Elizabeth Watkins, known as “Lady Bountiful” or KU’s “Fairy Godmother,” never had any children of her own because, it seems, she thought of KU students as her surrogate children. Her generosity, vision and kindness have left an unparalleled legacy at KU as students are still enjoying the benefits today.

Born Elizabeth Josephine Miller in 1861, “Lizzie” and her family moved to Lawrence when she was a young child. She was unable to continue her education when forced to quit KU’s preparatory high school at age 15 to get a job and help pay the family bills. Elizabeth used her natural talent to excel in the business world, moving her way up the corporate ladder at J.B Watkins Land and Mortgage Company. She eventually became secretary to the firm’s founder, Jabez Bunting Watkins, a self-made lawyer, millionaire and highly successful business man. The two would later fall in love and get married, setting their sights on philanthropic projects of all kinds. During an interview with the Kansas City Star, Elizabeth explained, “We had no children and our plan was to give it all for the good of humanity, chiefly here in Lawrence.” Although Jabez passed away after only 11 years of marriage, Elizabeth, now in charge of a substantial business empire and large fortune, continued the couple’s benevolent plans. Living in “The Outlook” atop Mount Oread (what is now the Chancellor’s residence) allowed Elizabeth to be immersed in the everyday lives of KU students. In response to the lack of health care and medical aid for students, she funded the creation and construction of Lawrence Memorial Hospital, Watkins Memorial Hospital (now Twente Hall, home of the School of Social Welfare) and Watkins Nurses Home (now the Hall Center for Humanities).

The issue that seemed closest to her heart, however, was the education of female students. Wanting other young women to have what she was denied, a University education, she dreamed up the idea of a scholarship hall, the first of its kind. Addressing the need for organized housing for female students and coupled with the desire to help gifted scholars in need, Elizabeth created a residence where women could provide labor (such as cooking and cleaning) in exchange for a place to live, study, and experience a sense of community. “I have never done anything into which I have put more of myself. It is a dream come true,” she said about the development of Watkins Hall and, eventually, Miller Hall. Elizabeth passed away in 1939 at the age of 78. In her will, she left a gift of money and land to the KU Endowment Association, helping the University to double the size of its campus and providing invaluable funds for academic ventures of all kinds.
Not only is Elizabeth Watkins one of KU’s greatest benefactresses, but her compassion, sagacity and altruistic heart forever changed the lives of all University students. Irvin Youngberg said it best, “the benefactions of one person, Mrs. Elizabeth Watkins, probably have done more to make the University of Kansas what it is now than the efforts and benefactions of anyone else... Kansans will be forever indebted to a good and generous lady for her wise and farsighted philanthropy at their state university.” We are proud to honor Elizabeth Watkins as the 2011 Pioneer Woman.