The WOMEN’S ISSUE

Mary Ball Washington’s Fight for Independence

Martha Washington, Quilt Maker and Businesswoman Extraordinaire

The Ladies and the Suffrage Movement
GEORGE WASHINGTON’S DISTILLERY & GRISTMILL

Learn more about George Washington and whiskey or take a virtual tour of the distillery.

mountvernon.org/distillery

GEORGE WASHINGTON’S
DISTILLERY & GRISTMILL

Spring 2020
Rebecca A. Baird, Editor
Norie Quintos, Editorial Consultant

CONTRIBUTORS:
Rebecca Baird
Steve Bashore
Ann Greer
Amanda Isaac
Erick Litchford
Jessie MacLeod
Tom Reinhart

Rebekah Hanover Pettit, Senior Designer
Dawn Bonner, Visual Resources Manager
Tulia Romano, Production Coordinator

Cover Image: Council of 1921, Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association
Top Image: Detail from Martha Washington's Neo-Classical Swags quilt. Photo by Sara Medellin, MVLA

Mount Vernon magazine is published three times a year by the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, a nonprofit organization that owns and manages George Washington’s estate. All creations on America where all citizens and value the singular story of the Father of our country. Ever mindful of our past, we seek to make it a compelling way to tell the story of George Washington, so that his timeless and relevant lessons are accessible to the world.

This publication is produced solely for nonprofit, educational purposes, and every reasonable effort is made to provide accurate and appropriate attribution for all elements, including historic images in the public domain. All other material, unless otherwise noted, is the copyright of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association. While every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of this magazine, the research and interpretation of the text and images are the responsibility of the contributing authors and historians.

George Washington’s Mount Vernon
P.O. Box 110, Mount Vernon, Virginia 22121
All editorial, reprint, or circulation correspondence should be directed to magazine@mountvernon.org.

mountvernon.org/magazine

FEATURES

Proud Mary
New research unveils a more nuanced portrait of George Washington’s mother, and her fight for independence.

By Martha Saxton

The Ladies and the Vote
Women’s suffrage? The strong and independent members of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association were divided on the issue.

By Rebecca Baird and Jessie MacLeod

A Stitch in Time
Out of the folds of the three known quilts Martha Washington’s hand sewed, a historical tapestry emerges.

By Amanda C. Isaac
George Washington’s Mount Vernon estate is owned and maintained in trust for the people of the United States by the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, a private, nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1853 by Ann Pamela Cunningham.

Sarah Miller Coulson, Regent
Ann Cady Scott, Secretary
Margaret Hartman Nichols, Treasurer

VICE REGENTS
Cameron Kock Mayer, Louisiana
Maribeth Armstrong-Burkell, California
Jean Annfield Sherrill, North Carolina
Virginia Dawson Lane, South Carolina
Laura Pettis Bureuthard, Alabama
Susan Marshall Townsend, Delaware
Anne Noel-Petih, Wisconsin
Liz Balfour Munson, Rhode Island
Ann Cady Scott, Missouri
Susan Stevens Herder, Mississippi
Andrew Neiman Sahin, New Jersey
Loretta Hamilton-Milford, Arkansas
Margaret Hartman Nichols, Maine
Helen Herboth Laughery, Wyoming
Dorothy Martelito Woodell, Illinois
Lusia Bowers Henderson, Virginia
Mary Long Bishop, Oregon
Judith William-Grant, Colorado
Elizabeth Pitts Hoyle, Georgia
Anna shear Pasier, New York

SENIOR STAFF
Douglas Bradburn, President & CEO
Kevin Butterfield, Executive Director, Washington Library
Rebecca Baird, Archivist, Digital
Joe Bondi, Senior Vice President, Development
Matt Biney, Vice President, Media & Communications
Phyllis Dunne, Chief Financial Officer
Susan Schriver, Executive Director, Historic Preservation & Collections
Robert H. Smith, Senior Curator
Joseph Sigis, Vice President, Operations & Maintenance
K. Allison Wickens, Vice President, Education

DEPARTMENTS
14 | Behind the Scenes
How MVLA archivist Rebecca Baird keeps thousands of historical documents organized.

16 | Focus on Philanthropy
Una Davis honors her history-loving late mother with a generous gift.

18 | Object Spotlight
Shell cushions showcase Martha Washington’s fancy fingerwork.

46 | Washington in the Classroom
The contributions of women take center stage in history teacher Bonnie Belche’s California classroom.

48 | Shows of Support
The Neighborhood Friends hosted the Birthnight Ball, raising funds to support preservation efforts.

52 | Research at Mount Vernon
Mrs. Washington’s business savvy is best seen during her two periods of widowhood.

54 | Featured Photo
A wedding invitation for Sarah Johnson, a formerly enslaved worker, surfaces in the MVLA archives.

Special Exhibit
Donald W. Reynolds Museum & Education Center
Through September 30
In 1853, the group of patriotic women who rescued Mount Vernon was truly ahead of its time. Nearly 70 years before American women secured the right to vote, the founding members of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association (MVLA) defied all preconceptions about a woman’s role in society as they sought to purchase the home of George Washington for the people of the United States.

To succeed, the members of the MVLA naturally turned to other women. In one of her appeals, MVLA founder Ann Pamela Cunningham urged “any lady” receiving a copy of her missive to “please show it to her friends, and strive to awaken an interest among them,” noting that “there can be no truer cause to plead for than that of Washington, nor one more dear to the heart of patriotic women.”

This year, as historic sites and museums throughout the country mark the 100th anniversary of the women’s suffrage movement and the ratification of the 19th amendment, we too at Mount Vernon have an opportunity to showcase the pioneering roles that women played, and continue to play, at the home of our Founding Father. The stories of various women who challenged, moved, and inspired George Washington, and later sought to protect not only his home, but his enduring legacy, are powerful stories in and of themselves.

In the pages that follow, historian Martha Saxton offers her perspective on George Washington’s mother, Mary Ball Washington, whose oft-misunderstood relationship with her famous son continues to intrigue and confound biographers today.

We also examine the women who made their homes at Mount Vernon during George Washington’s lifetime, beginning with Martha Washington. Curator Amanda Isaac takes a closer look at Martha’s masterfully crafted quilts, three surviving examples of which have recently returned to Mount Vernon. Exploring another aspect of 18th-century life at Mount Vernon, Alexi Garrett discusses Martha’s thriving business enterprises. We also present the manner in which Mount Vernon’s modern-day interpretation has evolved to more accurately depict enslaved women and the roles they played in the operations of the estate.

Finally, addressing the particular interest in suffrage, MVLA archivist Rebecca Baird and Mount Vernon curator Jessie MacLeod delve into the MVLA’s relation to the historic movement—and where its members engaged and abstained—as this polarizing issue took center stage a century ago.

As Regent of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, there is both honor and responsibility in seeking to showcase these notable women and their quiet but impactful contributions to both Mount Vernon and the nation. I hope their stories will captivate and inspire. We are ever grateful for your support.

Sarah Miller Coulson
Regent
Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association

On February 11, Mount Vernon teamed up with HISTORY (formerly the History Channel) to host a special red-carpet preview screening for a new George Washington–focused docudrama. With renowned historian Doris Kearns Goodwin as the executive producer, the three-part mini-series debuted on HISTORY over Presidents’ Day weekend.

