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The Intersection of Gender and Early American Historic Preservation: A Case Study of Ann Pamela Cunningham and Her Mount Vernon Preservation Effort

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The Intersection of Gender and Early American Historic Preservation:

A Case Study of Ann Pamela Cunningham and Her Mount Vernon Preservation Effort

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Introduction

American historic preservationists universally credit Ann Pamela Cunningham, the woman who saved George Washington’s Mount Vernon home, as the chief architect of the historic preservation movement in the United States. However, little scholarship has considered how Cunningham’s social position as a woman significantly contributed to her ability to save Mount Vernon, and thus jumpstart a national movement to save historically significant places. Using Cunningham and the organization she formed, the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union (MVLA), widely regarded as the nation’s first historic preservation society, this paper considers the intersection of gender and early historic preservation in the United States.

After a brief note explaining my research, I provide relevant background of the history and significance of Mount Vernon. By way of argument, I first contend that Ann Pamela Cunningham and the women of the MVLA worked within socially constructed norms and expectations regarding women’s roles in the antebellum period in their

2 See e.g., Howe, supra note 1 at p.34.
3 By “gender” I mean social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities, not biological differences between the sexes. I conceptualize gender as patterns of behavior that people learn to be associated with males and females, and then, according to their biological sex, people “perform” “male” and “female” roles in the social context according to that learned behavior. See generally Judith Butler, Gender Trouble, 1990 and Simone DeBeauvoir, The Second Sex, 1949. By “social and cultural construction” I mean a social system "constructed" by people in a particular culture or society that exists because people agree to follow certain rules of conduct. Eventually men and women internalize certain modes of conduct, equating “normal” conduct or the “norm” along gender lines. See generally Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality, 1966.
4 Antebellum (Latin meaning “before war”) period in American history refers to the 10-year period leading up to the American Civil War. While rife with increasing division between the North and South, the antebellum period is often nostalgically romanticized as a period of idealized, genteel and stable agrarian Southern society. See e.g., Margaret Mitchell, Gone With the Wind, a novel which profoundly impacted the way Americans view the pre-Civil War South. See also Judith B. Mitchell, “Ann Pamela Cunningham: A Southern Matron’s Legacy”, thesis presented to graduate faculty of Middle Tennessee State University, Dec. 1993.
historic preservation efforts. Doing so enabled these women to achieve crucial social and political acceptance by both men and women for their preservation efforts.

At the same time and equally important, I argue secondly, Cunningham and the women of the MVLA manipulated ideals of womanhood associated with the elite antebellum South to gain necessary political leverage for their cause. Their feminist spirit contributed not only to their ultimate successful preservation of Mount Vernon, but also to the erosion of socially constructed norms regarding women’s proper (non-public) place in society on a much larger scale. Thus, historic preservation pursuits gave Cunningham and America’s women a channel through which to contemporaneously work within and overcome norms about women’s roles. Consequently, women’s early historic preservation efforts resulted in important gains for women’s legal and political equality with men.

I next explore how notions of femininity relate to Cunningham’s approach to and conception of historic preservation. I reason that Cunningham’s use of patriotism to promote historic preservation related to women’s roles as preservers of the past and teachers of culture, history and identity. The political uncertainties of the antebellum period, namely those created by the Civil War, led to social insecurities and dissolution of the republican ideals of virtue, purity and patriotism that George Washington personified. Consequently, men and women alike viewed the effort to preserve his home as a political undertaking especially suited for women, as it required virtue, purity, caretaking and

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5 By femininity I mean characteristics and behaviors a particular dominant culture associates with or considers appropriate for women and girls. Distinct from sexual biology, although presuming some degree of essentialist notion of femaleness, femininity refers to socially learned traits and manners. In the antebellum period, femininity was particularly associated with ideals of gentility, morality, purity and domesticity. See Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” American Quarterly 18 Summer 1996, p.151. Welter states, “The attribute of true womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.”
moral guardianship, traits overwhelmingly associated with womanhood at the time. At the same time, the focus on patriotism enabled Cunningham to characterize her public, political efforts as sufficiently feminine, since it was acceptable, even expected, that women be the preservers of culture and historic pride.

Further, I suggest that Cunningham’s grassroots organizational approach to historic preservation was particularly well-suited for women in the antebellum period. As they were precluded from participation in more traditional, male-dominated forums of political change, namely the government, both state and federal, this bottom-up organizational approach and form for the MVLA focused efforts at a more local, community level. This organizational strategy gave women power to organize an historic preservation movement despite lack of direct access to channels of political change. It also provided a form of organizing that transcended preservation efforts, setting a platform for later, more radical women’s rights organizing.

Finally, I detail Cunningham’s devotion to a purist vision of preservation, perhaps her most enduring contribution to historic preservation. I discuss how Cunningham derived a purist model for historic preservation from socially constructed associations between femininity and purity, as well as from ideas that women were the purest guardians of history and culture in the antebellum period. In conclusion, I elucidate how this purist concept continues to influence contemporary preservation efforts in the US.

Research Note

By “grassroots” I mean a public movement, often political, pioneered by a group of citizens who cooperatively organize around a cause at the community level to influence those in traditional power structures, namely elected government. The power of the movement is derived from the number and dedication of the citizens involved, who through their efforts, learn to be organizers. In doing so, the grassroots leaders attain power within the traditional power structures, even while working outside of them to advance their political agenda.
I’d like to thank Jennifer Kittlaus at the Mount Vernon Library for her assistance with this paper. During two visits to Mount Vernon, I reviewed many early records of the MVLA. I reviewed correspondence that Cunningham had with lady regents and other fundraisers, such as Edward Everett, regarding the status of their efforts in the Virginia Legislature to incorporate the MVLA and gain title to Mount Vernon, as well as their strategies for raising money and the status of those efforts throughout the preservation period. I reviewed early legal documents including the charters of the MVLA, its by-laws and constitution, the deed to the Mount Vernon estate and legal opinions about the Association’s legal status and its ownership of Mount Vernon. While all of these documents proved very interesting, some of them were difficult to read because they were original, hand-written copies! To the extent possible, I have incorporated them into this paper. Jennifer also provided me with secondary sources that led me to other sources, including an unpublished dissertation by Judith Mitchell (see Note 4), which was very helpful to my project.

I also sought assistance from the State of Virginia Library. Librarians there led me to the Virginia Acts of Assembly, including those acts relating to the incorporation of Mount Vernon. I had hoped to review debates on the floor of the Virginia legislature regarding the incorporation of Mount Vernon and resistance to women’s property holding at the time of Cunningham’s efforts. I learned through my research with the State of Virginia Library that no such debates are recorded. Records are limited to motions on the floor of the legislature and, of course, the texts of final bills and amendments, some of which I obtained.
I had also hoped to review the Code of Virginia to locate specific statutes regarding women’s property holding rights during the pre and post Civil War era. However, because the Code of Virginia for the early time period of my study is available only by visit to the library in Richmond and is not available through inter-library loan, I resorted to secondary sources for information regarding women’s property rights at the time. Namely, I gleaned valuable information from the original legal opinions prepared for Cunningham by lawyers and judges during the time of her incorporation efforts, as well as from books written by Mount Vernon scholars, including Thane and Lashley (see Notes 11 and 33, respectively).

The Georgetown University Law Center Library reference desk helped me obtain numerous books through the Interlibrary-Loan System, which greatly enriched my project.

Finally, I’d like to thank Professor Byrne for his support for my project and his guidance regarding different ways to consider the intersection between gender, historic preservation and Mount Vernon. His feedback during the course of my project made for more interesting research, writing and learning.

**Background on Mount Vernon**

In 1761, George Washington, who would later become the first president of the United States, legally inherited the Mount Vernon estate, the land of which had been in the Washington family since 1674. From 1761 until the beginning of the Revolutionary...
War, Washington lived at Mount Vernon and, as a national hero, he returned there following his service in the war. It is estimated that during his two terms as United States president, Washington spent 434 days in residence at Mount Vernon.

After his presidency, Washington resided at Mount Vernon until his death in 1799. At that point, plantation ownership passed through a series of descendants who lacked either the will or the means to maintain the property. Finally, John Augustine Washington offered it for sale in 1848. Both the state of Virginia and the federal governments repeatedly declined to purchase the home and estate. This refusal to act was, at least in part, because John Washington was intractable with respect to his $200,000 asking price, which the government was not prepared to pay, especially with the nation on the brink of civil war.

