

THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES’ ASSOCIATION: THE POSSIBILITIES AND DEBATES IN A CIVIL SOCIETY

Ann Pamela Cunningham created the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association (MVLVA) by writing a compelling public letter to rally others to the cause of preserving Mount Vernon.

LEVEL:

High School and College

TIMEFRAME:

Approximately one class session

STANDARDS:

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|----------------------|---------------------------|
| · Public History | · Primary Source Analysis |
| · Antebellum History | · Writing |
| · Civic Agency | · Reading |

EAD THEME:

Contemporary Debate and Possibilities

QUESTIONS:

- What type of community of readers does Cunningham seem to be writing to?
- How does she try to motivate their civic participation in the effort to preserve Mount Vernon?
- To what extent are voluntary organizations of people responsible for solving challenging problems in the United States?

OBJECTIVES:

- Reflect on the challenges of civic participation for different people and the strategies that historical and contemporary people have employed in their civic participation;
 - Discuss how student knowledge of civil society, individual leadership, and collective action in history can inform their approach to important debates today;
 - Craft and present a “letter to” a particular group who students want to motivate to engage with an important civic challenge or aspiration.
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PLAN:**Engage:**

1. Ask students: in your community, is there a historical structure, event, figure, community, phenomenon, or issue that you believe has been unfairly neglected?
 - a. What would it look like to adequately commemorate this history at a specific site in your community?

Explore:

2. Provide background: (additional background information can be found in the PDF)
 - a. In her 1853 public letter, Ann Pamela Cunningham identified what she believed to be a substantial contemporary challenge: preserving Mount Vernon, commemorating Washington, and promoting certain values and ideals for society.
 - b. At first, she wrote “To the Ladies of the South,” a social, regional, and racial group that she saw herself in. Cunningham believed both that her audience had a civic responsibility to help buy and preserve Mount Vernon, and that she could take on a leadership role in this project.
 - c. For Cunningham and many others, preserving Mount Vernon, commemorating Washington’s history, and connecting Americans and foreign visitors with this symbolic site was a crucial civic project. The undertaking had many setbacks and encountered numerous obstacles, but in many ways far surpassed anyone’s hopes at the time. The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association (MVLA) still owns and operates Mount Vernon today.
3. Have the students read Cunningham’s letter (attached in the PDF).

Explain/Evaluate:

1. Using Cunningham’s “To the Ladies of the South” as a reference point, tell the students to craft their own communication to the population or community that they would need to motivate to collaborate with in raising awareness, funds, and enthusiasm for the work of adequately commemorating or lifting up this history.
2. Tell the students:
 - a. Your communication should be in the format best suited to reach and influence your audience, such as:
 - i. A newspaper editorial or article;

- ii. A series of Tweets;
 - iii. A meme, GIF, Tik tok, short video, or other visualization;
- b. In crafting your communication, you do not need to echo Cunningham's approach, but you can keep in mind what you found effective or ineffective about her approach:
- What tone is the correct way to connect and motivate your audience?
 - Who is included or excluded in the audience you are addressing and the community you hope the historical site will serve?
 - What stylistic moves and rhetorical devices would serve your purpose well?
 - To what extent is it constructive to create a sense of an external threat or enemy?
 - How will you express the beliefs and values that you think will connect and motivate your audience?
 - What is a reasonable amount of civic participation to encourage in your audience?

Extend:

- Students can have the opportunity to actually publish their communication in a school newspaper, Twitter or Facebook page, or address it to the school, local parks department, or whatever agency or office that might have authority over the preservation or creation of the historical site in question.

OTHER RESOURCES

<https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/mount-vernon-ladies-association/>

<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/ann-pamela-cunningham>

THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION: THE POSSIBILITIES AND DEBATES IN A CIVIL SOCIETY

From George Washington's death in 1799 until the 1850s, Mount Vernon remained privately owned in the hands of his family's estate. Over these decades, the family struggled to maintain mansion and lands, where they continued to force enslaved people to work. Many of the thousands of visitors who trekked to Mount Vernon each year complained about its ramshackle appearance. Both the mansion and George Washington remained vital national symbols for many Americans, but it seemed that the federal government had fallen short in preserving the site and commemorating its history.