Narrated by award-winning actor Jeff Daniels and starring Nicholas Rowe (The Crown), the series explores Washington’s life from his days as a young soldier to his heroics during the Revolutionary War, and on to the presidency. Each episode incorporates dramatic live-action sequences, excerpts from Washington’s letters, and insights from historians and experts, including former president Bill Clinton, historian Joseph J. Ellis, and Mount Vernon’s own president, Doug Bradburn. Scenes from Mount Vernon also feature prominently in the production.

During this preview event, Mount Vernon welcomed more than 300 supporters, stakeholders, and special guests from HISTORY for an advanced screening of the first episode and a question-and-answer session with Goodwin and Bradburn, followed by a champagne and dessert reception. The mini-series is available on demand through local cable providers.
State-of-the-Art
Bucket Brigade

Last year Mount Vernon completed the installation of a state-of-the-art water-mist fire-suppression system. The estate’s buildings, like any wooden construction, are susceptible to fire, and as the inferno that destroyed the roof of France’s Notre Dame cathedral reminded the world, fire doesn’t respect a historic landmark filled with priceless objects. Institutions such as the MVLA must take great care to protect their irreplaceable historic resources from any and all threats, especially fire. Fortunately, like George Washington himself, the estate has since been protected by a Ford fire engine and a fully trained fire crew on staff. Another innovation came with the installation of a halon gas suppression system in 1981. This waterless system—which precluded the need to introduce water into the delicate museum environment—was state-of-the-art at the time of installation, but by 30 years later it had become outmoded. Today, the most advanced and effective option available for house museums is a water-mist suppression system, which utilizes tiny water droplets to extinguish a fire more effectively than a traditional water sprinkler. A water sprinkler wets all combustible material as soon as a fire is detected, so that the fire will not be contained. But it can saturate and damage historic architecture and artifacts. In many cases when a sprinkler system is triggered, water damage is often more widespread and severe than any fire damage itself—not the ideal solution for a historic house museum. A water-mist system uses far less water than a sprinkler system. The mist quickly fills the air, cooling flames and hot gases by evaporation and causing water vapor to be drawn in by the fire, thereby extinguishing it. Both fire and water damage are minimized. Another advantage is that the water to fight a fire is not stored in the pipe’s pipes themselves (water that might leak on historic building fabric or museum objects); when a fire is detected, a powerful pump quickly fills the pipes, and mist is generated only in the needed location in a building. Staff from the departments of Historic Preservation and Collections and Operations and Maintenance has worked closely with Fireline Corporation of Baltimore to install a Marlof HI-FOG water-mist system into the Mansion and the outbuildings of the north lane. The work involved evaluating the course of every pipe and the placement of every mist head and fastener. Careful planning has minimized impact on the historic fabric of the buildings. The work required limited plaster removal in areas identified as non-original. The west wall of the little parlor was one such area. Over the course of the project, visitors have been able to watch the removal of mid-20th-century plaster and see exposed 18th-century lath and 1734 framing elements, as well as the installation of the piping for the new fire system and the process of re-plastering with period-correct lime plaster. Hopefully the new HI-FOG water-mist fire-suppression system will never need to prove its worth. Nevertheless, it’s nice to know it’s there, protecting the priceless and irreplaceable, thanks to the generous donors who made the installation possible.
New Replica Plow Constructed

In the mid-1760s, George Washington sought to improve his farm in a variety of ways, and this included purchasing the best plow of the era. Known as the Rotherham plow, it was developed around 1730 in Rotherham, Yorkshire, England. Writing in March of 1765 to one of his English merchant suppliers, Crosbies and Trafford in Liverpool, Washington said:

“I should be obliged to you for sending me one of the Rotherham (or Patent Plows)... you would do me a singular favour in getting it from a place of that name in Yorkshire... for none but the true sort will answer the end of my sending for it I had rather be at the expense of the Carriage from thence than not have the right kind or be disappointed. You will please to order it to be made exceeding light as our Lands are not so stiff as your’s nor our Horses so strong.”

Records indicate that this plow did indeed answer the needs at Mount Vernon. In the following years, Washington would experiment with other plows and even design some himself. In 2006, the Historic Trades department collaborated with Colonial Williamsburg master wheelwright John Boag and master blacksmith Ken Schwarz to construct the Rotherham plow currently displayed in the Education Center. This year, to add more authenticity and accuracy to the work done at the farm, Mount Vernon once again enlisted Boag’s and Schwarz’s help.

Boag did all the wood construction of the plow. Mount Vernon blacksmiths Nicholas Kimball and Mark Kelly traveled to Williamsburg to work with Schwarz, and get guidance on forging all the ironwork required for the plow. The work was completed in Mount Vernon’s blacksmith shop. The final product was a fruitful collaboration between trades departments both rooted in the history of Virginia craftsmanship and agriculture.

The plow now heads to the farm, where it will aid interpretation and demonstrations of Washington’s efforts to improve the cultivation, work, and yields on his farms at Mount Vernon.

The replica of the Rotherham plow was funded in honor of Dr. Bruce A. Ragsdale, a member of the 2014–15 class of research fellows at the Washington Library and the 2016 Mount Vernon Georgian Papers fellow. Ragsdale’s research explores George Washington’s agricultural management.

Silk Sash and Sword on Exhibit

The Symbols of Rank exhibition, now on view in the Museum, explores the symbolism of the accoutrements and sword featured in Charles Willson Peale’s 1772 portrait, George Washington as Colonel of the Virginia Regiment, currently on loan from Washington and Lee University. Until May 10, 2020, visitors will have the rare opportunity to see Washington’s original silk officer’s sash. Because of the delicate nature of the sash, a reproduction sash will be on view as a part of the exhibit from May 11 to September 30, 2020.

The silk sash is one of several officer’s sashes that Washington owned. Made using a technique called “spray weaving,” silk sashes had enormous strength and could be used as stretchers to carry wounded officers off the battlefield.

Washington purchased a “Rich Crimson” officer’s sash from London in 1754 and likely wore it through much of the French and Indian War. In July 1755, the mortally wounded General Edward Braddock gave Washington his own officer’s sash. In 1774, on the eve of the Revolution, as commander of several independent militia companies, Washington ordered a new officer’s sash from Philadelphia. When he took command of the Continental Army, he stopped wearing this type of sash, creating instead a new system of rank designation for the nation’s army.

Paired with the sash for this special exhibition is Washington’s silver smallsword. Charles Willson Peale carefully replicated the hilt of the sword in his portrait of Washington. Smallswords were elements of civilian attire, worn both indoors and out, by virtually every 18th-century male of genteel social status. This is traditionally believed to be the sword worn by Washington on two key ceremonial occasions: the resignation of his military command in 1783 and his inauguration as president in 1789.

Both the smallsword and the sash came back to Mount Vernon through the generosity of the wealthy Morgan family. John Pierpont Morgan, Sr., donated the sword to Mount Vernon in 1909, while his son, John Pierpont Morgan, Jr., presented the sash in 1924.

Also appearing in the exhibit are a miniature version of Peale’s 1772 portrait, painted by Anson Dickinson, ca. 1850; a gorget (the silver crescent-shaped neckpiece similar to the one in the painting); and a silver officer’s cockade insignia, ca. 1799, ordered by Washington during the Quasi-War with France.