As “public outcry was insufficient to convince either the state of Virginia or the federal government to buy the estate,” it became evident that if Mount Vernon were to be saved, the preservation effort would need to be a private one. In December 1853 Ann Pamela Cunningham, an elite Southern woman, took up the cause. Her plan was to raise the money necessary to purchase Mount Vernon and donate the money to the Virginia legislature, which in turn would use the money to gain title to the first President’s estate. She called the women of the nation to organize local, nationwide efforts to raise the funds, which they did with great organization and success. Eventually the women altered their original plan to give Virginia the money. Instead, in 1860, the MVLA, under

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8 Hosmer writes, “Today it is hard to recapture the veneration that nineteenth century Americans had for George Washington.” See Hosmer, supra note 1 at p.41.
9 In 1846, 1848 and 1850 Congress declined to honor petitions which called for action to save Mount Vernon. See Hosmer, supra note 1 at p.41.
Cunningham’s leadership, acquired title to the mansion and a portion of the land for $200,000, rescuing it from neglect and setting in motion its preservation and care. This acquisition of title was an important and rare achievement for women at the time, for it recognized some of the first property holding rights for women in the US.11 After the MVLA acquired Mount Vernon, the government made subsequent offers to buy the estate, but the MVLA refused to sell.12

Today the MVLA, a private non-profit organization, still possesses title to Mount Vernon and to this day only women serve on the Board of Regents for the Organization. The MVLA continues to preserve the Mount Vernon estate, and also maintains a library rich with original documents pertaining to the history of Mount Vernon as well as Washington, Cunningham and the MVLA.

Mount Vernon was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1960 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In addition to its historic significance, Mount Vernon’s distinguishing architectural features have been borrowed by American homes, mansions and even commercial buildings. Prominent international exposure has “broadened even further the recognition of Mount Vernon as a symbol of George Washington and of the United States.”13

Part I: Cunningham worked within norms of femininity to gain public support for her Mount Vernon preservation efforts.

12 See Murtagh, supra note 10 at p.28.
Ideologies of gender and morality played a central role in identity in the nineteenth century. During this period society associated virtue with female qualities, such as purity and domesticity, and viewed women as the guardians of culture and morals. The idea that females were of moral superiority was central to nineteenth century notions of true womanhood. Historian Jan Lewis writes that “well into the nineteenth century, Americans linked the fate of their nation to the virtue of its people,” with women personified as the “moral keepers of the country.”

Undoubtedly, antebellum ideas about women’s virtue and role as guardians of society’s culture and morals impacted Ann Pamela Cunningham, a highly educated, wealthy, elite Southern woman. “Cunningham was a modest, refined Southern woman with a high regard for social proprieties in force during the antebellum period.” She was “securely anchored” to the societal expectations for elite antebellum women. She also believed that, in patriotic and virtuous matters, “womanly influence was certainly equal, if not superior, to that of men.” Cunningham moved among elite social and economic circles in the South and a “web of relationships connected her to many socially prominent Southern families.” Based on her social standing, nineteenth century notions of femininity surely influenced Cunningham.

15 Id. at p.11.
16 Howe, supra note 1 at p.32.
17 Ginzberg, supra note 14 at p.12.
19 Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.3.
20 Id. at p.25.
21 Id. at p.11.
22 Id. at p.14.
Similarly, at school Cunningham most certainly learned the proper roles for elite, educated women in her time which impacted her throughout her life. Cunningham attended South Carolina’s prestigious Barhamville Academy, well-known for offering first-rate education to “thoroughbred” young women. During the time in which Cunningham attended the academy, the school’s headmaster wrote, “Home is the sphere in which female excellence is destined to revolve.” The combination of Cunningham’s social and educational background makes clear that Cunningham understood the importance of femininity to a proper Southern lady in the nineteenth century.

Cunningham worked within these socially constructed norms regarding womanhood in the antebellum period to advance her preservation cause. For example, she was very mindful that women’s public roles should be closely circumscribed. She wrote that at the outset of her efforts, she “only intended to pull the wires from behind the scenes and pass the cause to others’ hands.” Cunningham wrote,

“When I started the Mount Vernon movement…my appeal was to the Southern Ladies. The intention was simply to raise $200,000 and give it to Virginia to hold title and to purchase Mount Vernon.”

Only after the government refused to participate in saving Mount Vernon did Cunningham announce, “Let the women of America own and preserve Mount Vernon!” Thus, while ultimately Cunningham did lead a national public movement, in many ways in contrast to nineteenth century notions of femininity, it appears that having such a public role was not what she originally imagined.

23 Id. at p.23.
25 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/1866.
26 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection. See also Historical Sketch of Ann Pamela Cunningham, printed for the Association, New York: Marion Press, 1911, p.7.
27 MVLA Early Records/APC Collection. See also Historical Sketch of Ann Pamela Cunningham, supra note 26 at p.6.
Throughout her campaign to save Mount Vernon, Cunningham consciously and consistently evoked images of pure and dutiful women. By appealing to antebellum feminine notions of virtue and purity, Cunningham hoped to convince women to join the preservation crusade. For example, Cunningham’s first public plea for help to save Mount Vernon appeared in December 1853, when Cunningham petitioned the “Ladies of the South” in the *Charleston Mercury*, the most influential newspaper of the time.28 Her announcement called for women to come forth to save Mount Vernon and recognize that Washington’s home needed their womanly devotion and “purity of heart.”29 She wrote, “Ladies of the South, of…warm, generous, enthusiastic hearts, where still lingers some unselfish love of country and country’s honor…to you we turn…in behalf of the home and grave of Washington.”30

By appealing to norms of femininity, including virtue, purity, duty to country and guardianship, Cunningham fostered the idea that women uniquely shared the responsibility to unite to preserve Washington’s home, the most historic of the nation’s places.

Cunningham continued,

“Shame on…America – suffer Mount Vernon, with all its sacred associations……It is woman’s office to be a vestal, and even a fire of liberty may need the care of her devotion and the purity of her guardianship.”31

By cultivating the notion that saving Mount Vernon was a womanly duty, requiring great devotion and guardianship, Cunningham capitalized on the power of notions of femininity to draw large numbers of women into her cause.32 She was acutely aware that

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28 Thane, supra note 11 at p.16.
29 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/1853.
30 *Charleston Mercury*, 2 Dec 1853. See also MVLA/ Early Records/APC Collection/1853/3376.
31 Id.
32 See Ginzberg, supra note 14 at p.220.
in order to garner support and volunteers for her public effort, she would need to appeal to women’s traditional notions of femininity.

Cunningham’s choice to use a pen name for her pleas in the *Mercury* also coincides with her desire to work within socially constructed norms about women’s proper roles in antebellum society. “A lady’s name, the custom ruled, must never appear in print.” As engagement by women in public activities during the antebellum period was considered contrary to notions of femininity, use of a pen name made it possible for Cunningham to conceal her identity and thus avoid direct public criticism for her efforts. Cunningham’s choice of the pen name “A Southern Matron” also demonstrates Cunningham’s desire to appeal to accepted notions of femininity, as that pseudonym framed her plea as one rooted in maternal and pure Southern gentility.

Cunningham’s newspaper announcements defied typical notions of femininity in the antebellum period simply because the act of publishing by a woman was uncustomary and anti-feminine. Yet because Cunningham crafted her publication within socially acceptable gender constructs, carefully personifying herself as a virtuous and dignified Southern woman appealing to other genteel, proper women to join her crusade to preserve Mount Vernon, she circumvented much, although not all, public criticism.

In fact, Cunningham received much support from some newspapers. On November 24, 1854 the *Washington Circular* favorably published “An Appeal for Mount Vernon”.

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35 *Charleston Mercury*, 2 Dec 1853, supra note 30.
36 For example, in one recording Cunningham writes of her frustration regarding a Michigan newspaper that published a “disturbing article” about the MVLA’s efforts, See Early Records/ER-15/1859, as well as a similarly unfavorable article in a Providence, RI newspaper, See Early Records/ER-13/2865.
Vernon by the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union.” Additionally, the editor of the *Mobile Herald and Tribune* wrote an article for his paper:

> “The purchase of Mount Vernon by women impresses me as a most admirable way to secure the property and set it solemnly apart to the guardianship of the hero’s grave. The form of the tribute, hallowed by womanly affections and executed by womanly devotion, is the most fitting it can assume.”

This editor seems pleased with the women’s efforts to save Mount Vernon, at least in part because their efforts conform to notions of femininity, namely womanly devotion and guardianship. This favorable write-up evidences the importance of working within norms of femininity in order to gain wide support for the preservation cause. By appealing to feminine duties of caretaking and virtue, Cunningham cast her preservation effort as one sufficiently consistent with feminine roles, so that rather than view the plea as one to join in a public political crusade, her plea was seen as one calling women forward to take on a virtuous womanly, feminine duty to honor their country and protect its sacred history. At the same time, the women’s publications in newspapers demonstrated that ideas about womanhood were changing as women found access to public discourse.

