

The Bureau of Home Economics

How Women Harnessed the Power of Science and Nutrition to Help Fight WWII and Improve Life on the Home Front

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Home economics, as a field of scientific research and practice that aims to improve quality of life, does not get the attention in the twenty-first century that it should. When thinking of this subject, one might picture middle school students learning how to sew or attempting to cook an ill-fated meal, but in the late nineteenth century and through most of the twentieth century, home economics was a thriving field that provided an area for women to contribute to their communities, families, and to their country during war times. The Bureau of Home Economics and the women who ran this organization could disseminate information that directly contributed to improving lives on the home front and aiding in the War effort between 1939 and 1945.

History and Background of Home Economics and the Bureau

The Bureau of Home Economics was formed during President Warren Harding's administration on July 1, 1923, as part of the reorganization of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "Secretary Wallace (Henry C. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture) recommended to Congress that the scientific research in home economics formerly conducted in the Office of Home Economics of the States Relations Service be organized into a separate bureau."¹ The request to establish this bureau occurred because it was recognized that the science of home economics and its contributions to the nation's lives was important, and the Department of Agriculture was responsible for developing this field of study.

Educating women in the field of home economics became more popular and received government backing after the passage of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. "The Smith-Lever Act established a national Cooperative Extension Service that extended outreach programs through land-grant universities to educate rural Americans about advances in agricultural practices and technology."² The official text of the Act is found

under bill number H.R. 7951, 63rd Cong., Pub. Law No. 63-95, 38 Stat. 372, Chap. 79 (1914). Although it was several more years before the Bureau of Home Economics was created, this Act helped pave the way for the education of Americans in this field of study and for home economics to be identified as a field of science.

In 1915, the Office of Home Economics under the States Relation Service was created and identified areas of study around the relative utility and economy of agricultural products for food, clothing, and other uses in the home, with a specific focus on methods for effective utilization of such products. The creation of the Bureau of Home Economics followed in 1923 to continue this work set forth in the 1915 appropriations act for the Office of Home Economics but with the power of a full-fledged Bureau. This new Bureau was tasked with research into the areas of food and nutrition, textile and clothing, and economics of the home. It produced many reports for the general public on various topics; many were published in *Farmers' Bulletins*.³

On February 23, 1942, the Bureau of Home Economics was assigned to the Agricultural Research Administration of the Department of Agriculture by Executive Order 9069, issued by Franklin D. Roosevelt.⁴ In 1943, the Bureau was subsequently redesignated the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics. This change reflected its more intense focus on nutrition because of the work done as part of the War effort. The Bureau's work continued through the 1950s but was reorganized and curtailed in 1960 and officially ceased to exist in 1962. Some of its work continued in Nutrition and Consumer-Use Research at USDA's Agricultural Research Service.⁵

Nutrition, Sewing, Science, and WWII

The Bureau of Home Economics played an important role in the lives of Americans, particularly women, during much of the twentieth century and specifically during the Second World



Figure 1. Library of Congress, PPOC, Bureau of Home Economics, *Join the ranks—Fight Food Waste in the Home*, between 1940–1946, 1 negative: 4x5 inches, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017697237/>.

War. The Bureau not only studied the best ways to clean, sew, and purchase food and clothing, but it also provided information on how to best utilize resources in the home. Simply put, the purpose of the Bureau of Home Economics was to engage in “research detailing the scientific basis for the mechanics of living: not what to do in the home, but why; not recipes, but principles.”⁶ Although the Bureau certainly provided plentiful recipes and how to work efficiently at home, the scientific research behind these actions was most important. Ensuring the resources of the home were being used efficiently and that nutrition and science were merged into recommendations and practices that could be replicated easily was important.

During WWII, the Bureau had the vital task of helping American families make their finances, food, supplies, and other consumer goods last longer. The Bureau conducted studies and economic research to inform education materials that helped people make necessary budget adjustments and food choices that were nutritious, low cost, and specific to the part of the country families lived in (for example, providing diet plans for the southwest part of the country where conditions for growing food were more difficult). Conducting this research and operating the Bureau required funding through appropriation bills.

During the War, on January 22, 1942, Chief of the Bureau Louise Stanley, appeared before the House Subcommittee of the Agriculture Department to describe the important work of the Bureau and request additional funding for 1943. In 1942, the Bureau was allocated \$356,530 and requested an additional \$12,360 the following year.⁷

At this hearing, Stanley provided detailed justifications for the work of the Bureau and discussed primarily the research and fields of study the Bureau engaged in as justification for the budget request. She spoke about the importance of understanding the vitamin content in meat, eggs, dried vegetables, and fruits and providing recipes for the Surplus Marketing Administration for school lunches and low-income families. Turning to textiles and clothing, the Bureau was prepared when the silk shortages came with nearly 300 cotton stocking designs. Stanley spoke to their popularity when questioned whether women have been buying them since Pearl Harbor.⁸

