



Women Pioneers OF CORPORATE AMERICA

By Stephanie Cuba

LONG BEFORE GENDER EQUALITY and corporate social responsibility made headlines, a handful of extraordinary women quietly—but powerfully—shaped the American business landscape from within its highest ranks. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when boardrooms and executive suites were exclusively male, women like Clara Abbott, Anna Bissell, Lettie Pate Whitehead Evans and Marjorie Merriweather Post not only secured seats at the table—they helped build the table. While following different paths into corporate life, these trailblazing women shared a strategic mind for business, a belief in their rightful place at the helm and an unshakable determination to do well by doing good.

All four are worthy role models who steered companies that remain global powerhouses today: Abbott Labs, Bissell Homecare, Coca-Cola and General Foods. Abbott was the first woman to serve on the board of a major US company (1900) and Bissell was the first female chief executive officer (CEO) of a large US company

(1889)—both central to their companies' prosperity. Evans helped build the Coca-Cola bottling company before serving with distinction on Coca-Cola's board for two decades, while Post expanded General Foods globally and supported the 1930s movement for gender diversity on boards.

These women demonstrated how commitment to both customers and employees enable a corporation to grow for the benefit of shareholders. In forging such virtuous circles, these women were capitalists with a soul—relevant models amid ongoing debates over shareholder primacy, stakeholder interests and gender diversity.

Clara Abbott: America's First Female Corporate Director

Decades before the 19th Amendment granted women the right to vote in America, Clara Abbott (1857–1924) became the first woman director of a US public company. She used her seat to guide the early strategic growth of Abbott Labs and instill a culture of corporate responsibility.

Born in 1857 in Pomfret, Vermont, Clara married her childhood sweetheart, Dr. Wallace C. Abbott, in 1886, shortly after he received his MD from the University of Michigan. Dr. Abbott was both a physician who made house calls and a druggist who ran the fledgling company from the family home in Chicago.

Clara Abbott served on the Abbott Labs board from 1900 to 1908 and again from

1911 until her death in 1924, when the company was still private. After Dr. Abbott's death in 1921, she inherited a significant ownership stake in the company about which she already had a deep understanding of its operations and values.

Through her board service, Clara helped steer the firm through World War I and the challenging postwar economy. She understood that companies have a duty primarily to their shareholders but also believed they had an obligation to employees and customers, who responded with dedication and trust.

At her death in 1924, Clara's will established The Clara Abbott Foundation to benefit Abbott employees. She donated 12,000 shares of Abbott stock to be used "in furtherance of my beloved husband's profession and work."

Today, Abbott Labs employs 114,000 people in more than 160 countries and generates annual revenues exceeding \$40 billion. The Clara Abbott Foundation, now worth nearly \$400 million, has for over 80 years provided Abbott families with assistance in healthcare, education and basic living expenses.

Clara Abbott's boardroom work and legacy exemplify the power of quiet leadership rooted in both business and social purpose. She stands as a clear example of how an organization's economic success and well-being are enhanced by cultivating lasting commitment from its customers and enduring trust among its workforce.

Left to right: Clara Abbott, Lettie Pate Whitehead Evans, Anna Bissell and Marjorie Merriweather Post.

Anna Bissell: America's First Female CEO

At a time when most women were barred not only from voting but also owning property or holding leadership positions, Anna Bissell (1846–1934) rose to the helm of one of the most successful manufacturing companies in the United States. She did not merely manage her late husband's invention—she transformed it into a global household name.

Appointed as CEO of Bissell Carpet Sweeper Company in 1889, Anna became the first female CEO of a major American corporation. In this role, she was a forward-thinking leader who prioritized product quality, employee welfare, global strategy and ethical management—building the company's long-term value long before these became corporate buzzwords.

Her life began in De Pere, Wisconsin, where her family had settled after leaving Nova Scotia. Completing all the formal education available to her, she became a teacher at age 16. Three years later, she married Melville R. Bissell and settled in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Though Bissell would become a household name in carpet sweepers, this was not its original business.