Further, an ideology of women’s activism grounded in notions of femininity gave security to men that women like Cunningham and the MVLA’s historic preservationists were not overly radical. While some men refused to support Cunningham’s historic preservation movement “because it was a woman’s effort” and they “disapproved of women mixing in public affairs!”, many men came to accept preservation as women’s work and helped Cunningham’s crusade and historic preservation generally. For

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37 *Washington Circular*, 24 Nov 1854. See also MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/1854.
38 Thane, supra note 11 at p.18.
39 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection. See also See also *Historical Sketch of Ann Pamela Cunningham*, supra note 24 at p.8.
example Cunningham sought out the services of George Washington Riggs, a Washington banker of great distinction. 41 He replied to Cunningham’s request,

“It would give me great pleasure to do anything in my power to promote the success of the MVLA…I shall be happy to perform the duties of Treasurer of the Association, with the understanding that there is to be no compensation or salary attached to the office.” 42

Riggs was clearly pleased with the efforts of the MVLA and willing to complement their womanly efforts by performing the more masculine task of maintaining their finances.

Whereas more radical efforts, such as suffrage, 43 excluded men and viewed them as a barrier to the achievement of their feminist goals, Cunningham “routinely sought out socially and politically prominent men who provided legal and financial expertise to the Ladies’ Association.” 44 Early records show that a “group of gentleman” aided the MVLA by regularly issuing the Mount Vernon Record, that President Buchanan himself sent $50 for the cause, 45 and during an 1864 meeting of the Association, called to discuss how to get through the war without the necessary funds, Riggs himself offered to provide the MVLA with the money needed. 46 Of the assistance she sought and received from other men, Cunningham wrote,

“I had enlisted enthusiastically an influential gentlemen in Charleston, whose glowing appeals in the Courier…did us definite good. William L. Yancey took up our cause in Alabama. Wherever his law practice carried him, he spoke for us; took up collections.” 47

The willingness of these men to accept the public roles of Cunningham and the MVLA women likely stemmed, at least in part, because the men did not feel threatened by the women, who worked within norms of feminine behavior. By working within such norms, Cunningham and the MVLA gained wide, although not total, support of these and other

41 Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.64.
42 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Riggs/7 May 1858.
43 See generally Ginzberg, supra note 14 at p.101.
44 Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.5.
45 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Mount Vernon Record/September 1858, p.21.
47 Thane, supra note 11 at p.47; see also MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/1857.
prominent men by forming alliances with men and increasingly working alongside men. This conservative approach was instrumental to the broad political support that Cunningham and MVLA enjoyed.

Working within accepted notions of femininity most certainly contributed to the support that Edward Everett offered the MVLA. Everett was the most popular public speaker of his time, most famous for his long-winded address at Gettysburg. Early in 1856 Cunningham, keenly aware of the advantage of working with powerful men, convinced Everett to join the Mount Vernon preservation crusade. Of Cunningham, Everett wrote,

“Miss Cunningham, the Southern Matron, who has been principally active in getting up the MVLA…an invalid maiden lady seems that last person to manage a difficult business, but I believe this poor little woman…has done all that has been done for the purchase of Mount Vernon.”

Everett was so touched by this “poor little” woman’s efforts to manage such a difficult (male) business, that he pledged to dedicate all of his orations to Mount Vernon. Lashley writes, “There can be little doubt that Pamela Cunningham’s feminine charm paid off.” “Everett was so swept up in the idealism of the Mount Vernon movement that he offered to give his address free of charge anywhere the Ladies might like to send him.” Thus, by carefully circumscribing her public efforts to maintain her status as a well respected “lady” and by utilizing feminine allure, Cunningham drew the support of Everett. He welcomed the opportunity to take on the masculine, breadwinner role of leading a substantial amount of the public appearances and fundraising efforts on behalf

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48 Hosmer in Lord, supra note 34 at p.196.
49 Id.
50 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Everett/10 March 1856.
51 Historical Sketch, supra note 24 at p.9.
52 Lashley, supra note 33 at p.44.
53 Hosmer in Lord, supra note 34 at p.196.
of the Ladies’ Association and for his “dear little Pam,” the paternal reference he often used to address her.

The importance of recruiting Everett for the Mount Vernon cause cannot be overstated. In three years, Everett gave his Mount Vernon preservation speech 139 times, which provided important publicity for the effort nationwide. That the publicity came from a man made it more socially acceptable. While Everett took on the public role of publicizing the effort and raising money, Cunningham and the MVLA ladies were able to appear to be working for the effort in more private forums, much more aligned with their feminine roles. Everett donated all of the admission fees from his speaking engagements to the MVLA fund -- about $50,000, one-fourth of the money needed to purchase Mount Vernon from George Washington’s heir, John Washington. This seemed the ultimate display of chivalry towards the women, demonstrating that while the women were stepping outside of norms of femininity and taking on public roles, it was still Everett, a male, who controlled much of the financial resources of the organization.

In summary, through identification of women with virtue and morality, traditional feminine values, Cunningham created a means for women “to get a powerful hold on society and on women themselves.” By casting the preservation effort as a virtuous duty, Cunningham imparted a sense of personal authority and responsibility upon women to join the preservation effort. In turn, this authority provided women with the personal justification necessary for them to feel comfortable stepping outside traditional private, feminine roles. It also provided vision, purpose, and most of all courage for the

54 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Everett Collection.
55 Hosmer in Lord, supra note 34 at p.196.
56 Id.
57 Ginzberg, supra note 14 at p.6.
women." The ladies were amazed to find themselves “making speeches and passing resolutions like men!” Vice Regent LeVert called to the women of Alabama, “Raise your voices, ladies, and fear not. Call a meeting; elect a president, a treasurer…” Cunningham herself wrote, “So exhilarated I was with every accomplishment we made!” Women preservationists began to realize they “possessed influence” and that “as organizations they could ask and gain.”

Part II: Cunningham and the women of the MVLA manipulated ideals of antebellum womanhood to gain political leverage for their preservation cause.

While traditional feminine ideals seem to demarcate Cunningham’s efforts and the efforts of the MVLA, their preservation campaign to save Mount Vernon was unambiguously feminist. The fame which Cunningham’s declaration, “I shall do it!” has received itself illustrates how out of the ordinary for women her effort was. In fact, a friend and member of the MVLA, Virginia Campbell, remarked of her preservation crusade that Cunningham’s “nearest and dearest friends did not hesitate to say it was the wild idea of a sick woman’s brain.” Cunningham herself wrote of her desire for “intellectual” activities to fill her days and declared that the “mind has no sex.” Indeed, Cunningham had a pioneer feminist spirit.

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58 Id. at p.8.
59 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Regents/Mrs. Roger A. Pryor Collection/1895.
60 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Regents/Mrs. Henry LeVert Collection.
61 Lashley, supra note 33 at p.78.
62 Scott, supra note 11 at p.2.
63 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/September 1897 (?)/ER-IV; see also Reports of the MVLA/1889, p.7.
64 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Virginia Hale Watson Campbell Collection.
66 Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.33.
67 Generally, references to feminism and feminist spirit throughout this paper focus on the emerging idea during the antebellum period that biological sex should not be the only factor in shaping a person's social identity, and that men and women should have more equalized socio-political, legal and economic rights.
Cunningham’s mother’s admonition of Ann Pamela taking on public roles is similarly evidence that Cunningham’s actions were outside traditional notions of femininity for Southern elite women. She wrote to her daughter,

“You seem positively to stop at nothing…Oh, Pamela, I beg you to consider ere you go further, and let such a course…cause you to forget so far the delicacy of your sex! You certainly take upon yourself what no other woman would attempt!”

This scolding illustrates that Cunningham’s mother, also raised in traditional antebellum elitist femininity, viewed her daughter’s preservation efforts as outside norms of acceptable female behavior and dangerously feminist in their resolve.

Ironically, it was Cunningham’s mother who originally inspired her daughter to take up the Mount Vernon cause. After seeing Mount Vernon during a trip North, Louisa Cunningham wrote to her daughter,

“When we passed Mount Vernon…I was painfully distressed at the ruin and desolation of the home of Washington and the thought passed through my mind: Why is it that the women of this country did not try to keep it in repair if the men could not?”

Initially Louisa Cunningham supported the idea that women, and her daughter in particular, would lead Mount Vernon’s preservation efforts. However, once Ann Pamela stepped too far outside of the socially acceptable norms of femininity, Louisa Cunningham withdrew much of her support. Her mother’s admonishment illustrates her concern that her daughter’s feminist spirit was eroding her femininity.

