

**Keepers of Domesticity: The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association and the Historic House  
Museum in the Political Sphere**

Reagan Shivers

Gender in American History

Dr. Mieras

The modern American house museum attracts tourists with perfectly poised, frozen-in-time snapshots of what life was like for a family in the distant past. Beyond the surface, American house museums have a political and gendered history, dating back to the preservation of George Washington's Mount Vernon in the 1850s. Catalyzed by nationwide anxieties about the upcoming Civil War, Ann Pamela Cunningham and the women of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association enshrined Washington's patriotic, fatherly image into the minds of Americans in hopes that domestic imagery would strengthen the Union. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association's restoration of Mount Vernon legitimized white women's roles in the historic preservation movement by using rhetoric that appealed to Antebellum ideals of women's moral superiority and the power of the domestic space. Three key topics support this idea; first, the political context and gender structures surrounding the origins of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, the mission of the organization and its founder, Ann Pamela Cunningham, and lastly, the domestic rhetoric used by the Association in two magazines.

Gender roles in the Antebellum South limited white women's options to exercise authority outside the private realm. Antebellum men and women functioned in separate spheres. Women primarily performed domestic duties in the home while men upheld the roles outside of the home, being still dominant heads of the household. Though restrained by material and legal disadvantages, mothers were afforded some power in the home. Republican Motherhood was an ideology that ruled over white, middle-class families. A Republican Mother was appointed as the moral captain of the home, in charge of educating her children, primarily her sons, about virtue and self-denying behavior to prepare them for their expected ventures into the public sphere, where she could not follow. Mary Ryan, a scholar of American women's history, notes that Republican Motherhood was “. . . advertised as a method of political and social control; it would

moderate the passions of young men who had been invested with awesome powers of democratic citizenship.”<sup>1</sup> Women's moral purity and virtue were believed to influence their sons to be better men and exercise these principles in adulthood. Though not investing any real political power into mothers, this role exalted women's moral superiority, which allowed them power in the private realm and secondhand influence in the public sphere.

Women's moral dominance over the private sphere left ample space for an elevated role in historic preservation. Edith Mayo notes, “Historic and cultural preservation theory was based on the prevailing definition of history as the study of the deeds of ‘great men.’”<sup>2</sup> This idea was especially relevant in the Antebellum era, where images of Revolutionary Era leaders were invoked to make statements about the country's current affairs. According to Mayo, women's “proper sphere” in the home appointed them the roles of “culture bearers” and “preservers.” The early history of house museums originated from “aesthetic moralism,” the mid-nineteenth-century idea that a well-designed home would promote positive family values amid threats of a Civil War.<sup>3</sup> If women were the supposed keepers of domestic culture, the practice of historically preserving the homes of great men was a celebrated cause, one that brought women into the field of public history and created a loophole between private and public spheres. Although still limited by the lack of electoral power, women public historians could exercise intellectual and political persuasion by curating nationally treasured properties. Additionally, women who were

---

<sup>1</sup> Ryan, Mary P. *Mysteries of Sex: Tracing Women & Men through American History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006: 96.

<sup>2</sup> Mayo, Edith P. “Women's History and Public History: The Museum Connection.” *The Public Historian* 5, no. 2 (1983): 65.

<sup>3</sup> West, Patricia. *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999: 2.

active in historic preservation founded organizations that connected them with other women in the field. Ladies' associations were prominent in the nineteenth century and empowered women to work together toward a common goal, often moral and social reform.<sup>4</sup> In a society that did not promote women's participation in the public sphere, either through the press, public speaking, or the vote, these associations were significant in allowing women to develop and spread ideas freely among each other.

The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association was one such organization that sought political and moral reform through the restoration and historic preservation of George Washington's Mount Vernon plantation. According to legend, Louisa Bird Cunningham conceived the idea of establishing the MVLA when she saw the dilapidated condition of Mount Vernon from aboard a steamboat crossing the Potomac River in 1853. She observed that the political climate of the country was mirroring that of Mount Vernon and wrote to her daughter Ann Pamela asking, "If the men of America have seen fit to allow the home of its most respected hero to go to ruin, why can't the women of America band together to save it?"<sup>5</sup> The Federal Government tried several times to purchase Mount Vernon from its owner, John Augustine Washington, a descendent of Washington, but all were unsuccessful. It was because of rumors that John Augustine was considering selling the estate to "Northern capitalists" wishing to turn the property into a vacation resort that the Cunninghams acted.<sup>6</sup> The idea of one of the South's most sacred sites becoming industrialized incited enough fear for Ann Pamela to issue a series of published

---

<sup>4</sup> Ryan, Mary P. *Mysteries of Sex: Tracing Women & Men through American History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Howe, Barbara J. "Women in Historic Preservation: The Legacy of Ann Pamela Cunningham." *The Public Historian* 12, no. 1 (1990): 34.