The couple first ran a crockery and china business. All of the stock arrived in crates packed with sawdust, which became embedded in the carpets and proved nearly impossible to remove. In 1876, after numerous complaints from Anna, Melville invented the revolutionary carpet sweeper. When customers saw how much easier this made the cleaning, they wanted a sweeper of their own, and soon they were selling more sweepers than crockery.

Anna became a star salesperson, traveling from town to town to sell sweepers for \$1.50 apiece. On a trip to Philadelphia, she persuaded department store pioneer John Wanamaker to carry the product.

After a fire destroyed the company's plant in 1883, Anna secured bank loans on reputation alone, enabling production to resume within 20 days. When Melville died unexpectedly in 1889, Anna—then in her early 40s and the mother of five children—stepped in to lead the company.

In the 19th century, widows often entered business out of necessity, but few excelled as Anna did. She didn't just maintain the company—she expanded it. One observer remarked that she “studied



Headquarters of global healthcare leader Abbott in Abbott Park, IL.
The company's 114,000 employees serve people in more than 160 countries.

Courtesy of the Abbott Historical Archives

business the way other women of her time studied French.” She kept pace with industrial complexities and mastered every facet of production.

Most astutely, Anna recognized that the company's future depended on intellectual property and global branding. She trademarked the Bissell name in multiple countries and expanded the company's distribution into Europe and beyond, positioning Bissell as an international force.

Under Anna's leadership, by 1900 Bissell became the world's largest manufacturer of carpet sweepers. She modernized the company's operations and insisted on progressive employee policies—benefits, pensions and safe working conditions. She introduced fixed work hours, annual leave, a pension plan and an early version of worker's compensation—virtually unheard of at the time. She knew that all of these measures were the right things to do and good for business.

Anna believed in merit-based advancement, promoting employees on skill and dedication regardless of gender—extraordinary in an era when women rarely held supervisory roles. At her death, newspapers called her “a business executive without peer, a respected and beloved philanthropist and a true matriarch in her family.”

More than 140 years later, Bissell Inc. remains one of the world's largest manufacturers of floor care products. Anna wasn't trying to be “the first woman CEO.” She was trying to build a great company—and in doing so, she made history.

Lettie Pate Whitehead Evans: Business Trailblazer

Letitia Pate Whitehead Evans (1872–1953), business leader and philanthropist, was born in Bedford County, Virginia. Known as Lettie, she grew up in a nurturing family and attended private schools in Bedford and Lynchburg. In 1894, she married Joseph Brown Whitehead of Mississippi. The couple settled in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he practiced law, and they had two sons.

In 1899, Joseph Whitehead and fellow attorney Benjamin F. Thomas approached Asa Candler, president of The Coca-Cola Company, with what seemed a “preposterous idea”—bottling Coca-Cola, then sold only at soda fountains. Candler granted them the exclusive rights to bottle and sell Coca-Cola across most of the United States. Improvements in bottling technology soon made the venture highly successful, and bottled soft drinks became a

lucrative staple of American consumer life. By 1900, Coca-Cola was sold in every state.

That same year, the partners created separate bottling companies to divide the national market. Joseph Whitehead joined John T. Lupton to establish the Dixie Coca-Cola Bottling Company (later Atlanta Coca-Cola Bottling Company) to serve the Southeast, along with bottlers in other regions. The Whiteheads moved to Atlanta in 1903, where they became prominent in business and society. Just three years later, Joseph died of pneumonia, leaving behind his widow and two young sons.

Lettie Whitehead took charge, becoming chair of Whitehead Holding Company and president of Whitehead Realty Company. She not only managed the businesses but expanded them aggressively—reorganizing operations, improving distribution networks and helping build one of the largest Coca-Cola bottling operations in the country. Her efforts to standardize and scale the bottling were key to Coca-Cola's rise as a national and global brand.