Cunningham’s abundant references to the MVLA as a “sisterhood” also evoke feminist notions of the collective power of women, especially those organized legally around a political objective. Cunningham described the women of the MVLA to be as a

and opportunities. I acknowledge that there are many theories of feminism and many meanings of “feminist”. However, for purposes of this paper, I focus on Cunningham and the MVLA’s increasing awareness of inequalities between the sexes and characterize their use of grassroots tactics to overcome those inequalities as a manifestation of a feminist spirit, an awareness of inequality and an effort to undo it.

68 Lashley, supra note 33 at p.53; see also MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Louisa Cunningham Collection.
69 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Virginia Hale Watson Campbell Collection.
“band of women combining rare talents…a sisterhood of whom the country may well be proud.”⁷⁰ She wrote that the sisters of the MVLA “recognize in this association a bond of union…with such a spirit ruling the Association, who will say it is not destined to commence a new Era!”⁷¹ The concept of sisterhood encouraged women to believe in “female” traits, such as those aligned with traditional notions of femininity, but also encouraged women to have concern for women’s status, socially, politically, economically.⁷² Thus, Cunningham’s use of “sisterhood” exemplifies her clever ability to simultaneously promote traditional notions of womanhood, while also energizing the collective conscience of these women. By capitalizing on a “mandate of virtue” Cunningham and the MVLA sisters had “the impetus and social acceptance to act.”⁷³ They manipulated this mandate of virtue to their advantage, in a way that justified the entrance of their sisterhood into public spheres of business, law and politics.

One prominent example of the feminist achievements of Cunningham and the MVLA in the public sphere is the legal incorporation of the MVLA. Virginia’s incorporation of the MVLA on March 17, 1856 represented an unprecedented legal achievement for American women, as never before had a women’s organization been legally incorporated in the US.⁷⁴

To achieve incorporation required a strong-willed feminist spirit and collaboration. Since the legislature was in Richmond, Cunningham worked closely on

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⁷⁰ MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/“Paper on the Vice Regents”; see also MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/ “Form Letter: Regent to Vice Regents on their Official Duties.”  
⁷¹ Id.  
⁷² Ginzberg, supra note 14 at p.24.  
⁷³ Id. at p.14.  
⁷⁴ Hosmer, supra note 1 at p.49. See also Thane, supra note 11 at p.28.
the MVLA’s incorporation with Mrs. Ritchie, the Richmond Vice Regent who led the incorporation efforts. On February 29, 1856 Ritchie wrote to Cunningham:

“I must give you some scraps of good news. I have been electioneering, and very successfully. Night before last I had a musical soiree, and desired my husband invite as many of the Senators and Members of the Legislature as the house would hold. Our small but very expansive rooms were well crowded…Then came the grand coup. As the ladies began to retire, Mrs. Pellet [another Richmond committee member] commenced the subject with Governor Floyd…Governor Floyd pledged himself to use his best endeavors to pass our bill and at once so did all the other Members and Senators present.”

This letter demonstrates how Ritchie shrewdly used her feminine hospitality role and capitalized on her husband’s social clout in order to gain support for Mount Vernon’s incorporation. While acting in her domestic capacity as hostess in her home, she was able to segue into an inconspicuous political role, thus gaining the promises of the Legislature’s men to support the MVLA cause by manipulating her feminine roles.

Ritchie further writes to Cunningham, “After all the ladies had left, the gentlemen still remained and talked to me, and some were actually warmed into enthusiasm.” Her explanation that she “warmed” the men into support further illustrates that she herself was aware of her own command of femininity to achieve her political incorporation goals.

While Ritchie’s letter gave Cunningham and the MVLA Vice Regents great hope for their bill of incorporation in the Legislature, it took more than Ritchie’s warming the men on the occasion described to convince them to accept the MVLA charter for incorporation. As the legislative session moved towards its end, no action had been taken and the Bill was “always mysteriously bypassed.”

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75 Thane, supra note 11 at p.38; See also MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Anna Cora Ritchie Collection.
76 Id.
77 Thane, supra note 11 at p.38.
denied access to most of the major institutions by which society governed itself,”78 it was only through relentless insistence and creative tactics that Cunningham and the MVLA women were able to achieve incorporation of the MVLA by the Virginia Legislature.

In response to the obstinacy of the Legislature to act on the Bill, Cunningham and Ritchie cleverly devised a plan to exert greater pressure on the Legislature. They learned that on one Sunday evening towards the close of the session, many of the Legislature’s men would be dining at the Exchange Hotel in Richmond. Ritchie and Cunningham quickly contacted as many Richmond committee ladies as they could. The group of MLVA women “descended”79 on the governor and Mr. Langfit, the House Speaker, as they dined at the hotel. “The governor capitulated on the spot, the Speaker was routed to give his consent, and Mr. Langfitt was promised the floor at eleven o’clock the following day to present the bill.”80

This example demonstrates the feminist spirit that Cunningham and the MVLA had. They refused to be excluded from having their voices heard in the Legislature, and creatively devised means of asserting power over the men. If they were to be formally precluded for participation in the Legislature, they were determined to nonetheless exert influence over it. Their creativity did not stop with the dinner descent. After their infiltration of the men’s dinner at the hotel, the MVLA ladies “took to separate carriages to alert all the other members of the Association in the city, and many of them proceeded in a body to the Capitol a little before eleven, and filed into the gallery.”81

78 Scott, supra note 11 at p.2.
79 See Thane, supra note 11 at p.38 (describing a “dramatic descent of some ladies of the Richmond committee.”).
80 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Anna Cora Ritchie Collection/17 March 1856.
81 Thane, supra note 11 at p.39.
women, they were denied the right to vote, they would use their presence in the House to exert pressure on the voting.

Undoubtedly their presence in the House affected the men’s votes. Ritchie wrote to Cunningham:

“There was an astonished silence in the House, even before the Speaker’s gavel fell. He made a courtly speech with reference to the ladies who had honored the Assembly with their presence, and asked if the gentlemen would set aside other business until the ladies’ bill was attended to. Most of the replies were ‘certainly, certainly’, with a few murmurs of ‘outrageous’, which were ignored.”

It was under this feminist gaze, as the women made their presence in numbers known, that the men voted in favor of the incorporation of the MVLA. Only two men dissented. In the Senate, after the lone dissenter “wilted” to the women’s power, voted unanimously in favor of the Ladies. This determination and willingness to challenge the Legislature despite the insistence on traditional notions of women’s social roles, was decidedly feminist.

The importance of their presence that day cannot be underestimated. Ritchie wrote to Cunningham,

“I have just returned from the Capitol. Our bill has gloriously passed both Houses… Many of the Members and Senators talked to us, and assured us again and again that the bill would never have passed but for the presence of the ladies.”

Indeed, the men, as they voted in favor of the women’s charter, must have been acutely aware that the women had prevailed over them, in this most public political arena. At the same time that this feminist will influenced the men in this normally masculine space, the atmosphere in the House on that day was a decidedly feminine atmosphere. This was, after all, spring time in antebellum Virginia. Thayne writes, “One can picture the floating

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82 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Anna Cora Ritchie Collection/17 March 1856.
83 Thane, supra note 11 at p.39.
84 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Anna Cora Ritchie Collection/17 March 1856.
ribbons and the rustling flounces and the flowered bonnets.”  

The juxtaposition of the feminine with the feminist “redefined women’s place by giving the concept of femininity a public dimension.”  

The Mount Vernon Ladies Association was now officially an incorporated entity in Virginia, with all of the rights and privileges that accompany such status.

Grant of a charter to a female organization such as the MVLA gave women a level of independence not normally available to them, as in marriage husbands had control over all property. Ginzberg writes,

“Corporate status circumvented married women’s formal legal disabilities at the discretion of the state legislature by creating a legal ‘person’. . .these legal charters contradicted everything we knew about the legal status of married women in the antebellum era.”

Thus, with the legal incorporation of the MVLA, the women gained some level of legal equality with men. The achievement of incorporation represented a significant gain for the MVLA because it reduced the normal limitations on women’s legal right to act in the public forum, and gave women legal authority to engage in public activity and transactions otherwise proscribed to married women, including “acquiring, holding and conveying property.”