Two Calves Born on the Farm

Mount Vernon’s livestock team welcomed the arrival of two calves in late 2019. On Thanksgiving morning, Clover, an American Milking Devon cow, gave birth to a healthy bullock, which the staff named Spud. Two and a half weeks later, Crimson, another American Milking Devon cow, welcomed a calf of her own. Mount Vernon Regent Sarah Coulson chose the name Knox for the second calf. Moms and babies are doing well.

Like the other animals at Mount Vernon, Spud and Knox are examples of a heritage breed—one that would have been found in Virginia during Washington’s lifetime, and a representative example of a breed that Washington kept more than 200 years ago. After a period of bonding with their mothers, the calves will begin to train to work on the estate as oxen, participating in farming activities and demonstrations. They will reach 1,500–1,600 pounds when fully mature.
Meet MVLA’s New African American Interpretation Coordinator

To expand its African American interpretation, Mount Vernon created a new staff position focused on this important area. As Mount Vernon’s first African American interpretation coordinator, Brenda Parker—a long-serving character interpreter—provides expertise and perspective on programs and projects about the enslaved and free blacks who lived at Mount Vernon during George and Martha Washington’s lifetimes.

“You cannot tell the stories of George Washington and Mount Vernon without telling the stories of the enslaved men and women who lived at Mount Vernon, who have been silenced from the historical record for so long,” said Parker. “I am honored to take on the important work of bringing them into today’s conversations about the past.”

A talented interpreter and seasoned veteran of the local theater scene, Parker first came to Mount Vernon more than 15 years ago to work as a server at the Mount Vernon Inn. She later took on a different role as a character interpreter, bringing voice to enslaved individuals such as Caroline Branham, a housemaid, and Priscilla, a field worker. Even with her new responsibilities, Parker continues portraying these characters today.

In addition to reviewing and enhancing current interpretation and programs related to slavery, Parker is creating new programs to engage audiences in different ways. She recently introduced a new character interpretation program titled, “Freedom Skies,” which knits together vignettes about the people who were enslaved by George Washington and the Custis estates, some of whom were granted their freedom on January 1, 1801. To broaden awareness of Mount Vernon’s research and programming, Parker will forge deeper connections with communities of color, both in the local area and nationwide—including the men and women who descend from the enslaved community at George Washington’s estate. She will also follow the new first lady in May 1789 as she traveled from Mount Vernon to the new capital of New York City. The journey included a lavish meal at Gray’s Ferry and Gardens in Philadelphia with well-known politicians of the day. The menu, which featured 10 bottles of Madeira wine and 45 bowls of punch, will be reprinted in the edition. Extensive family trees for the Dardinges, Custises, and Washingtons will undoubtedly be useful to scholars and genealogists alike. The volume will also include images of various individuals important to Martha Washington, such as her youngest children Jacky and Patsy, her favorite niece Fanny Bassett Washington Lear, and her grandchildren raised by the Washingtons—Eleanor and George Washington Parke Custis.

Beyond these items, the volume will also contain forgeries—a fact that some people may find surprising. By including these spurious letters, editors confirm to readers that these items were, indeed, wrongly attributed to Martha, not simply missed by or omitted in the publication. Martha Washington’s papers tell the story of a woman—as an individual and as a famous wife—a family, a community, and the creation of the United States. Her story is crucial to understanding George Washington’s life and character. During her lifetime, Martha became the most well-known woman in America. Later generations reinvented her persona to fit their own historical narrative, an act that continues today. By making available the story of Martha Washington through her own words and those of her contemporaries, The Papers of Martha Washington will provide the most three-dimensional, accurate portrait yet published of perhaps the most important person in George Washington’s life. The publication of The Papers of Martha Washington was supported by the Dr. Scholl Foundation, The Founders, Washington Committee for Historic Mount Vernon, Richard S. Reynolds Foundation, and Karen Buchwald Wright, and other generous donors.

Martha Washington Papers to Be Published

Dr. Lynn A. Price, Assistant Editor, Washington Family Papers project

In 2015, the Martha Washington Papers Project commenced the task of collecting, transcribing, and annotating all existing correspondence to and from the first lady. The compilation netted nearly 400 pieces of correspondence, including the four surviving letters and one brief postscript between Martha and George Washington, and more than 170 financial documents. A book of the papers, set to be published in 2021 by the University of Virginia Press, will also include contextual editorial essays, the inventory of Martha Washington’s possessions at the time of her death, a detailed list of the division of the Custis dower slaves, her last will and testament, and original maps created by historian and cartographer Rick Britton.

The Papers of Martha Washington will reveal the multifaceted character of the General’s life partner and place her experiences into their proper historical context. For example, letters from the widow Martha Dandridge Custis to merchants in England, after the death of her first husband Daniel, show her business savvy. Then upon her marriage to George Washington, letters illustrate the transition of control to her new husband, as was the practice in the 18th century.

The book also surfaces unique and heretofore unpublished documents reflecting Martha Washington’s life and experiences. Her recipe for cough medicine, for example, won’t taste good, but it will offer relief “as long as the stomach will bear it.” Contemporary newspapers followed the new first lady in May 1789 as she traveled from Mount Vernon to the new capital of New York City. The journey included a lavish meal at Gray’s Ferry and Gardens in Philadelphia with well-known politicians of the day. The menu, which featured 10 bottles of Madeira wine and 45 bowls of punch, will be reprinted in the edition. Extensive family trees for the Dardinges, Custises, and Washingtons will undoubtedly be useful to scholars and genealogists alike. The volume will also include images of various individuals important to Martha Washington, such as her youngest children Jacky and Patsy, her favorite niece Fanny Bassett Washington Lear, and her grandchildren raised by the Washingtons—Eleanor and George Washington Parke Custis.

Beyond these items, the volume will also contain forgeries—a fact that some people may find surprising. By including these spurious letters, editors confirm to readers that these items were, indeed, wrongly attributed to Martha, not simply missed by or omitted in the publication. Martha Washington’s papers tell the story of a woman—as an individual and as a famous wife—a family, a community, and the creation of the United States. Her story is crucial to understanding George Washington’s life and character. During her lifetime, Martha became the most well-known woman in America. Later generations reinvented her persona to fit their own historical narrative, an act that continues today. By making available the story of Martha Washington through her own words and those of her contemporaries, The Papers of Martha Washington will provide the most three-dimensional, accurate portrait yet published of perhaps the most important person in George Washington’s life. The publication of The Papers of Martha Washington was supported by the Dr. Scholl Foundation, The Founders, Washington Committee for Historic Mount Vernon, Richard S. Reynolds Foundation, and Karen Buchwald Wright, and other generous donors.

Martha Washington Papers to Be Published

Dr. Lynn A. Price, Assistant Editor, Washington Family Papers project

In 2015, the Martha Washington Papers Project commenced the task of collecting, transcribing, and annotating all existing correspondence to and from the first lady. The compilation netted nearly 400 pieces of correspondence, including the four surviving letters and one brief postscript between Martha and George Washington, and more than 170 financial documents. A book of the papers, set to be published in 2021 by the University of Virginia Press, will also include contextual editorial essays, the inventory of Martha Washington’s possessions at the time of her death, a detailed list of the division of the Custis dower slaves, her last will and testament, and original maps created by historian and cartographer Rick Britton.