<sup>6</sup> West, 6.

writings, each titled "Appeal to the Ladies of the South," in which she called on Southern women to support the establishment of the MVLA in 1853, signing herself as "A Southern Matron." Cunningham appointed herself as Regent of the Association, also appointing Vice Regents to lead each participating state chapter. Regents oversaw fundraising events for their chapters, supporting the Association's \$200,000 goal to purchase the estate from John Augustine Washington. The goal was met in 1860, and the MVLA took complete ownership of Mount Vernon and began renovations.

The origin story and foundational structure of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association prove that it was uniquely a woman's endeavor and even an opportunity for white women to exercise their voices in the public sphere. However, limited public roles did not easily allow them to publish works, so the women of the MVLA used their power in the private realm to persuade readers in the literary sphere. The language Ann Pamela Cunningham and other MVLA writers used in early publishing is distinct in its use of domestic rhetoric to frame Washington as the father of the nation. Also important is how they described the women they spoke to; often, they appointed family titles to Washington and readers, and used ideas of Republican Motherhood to convince them to act. In doing so, Cunningham and the MVLA's writers manipulated the power of domesticity in the private realm into a workable tactic for their voices to be respected in the public arena. In an 1855 document outlining the organization of the Association's central committee, Cunningham appointed *Godey's Lady's Book* and *The Southern Literary Messenger* as the MVLA's primary organs of communication with the public.<sup>7</sup> The MVLA used these magazines to reach readership across the North and South, publishing appeals,

---

<sup>7</sup> Pribanic-Smith, Erika J. "Two Magazines and the Fight to Save Mount Vernon, 1855–1860." *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* Volume 26, no. 1 (2016): 96.

committee records, updates, and most significantly, writings that “extolled Washington’s virtues” to invoke support for the cause.<sup>8</sup>

In her second appeal as a Southern Matron in 1854, Cunningham articulated a lengthy argument to fundraise for the cause. To do this, she invoked excited feelings of patriotism and domestic responsibility. She addressed Southern women: “Will you fail...a thousand times no! Pride for your reputation, as the embodiment of all that is tender, noble, and generous must forbid it!”<sup>9</sup> In this line, Cunningham framed Republican Motherhood as the answer to fundraising; a responsible woman would donate to the Association and exercise her role as a generous, noble mother. In the first official Mount Vernon report that appeared in both Godey’s and *The Messenger*, Cunningham recalled<sup>9</sup> preservation of the home, and by extension memory, saying, “woman in her higher and better nature retained a sacred reverence for the 'memory of Washington'”<sup>10</sup> This statement is in an appeal titled, “To the Daughters of Washington,” already establishing Washington as a father figure, placing a daughterly duty on the country’s women to uphold his virtuous image. In another piece, Cunningham uses figurative language to call for remembrance of Washington again by proclaiming that women should “become the Vestals to keep alive the fires of patriotism.”<sup>10</sup> Family titles are often used in the writings surrounding the early years of the MVLA because they invoke a sense of obligation to uphold domestic values. By framing Mount Vernon, Washington, and the citizens of the country as a family, the MVLA attempted to create domestic ties that would strengthen the <sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Pribanic-Smith, 98.

<sup>9</sup> Cunningham, Ann Pamela. “Second Appeal on Behalf of Mount Vernon to the Ladies of the South.” (1854).

<sup>10</sup> “To the Daughters of Washington,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 21 (1855): 318

<sup>11</sup> Godey’s *Lady’s Book* Vol. 57: 178.

On house museums functioning as political statements, Patricia West notes, “By claiming to provide the ‘rootless’ populace with a shared ancestral home and sacred heritage, the house museum found a permanent niche in American political culture.”<sup>12</sup> preserved domestic space had the power to communicate an idealized version of the American home. West also quotes Catharine Beecher: “. . . the home was the perfect vehicle for national unity because it was a universally experienced institution.”<sup>12</sup> Cunningham hoped to create a shared identity that would combine patriotic feelings of the Revolutionary era with influences from the Cult of Domesticity. In 1858, she wrote: “. . . devoted woman alone triumphs when the common homestead can be procured as a common heritage for the estranged children of a common father, the spell of whose memory will yet have the power to reunite them around his hallowed sepulcher.” She goes on to assert women’s executive role in curating Washington’s image by adding, “Our country can be saved. . . for woman has become her guardian spirit.”<sup>13</sup> Cunningham deliberately characterizes Washington as a common father, with arguably religious implications in the addition of women being described as angelic, spiritual beings. In these remarks, she plays on the audience’s adherence to upholding the good image of God and the domestic family as the worldly representation of God’s will. Additionally, Cunningham ascribes a spiritual role to women because of the limitations of material world positions they were allowed to hold. She compares the women of the MVLA to angels to justify their work; if they function symbolically as guardian angels, they are not imposing on traditionally male spaces but performing religious duties.