As an incorporated entity, the MVLA gained the legal right to purchase, hold and improve Mount Vernon and enjoy full discretion over the Estate once they paid Washington. The MVLA now “constituted a body, politic and corporate” and as such was “entitled to all the rights, powers, privileges and immunities prescribed by existing

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85 Thane, supra note 11 at p.39.
86 Scott, supra note 11 at p.2.
87 Mitchell supra note 4 at p.58.
88 Ginzberg, supra note 14 at p.50.
89 Scott, supra note 11 at p.26.
90 Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.63.
The MVLA now had the legal right to “purchase, hold, and improve two hundred acres of Mount Vernon…and shall have and exercise full power over the use and management of the same.” The legislators’ acceptance of the MVLA constitution and by-laws “signaled a public and legal recognition of Cunningham as the first Regent of the MVLA.” With the credibility and security of legal status, Cunningham, after four years, ceased to use her pen name “A Southern Matron” and took on her new title of Regent. With the weight of the law behind her, Cunningham could publicly reveal her identity in public efforts, an important step for women’s equality.

An equally feminist achievement of the MVLA that increased the women’s independence, individuality and status was the prowess that Cunningham and the MVLA developed with respect to the business, legal and public relations affairs of the organization. “Cunningham exhibited a remarkable knowledge of organizational management, fund-raising on a national level, and the workings of the legal and political systems.” By 1860 Cunningham had appointed vice regents in 30 states. These vice regents in turn appointed lady managers in each county, town village, and state. “Within this network women learned how to conduct business, carry on meetings, speak in public, and manage money.” Ginzberg writes,

“Everywhere well educated women were found fully able to understand and explain… public questions…everywhere started up women acquainted with the order of public business; able to call and preside over public meetings of their own sex; act as secretaries and committees, draft constitutions and by-laws, open books, and keep accounts with precision, appreciate system…enter into extensive correspondence with their own sex…co-operate [with] men.”

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91 See Amended Charter, Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, passed March 19, 1858. MVLA library collection. Also on file with State of Virginia Library – State of Virginia Code compilation.
92 Id.
93 Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.63.
94 Id.
95 Id. at p.5.
96 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/ Form letter: Regent to Vice regents on their Official Duties.
97 Scott, supra note 11 at p.2.
98 Ginzberg, supra note 14 at p.160.
Through their involvement with the MVLA, Cunningham and many other women developed competence in public tasks and roles traditionally limited to men.

In so doing, the women were replacing the idea that women were best suited for more domestic, feminine roles with the more feminist conjecture that both men and women should have public responsibilities and power. “For some women, working toward collective goals tapped into creativity that had been quiescent in the narrow round of domesticity.”\(^99\) To return to the earlier example of the incorporation success, after the bill for incorporation passed in the Virginia legislature, Ritchie wrote to Cunningham, “Think, think, imagine if you can, how we felt!”\(^100\), demonstrating the emotional impact such a victory had for the women’s sense of confidence and abilities to effect change in the public sphere.

Madame LeVert’s plea to the women of Alabama demonstrates the kind of confidence that women preservationists gained through their preservation fundraising efforts. In her appeal to the ladies of Alabama, the Vice Regent from Alabama declared, “Your hearts are enlisted in Washington’s behalf…Raise your voices, ladies, and fear not. Call a meeting; elect a president, a treasurer, and all the other necessary officers. Issue circulars, open subscription lists…You have time, talents and patriotism enough among you, if you would only give to this noble cause!”\(^101\)

LeVert, too appealed to women’s sense of femininity by evoking images of their hearts and ideas about their patriotism. At the same time, LeVert’s challenge to the women to find their talents and take on leadership roles in the preservation cause demonstrates her own conviction that women were talented and capable of doing important work in the public sphere. Likewise, her call on women to “call meetings” and elect themselves to

\(^99\) Scott, supra note 11 at p.2.  
\(^100\) MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Anna Cora Ritchie Collection/17 March 1856.  
\(^101\) MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Regents/Mrs. Henry LeVert Collection.
positions of great importance demonstrates an increasing comfort among women themselves about taking on leadership in public affairs such as preservation.

Cunningham’s negotiations with John Washington offer a final example of her indomitable feminist spirit and her ability to manipulate femininity in the interest of her preservation cause. While in the beginning of Cunningham’s efforts to acquire and preserve Mount Vernon John praised the ladies’ efforts, he wrote to Cunningham that he declined “the proposition you have so eloquently made”\footnote{MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/John Augustine Washington Collection/10 January 1854.} to have the MVLA purchase the property. He further stated that if the State of Virginia declined to purchase Mount Vernon, he “would feel inclined to dispose of the property only to the government of the United States.”\footnote{Id.} John’s obstinacy, which Cunningham described as the “refusal of Mr. Washington to sell to the ‘ladies’ on the plea that it would mortify his feeling to accept the patriotic sacrifices of his countrywomen”\footnote{MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/John Augustine Washington Collection/ER11-174.} did not stop Cunningham, who wrote to her vice regents that by “raising the money we could change Washington’s mind and get the place ourselves!”\footnote{MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Miss Sarah Tracy Collection/28 May 1866.}

By engaging Washington in a distinctly feminine, cooperative business discussion during her final meeting with John Washington, she finally convinced him to sell Mount Vernon to the MVLA. Cunningham wrote,

“\textit{I talked pleasantly…I told him I knew the public had behaved abominably toward him…What a change in his face!...Unaware I had touched a sore sport…I told him…I would go before the next legislature and ask it to make every change he required …I held out my hand, he put his hand in mine…our compact was sealed! None but God can know the mental labor and physical suffering that Mount Vernon has cost me!}”\footnote{MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/ER 4229.}

\footnotetext{102 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/John Augustine Washington Collection/10 January 1854.} 
\footnotetext{103 Id.} 
\footnotetext{104 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/John Augustine Washington Collection/ER11-174.} 
\footnotetext{105 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Miss Sarah Tracy Collection/28 May 1866.} 
\footnotetext{106 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/ER 4229.}
By tailoring her plea to his emotional senses, Cunningham showed Washington that she sympathized with the detestable manner in which the men of the legislature had treated him. Washington told Cunningham in a letter that, since she had ultimately convinced him “the women of the land will probably be the safest as they will certainly be the purest guardians of a national shrine, I am willing to comply with your request.”107 Howe writes that historic preservation is a “field where women can use their relationship building and negotiation skills to negotiate various interests in historic preservation.”108 Whereas in the beginning of the preservation fundraising efforts, Washington detested the idea of selling the property to women, ultimately Cunningham convinced him that it was women precisely who would honor his wishes for the estate and meet his price, a faith he likely found as a result of Cunningham’s feminine ability to touch him emotionally, rather than from a purely business perspective.

On the one hand historic preservation work of women like Cunningham and the members of the MVLA reinforced prevailing cultural definitions of womanly behavior since the women consciously worked within socially constructed norms of femininity. At the same time, because preservation work provided a politically acceptable women’s public cause, involvement by women in early preservation efforts “helped make women conscious of themselves as women – a necessary first step to the development of a feminist consciousness.”109 “While improving the world around them, they also learned important lessons: to work together as women, to recognize that they were competent to tackle the problems they faced, and to acknowledge their own self worth as

107 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/John Augustine Washington Collection/13 March 1858.
108 Howe, supra note 1 at p.50.
Involvement in the preservation efforts of Mount Vernon offered these women an opportunity “to establish an identity independent of husbands and a chance to exercise competence or ambition.” Women learned to be professionals before the traditional professions were open to them.

Consequently, early preservation efforts resulted in important gains for women’s legal and political equality with men. These efforts also provided a means of organizing that transcended preservation goals, setting a platform for later, more radical women’s rights organizing. Over time, the aggregate effect of women’s organizing was a shift in social definitions of women’s roles. These developments made women’s suffrage inevitable by the second decade of the twentieth century.

III-A: Cunningham’s use of patriotism as a tool to promote historic preservation related to women’s roles as preservers of the past and keepers of culture.

From the beginning of her efforts, Cunningham identified preservation of the home of the nation’s foremost hero, George Washington, as a patriotic endeavor for which women had a unique calling and role to play. She wrote of the Mount Vernon preservation effort that a “call was made to the women…to gather around Washington’s grave, and like vestal virgins to keep alive the fires of patriotism!” Mount Vernon scholars have written that Cunningham saw her preservation work “as an instrument of

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110 How, supra note 1 at p.32.
111 Scott, supra note 11 at p.27.
112 Id. at p.4.
113 Id.
114 I use patriotism, which derives from the Latin “fatherland,” to mean devoted love, loyalty, support, and defense of one’s country by individuals and groups. Patriotism includes pride in history, ideals and culture, and the desire to preserve the character and identity of a nation based on those ideals. Patriotism also implies a moral willingness to sacrifice one’s personal interests for the betterment of one’s country.
115 Historical Sketch, supra note at p.19. See also MVL/A/Early Records/APC Collection/Cunningham.
patriotism,” and that patriotism was an “obvious motivation” for her preservation efforts. Her preservation struggles to save Mount Vernon, in her words, gave her the “satisfaction of having done something for the good of my country.”