This is where the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association for the Union (MVLA) comes in. Ann Pamela Cunningham launched this voluntary organization in 1853 when it appeared that the government would never purchase and maintain the site. She hoped to raise the necessary funds to purchase Mount Vernon and restore it to what it had been during Washington's life. Born to a wealthy cotton plantation owning family in South Carolina, Cunningham wrote a letter to her fellow southern women, entitled "To the Ladies of the South." As the letter demonstrates, Cunningham wanted to claim Washington and Mount Vernon as the inheritance of the South. But she soon expanded her call for support to elite and patriotic women across the United States, as well as influential men such as Edward Everett, an epic fundraiser for the MVLA. Initially, the Washington estate and others rebuffed and even laughed at Cunningham's efforts, but the collective work of MVLA supporters added up. This was impressive, since Cunningham campaigned during a time when women were not afforded voting rights.

Over the next few years, the MVLA and their advocates raised hundreds of thousands of dollars. To do this, they wrote newspaper articles and letters, held public events, and appealed to Americans' sentiment of Washington. By the end of the decade, they successfully purchased Mount Vernon, forming the first major historic preservation organization in the United States. They did all of this at a moment when the sectional crisis between Northern free states and Southern slave-holding states was reaching its peak.

The MVLA showed that people who were typically excluded from the political process and leadership roles in society could still exercise their civic agency toward a project aimed at serving a broader community.

ANN PAMELA CUNNINGHAM, "[TO THE LADIES OF THE SOUTH](#)" (CHARLESTON MERCURY ON DECEMBER 2, 1853)

1 To the Ladies of the South.

2 A descendant of Virginia, and now a daughter of Carolina, moved by feelings of reverence for
3 departed greatness and goodness, by patriotism and a sense of national, and above all, of
4 Southern honor, ventures to appeal to you in behalf of the "home and grave" of
5 WASHINGTON.

6 Ladies of the South, a region of warm, generous, enthusiastic hearts, where there still lingers
7 some unselfish love of country and country's honor, some chivalric feelings yet untouched by
8 that "national spirit," so rapidly overshadowing the moral of our beloved land- a moral blight,
9 fatal to man's noblest attributes, which love of money and speculation alone seems to survive,-
10 to you we turn, you, who retain some reverence for the noble dead, some admiration and
11 remembrance of exalted worth and service even where they are no more ! Of you we ask:
12 Will you, can you, look on passively and behold the home and grave of the matchless Patriot,
13 who is so completely identified with your land, sold as a possession to speculative machinists
14 without such a feeling of indignation firing your souls as shall cause you to rush with one
15 heart and spirit to the rescue?

16 Ladies of the South, can you be still with closed souls and purses, while the world cries
17 "Shame upon America," and suffer Mount Vernon, with all its sacred associations, to become,
18 as is spoken of and probable, the seat of manufacturerers and manufactories; noise and smoke,
19 and the "busy hum of men," destroying all sanctity and repose around the tomb of your own
20 "world's wonder?" Oh, it cannot be possible!

21 What, such sacrilege, such desecration, while you have the hearts to feel the shame, and
22 the power to prevent it? Never! Forbid it, shades of the dead, that the Pilgrims of the shrine of
23 true patriotism should find thee forgotten, and surrounded by blackening smoke and deafening
24 machinery, where money, money, only money ever enters the thought, and gold, only gold,
25 moves the heart or moves the arm!

26 Ladies of the South ! should we appeal to such as these to protect the grave of
27 WASHINGTON from the grasp of the speculator and worldling! And should we appeal either
28 to or through your Senators and Representatives? What have they done, or would or could do,
29 in that mephitic air!

30 No: it is to you, mothers and daughters of the South, that appeal can be made with a hopeful
31 confidence. It is woman's office to be a vestal; and even the "fire of liberty" may need the care
32 of her devotion, and the purity of her guardianship. Your hearts are fresh, reverential, and
33 animated by lively sensibilities and elevating purposes. With you, therefore, patriotism has not
34 yet become a name. And should there ever be again "times to try men's souls," there will be

35 found among and of you, as of old, heroine, superior to fear and selfish consideration, acting
36 for country and its honor.