---

<sup>12</sup> West, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Cunningham, Ann Pamela. “Mount Vernon Record” 1858.

The most perceptive use of domestic ideology in the MVLA's campaign is in an address published in *The Southern Literary Messenger* in 1855 by Beverly Wellford. The address, delivered on July 4<sup>th</sup>, begins with the patriotic remark that "The women of Virginia of 1855, inherit the instincts and the spirit of their mothers of 1776."<sup>14</sup> The combination of popular Revolutionary era rhetoric and Antebellum ideas of gender and motherhood created a powerful persuasive element in Wellford's address. The invocation of the Spirit of '76 is a powerful rhetorical device that once again connects the women of the MVLA and supporters of the cause to a shared ancestral past, more importantly, placing women in a history that they are often left out of. She continues the theme of motherhood with a long passage describing the duties of Republican Mothers by writing, "As mother and wife, as sister and daughter, it is hers in the ever recurring duties. . . of domestic life. . . which enshrine her in the affections of all save the most unmanly of the race." She then connects these ideas to Washington's family, noting, "the tutorings of the Mary who bore him. . . and the sustaining affections of the Martha who shared his fortunes and blessed his life." Finally, Wellford completes her call to action by claiming, "It is appropriate that. . . the women of Virginia should be engaged in the sacred work of reviving revolutionary associations."<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Wellford decentralizes Washington to persuade her audience of women's importance in shaping men; if Washington abided by the teachings of his mother, and shared his successes and affections with his wife, then so should Antebellum men. Wellford's address combines the three main themes that constitute many of the MVLA's rhetorical appeals. She uses strong patriotic language, notably delivering the address on July 4<sup>th</sup> and directly mentioning the Spirit of '76. She also ascribes the domestic structures of

---

<sup>14</sup> Wellford, Beverly R. "Address Delivered Before the Ladies' Mount Vernon Association." *Southern Literary Messenger* Volume 21, no. 9 (1855): 562.

<sup>15</sup> Wellford, *The Southern Literary Messenger* Vol. 21 no. 9: 565.



Antebellum-era families to the Washingtons, lending more importance to preserving their estate and image. Lastly, throughout the entire appeal, Wellford illuminates her ideas with subtle religious vocabulary, using words such as “sacred,” “blessed,” and “enshrine.” The MVLA's writers knew that their audience, both conservative men and women, would donate to the cause if they were convinced they were doing it for God, family, and country.

As proved by Cunningham and Wellford, women’s involvement in preservation allowed them to undertake practices traditionally reserved for men; they published writings, did public speaking and fundraising, and most importantly, did all of it to support a woman-led association. Even more than their success in restoring Mount Vernon and Washington’s image, the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association became a model for future historic preservation societies. William J. Murtagh, a scholar of historic preservation, observed that the MVLA’s efforts “established certain presumptions about preservation in America. . . these assumptions included the idea that private citizens, not government, were the proper advocates for preservation. . . and that women would assume a dominant role in the acquisition and management of such properties.”<sup>16</sup> Several organizations mirrored the structure of the MVLA following the Mount Vernon effort, most notably the Valley Forge Association and the Ladies’ Hermitage Association.<sup>17</sup> Both groups emulated the MVLA in that they sought to preserve the sites of great men or events, used domestic, patriotic, and religious rhetoric to gain support, and were organized and governed by women. Women’s domination of the historic preservation field was made possible by the domestic rhetoric used by the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association’s writers. Ann Pamela

---

<sup>16</sup> Murtagh, William J. *Keeping Time: The History and Theory of Preservation in America* (Pittstown, N.J.: The Mainstreet Press, 1988) 30.

<sup>17</sup> Howe, Barbara J. “Women in Historic Preservation: The Legacy of Ann Pamela Cunningham.” *The Public Historian* 12, no. 1 (1990): 35.

Cunningham and Beverly Wellford understood the boundaries of gender and used the power within their limits to construct a persuasive argument. In this case, women's seemingly restraining role in the home became a tool for participation in the political sphere and laid the groundwork for women's continued participation in the field of public history.