In addition, Stanley discussed with the equipment division of the Bureau and how its data provided the basis for decisions as to what substitutes could be used for various household equipment which was in short supply during the War. Recipes and baking temperatures had to be altered to adapt to new materials that housewives had not been using before. Stanley indicated that “household equipment has had to be revamped to eliminate strategic metals which cannot be had now for non-defense uses.”⁹

Most impressive were the many agencies the Bureau provided services to during this time. Some highlights include *Treating and testing samples of fabrics for mildew-proofing properties* and *Value and consumption of bananas* provided for the War Department and Office for Emergency Management; *Requests for knitting instructions* for the American Red Cross; *Nutritive value of Army ration C* for the National Research Council; *Testing the home mill for grinding wheat in the farm home* for the Rural Electrification Administration; and *Planning and making low-cost coat for child* for the Farm Security Administration.¹⁰ The Bureau of Home Economics provided invaluable information to the United States government and the American people during WWII, improving their lives by helping their dollars, food, and textiles go the distance. Some of this information came in the form of WWII posters, including figure 1 from the Bureau.

Finally, the legacy of the Bureau continues to this day through what was a collaboration between the Food and Nutrition Board, the Committee on Food Habits, the Bureau of Home Economics, the Children’s Bureau, and the University of Chicago Home Economics Dean to create a national food policy. “After Congress authorized a military draft in the fall of

1940, experts' worst fears about the American diet proved true: one-third of the men called up for service failed their physicals due to nutrition-related factors."¹¹ Home economists together revived the World War I slogan "Food Will Win The War" and began creating a national food policy.¹² This collaborative body worked together to determine what Americans should eat following President Roosevelt's declaration that "food and nutrition would be at least as important as metals and munitions."¹³ This work led to a revision of Recommended Daily Allowances (RDAs) for the country and also emphasized the importance of nutritious school lunches, because "after all these meals grew future soldiers."¹⁴

The Founders of Home Economics & Women of the Bureau

Many notable women were a part of the Bureau of Home Economics during its reign between 1923 and 1962 and greatly influenced the way Americans lived. While they all cannot be mentioned here, it is important to remember how special and noteworthy their contributions to the field of home economics were at the time and how their work paved the way for future women scientists and home economists.

Two women that deserve special mention as great influencers of home economics long before the establishment of the Bureau are Ellen Swallow Richards and Margaret Murray (later becoming Margaret Murray Washington after becoming the third wife of Booker T. Washington). Both faced enormous challenges in access to education as women of the mid-nineteenth century. Murray, born in 1865, faced these obstacles without the advantages of educated parents and the challenges that came from being a person of color. Murray was born during the Civil War in Macon, Mississippi. Her love of education and intelligence was immediately recognized by her family, who allowed her to stay home and study while her siblings worked in the fields. She fought to attend Fisk College, founded in 1866, and eventually became a teacher at Tuskegee Institute. Here, she met and married Booker T. Washington in 1892 and continued running domestic science, eventually taking her work outside the traditional classroom.¹⁵ This period marked a turning point in educating future home economists as "Vassar, MIT, Fisk, and Tuskegee were part of an unprecedented expansion of education after the Civil War, particularly for African American women, westerners, and scientists."¹⁶

Richards, born in 1842, attended Vassar, graduating in 1870 and then going on to MIT as the first woman to attend this prestigious institution, earning a "second bachelor's

degree from MIT in 1872 and, simultaneously, a master's from Vassar, and then became MIT's first female instructor. Against all odds, she had become a working woman in science."¹⁷ Throughout her career in science, Richards went on to use what she learned in the lab to experiment in and improve her own home. She studied water quality and environmental hazards and even designed a "vacuum cleaner" version that sucked away dust and took less physical energy than sweeping. She also formed a Sanitary Science Club and eventually was asked by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to help them study plant science.¹⁸

Louise Stanley was the first Chief of the Bureau of Home Economics. Born in 1883, and educated at Peabody College, Columbia University, and Yale University, she became a professor of home economics and department chair at the University of Missouri (1907-1923) before moving to Washington, D.C., becoming the Bureau's Chief, where she remained from 1923-1943. She was inducted into the National Agricultural Hall of Fame for contributing to farm housing and nutrition education.¹⁹

In 1924, Hildegard Kneeland was appointed head of the 'Economics of the Home' Branch of the Bureau, where she led several research projects. "The most prominent was an initiative called the 'USDA Time-Use Studies' which aimed to determine how much time rural and urban homemakers spent on various household tasks including cooking, washing, and childcare."²⁰ This same year, Ruth O'Brien was the first head of the Textiles and Clothing Division where her area of expertise was textile chemistry. She also worked on the "development of standard sizes for commercially-sold clothing and fabric selection for the home sewer."²¹ These women were tremendously influential in improving the Bureau's programs and education that helped an entire generation of women improve their lives and the lives of their families.