Lettie developed a close friendship and business partnership with Robert W. Woodruff, who became president of Coca-Cola in 1923. In 1934, she sold the family's bottling interests back to the Coca-Cola Company in exchange for stock, greatly increasing her wealth and stake in the enterprise. That same year, she joined Coca-Cola's board of directors, becoming one of the first women to serve on the board of a major American corporation. Her appointment was not symbolic; she was a respected and influential director, contributing meaningfully during a period of significant growth and change.

With her fortune secure, Lettie devoted herself increasingly to philanthropy. During World War II, she donated more than \$50,000 to the Queen's Canadian Fund for Air Raid Victims, funded a Spitfire fighter plane for Britain that she asked to be named *Virginia* and provided ambulances for France. She also served as a trustee of the American Hospital of Paris.

Over her lifetime, she gave over \$150 million to more than 130 organizations—equivalent to several billion dollars today. In 1945, she established the Lettie Pate Evans Foundation, to which she left her estate. The foundation continues to support educational and cultural institutions.

Lettie Pate Whitehead Evans was far more than a caretaker of her late husband's business. She was a pioneering

BISSELL CARPET SWEEPER CO.
FACTORY:
GRAND RAPIDS, MICH. The Largest and Only
 Exclusive Manufacturers of
 Carpet Sweepers in
 the World
 Manufacturing over Twenty Different Styles and embodying every desirable feature known under 35 Patents and Patents Pending.

Bissell, No. 5.—Opening at the top. Sweeps closer to the sur-base than any other Sweeper.

The motive power in all of the Sweepers of our manufacture consists in the Friction Wheel, which is conceded to be the only EFFECTIVE and POSITIVE MOTIVE Power ever produced in Sweepers. Being exclusive manufacturers of

CARPET SWEEPERS
 we are in a position to meet any competition that may arise.

Crown Jewel, No. 3.—A strong, durable and finely-finished four-wheeled Sweeper.

We are constantly adding new improvements to our several Brands and invite your inquiries from time to time for Price-Lists and Descriptive Circulars.

All Sweepers of our Manufacture are Warranted.

"THE GRAND RAPIDS,"
 The most Popular Sweeper in the World.

SEND FOR PRICE-LIST AND DESCRIPTIVE CIRCULARS.

Bissell Carpet Sweeper Co. advertisement, 1887.

executive and civic-minded leader whose vision and contributions helped Coca-Cola become the global brand it is today.

Marjorie Merriweather Post: Corporate Visionary

"Again, back in my Daddy's business!" scribbled Marjorie Merriweather Post (1887–1973) on the announcement of her appointment to the General Foods board in 1936. Though not officially on the board until then, her influence on the company had been evident since her father's death in 1915.

In 1891, when Marjorie was four, the Post family moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, where her father, C.W. Post, sought treatment from John Harvey Kellogg. Kellogg's use of breakfast cereals and coffee substitutes inspired Post to experiment with food manufacturing. Walking the neighborhood with her father, Marjorie watched women laboring in kitchens at dawn, a burden they hoped to ease. Out of that vision came Postum, a breakfast beverage, as well as Post Toasties and Grape-Nuts, cold cereals. These products were the foundation of the Postum Cereal Company, launched in 1895. By age 10, Marjorie was attending board meetings with her father and learning the business firsthand.

That same instinct to lighten household burdens guided her most famous decision: championing the 1929 acquisition of Clarence Birdseye's frozen food company. Drawing on vivid memories of her mother's laborious canning, she foresaw that Birdseye's ability to freeze vegetables, fruits, fish and poultry would transform the food industry. Her persistence persuaded both the General Foods board and her then-husband, financier E.F. Hutton, to make the purchase. It was a bold move that reshaped the American diet and put General Foods on the path to becoming a conglomerate.

