



A TIMELINE OF THE WOMEN  
WHO CHANGED AMERICA



## June 2026 Her Story ENewsletter Women in the Clothing Industry



The co-founder of the Gap, **Doris Fisher**, had escaped our attention until we read of her recent death. She was described as a “path-breaking entrepreneur” whose “brilliance, quiet determination, and heart shaped everything from Gap Inc.’s indelible influence on fashion and retail to philanthropy and the San Francisco art scene.” Doris and Don Fisher founded the first Gap store in 1969 in San Francisco with \$63,000 – and she came up with the store’s name. A Stanford-educated economist, Doris helped the Gap grow to become a fashion behemoth that includes Old Navy, Banana Republic, and Athleta. The Gap Foundation was established in 1977. It provides donations to disaster-relief efforts, supports programs that provide skills to female garment workers, and provides mentorships to young minority workers. Two other women who founded fashion behemoths and whom we profile in this month’s newsletter are Lena Bryant Malsin and Elisabeth Claiborne Ortenberg.



In 1904, dressmaker and seamstress **Lena Bryant Malsin’s** name was misspelled as “Lane” on her bank loan application. Thus, the Lane Bryant clothing store name was born. She wanted money to open a retail clothing store in New York City that would sell clothing reflecting her novel idea: commercially manufactured maternity clothes! Newspapers were unwilling to carry advertisements for maternity clothes, as the newspapers considered them lewd, so Bryant set up a mail order catalog business. By 1950, the Lane Bryant Company was the sixth largest mail order catalog in the U.S. A retail genius, Bryant then pioneered clothing for full-figured women. Bryant was a philanthropist as well as an entrepreneur and retail giant. She worked with the Red Cross after disasters and gathered clothing for displaced persons after World War II. Bryant was one of the first in her industry to offer employees benefits including profit sharing, pension, disability insurance, life, and health insurance.



**Elisabeth Claiborne Ortenberg** was born in Belgium to American parents; she showed artistic talent early in life. Her family returned to the US due to World War II. She later attended but did not graduate from high school, preferring to study art in Europe instead. She became a clothing artist and designer and worked for years in the garment district in New York City. Frustrated by the lack of practical clothing for working women, she, her husband, and two others founded Liz Claiborne, Inc. in 1976. By 1988, it had a one-third share of the upscale women’s sportswear market. Claiborne insisted that her clothing line be displayed by itself in department stores; this changed the way retail stores displayed merchandise. Liz Claiborne, Inc. made the Fortune 500 list in 1986 with retail sales of \$1.2 billion. Also a philanthropist, Ortenberg and her husband established the Liz Claiborne & Art Ortenberg Foundation that supports wildlife and wildlands.

Lena Bryant Malsin and Elisabeth Claiborne Ortenberg are among the more than 850 women profiled in our book *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America*. Women’s accomplishments continue to inspire and encourage us. Continue to help us tell women’s stories!

Charlotte Waisman and Jill Tietjen

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