Cunningham’s use of patriotism to promote support for historic preservation related in part to women’s roles as preservers of the past. With the Civil War looming, the country faced increasing sectional division between the North and South. Naturally, many Americans felt great uncertainty about the nation’s future. Mitchell explains,

“In an era of mounting social, economic and political conflicts, Americans became increasingly preoccupied and sentimental about the past. Many...perceived a rapid decline of public virtue and patriotism throughout the union…America needed an icon upon which to focus its attention…Mount Vernon provided a rallying point.”

The political uncertainties created by the Civil War provided an opportunity for women to use historic preservation to restore a connection to a more virtuous, patriotic past. The fact that Mount Vernon was a site associated with Washington made it “worthy of preservation” for “no American figure at the time could rival the historic importance of George Washington and his patriotic spirit.”

By focusing the purpose of the preservation effort as one to save the home of the “country’s father” Cunningham characterized preservation as a patriotic cause around which women, Northern and Southern, could unite. Cunningham encouraged them “come forward” for the preservation effort “with energy and zeal in this tribute of love and gratitude to our common father.” By emphasizing to the ladies that the objective

\[116\] Lindgren, supra note 40 at p.19.
\[117\] Murtagh, supra note 10 at p.37.
\[118\] MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/John Augustine Washington Collection/1859(?)
\[119\] Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.36.
\[120\] Murtagh, supra note 10 at p.30.
\[121\] Id. at p.28.
\[122\] See e.g., Lashley, supra note 33 at p.68.
\[123\] MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Cunningham/Form letter for invitation to accept a Vice Regency in the Association/ER11-173, emphasis mine.
of the preservation effort was “to secure perpetual guardianship for Mount Vernon that it may be kept national property sacred for all times to the memory of the father of our country,”\footnote{MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Cunningham/ Form letter: Regent to Vice Regents on Their Official Duties/ERI-99.} Cunningham characterized preservation as a feminine duty of guardianship over the nation’s history. Women who joined the preservation cause would be carrying out their traditional feminine duties to preserve the country’s past and honor its heroes. In doing so Cunningham fused femininity with the womanly duty to “rekindle the flame of republican virtue”\footnote{Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.6.} that Washington personified by uniting in an effort to preserve his home and history. In doing so, Cunningham cultivated fundamental ideas about historic preservation deriving from notions of femininity, including the central role of guardianship, patriotism and identity with the past as purposes of preservation efforts.

Throughout the country vice regents’ appeals for the MVLA demonstrate the support generated for preservation by casting it as a feminine, patriotic duty. Mary Rutledge, Vice Regent from Tennessee, distributed a “Circular to the Patriotic Men and Women of Tennessee” in November 1858 and managed to raise $2000. She told Cunningham that “state pride shall be worked on by every argument.”\footnote{MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Letters to Cunningham/1858.} Similarly, as previously mentioned, Vice Regent LeVert’s plea to the women of Alabama decried, “Your hearts are enlisted in Washington’s behalf… You have…patriotism enough among you, if you would only give to this noble cause!”\footnote{MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Regents/Mrs. Henry LeVert Collection.} By casting themselves as voices for patriotism and womanly duty of guardianship and care, these vice regents were able to gain wide support for their preservation efforts, as many women heard the preservationist patriotic call and united for the MVLA cause. At the same time, the vice regents
promoted the idea that their preservation efforts enabled them to fulfill their feminine roles of preservers of culture, history and national pride.

The centrality of patriotism to historic preservation continued to influence the movement well beyond the success at Mount Vernon. Most post-Mount Vernon preservation groups garnered support by putting patriotism on their agenda.\(^{128}\) For example, the women’s organization devoted to saving Andrew Jackson’s home in Tennessee stated that it “is good policy in a republican government to inculcate sentiments of veneration for those departed heroes who have rendered services to their country”\(^{129}\) as validation for their efforts. This statement suggests that, like Cunningham and the MVLA, this women’s group likewise sees preservation as a vehicle through which they can work to instill patriotism and spread understanding of the past.

Cunningham’s success at Mount Vernon was so influential that “her efforts established certain presuppositions about historic preservation in America,” including the central role of women and of patriotism in historic preservation.\(^{130}\) Generating a sense of patriotism to preserve landmarks associated with important political heroes “laid the groundwork in the nineteenth century as the historic preservation movement developed.”\(^{131}\) Cunningham’s conception of Mount Vernon as a patriotic “mecca” created a historic house paradigm that set the standard for the American preservation movement for “ensuing decades.”\(^{132}\) Contemporary historic preservation work seeks to protect places for their architectural and aesthetic significance as much as their historical

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128 Howe, supra note 1 at p.36.
129 Murtagh, supra note 10 at p.11.
130 Id. at p.30.
131 Id. at p.166.
132 Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.137.
or patriotic importance. However, it is Cunningham we can thank for the patriotic sentiment she cultivated for preservation. This overlay of patriotism and femininity incentivized early women preservationists to unite in a womanly duty to honor and celebrate the country’s history through preserving its past landmarks, most notably Mount Vernon.

Part III-B: Cunningham’s grassroots approach to preservation is another example of Cunningham’s efforts to work within and challenge norms of femininity to advance her preservation goals.

Cunningham took a distinctly grassroots approach to the organization of the MVLA and its preservation efforts. This bottom-up strategy for fundraising and organizing to preserve Mount Vernon was particularly effective for women in the antebellum period. Because women were denied access to power through traditional government and policy-making forums, a preservation strategy focused on organizing women at the community, local level empowered women to influence those with financial and political power, even while working outside traditional male-dominated political arenas. Similarly, their grassroots approach provided the flexibility the women needed to manipulate notions about women’s proper roles to their advantage as they raised money and support for the Mount Vernon preservation project.

Cunningham’s personal records reveal that she carefully contemplated the choice to pursue grassroots-type organization. Cunningham wrote,

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133 Lindgren, supra note 40 at p.10.
134 By “grassroots” I mean a public movement, often political, pioneered by a group of citizens who cooperatively organize around a cause at the community level to influence those in traditional power structures, namely elected government. The power of the movement is derived from the number and dedication of the citizens involved, who through their efforts, learn to be organizers. In doing so, the grassroots leaders attain power within the traditional power structures, even while working outside of them.
Rather than burden the women on the ground with bureaucracy and hierarchy, organizational attributes customary to traditional male power structures, such as governments and corporations, Cunningham gave the vice regents freedom to develop their own strategies for fundraising for the preservation effort. Her approach was “a truly grassroots effort.” Rather than possess a “national organization”, chapters and efforts “sprang up” throughout the nation with little “central core.”

While she leaves the specifics of organizing to the judgment of the women themselves, Cunningham offers some advice, based on geographic peculiarities. In her advice letter to the vice regents, she writes,

“As knowledge of the plan pursued in other states may perhaps offer some aid in organizing your own, I will sketch their procedures…In the Southern states where the character of the people is impulsive and confiding, and the population scattered, the organization if very simple, yet effective. The vice regent appoints a treasurer, her secretary, one lady manager (‘a term that pleases more than ‘agent’”) for each county, town and village, who is responsible to her.”

In contrast to her advice regarding organization in the South, of the North Cunningham writes, using New York as a model:

“As after much deliberation she [Vice Regent for New York] adopted a form similar in its basics to that at use in the South but with additional regulations thought necessary for that region…I forward you…correspondence…giving you an exact account of her method of management.”

This advice to the ladies demonstrates that Cunningham understood that one of the strength of grassroots organizing is its flexibility to account for geographic and cultural

135 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/ Form Letter: Regent to Vice Regents on their Official Duties/ER1-99.
136 Hosmer, supra note 1 at p.21.
137 Id.
138 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/ Form Letter: Regent to Vice Regents on their Official Duties/ER1-99.
139 Id.
differences. Rather than take a top-down managerial role, Cunningham instead took a hands-off, advice-giving approach. She gave the women some guidance, but left the ultimate decisions about strategizing to the women at the local level. This made it possible for her to focus on the larger picture of the fundraising and preservation, while others on the ground raised money, dollar for dollar. Further, this approach made it possible for women to identify norms of women’s work on more local levels. Doing so enabled the women, in their communities, to better identify and manipulate feminine roles to their advantage in their efforts.

