze in Geneva, and Mannes College of Music, New York. She also studied orchestration with Lee Hoiby and received a DFA degree from the Franklin Pierce College in Rindge, New Hampshire, in 1968.

Betty Harkness	
<b>Born</b>	<div>Rebekah Semple West</div> <div>April 17, 1915</div> <div>St. Louis, Missouri, United States</div>
<b>Died</b>	<div>17 June 1982</div> <div>(aged 67)</div> <div>Manhattan, New York, United States</div>
<b>Nationality</b>	American
<b>Education</b>	John Burroughs School <div>Fermata</div>
<b>Alma mater</b>	Franklin Pierce College
<b>Known for</b>	Harkness Ballet
<b>Spouse(s)</b>	<div><div><div><div><span></span></div><div>Dickson W. Pierce</div></div><div><span>(<span>m.</span> 1939<span>;</span> <span>div.</span> 1946)</span></div><div><span></span></div><div><div><div><span></span></div><div>William Hale Harkness</div></div><div><span>(<span>m.</span> 1947<span>;</span> <span>his death</span> 1954)</span></div><div><span></span></div><div><div><div><span></span></div><div>Benjamin H. Kean</div></div><div><span>(<span>m.</span> 1961<span>;</span> <span>div.</span> 1965)</span></div><div><span></span></div><div><div><div><span></span></div><div>Niels Lauersen</div></div><div><span>(<span>m.</span> 1974<span>;</span> <span>div.</span> 1977)</span></div></div></div></div></div></div>
<b>Children</b>	<div>Allen Pierce</div> <div>Anne Terry Pierce</div> <div>Edith Harkness</div>
<b>Parent(s)</b>	<div>Allen Tarwater</div> <div>Rebekah Cook West</div>

In *Blue Blood* (1988), author Craig Unger writes that at the time of her death, her dance empire had been destroyed, she had been humiliated by the press, and most of her fortune had been lost through her capricious behavior.

## Marriages

On June 10, 1939, Harkness married Dickson W. Pierce, the son of Thomas M. Pierce and a descendant of Franklin Pierce, the 14th President of the United States.<sup>[1]</sup> Before their divorce in 1946, they had two children:<sup>[8]</sup>

- Allen Pierce (b. 1940), who shot and killed a man in a brawl and was charged with second-degree murder.
- Anne Terry Pierce (b. 1944),<sup>[11]</sup> who married Anthony McBride in 1966<sup>[1]</sup> and had a severely brain-damaged baby who died at age 10.

On October 1, 1947, she married William Hale Harkness (1900–1954), the son of William Lamon Harkness, both Standard Oil heirs. He was previously married to Elisabeth Grant.<sup>[12]</sup> Before his death in August 1954, they had one child together:<sup>[3]</sup>

- Edith Hale Harkness (1948–1982), who married Kenneth Perry McKinnon in 1971.<sup>[13]</sup> Edith was in and out of mental institutions and eventually committed suicide.

In 1961, she married Dr. Benjamin Harrison Kean (c.1912–1993),<sup>[14]</sup> a physician who was a professor of Tropical Medicine at the Cornell Medical College.<sup>[11]</sup> They divorced in 1965.

In 1974, she married Niels H. Lauersen, another physician, who was 20 years her junior.<sup>[15]</sup> They divorced in 1977.<sup>[16]</sup>

Harkness died of cancer in her Manhattan home on June 17, 1982.<sup>[2]</sup> Her ashes were placed in a \$250,000 urn designed by Salvador Dalí, Then placed in the Harkness Mausoleum in Woodlawn, Cemetery.<sup>[17]</sup>

Harkness' "Holiday House" in Watch Hill, Rhode Island, is today owned by singer Taylor Swift.<sup>[18]</sup>

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## Further reading

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- Craig Unger, *Blue Blood*, St Martins, November, 1989, ISBN 0312917775.

## External links

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- *Missouri Biographical Dictionary* entry on Harkness ([https://books.google.com/books?id=0oOueph\\_raYC&pg=PA294&lpg=PA294&dq=fermata+finishing+school&source=bl&ots=1GxvKb2rxK&sig=G2nkSE0AaSZ1KT-2rpp\\_B\\_vyJkU&hl=en&sa=X&ei=EbPJT4z\\_Aaq3iQejp7nABg&ved=0CFEQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=fermata%20finishing%20school&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=0oOueph_raYC&pg=PA294&lpg=PA294&dq=fermata+finishing+school&source=bl&ots=1GxvKb2rxK&sig=G2nkSE0AaSZ1KT-2rpp_B_vyJkU&hl=en&sa=X&ei=EbPJT4z_Aaq3iQejp7nABg&ved=0CFEQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=fermata%20finishing%20school&f=false))
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- The end of the Harkness years (<https://web.archive.org/web/20120124071529/http://www.joffreymovie.com/2011/12/21/the-end-of-the-harkness-years/>)

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