The Papers of Martha Washington will reveal the multifaceted character of the General’s life partner and place her experiences into their proper historical context. For example, letters from the widow Martha Dandridge Custis to merchants in England, after the death of her first husband Daniel, show her business savvy. Then upon her marriage to George Washington, letters illustrate the transition of control to her new husband, as was the practice in the 18th century.

The book also surfaces unique and heretofore unpublished documents reflecting Martha Washington’s life and experiences. Her recipe for cough medicine, for example, won’t taste good, but it will offer relief “as long as the stomach will bear it.” Contemporary newspapers followed the new first lady in May 1789 as she traveled from Mount Vernon to the new capital of New York City. The journey included a lavish meal at Gray’s Ferry and Gardens in Philadelphia with well-known politicians of the day. The menu, which featured 10 bottles of Madeira wine and 45 bowls of punch, will be reprinted in the edition. Extensive family trees for the Dardinges, Custises, and Washingtons will undoubtedly be useful to scholars and genealogists alike. The volume will also include images of various individuals important to Martha Washington, such as her youngest children Jacky and Patsy, her favorite niece Fanny Bassett Washington Lear, and her grandchildren raised by the Washingtons—Eleanor and George Washington Parke Custis.

Beyond these items, the volume will also contain forgeries—a fact that some people may find surprising. By including these spurious letters, editors confirm to readers that these items were, indeed, wrongly attributed to Martha, not simply missed by or omitted in the publication. Martha Washington’s papers tell the story of a woman—as an individual and as a famous wife—a family, a community, and the creation of the United States. Her story is crucial to understanding George Washington’s life and character. During her lifetime, Martha became the most well-known woman in America. Later generations reinvented her persona to fit their own historical narrative, an act that continues today. By making available the story of Martha Washington through her own words and those of her contemporaries, The Papers of Martha Washington will provide the most three-dimensional, accurate portrait yet published of perhaps the most important person in George Washington’s life. The publication of The Papers of Martha Washington was supported by the Dr. Scholl Foundation, The Founders, Washington Committee for Historic Mount Vernon, Richard S. Reynolds Foundation, and Karen Buchwald Wright, and other generous donors.

Martha Washington Papers to Be Published

Dr. Lynn A. Price, Assistant Editor, Washington Family Papers project

In 2015, the Martha Washington Papers Project commenced the task of collecting, transcribing, and annotating all existing correspondence to and from the first lady. The compilation netted nearly 400 pieces of correspondence, including the four surviving letters and one brief postscript between Martha and George Washington, and more than 170 financial documents. A book of the papers, set to be published in 2021 by the University of Virginia Press, will also include contextual editorial essays, the inventory of Martha Washington’s possessions at the time of her death, a detailed list of the division of the Custis dower slaves, her last will and testament, and original maps created by historian and cartographer Rick Britton.

The Papers of Martha Washington will reveal the multifaceted character of the General’s life partner and place her experiences into their proper historical context. For example, letters from the widow Martha Dandridge Custis to merchants in England, after the death of her first husband Daniel, show her business savvy. Then upon her marriage to George Washington, letters illustrate the transition of control to her new husband, as was the practice in the 18th century.

The book also surfaces unique and heretofore unpublished documents reflecting Martha Washington’s life and experiences. Her recipe for cough medicine, for example, won’t taste good, but it will offer relief “as long as the stomach will bear it.” Contemporary newspapers followed the new first lady in May 1789 as she traveled from Mount Vernon to the new capital of New York City. The journey included a lavish meal at Gray’s Ferry and Gardens in Philadelphia with well-known politicians of the day. The menu, which featured 10 bottles of Madeira wine and 45 bowls of punch, will be reprinted in the edition. Extensive family trees for the Dardinges, Custises, and Washingtons will undoubtedly be useful to scholars and genealogists alike. The volume will also include images of various individuals important to Martha Washington, such as her youngest children Jacky and Patsy, her favorite niece Fanny Bassett Washington Lear, and her grandchildren raised by the Washingtons—Eleanor and George Washington Parke Custis.

Beyond these items, the volume will also contain forgeries—a fact that some people may find surprising. By including these spurious letters, editors confirm to readers that these items were, indeed, wrongly attributed to Martha, not simply missed by or omitted in the publication. Martha Washington’s papers tell the story of a woman—as an individual and as a famous wife—a family, a community, and the creation of the United States. Her story is crucial to understanding George Washington’s life and character. During her lifetime, Martha became the most well-known woman in America. Later generations reinvented her persona to fit their own historical narrative, an act that continues today. By making available the story of Martha Washington through her own words and those of her contemporaries, The Papers of Martha Washington will provide the most three-dimensional, accurate portrait yet published of perhaps the most important person in George Washington’s life. The publication of The Papers of Martha Washington was supported by the Dr. Scholl Foundation, The Founders, Washington Committee for Historic Mount Vernon, Richard S. Reynolds Foundation, and Karen Buchwald Wright, and other generous donors.
Outbuildings—the smaller separate buildings such as kitchens, smokehouses, barns, and other structures—were a vital component of plantation landscapes, but unfortunately, these types of support structures rarely survive the passing of time. Fortunately, Mount Vernon has preserved an almost complete set of domestic outbuildings from the time of the Washingtons. Over the last seven years, the preservation team has used a two-phase approach to address the care of these structures. The first phase focuses on buttoning up the exteriors to prevent infiltration by precipitation, moisture, and pests. This work has principally addressed the conditions of roofs and exterior siding. The second phase will involve a full restoration, including interior and exterior work needed to ensure that the buildings reflect current understanding of their 1799 appearances.

While carrying out the work needed to make a building weathertight, the preservation team sometimes uncovers underlying problems that must be addressed to complete the phase-one work. The north garden house needed a roof replacement, and when the old shingles were stripped in 2017, staff noticed that the upper parts of its wall frames were seriously compromised. The discovery kicked off a two-year project that challenged the team to develop new conservation and preservation strategies to save as much of the 18th-century building fabric as possible.

The north garden house is one of 15 buildings at Mount Vernon that survive from George Washington’s lifetime. Although small, it has a rich history. The building was constructed, along with its companion building, the south garden house, in early 1785. Washington redesigned his garden landscape only one year later, expanding the gardens and moving the garden houses farther west. At that point, enslaved workers lifted the building and moved it to its present location at the west end of the upper garden. Washington’s diary documents the undertaking in several entries, the most descriptive appearing on February 4, 1786, when he writes, “Having assembled the Men from my Plantations, I removed the garden Houses which were in the middle of the front walls to the extreme points of them; which were done with more ease, & less damage than I expected, considering the height one of them was to be raised from the ground.”

For most of the Washingtons’ lifetimes, the building was used to store gardening tools and equipment. The repeated references to it as a “garden house” indicate that it was intended to be used for that purpose. But there is also evidence that the building was temporarily repurposed as a schoolhouse for the Custis grandchildren from 1786 to 1788, while they were living at Mount Vernon.

