

"Federation Corner" column
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How American women saved Mount Vernon and democratized historic preservation

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Last week, readers were surely surprised to learn that the survival of iconic Independence Hall did not happen by accident, but because of the prodding and assistance of prominent individuals and groups, as well as the demands of the people, over the course of more than a century. It took many missteps and steps to figure out what needed to be saved, what needed to be removed, and what needed to be restored to what it had been when history was being made in this building.

However, even as state and local government hesitantly carved this meandering path to meaningful preservation, a more direct path and more inspiring role model for historic preservation in 19th century America was being created by Ann Pamela Cunningham and the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association that she founded.

After George Washington's death in 1799, followed by Martha Washington's death in 1802, Mount Vernon passed through the hands of several generations of Washington relatives until it was taken over in 1829 by George Washington's great-grandnephew, John Augustine Washington III.

As his funds dwindled and the wear and tear of hundreds of visitors began to take its toll, Washington could do little to maintain the Mansion and its surroundings. Several columns on the piazza rotted away completely, so the roof was propped up with the masts of old ships. Not surprisingly, Washington was approached by speculators who hoped to develop the property into a commercial enterprise. Washington revealed that his best offer for the property was \$300,000, yet he could not consent to sell Mount Vernon without an absolute assurance that it would be protected as is for future generations.

In 1848, Washington approached Congress and suggested that the government purchase the Mansion, but his timing was unfortunate. Factions from the North and South were already immersed in the debates about land and slavery that would eventually lead to the Civil War. Very little interest was paid to Washington's offer. He then changed course and traveled to Richmond, where he made a similar appeal to the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia. The answer was much the same.

On a moonlit evening in 1853, Louisa Dalton Bird Cunningham stared out from the deck of a passing steamer and saw the first president's house in near ruin. She wrote a letter about this to her invalid daughter, Ann Pamela Cunningham, back home in South Carolina. Her daughter was inspired to action, hoping to get Southern women to raise enough money to give to the state of Virginia to purchase and maintain Mount Vernon. She published an anonymous appeal, signing it as "A Southern Matron" in a South Carolina newspaper in December 1853.

Men, particularly Virginia's governor, disdained this effort by a woman. In response, Cunningham organized the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, and began to accept contributions directly. As more and more newspapers published her appeals, and a variety of extremely influential women agreed to become the original Vice Regents. Several men then began to offer help in meeting Washington's purchase price of \$200,000, particularly diplomat and politician, Edward Everett, who gave 129 lectures on 'George Washington, Builder of the Union' around the nation, leading to over \$69,000 in contributions.

By April 1858, Cunningham was ready to buy Mount Vernon with a large down payment and the balance over three years. However, with thousands of contributions, she was able to pay it off by December 1859

and take possession on Washington's birthday on February 22, 1860. Fortunately, Mount Vernon was treated as neutral territory during the Civil War. After the war, Cunningham led new efforts to raise funds for restoration work, including seeking compensation for the U.S. government's use of Mount Vernon's excursion steamboat as a troop carrier during the war. It took a relentless, sustained effort by her and her sister Vice Regents until 1869 to finally receive \$7000 compensation "to be used in repairing the desolation at Mount Vernon."

Fortunately, Ann Pamela Cunningham possessed the sensibilities of a true preservationist. She immediately dismissed all proposals to tear down Washington's outbuildings or to transform the landscape. In her farewell address to her fellow board members in 1874, shortly before her death, she established "a concise and eloquent mission statement that would serve as a guide for future historic preservation sites and which continues to be followed at Mount Vernon today:"

"Ladies, the Home of Washington is in your charge. See to it that you keep it the Home of Washington! Let no irreverent hand change it; no vandal hands desecrate it with the fingers of 'progress!' Those who go to the Home in which he lived and died, wish to see in what he lived and died! Let one spot in this grand country of ours be saved from 'change!' Upon you rests this duty."

The website of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association today states:

"Mount Vernon is owned and maintained in trust for the people of the United States by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, a private, non-profit organization founded in 1853 by Ann Pamela Cunningham. The Association is the oldest national historic preservation organization in the country, and it has always been in the forefront of the restoration field. It is directed by a Board of Regents, comprised solely of women, who represent over 30 states. Mount Vernon is the most popular historic estate in America and is open 365 days a year. Mount Vernon does not accept grants from federal, state or local governments, and no tax dollars are expended to support its purposes. Primary sources of income are revenue from the retail and dining facilities, ticket sales, and donations from foundations, corporations, and individuals.

"The estate, gardens and farm of Mount Vernon totaled some 8,000 acres in the 18th century. Today, roughly 500 acres of this historic estate have been preserved 16 miles south of Washington, D.C., on the banks of the Potomac River. Visitors can see 20 structures and 50 acres of gardens as they existed in 1799. The estate also includes a museum, the tombs of George and Martha Washington, Washington's greenhouse, an outdoor exhibit devoted to American agriculture as practiced by Washington, the nation's most important memorial to the accomplishments of 18th-century slaves. Mount Vernon welcomes an average of 1,000,000 visitors each year."

When it came to historic preservation, American women proved that they were the leaders and men could be their useful helpers, 67 years before men finally, and grudgingly, gave women the right to vote. American women brought grass roots American democracy to historic preservation long before they were allowed to participate in American democracy as voters, and they did so with little help from the government of men. Women sought to use the Ladies' Association model to save Valley Forge in 1878, to save Andrew Jackson's Hermitage in 1888, and to save houses lived in by Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, in the 1910s.

Frances P. Bolton, the Vice Regent from Ohio from 1938 to 1977, and Ohio's first Congresswoman from 1940 to 1969, sought, in the 1940s, to preserve the view of Maryland from Mount Vernon. The Ladies' Association purchased 750 acres, which was the nucleus of what later became the 4,000 acre Piscataway National Park, which has protected 6 ½ miles of Potomac River shoreline from industrial and commercial development

Several of Montgomery County's most internationally important historic resources are the homes of important American women: Clara Barton's home and one-time American Red Cross headquarters and disaster relief warehouse in Glen Echo and Rachel Carson's home in Quaint Acres, near White Oak, where she wrote *Silent Spring*, both of which are National Historic Landmarks. While I am the current president of Montgomery Preservation, Inc., I serve at the pleasure and the insistence of strong women, the preservation descendants of Ann Pamela Cunningham.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to waynemgoldstein@hotmail.com