The Future of Home Economics

Can the field and study of home economics return in the twenty-first century? After the COVID-19 pandemic, improving the home's function would seem important to many people. Utilizing resources efficiently and effectively, understanding how to cook a basic, nutritious meal, mend a pair of pants, maintain appliances, and even how to grow vegetables in a small home garden are skills that are desired by many but are often not taught in mainstream education.

Danielle Dreilinger argues that people want home economics and suggests the following five solutions in order to revive this important field of study: Change the name back

to “home economics,” reverting back to its original name after it was altered to “family and consumer sciences” in 1993; Make home economics mandatory in middle and high schools; Diversify the profession; Embrace life skills as well as career preparation; and Advance the progressive, scientific, ecological view within home economics. “Home economics is, can, and should be an interdisciplinary, ecological field that explores the connections between our homes and the world with an eye to addressing the root causes of problems such as hunger, homelessness, isolation, and environmental devastation.”²² The field of home economics should be revived, taught in schools, and celebrated for its history and all it has to offer people of all ages and backgrounds.

Conclusion

Discovering so much information and resources on a topic I did not know anything about before beginning my research was fascinating. While much of my research was discovered through sources that would not be available to the public, the [National Agricultural Library Digital Exhibit](#) is an official website of the U.S. government and is available to those with access to the internet. A solid historical look at the Bureau of Home Economics is available here, along with summaries of their work, the women who ran it, and interesting images. More exhibits like this on other historical agencies and bureaus would be beneficial for the public.

The Bureau of Home Economics and the women who ran it improved the lives of Americans during WWII and changed how we lived during the twentieth century. The impact of the Bureau’s work can still be measured today. The women who ran the Bureau and who were influential in this field should be celebrated and honored for their commitment to science, research, and valuing the work of homemakers. Dreilinger makes an important argument stating, “We have an opportunity to bring back home ec. Let’s not waste it. Home economists hate waste.”²³ Home economics as a field of study and practice should be reinvigorated in schools and society and revered for the benefits it can provide us all now and in the future.

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Notes

1. United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Home Economics, *Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Home Economics* (Washington, DC: US GPO, 1924).
2. “The Smith-Lever Act of 1914,” National Archives Foundation, updated 2022, <https://www.archivesfoundation.org/documents/smith-lever-act-1914/>.
3. “History of the Bureau,” A National Agricultural Library Digital Exhibit: Apron Strings and Kitchen Sinks: The USDA Bureau of Home Economics, accessed March 3, 2022, <https://www.nal.usda.gov/exhibits/ipd/apronsandkitchens/timeline>.
4. Consolidating Certain Agencies within the Department of Agriculture, Exec. Order No. 9069, 3 C.F.R. 1094-95 (1938 Cum. Supp.) (1943).
5. “History of the Bureau,” US Department of Agriculture, accessed March 3, 2022, <https://www.nal.usda.gov/exhibits/ipd/apronsandkitchens/timeline>.
6. Danielle Dreilinger, *The Secret History of Home Economics* (New York: Norton, 2021), 65.
7. *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1943: Hearing on H.R. 6709 Before the Subcomm. on Agriculture Department of the H. Comm. on Appropriations*, 77th Cong. 905 (1942) (statement of Dr. Louise Stanley).
8. *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1943: Hearing on H.R. 6709 Before the Subcomm. on Agriculture Department of the H. Comm. on Appropriations*, 77th Cong. 910 (1942) (statement of Dr. Louise Stanley).
9. *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1943: Hearing on H.R. 6709 Before the Subcomm. on Agriculture Department of the H. Comm. on Appropriations*, 77th Cong. 915 (1942) (statement of Dr. Louise Stanley).
10. *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1943: Hearing on H.R. 6709 Before the Subcomm. on Agriculture Department of the H. Comm. on Appropriations*, 77th Cong. 919-921 (1942) (statement of Dr. Louise Stanley).
11. Dreilinger, *Secret History*, 112.
12. “WWII on the Home Front,” DocsTeach, National Archives, accessed June 14, 2023, <https://www.docsteach.org/activities/printactivity/wwii-on-the-home-front>.
13. Proceedings of the National Nutrition Conference for Defense, May 26, 27, and 28, 1941, Called by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (Washington, DC: US GPO, 1942), viii.
14. Dreilinger, *Secret History*, 114.
15. Dreilinger, *Secret History*, 9–15.
16. Dreilinger, *Secret History*, 12–13.

17. Dreilinger, *Secret History*, 9.
18. Dreilinger, *Secret History*, 19–22.
19. “Louise Stanley (1883-1954),” A National Agricultural Library Digital Exhibit: Apron Strings and Kitchen Sinks: The USDA Bureau of Home Economics, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.nal.usda.gov/exhibits/ipd/apronsandkitchens/items/show/17>.
20. “History of the Bureau,” accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.nal.usda.gov/exhibits/ipd/apronsandkitchens/timeline>.
21. “History of the Bureau.”
22. Dreilinger, *Secret History*, 288–93.
23. Dreilinger, *Secret History*, 296.