Architecturally, the north garden house is a rare and lovely example of an octagonal 18th-century outbuilding, topped by a bell-shaped roof. The combination of these two unusual forms required a complex and atypical frame. Oak rafters form the roof and feature a convex curve above and a concave curve below to achieve the bell shape. All of the rafters come together at the top of the roof, and a square king post provides support at the center. The corner posts of the building’s walls, where the facets of the building intersect, are single pieces of oak cut into a chevron shape to form the interior and exterior angles of the octagon. This attention to the building’s design extends to the pine siding boards, which are rusticated and sand-cast to match the Mansion’s exterior finish.

The removal of roof shingles in 2017 revealed that moisture and pests had damaged sections of the roof and wall framing and put the interior plaster at risk. The team immediately began performing in-depth research in order to understand the building’s history and develop solutions for preserving the building fabric. The first step was to stabilize the historical interior plaster, which was in danger of detaching from the walls. This required removing some siding boards, so that the plaster could be accessed for treatment from the exterior. The plaster was then reinforced by injecting...
a lime-based consolidant, invented by Mount Vernon conservator Steven Stuckey, which essentially filled the cracks and re-adhered the plaster to the lath.

The cornice and lower shingle nailers were removed to expose the underlying framing of the walls and roof. Patches of rotted wood present on the studs, posts, and plates were then delicately removed. Preservation carpenter Brad Collins painstakingly created custom-shaped wood blocks, or dutchmen, for insertion into the voids in the framing members, fitting together like 3-D puzzle pieces. This type of repair reconstitutes and strengthens the frame while preserving the greatest amount of original material.

The rafters of the building were repaired using a different method. The bottoms of many of the rafters had deteriorated, and the original connections between the rafters and the ceiling joists were no longer intact. To address the disconnect, new lengths of wood, called sisters, were run alongside the rafters and fastened to triangular wooden support blocks that were wedged under the rafters. The sisters then lapped over the wall plates, reestablishing the connection between roof and walls without needing to drill into the 235-year-old wood. This solution transfers the weight of the roof onto the walls below and provides a new surface for nailing on roof shingles and cornice.

The preservation team took advantage of the exposed framing to date the building’s timbers by examining tree-ring patterns. This process, called dendrochronology, confirmed that the north garden house was indeed built in 1785; it even indicated that at least one part of the frame was replaced during the re-siting of the building in 1786.

The framing repairs are finished, and new cypress shingles will be installed this spring. The exterior siding and trim will be primed, painted, and sanded to match the Mansion, which itself has been undergoing a three-year exterior restoration. Going forward, the team will continue to address phase-one work on other outbuildings, with the smokehouse next on the list. When all of Mount Vernon’s outbuildings have been made weatherproof, the team will move on to phase two, completing full restorations of the outbuildings in conjunction with curatorial colleagues.

The restoration of the North Garden House was generously supported by an anonymous foundation; the Marietta McNeill Morgan & Samuel Tate Morgan, Jr. Trust; the Roller-Bottimore Foundation; the George L. Shields Foundation, Inc.; the Richard and Caroline T. Gwathmey Memorial Trust; and the Christine and Jaime Yordán Foundation.
Happy 288th Birthday, George!

Nearly 19,000 visitors came to Mount Vernon to celebrate George Washington’s 288th birthday on Monday, February 17. On the grounds, they enjoyed music, military demonstrations, hands-on activities, and other fun and festive programs. On February 22, George Washington’s actual birthday, another 7,000 guests took advantage of sunny skies and free admission to explore Mount Vernon and pay their respects to the first president.

Scenes from Washington’s birthday commemoration, including a tribute at his tomb, performances by characters, military demonstrations and more. Above, Mount Vernon President Doug Bradburn fields questions from “kid reporter” Phoenix Legg. (photos by Thalia Romano)
Behind the Scenes
To Preserve and Protect
Archivist Safeguards Association Documents

The archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association hold a fascinating collection of treasures. In considering their contents, MVLA archivist Rebecca Baird points out one of her favorite items in the collection: the original 1858 signed agreement between John Augustine Washington III and Ann Pamela Cunningham, transferring ownership of Mount Vernon.

“It is signed ‘A Southern matron,’ which was Ann Pamela Cunningham’s pseudonym,” Baird notes. “It was such a significant moment for her personally, but she knew she needed to focus on the work that lay ahead of her in raising the money to pay for the property.”

Details like this aren’t lost on Baird. An ardent and unabashed admirer of the MVLA, Baird relishes the opportunities her role as archivist has presented her with over the past five years. By combing through the Association’s records and making them available to scholars, staff, and the public, she has become an expert on matters of institutional history.

Most of the documents that land in Baird’s hands are passed along by employees, Board members, and even past Mount Vernon visitors who aren’t sure what to do with their old files, photos, and other materials. She receives one or two such donations a month, which she evaluates according to Mount Vernon’s collection policy. If she accepts the donation, the real work begins. For a collection of materials, Baird would organize it and write finding aids (essentially a road map with information such as the history, dates, and creator). For single items, she must decide where it belongs in the collection. She then makes the materials available to the public through the Library’s archives database and digital collections (accessible on mountvernon.org).

As she sifts through the papers, she often discovers delightful surprises.

“Finding little gems within the materials, like great photos we don’t have or a menu to an event with royalty, means that they don’t have to stay hidden; we can share them with everyone,” she says.

Beyond processing the materials that end up in her care, Baird also monitors auction house websites for items related to Mount Vernon or the MVLA that are not currently in its collections. A recent example of her finds is a circa-1940s menu from the Little Hatchet Tavern, the on-site restaurant that later became the Mount Vernon Inn.

“We didn’t have one of these yet in the archives, and it’s a great representation of Mount Vernon during this era,” she explains.

What is the number one acquisition on Baird’s wish list? MVLA founder Ann Pamela Cunningham wrote an editorial in the Charleston Mercury, published on December 2, 1853, which began the movement to rescue George Washington’s home. Mount Vernon has only a reproduction clipping of the piece, and Baird would love to have the entire newspaper.

“It is the first appeal in support of saving Mount Vernon. I think it’s going to be hard to find,” she says. “I’m even looking for it on eBay.”

Many people would long for Baird’s organizing skills in weeding out treasures, preserving them, and organizing them in a way that’s both useful and sustainable.

“When it comes to preserving materials, I always suggest that people invest in archival quality folders, acid-free boxes, and mylar sleeves, which will help keep papers and photos safe for generations, but organizing these materials is another matter,” she continues. “Archivists follow specific theories and principles, but in general, I recommend that you hang on to records that will tell your family more about you, such as your school and employment history, awards you received, and classes you took, along with all of your vital records and official documents like birth certificates and marriage certificates. Keep them in a safe place so that your family can pass them down.”

To Preserve and Protect
Archivist Safeguards Association Documents

The archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association hold a fascinating collection of treasures. In considering their contents, MVLA archivist Rebecca Baird points out one of her favorite items in the collection: the original 1858 signed agreement between John Augustine Washington III and Ann Pamela Cunningham, transferring ownership of Mount Vernon.
A Family Affair

Davis Honors Mother’s Legacy with Library Gift

Reminiscing about her mother, Mount Vernon supporter Una Davis recalls a woman with a deep passion for history and a keen interest in genealogy. “She liked to tell her children whom we were related to. The most exciting person on that list was George Washington,” she explains.