The varied strategies for fundraising in different parts of the country evidence the success of this bottom-up strategy. “Vice regents raised money through localized projects in their own states.”140 Jenny Ward, Vice Regent for Kansas, raised money thru the collection of small donations from school children. Kansas schoolchildren raised enough funds to pay for a replica of servant’s quarters to be constructed at Mount Vernon.141 Ward wrote to Cunningham that she thought the best way to raise money in Kansas, “nearly two thousand miles away” from Mount Vernon and at time when people in Kansas were focused on “promoting the varied interests of our state,” would be to generate enthusiasm with children and focus on the collection of small contributions through educational programs involving speeches, essays and songs.142 After achieving their goal, Kansas schools celebrated statewide on George Washington’s birthday.143

As Ward focused on children, a traditionally female realm of responsibility, having identified that approach to be best suited for her efforts in Kansas, Jane Yates

140 Howe, supra note 1 at p.34.
142 Id.
143 Id.
Antwerp, Vice Regent for Iowa, held a charity fancy dress ball that raised $200 for the ladies’ fund.\(^{144}\) This effort made sense for Antwerp, whose husband was a military general and thus the two led a very public life.\(^{145}\) Mrs. Ritchie in Virginia, taking advantage of her husband’s political leverage in the legislature, held a dinner party inviting the Virginia Assembly members.\(^{146}\) The flexibility at the top enabled these grassroots projects, which cumulatively were important to the success of Mount Vernon’s preservation. Hosmer writes, like many successful grassroots efforts, the “work of the association advanced gradually through the years, with assistance from a variety of sources.”\(^{147}\)

Public support and attention at the local level reflect the quintessentially grassroots nature of the early historic preservation effort. Whereas more powerful organizations rely on appropriations from government or other well-endowed sources for their funding, the ladies, without the luxury of support from the government, welcomed donations of all sizes from various willing sources. Ms. Antwerp’s ball raised $200, Mary Rutledge’s petition in Tennessee collected $2000 and President Buchanan’s $50 donation was likewise appreciated. Cunningham reminded the regents that the success of their cause depends on “gratuitous contributions and labors of patriots” and that in her experience “only personal appeals bring results”\(^{148}\) to remind them of the importance of their on the ground, personalized labors, a distinctly feminine approach. Her instruction that the vice regents “send the money as fast as collected to the Regent!” so that

\(^{144}\) “Catalogue of the Centennial Exhibition Commemorating the Founding of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, 1853-1953,” p.16 (1953), available at Mount Vernon, Va library.
\(^{145}\) Id.
\(^{146}\) MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Mrs. Cora Ann Ritchie Collection/17 March 1856.
\(^{147}\) Hosmer, supra note 1 at p.54.
\(^{148}\) MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/ Cunningham to Gilmer/ER-1855.
Washington can be paid “as soon as possible to forestall interest”\textsuperscript{149} demonstrates that, as most on the ground efforts that lack financial and political power, the women worked hard to meet their obligations to Mr. Washington and that they welcomed all forms of contributions.

The financial strength that the MVLA in time acquired is testimony to the power that the women gained through their individual efforts on the ground. While women preservationists on an individual level gained independence and confidence in their public abilities, the MVLA as a preservation group gained strength as financial resources increased, giving the women and the organization “power and prestige in the historic preservation movement.”\textsuperscript{150}

At the same time that the MVLA women were publicly collecting money and assembling a strong political constituency, their localized, bottom-up fundraising efforts fell within norms of femininity. Thus, both men and women were comfortable with the women’s involvement in the grassroots preservation efforts. Ms. Antwerp and Mrs. Ritchie’s engagement in the work of domestic hostess was an acceptable, feminine way for women to organize for their preservation cause. Mrs. Ward’s focus on children capitalized on women’s caretaking and educational duties. Similarly, Mary Hamilton aligned her preservation fundraising with other charity fundraising work she led in New York. As the granddaughter of Alexander Hamilton and great-granddaughter of a signer of the Declaration of Independence,\textsuperscript{151} Hamilton’s history and social status made her

\textsuperscript{149} MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/ Form Letter: Regent to Vice Regents on their Official Duties/ ER1-99.
\textsuperscript{151} “Catalogue of the Centennial Exhibition Commemorating the Founding of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, 1853-1953,” (1953), available at Mount Vernon, VA library.
particularly well-suited for the womanly duties of charity and patriotic work. Because these women were not directly working to change power structures of men, or upsetting notions of women’s domestic caretaking roles, grassroots organizing was an acceptable feminine form for women to assert themselves on public issues such as preservation.

Nonetheless, while their fundraising efforts capitalized on the ladies’ domestic skills and enabled them to work within norms of femininity, over time the ladies’ preservation efforts segued into more traditionally public forums. In particular, newspapers, quintessentially public forums, became a very important source of publicity for the ladies’ Mount Vernon preservation efforts. While encouraging the vice regents to be creative in their fundraising efforts, Cunningham emphatically emphasized the importance of using newspapers in grassroots, on the ground efforts. She writes,

“The name of every subscriber is to be published in some influential newspaper, appointed to be the organ of the Association for the State. Such publication is not only an announcement that their contributions are received and names registered but a great stimulus in drawing out subscriptions…My own experience has convinced me that the most important step to success is enlisting zealous editors to place the subject in an attractive manner before the people.”

Cunningham’s insistence that the ladies utilize newspapers demonstrates the clever balance she encouraged the ladies to achieve by utilizing both traditional and more public strategies to gain money and publicity for their preservation cause, almost exclusively at local, grassroots levels.

Grassroots organizing by women at the local level enabled the women to develop the necessary leadership skills that ensured the long term success of their preservation effort and future historic preservation causes. With increasing solidarity, vice regents gradually women formed committees on the local level in cities North and South to raise more money for the Mount Vernon preservation cause. “Mount Vernon’s administrative organization became an instant information resource and blueprint for other potential
preservationists to emulate.”

Many of these groups took on very similar organizational forms to that of Cunningham’s model for MVLA. Like the MVLA, they prepared written constitutions, enacted rules about meetings and uses of money and set up a grassroots system at the community level. For example, Nashville’s women used Mount Vernon as a model to preserve the home of President Andrew Jackson. Similarly, in 1878 Mrs. William Holstein wrote the MVLA for assistance in planning an association “similar to that of Mount Vernon” to save Washington’s headquarters at Valley Forge.

Furthermore, their organizing, and development of critical leadership skills as a result, gradually eroded the idea that woman’s place was in the home. Cunningham’s organizational prowess with respect to her historic preservation efforts set a model for future women’s societies. “As a result of Cunningham’s leadership, women’s clubs flourished through the country in early twentieth century.” Such associations served as centers for leadership and a “major tool of social change.” Organizations such as the MVLA provided “readily available pool of educated, organized women who would be mobilized easily” for preservation and other causes. In this way Cunningham’s grassroots preservation efforts provided a blueprint for working towards further gains for women in the twentieth century, setting a platform for later, more radical women’s rights organizing.

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152 Murtagh, supra note 10 at p.29.
153 Scott, supra note 11 at p.13.
154 Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.138.
156 Howe, supra note 1 at p.38.
158 Howe, supra note 1 at p.38.
Part III-C: Cunningham’s purist vision, derived from antebellum notions of femininity, guided her preservation efforts at Mount Vernon and continue to influence historic preservation today.

A substantial part of Cunningham’s legacy is that she gave historic preservation in the United States a purist philosophy. By purist I mean that Cunningham showed a “strict observance and insistence on historical accuracy in all facts of Mount Vernon’s restoration, including architectural style, landscape architecture, historic interiors and artifacts.”159 This purist approach to preserving Mount Vernon’s true history can be traced both to antebellum notions of femininity that associated woman with purity, as well the unique role that women had as preservers of culture and history.

Through her 20 years as first Regent of the MVLA, Cunningham set a “remarkable example of a conservative restorer.”160 In her records she wrote that Mount Vernon “must always project an image of “George Washington’s life and times.”161 Lashley writes that Cunningham was “one of the first persons involved in preservation who considered historical accuracy a prime requisite.”162

Much of Cunningham’s correspondence details her purist philosophy and dedication to ensuring that Mount Vernon look as it did when General Washington resided there. In a letter Cunningham wrote to George Custis, the adopted grandson of George Washington, to request his help with Mount Vernon’s restoration efforts, she wrote that the restoration goal was, “to preserve with sacred reverence his house and grounds in the state he left them. To ascertain the latter is of the utmost importance!”163 She hoped Custis’ “daily familiarity with Mount Vernon as it was…will give such an

159 Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.127.
160 Hosmer in Lord, supra note 34 at  p.200.
161 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Explanation of the Purpose of the MVLA/ER-11-174.
162 Lashley, supra note 33 at p.80.
163 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Letter from Cunningham to George Custis/ER-1857.
exact description of everything connected with the house and grounds” so that Mount Vernon would be kept as the “home of Washington.”