By 1935, Marjorie owned 10% of General Foods stock and pressed for a board seat. With women's suffrage secured and Frances Perkins serving as Secretary of Labor, the case for women in leadership was gaining visibility. A broader movement was building to support gender diversity on boards—a cause endorsed by General Foods director Sidney Weinberg, senior partner of Goldman Sachs, with whom Marjorie would later serve for many years. In 1936, she formally joined the General Foods board, cementing her place among the first women to hold such a role at a major American corporation.

Her impact extended well beyond business. Committed to social welfare, the arts



Lettie Pate Whitehead Evans tribute plaque affixed to the front of Tech Tower at Georgia Tech, photographed in 2007.



Library of Congress

Marjorie Merriweather Post at her desk, circa 1942.

and public service, Marjorie approached every challenge with practical resolve: see the problem, orchestrate the solution. During World War I, when medical supplies were scarce, she sent an entire hospital to France; when the ship carrying it sank, she sent another. For these efforts she received the French Legion of Honor. During the Great Depression, she personally funded and supervised a Salvation Army feeding station and chaired a state unemployment relief committee.

Her personal life was as expansive as her philanthropy. With her second husband, E.F. Hutton, she lived in a 54-room Manhattan apartment, built the 118-room Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach, cruised the seas on a four-masted yacht and built a lavish Adirondack camp that hosted foreign dignitaries. With her third husband, ambassador Joseph Davies, she lived in Moscow in the late 1930s, where she amassed an extraordinary collection of Russian art and decorative objects later housed at Hillwood in Washington, DC, which is now a museum.

Post's legacy is one of visionary leadership and enduring impact. She transformed a regional cereal maker into General Foods, a powerhouse of 20th-century consumer brands, through bold acquisitions and innovation. At the same time,

her philanthropy enriched American cultural life and set a high standard for civic responsibility.

Though these remarkable women reached business leadership through different routes—inheritance, marriage or widowhood—they did so in eras when women were largely excluded from such roles. What began as necessity became visionary leadership that transformed their companies. They mastered the full range of business operations, from branding and intellectual property to global expansion and acquisitions, while recognizing that fulfilling their duty to shareholders required cultivating trust among employees and loyalty among customers.

Their stories deserve to be remembered not only because they shattered ceilings, but because they forged enduring models of corporate leadership. They were ahead of their time—and perhaps ahead of ours. **\$**

Stephanie Cuba writes and speaks on professional development for university students and young professionals. She is a real estate developer and has served on the board of a for-profit charter school. Stephanie is co-author, with Lawrence Cunningham, of Margin of Trust: The Berkshire Business Model and The Warren Buffett Shareholder.

Sources

- “Anna Bissell’s Enduring Impact: Celebrating a Legacy of Service.” Bissell Homecare, Inc. March 14, 2025.
- Ewing, Kelley M. “Letitia Pate Whitehead Evans (1872–1953).” *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*. Library of Virginia. 2016.
- Filing Radar. *Abbott Laboratories*. <https://www.filingradar.com/company/ABT/overview>
- Larcker, David and Brian Tayan. *Pioneering Women on Boards: Pathways of the First Female Directors*. Stanford Graduate School of Business, Stanford Closer Look Series. September 3, 2013.
- Much, Marilyn. “Anna Sutherland Bissell Knew How to Clean Up in the Sweeper Market.” *Investor’s Business Daily*. October 22, 2018.
- Rubin Stuart, Nancy. “Marjorie Merriweather Post: The Philanthropic Heiress Who Built Mar-A-Lago.” *The Saturday Evening Post*. November 14, 2023.
- Rubin, Nancy. *American Empress: The Life and Times of Marjorie Merriweather Post*. Villard Books. 1995, 2004.
- Sinclair, Norman. *Seminal Leader*. DBusiness. September 12, 2013.
- “Why First Woman CEO in the United States Anna Sutherland Bissell was so Successful?” *Womenlines*. May 5, 2022.