Indeed, in tracing her family’s roots back to the 1600s, Davis’s mother, Anita Ball Dawson Claeboe, discovered a direct link to Mary Ball Washington, the first president’s enigmatic mother [see story, page 36]. Despite her proud personal connection to George Washington, Claeboe passed away in 2013 without ever having visited Mount Vernon.

After Claeboe’s death, Davis—a Boston-born history lover who now resides in San Diego—knew that she needed to honor her mother’s memory with a visit to the home of their famous relative. She and her husband went to Mount Vernon while in Maryland visiting a sister and brother-in-law.

For Davis, the deep-dive into early American history was thrilling and inspiring. Shortly after her visit, Davis began to explore possibilities of honoring her mother through a philanthropic gift. On a subsequent visit, she toured the Washington Library, where she learned about an opportunity to support research on the Washington family—including her own family’s branch.

Davis’s donation endows the Washington Papers Project Suite, which will become the permanent office and archive of the Papers of George Washington. Launched in 1968, the Papers of George Washington is a collaboration between the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association and the University of Virginia to publish print and digital editions of Washington’s entire correspondence. In 2015, the project’s scope expanded to include the Washington Family Papers, which will publish the surviving documents of the members of Washington’s family, including Mary Ball Washington. Davis’s gift will help support these important publications, expected to be completed this decade.

The idea of inspiring further scholarship on George Washington’s mother is particularly meaningful to Davis, who takes note of some common family threads. “She lived a tough early life with many personal losses, but when she married Augustine [George’s father], she found her rock. I am fascinated by her; she was a strong woman. My mother was a strong woman, and I’m often told that I am as well. It’s time we pay more attention to the women behind the scenes.”

My mother was so proud of her history, and this was the ideal way to honor her. She would have been so happy.

Davis hopes that her gift will inspire more study—both of American history and genealogy—as well as additional philanthropy. “My mother started the flame, but I’m fanning it. It’s so important to understand our past, and it’s so important to give back. What Mount Vernon does is simply incredible,” she notes. “There are many people who can give more than I did, and I hope they will be inspired to do that.”

A plaque displayed outside the Papers Project Suite, dedicated on Washington’s birthday earlier this year, bears Claeboe’s name. Davis and several members of the family traveled to Mount Vernon to take part in the plaque’s unveiling.

“It was the perfect family reunion. My mother was so proud of her history, and this was the ideal way to honor her. She would have been so happy,” remarks Davis.

20 SPRING 2020 | MOUNT VERNON LADIES’ ASSOCIATION
Notable Needlework

Martha Washington’s shell cushions—featuring a distinctive scallop shell and leaf pattern—are the best known examples of her needlework. The loose cushions are the only ones of this type that survive in America south of Pennsylvania. Mrs. Washington worked them in cross-stitch, with wool yarn and silk highlights on a linen or hemp canvas ground, in what may have been a pattern of her own design. By one estimate, the full set of a dozen cushions required more than 752,000 stitches. The ambitious project took her longer than she may have imagined. Though the materials arrived from London in 1766, it wasn’t until 35 years later, in the “70th year of her age,” according to her granddaughter, Eleanor (Nelly) Parke Custis Lewis, that she completed the cushions.

Life intervened, including the death of Martha’s own children, eight years of war, raising grandchildren, and eight years of public service as the president’s wife. At some point, she laid her work aside in her bedchamber closet. In 1794, she asked her niece at Mount Vernon to send the materials to Philadelphia, “as I intend to have them made into something if they are not spoiled and Eaten up with the moth.” She originally intended to upholster slip seats for formal side chairs, but ultimately had the embroidered canvases fabricated into cushions for Windsor armchairs, with a multicolor, hand-knotted silk and wool fringe along the front.

Each cushion is a rare documented example of Lady Washington’s needlework and original upholstery at Mount Vernon, as well as a testimony to her determination and resilience. Despite the unexpected circumstances of her life, she chose not to discard what she had started, but to adapt, and to realize a new purpose for them. Martha Washington gave the cushions to each of her three granddaughters, who lovingly preserved them.

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edmund Law Rogers Smith, 1948.
(photos by Mark Finkenstaedt and Amanda Isaac with Anne Kingery)
There are no known life images of Mary Ball Washington. All images are conjectural works of art.
Mary Ball Washington—once described by her son’s biographers as a pious, self-sacrificing widow capable of raising five children under difficult circumstances—has come more recently to be seen as selfish, cold, and determined to thwart her son’s ambitions. While neither portrait captures the strong, complex, and anxious woman revealed in the records—a woman haunted by childhood deprivation and loss—the first comes closer than the second.

The earliest writers about George Washington included Mary in their hagiographic accounts. Later scholars began using fragmentary evidence of George’s annoyance with his mother over her requests for small amounts of money and her unhappiness with his “inclination” to military life to condemn her as an overprotective, ignorant shrew. Far from illiterate and greedy, Mary was a fervent reader of devotional books, frugal to a fault, and on occasion, so cash poor as to be unable to feed herself and her dependents. Orphaned early, fears of illness, death, and want pursued her throughout her long life as she relentlessly pursued sustenance for herself and family, including the people she held as slaves. She brought the same tenacity to protecting her children’s health and enhancing the opportunities available to them.

While their genders and generations have obscured their similarities, mother and son shared a number of important traits, like being tall and physically robust. Some were a mixture of biology and practice—for instance, both carried themselves quietly and commandingly. And the two were superb horse riders.

Their most significant similarities, however, lay in their approaches to daily life. Both were extremely careful with money. Even in his high-spending years, George accounted for every penny. Mother and son cared vigilantly for their property and dependents. Orphaned early, fears of illness, death, and want pursued her throughout her long life as she relentlessly pursued sustenance for herself and family, including the people she held as slaves. She brought the same tenacity to protecting her children’s health and enhancing the opportunities available to them.

While their genders and generations have obscured their similarities, mother and son shared a number of important traits, like being tall and physically robust. Some were a mixture of biology and practice—for instance, both carried themselves quietly and commandingly. And the two were superb horse riders.

Mary Johnson, now Mary Johnson Ball, had little Mary in 1703 or 1704. When the child was about three, her elderly father died, leaving her three enslaved men and two parcels of land on the Rappahannock River, including one at the “Little Falls.” Mary Johnson Ball soon remarried, but that husband died not long after. For the next six or seven years, Mary lived with her twice-widowed mother and her two other stepsiblings, John and Elizabeth. She watched her mother manage her farm, going to court to recover small bits of property, and remaining an independent landowner in a culture that reserved that status for men. The girl felt her mother’s power and ability to direct her own life and knew the outlines of her almost mythic rise in life.

Then, when young Mary was about 12, both her half brother John and her seemingly indomitable mother grew sick and died. Mary Johnson Ball left her orphaned daughter a horse, her riding habit, and the promise of an enslaved woman. The sad girl made her new home with her half sister Elizabeth, who had recently married.

Mary’s losses made her transition into adolescence, when girls typically began thinking about marriage, particularly confusing and uncertain.

Within months of their mother’s death, she and Elizabeth had to witness their overseer come with a cart to take away barrels of their tobacco, corn, barley, and wheat, his reward for a successful suit against their deceased mother for back pay. Mary’s world must have seemed very fragile.