37 Believing this, one of your countrywomen feels emboldened to appeal in the name of the
38 Mother of WASHINGTON, and of Southern feeling and honor, to all that is sympathetic and
39 generous in your nature, to exert itself, and by your combined effort now, in village and
40 country, town and city, the means may be raised from the mites of thousands of gentle hearts,
41 upon whom his name has yet a magic spell, which will suffice to secure and retain his home
42 and grave as a SACRED SPOT for all coming time.

43 A spontaneous work like this would be such a monument of love and gratitude, as has never
44 yet been reared to the purest patriot or mortal man; and while it would save American honor
45 from a blot in the eyes of a gazing world, it would furnish a shrine where at least
46 the mothers of the land and their indignant children, might make their offerings in the cause of
47 the greatness, goodness, and prosperity of their country.

48 It is known to you that Congress has virtually declined to purchase and preserve Mount
49 Vernon in behalf of the nation. Yet there is now necessity for immediate action, as schemes
50 are on foot for its purchase by the Northern capital, and its devotion to money-making
51 purposes. It is, therefore, respectfully and earnestly suggested to you, and by one who, in her
52 descent, inherited the sympathies and reverence of those who were one in the social relations
53 of life with "Father of his Country," that the South, by general contribution, each a mite,
54 furnish the amount sufficient for the purchase of Mount Vernon. That the property be
55 conveyed in trust to the President of the United States, and the Governor of Virginia, to be
56 preserved and improved in your name as a hallowed resort for all people. That for its
57 continued preservation and improvement, a trifle be charged each visiter. And that your
58 contributions to effect these noble ends may be gathered into the hands of the Governors of
59 your States respectively, to be remitted to the Governor of Virginia, with authority and
60 direction to make the purchase.

61 A SOUTHERN MATRON.

62 Helpful vocabulary:

63

64 Reverence

65 Chivalric

66 Blight

67 Sacrilege

68 desecration

69 mephitic

70 indignant

71 matron

73



WASHINGTON AS NATIONAL SYMBOL

During his lifetime and afterlife, George Washington has been one of the—if not *the*—most important national symbolic figures in the United States. In the decades after his death, his plantation and mansion, Mount Vernon, became the most popular national tourist site for Americans—for many foreign visitors too. Meanwhile, George Washington seemed like perhaps the one symbol that could unite the national community so that it could overcome the internal divisions that threatened to tear it apart between national Independence (1783) and the Civil War (1861-1865).

Visitors and others who consumed the many books, articles, lectures, and art about Washington often believed that he exemplified the special qualities of dignity, fair-mindedness, fortitude, and sense of duty that had made the Revolution and Founding successful. Military officer Henry Lee named Washington, “First in war—first in peace—and first in the hearts of his countrymen.” At the same time, others questioned or challenged Washington’s status as a national symbol. For instance, abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass, recognized that Washington did free the enslaved people he owned at Mount Vernon, but also that Washington’s “monument is built up by the price of human blood.” The stakes of Washington as a national symbol have changed since the late nineteenth century. Still, interest in Washington as a national symbol and debates about what he symbolizes have continued to matter to Americans into the 21st century.

These learning resources explore Washington’s meaning and influence as a national symbol. Some of these sources are in Washington’s own words, but most are in the words or art of others. These sources show how and why Washington was a national symbol during his life and after his death. More importantly, they help students analyze how Americans have related to Washington as a national symbol. This will support students as they think critically about how our relationship with the nation’s history and its symbols both reflects and influences our identity and civic life as a people.

The sources in this lesson have the potential to engage students with four major civics themes:

- The importance of understanding and commemorating our history as a type of **civic participation**
- The complexity and stakes of recognizing the shared history of **we the people**
- The dynamic between national identity and the roles played by the **U.S. in the world**

WASHINGTON AS NATIONAL SYMBOL

- The connection between understanding history and civic engagement with **contemporary debates and possibilities.**

With this Learning Resource, the History Questions aim to stir classroom analysis of the primary sources, and the Civics Questions to help students apply those insights about history to our contemporary context. The Civics Activity asks students to motivate an audience to care about an important civic challenge they hope to address.