Likewise, at John Washington’s recommendation, Cunningham employed Upton Herbert to act as the superintendent of Mount Vernon because John told Cunningham that Herbert is as familiar “with everything of interest here as any other person now living” and that his knowledge about the home would make it possible to restore Mount Vernon so that it would project an “accurate image of George Washington’s life and times.”

Letters from restorers at Mount Vernon to Cunningham reporting the preservation progress indicated that Herbert uncovered “many of the old walkways and restored them as nearly as possible to their original condition.” Of the garden wall, Cunningham was pleased that Herbert “copied [it] exactly as to make the garden wall as it was in General Washington’s day.” Almost daily correspondence reiterates this purist approach to preservation.

Not only was Cunningham personally devoted to a purist approach to preservation, but as an organization, Cunningham ensured that the MVLA was also committed to keeping Washington’s home as it looked during his lifetime. When deciding whether to restore the mansion’s portico, Cunningham wrote that the Ladies would have to vote on restoration of the portico since it was not a structure erected by Washington himself. Since the ladies would need “time, investigation and

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164 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/ALS/ER-11.
165 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/John Augustine Washington Collection/Letter to Cunningham/10 January 1859.
166 Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.112.
168 Id.
deliberation...before restoring it,” Cunningham “refused to do anything except repair
the main structure where it seemed to be weak.” During the preservation efforts
Cunningham reminded the vice regents of the importance to “regard our prized position
as the guardians of his home!” to ensure the ladies were committed to preservation in
the purest sense.

In doing so, Cunningham capitalized on women’s cultural positions as guardians
of history and culture to emphasize the importance of their role in maintaining the
accuracy of Mount Vernon’s preservation. Her emphatic instructions illustrate the
importance that the ladies not allow unpure hands of the men to become mixed in their
preservation. Even John Washington spoke of the danger of Mount Vernon entering non-
sacred hands. He wrote to the MVLA of his

“Earnest desire to place so sacred a spot...in more secure and permanent hands than those
of any private individual and to prevent its being applied under any circumstances to an improper
or unworthy purpose.”

Men “whose life experiences were different, and who were busy seizing the opportunities
of an expanding economy, often failed to recognize (or closed their eyes to) negative
side-effects of what they were doing.” It was left to the women to ensure that history
and culture were accurately recorded and protected by women, the guardians of society’s
past and future well-being.

Similarly, Cunningham’s farewell address to the Ladies upon her resignation
demonstrates the intersection between her purist philosophy and antebellum notions of
femininity. She wrote,

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170 Id.
171 Hosmer in Lord, supra note 34 at p.200
172 Lashley, supra note 33 at p.68.
174 Scott, supra note 11 at p.4
“Ladies, the home of our 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 with the fingers of progress!”

Cunningham expresses a sense of urgency that the ladies keep Washington’s home in their care because, as morally pure guardians of the home, they can be relied on to preserve the home of the nation’s father in its authentic historic state, free from sullying by the less pure men. Washington’s letter to Cunningham, upon agreement to sale expresses similar confidence in the women’s focus on preserving the home in its pure state. He wrote Cunningham, “the women of the land will probably be the safest as they will certainly be the purest guardians of a national shrine, I am willing to comply with your request.”

These statements by Washington and Cunningham herself exemplify the antebellum notion that women were best-suited for leading preservation of historic places because, as the purer sex with the duty to preserve history, preservation of the past was safest in their hands.

In addition to the associations between purity and preservation that Cunningham fostered, the insistence of Mount Vernon’s preservation in its most historically accurate state enabled the women to exercise control over culture and history, of which they were seen as guardians. Cunningham wrote to the MVLA ladies,

“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!”

By casting this imperative as a duty, Cunningham reminded women of their opportunity to forever make a mark on history by responding to their feminine calling to preserve culture and history. Cunningham wrote,

175 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Cunningham-Farewell Address.
176 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/John Augustine Washington Collection/Letter to Cunningham/13 March 1858.
177 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/Cunningham-Farewell Address.
“There will be such moral grandeur…in the mere fact that the tomb of Washington rests secure…in the devotional reverence of the wives, mothers, and daughters of the Union, that it will be felt over the civilized world, making glad every elevated and patriotic heart!”  

By calling uniquely on the women, and appealing to feminine notions of morality, devotion and patriotism, Cunningham effectively reminded the women that the preservation cause gave them an opportunity to contribute to the betterment of the nation. “Denied the direct expression of national loyalty that military or public service offered to men,” Cunningham helped women see preservation “a means of patriotic expression” and an avenue through which to exert control over their country’s history.

In doing so, Cunningham used femininity to formulate fundamental ideas about historic preservation, including the central role of guardianship, patriotism and identity with the past which continue to influence historic preservation today. Howe writes, “women and their voluntary associations were among the first to document and protect the nation’s history.” By establishing historic sites, they “legitimized the nation’s short history” and established that “women would assume a dominant role” in United States historic preservation efforts.

The MVLA has historically carried out Cunningham’s imperative that the MVLA be sure not to let “vandal hands desecrate” Mount Vernon. For example, as part of their restoration efforts, the MVLA removed the side porch as well as the balustrade from the Mansion. Both were part of the mansion in 1858 when the MVLA acquired the property, but they were not part of George Washington’s home. Similarly, the Cupola

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178 MVLA/Early Records/APC Collection/24 November 1854.
179 Dubrow, supra note 149 at p.160.
180 Howe, supra note 1 at p.32.
181 Id. at p.35.
182 Murtagh, supra note 10 at p.30.
183 Information in this section was obtained through the Mount Vernon Website, www.mountvernon.org, last visited May 15, 2007. Select the link “Preservation & Archaeology  Restoration Projects.”
has been restored to what it would have looked like in 1799. The MVLA undertook major renovation in 1994, carefully restoring many of the cupola's original elements. “During the restoration several samples of the cupola's original moldings were found. These samples were duplicated and re-installed to where they were located in the 18th century.” In addition, an intensive paint analysis revealed the original colors that were used by George Washington and “as a result the exterior and interior paint colors match the original colors that were used by George Washington.”

In so doing, the MVLA has preserved Cunningham’s purist preservationist philosophy, which has set a standard for preservation efforts in the United States.\(^{184}\) Indeed, the efforts of the MVLA and other preservation efforts, still largely driven by women,\(^ {185}\) illustrate that women “have not given up their role as the traditional guardians of culture”\(^ {186}\) and continue to see historic preservation as a vehicle through which to guard the nation’s history.

**Conclusion**

Cunningham’s crusade to save George Washington’s home “evoked a national awareness about historic preservation.”\(^ {187}\) While today historic preservation is largely administered by state and local government agencies,\(^ {188}\) Cunningham’s characterization that private citizens, namely women, have a duty to preserve the past undoubtedly continues to influence modern preservation efforts. Likewise, while modern preservation

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\(^{184}\) Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.125.  
\(^{185}\) See Howe, supra note 1 at p.61.  
\(^{186}\) Id. at p.60.  
\(^{187}\) Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.126.  
\(^{188}\) Murtagh, supra note 10 at p.30 (“The passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966 shifted the movement’s emphasis from the idea that private citizens, not gov’t, were the proper advocates for preservation.”).
has moved away from an exclusive focus on preserving sites associated with military and political figures, and now encompasses adaptive rehabilitation, a focus on architectural significance and the establishment of historic districts, such as Washington DC’s Capitol Hill and South Carolina’s Old Charleston, Cunningham’s focus on patriotism as the motivation for historic preservation efforts continues to influence modern day efforts to save places of American historic significance.

In addition to jumpstarting a national preservation movement, Cunningham’s efforts also united a country deeply divided by political strife. During an era when the future of the nation was profoundly uncertain, Cunningham was visionary in her ability to see that a link to the past would unite people to believe in a hopeful national future. Understandably, the efforts of one lady alone were not sufficient to prevent a Civil War. Nonetheless, Cunningham’s organization of the nation’s women most certainly prepared them to take on leadership during and after the Civil War as Americans worked to reconstruct their short history and torn society.

Cunningham’s leadership in historic preservation sparked a feminist spirit in America’s women. In their preservation efforts, the women discovered the strength of their femininity and their important roles as women in society. They also discovered the ability to lead and be independent in the public sphere, setting the framework for soon to come women’s suffrage and other equal rights movements. As such, the history of historic preservation is far more than one of preserving our American past; indeed, as the contributions of Cunningham and the MVLA illustrate, historic preservation was a

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189 Mitchell, supra note 4 at p.140.
190 Murtagh, supra note 10 at p.30
vehicle in and of itself for the formation a history unique to American women, and the American people at large.