Anglican practice had repeatedly called on Mary to recognize and accept, without rancor, God’s hand in taking away people close to her. She tried. The method she settled on seems to have been taking on responsibility and honoring the habits of usefulness, frugality, and independence to try to stabilize, as much as she could, her own world. Within two or three years, she was managing her sister’s household as her sister bore two children. Much later, George advised a young relative without a dowry to be like a young girl he had known of whom, at 16 was so useful that she took charge of running a whole establishment. Surely, he was describing his mother and sharing his pride in her precocious competence.

As an adolescent, Mary acquired her first devotional book, probably from her sister’s husband. With it, Mary began her lifelong practice of seeking comfort and guidance from the writings of clergymen who explicated scripture, explained ritual, guided daily prayer, and offered readers godly ways to cope with painful events. Mary had no parent to turn to in these difficult years to tell her how to calm her anxiety over the omnipresence of death, how to fill her loneliness, or how to pacify the hurt she felt. At a similar age, George famously would study The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation to learn what an absent father might have taught him.

Some young women in the 1720s and later were already beginning to read novels, steeping themselves in the vocabulary and attitudes of sensibility, a prized virtue...
of the British and colonial elite that allegedly fostered sympathy with suffering and empathy for the feelings of others. Mary was not one of them. She developed neither much empathy nor stylish rhetoric, marking her hurried education and making her vulnerable to criticisms from the future president’s biographers.

When Mary married George Eskridge’s friend and brother-in-law, the widower Augustine Washington, he gave her Mathew Hale’s Contemplations, Moral and Divine—a book that had belonged to his first wife. Mary inscribed her name below that of her deceased predecessor. It became the most important book in her collection and her central aid in child rearing. Its wisdom, aphorisms, and anecdotes guided her for the rest of her life. George would have his own copy by 1764.

Mary’s conflict with her son also demonstrates how her gender rendered her desire for economic independence unintelligible to him.

During Mary’s married years, Augustine, who does not seem to have been particularly devout, was often away, so Mary would have presided over daily prayers and Bible reading. She passed on her lessons, and more importantly, her example of careful stewardship, thrift, vigilant oversight, independence, and fierce persistence most effectively, according to the evidence that exists, to her first son and her only surviving daughter Elizabeth (Betty). Mary actively involved both George and his sister Betty in running the plantation (later known as Ferry Farm) where they lived.

After George’s marriage to the wealthiest woman in Virginia, Mary continued running Ferry Farm, which Augustine had left to George. But George had moved with Martha to Mount Vernon. Like most Virginia farmers, Mary was cash poor. From time to time, she would ask George, the family patriarch, for small sums of money—six, 10, sometimes 20 pounds. George, now enjoying avenues of land owning and freedom from injurious taxes—but of independence for himself and other white men—based his anger on her gender. Betty, and other family members had been evacuated from Fredericksburg up into the Alleghenies to avoid a feared British attack. While there, crowded into small quarters, within a span of three weeks, Mary’s son Samuel died, as well as Fielding Lewis, Betty’s husband, who had been much more attentive to her than her own sons. Betty also became perilously sick. Mary, nearly 80, once again saw her dearest and closest dying. She had no money. Her overseer had been cheating her for a long time, and Betty’s once wealthy husband had died, leaving behind enormous debts incurred manufacturing arms for George’s army.

There is no doubt that by complaining about her fear of losing her land to wartime taxes Mary was not behaving with the cheerful acceptance of good Christians. George would later remind her of the teachings of Matthew Hale. Nevertheless, while she was failing to live up to Hale’s ideals, she was trying to be a good steward of her remaining possessions.

Mary’s conflict with her son also demonstrates how her gender rendered her desire for economic independence unintelligible to him. She had a clear notion of independence for himself and other white men—based on land owning and freedom from injurious taxes—but was unable to extend that to others, let alone his elderly, worried mother. As a patriarch, he could only see his mother’s desperation for independence as his humiliation. They reconciled; he praised her publicly for guiding him to manhood. In her will, she left him the “best” of everything: furnishings, her land at Little Falls, and an enslaved boy named George. After Mary’s death, George extended support to her indigent kin. As can often be the case between family members, their striking similarities sharpened their conflicts. And the particular character traits they shared look better and have been more easily forgiven on an acclaimed man than on his proud and unsung mother.

Martha Saxton is Professor Emerita of History and Sexuality, Women’s and Gender Studies at Amherst College. Her latest book, The Widow Washington: The Life of Mary Washington, is the biography of Mary Ball Washington based on archival sources. She is also the author of Being Good: Women’s Moral Values in Early America, and a biography of Louisa May Alcott.
Women’s suffrage? The strong and independent members of the MVLA were divided on the issue.

By Rebecca Baird & Jessie MacLeod
he passing of the 19th Amendment, celebrating its centennial this year, seems inevitable to a 21st-century American, but it was, in fact, the culmination of decades of contentious public battles, with men and women on both sides of the debate. Many people assume that the trailblazing members of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association were outspoken advocates for women’s suffrage, but this is not the case. Although several Vice Regents individually supported the right to vote, the MVLA followed a long tradition of remaining neutral in matters of politics and never made a public declaration for or against women’s suffrage. The Association’s struggle to endure as a unified and cohesive group over long distances while continuing its fundraising efforts for Mount Vernon’s restoration proved difficult enough without adding political strain to the mix. It’s a fascinating story that gives rich context to suffrage and the women’s rights movement.

From its inception, the mission of the MVLA focused solely on the preservation of George Washington’s home as a sacred and patriotic duty. Founder Ann Pamela Cunningham viewed the organization’s goal as one suited to a woman’s conventional role as domestic caretaker, saying, “It is woman’s office to be a vestal; and even the ‘fire of liberty’ may need the care of her devotion, and the purity of her guardianship.” Cunningham, however, was also well educated and frustrated with the limitations placed on her gender. She strongly believed men and women to be of equal intelligence. In searching for a purpose or cause to which she could devote her own skills and abilities, she chose patriotism and preservation of an important American landmark. She repeatedly criticized the men of America for neglecting to care for Mount Vernon and prided herself that women “triumphed where he failed.”

The Association was originally meant to be a Southern enterprise. When Miss Cunningham discovered the profound interest Northern citizens also had in their work, she opened membership to include women from all over the country. This proved to be immensely beneficial in garnering much-needed influential and financial support, but difficult to manage, considering the opposing viewpoints of those involved.

With the tumultuous period of the Civil War approaching, the Association’s advisers suggested adding the words “of the Union” and making its official chartered name the “Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union.” This would send a message to the world that the MVLA stood together for a common goal of unity despite the divisive political climate. The Ladies understood that Americans on both sides, despite their differences, treasured Mount Vernon and George Washington. The preservation of Washington’s estate, which needed public support, was more important to them than officially siding with the North or the South. The MVLA maintained its precariously neutral position throughout the Civil War and afterward, although several Vice Regents parted ways with the Association during this time. The precedent was set. When other public conflicts arose, such as the issue of suffrage, the Ladies followed the same policy and remained impartial.

The national suffrage movement had internal struggles of its own to contend with. After presenting a unified front during the Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, the active participants in the movement began to disagree on the best strategy to win the vote. Conservatives, under the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), preferred advocating for changes to each state’s constitution. More radical activists formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and worked to pass a federal constitutional amendment. Progress began advancing more for the conservatives, with several western states granting full or partial voting rights to women. By 1890, the two groups merged to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Another division in the ranks of suffragists was the inclusion of minority women, which inspired African American women to establish the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs to promote the rights of those who had been largely ignored by the suffrage associations. The final two decades of the suffrage movement, culminating in the victory for the 19th Amendment, were led by a
A new generation of activists who took a more militant approach. Young suffragists like Alice Paul picketed the White House, organized large-scale parades, and staged prison hunger strikes to bring attention to the cause.

Suffragists used many of the same tactics employed by the MVLA to gain support and disseminate information. The Association depended on grassroots organizing to raise funds for the purchase and restoration of Mount Vernon. Each state’s Vice Regent worked with a standing committee and “Lady Managers” to collect subscriptions in different cities and counties. Any amount of money was accepted, with donations ranging from a few cents to several thousand dollars (or tens of thousands of dollars in today’s money). State and local suffrage groups likewise strengthened the national suffrage organizations by recruiting new members and paying dues to fund annual conventions and publications.

Both the MVLA and suffragists had strong male advisers and allies. Orator and politician Edward Everett spoke to audiences around the country on the merits of George Washington, donating all proceeds to Mount Vernon. By the end of his life, Everett had raised almost $70,000 for Mount Vernon. Other men helped the Association with legal advice, financial transactions, public advocacy, and legislative influence. Female suffrage leaders often gave public speeches, a taboo in the 19th century. But male supporters such as abolitionist Frederick Douglass and social reformer Henry Browne Blackwell also spoke on behalf of the cause, and provided political and financial aid when needed. Businessman George Francis Train helped develop The Revolution newspaper for Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Another suffrage publication, Woman’s Journal, was printed from 1878 to 1931 and included updates from conventions, speeches, debates, poetry, and short stories. The Mount Vernon Record, the newsletter for the MVLA from 1858 to 1860, served a similar role for the Association by reporting on the Association’s efforts and publishing articles on Washington and other founding fathers. The Ladies also set aside a section of the newsletter to list names of donors, with the amounts given.

The number of women’s clubs and associations grew rapidly throughout the mid-19th century. Emboldened by the achievements of organizations such as the MVLA, women became more publicly involved in social reform and in tackling important issues, including temperance, abolition, education, and labor laws. While the MVLA focused solely on the first president’s estate, the individual women who served as Vice Regents participated in many other organizations and causes. We will likely never know how many members of the Ladies’ Association were pro-suffrage. It is impossible to look into the private thoughts of past Vice Regents to discern their feelings on the subject, so we extrapolate from the historical record of those who pursued related activities or left personal accounts. It can also be difficult to determine who should be assigned the title “suffragist.” Those who joined suffrage associations, attended rallies, and wrote editorials in support of women’s rights may readily be given this designation, but it is less clear if the term should be extended to a person who simply stated their opinion in favor of women’s suffrage.

There are several MVLA Vice Regents who stand out as suffrage advocates. Phoebe Apperson Hearst, Vice Regent for California from 1889 to 1918, publicly announced support for her state’s suffrage amendment in 1911. She also served as a vice chairwoman for the National Woman’s Party for a year.
until she became uncomfortable with its more progressive methods, at which time she resigned, but continued offering monetary contributions. Her son, newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, agreed to publish pro-suffrage articles under her recommendation. Before her appointment as the Vice Regent for New York in 1922, Edwine Blake Danforth fought successfully alongside Susan B. Anthony to force the University of Rochester to enroll female students. The school later named buildings after them, the Danforth Dining Hall and the Susan B. Anthony Residence Hall. As a resident of Colorado, Alice Hale Hill, who served as Vice Regent from 1889 to 1908, could legally vote before many of her fellow MVLA Board members. Five years after women in her state earned the right to vote by referendum in 1893, Hill and other influential Coloradans signed a public letter to declare the benefits experienced from equal suffrage. The letter advocated for women as a positive influence to bring significant change. In her memorial at the MVLA’s biannual Council meeting in 1953, Lucy Ramsay Taliaferro, the Vice Regent for Wyoming from 1936 to 1950, was said to have “worked hard for the ratification of the 19th amendment” she held a strong interest in politics and was vice president of her local National Women’s Democratic League. Other MVLA Vice Regents who have thus far been linked to pro-suffrage or women’s rights activities include Alice Longfellow, Mary Frances Maxey, Harriet Cole Towner, Harriet Lane Huntress, Margaret Busbee Shipp, Charlotte Woodbury, Pauline Revere Thayer, and Margaret Sweat.

And who were the women who didn’t want women to have the right to vote? Anti-suffragists formed their own associations, and printed pamphlets, articles, and speeches to support their arguments. They claimed a majority of women did not want to vote or were indifferent to voting. Many feared radical change and how it would affect the economy or society at large. Others asserted a wife’s voice was already represented in her husband’s vote. The common thread throughout was the distinct roles of the sexes and that allowing women to vote would unset the natural order of things. It was not uncommon for women to favor some aspects of women’s rights, but then clash with suffragists over the right to vote. The MVLA had at least one ardent anti-suffragist in its ranks. Annie Burr Jennings of Fairfield, Connecticut, who served as a Vice Regent of the MVLA from 1915 to 1939. She donated land for public use and helped establish the local historical society and public library. She also joined the Fairfield chapter of the Connecticut Association Opposed to Women’s Suffrage and hosted its meetings in her large estate, Sunnieholme. She later became the chapter’s chairwoman.

The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association not only ushered in the national historic preservation movement, but also demonstrated that women had capabilities beyond what society had deemed appropriate for them. What the Association was able to accomplish given the constraints of the time period is remarkable. Suffrage did not fit into the Association’s mission, but the MVLA is made up of individual women who have their own interests and pursuits. Considering the Association as a group of independent women, whose devotion to Mount Vernon is only a part of their story, fosters a better understanding of the MVLA’s role within the greater context of women’s rights and the suffrage movement.

Rebecca Baird is the archivist of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association. Mount Vernon Associate Curator Jessie McLeod also contributed to this story.
A historical tapestry emerges from the folds of Martha Washington’s quilts, all three now back home at Mount Vernon.

_By Amanda C. Isaac_
No, we’re not talking about contemporary art at Mount Vernon, but rather piecework quilts made by Martha Washington. Their large size—each one more than eight feet square—and bold patterning are a powerful expression of Mrs. Washington’s creative vision, and an important complement to the popular image of a diminutive, self-effacing, grandmotherly figure. In late 1919, Mount Vernon received the generous donation of a quilt top pieced by Martha Washington, the best documented of only three piecework quilts known to be made by her. Its addition to Mount Vernon’s collection coincides with a new initiative to document, research, conserve, and ultimately exhibit these works of art (see page 7).

Martha Washington’s quilts have been known for decades, but they continue to prompt fresh questions. When did she start quilting? How did she quilt and where? Did anyone help her? What was her skill level and style? Investigating the quilts pieced by the first lady, as well as related quilts from the extended Dandridge, Custis, and Washington families, has the potential to reveal more about her as an individual and many of the otherwise hidden women in her world, free and enslaved.

Then as now, making a quilt began with selecting fabrics, evaluating combinations of patterns and colors, and planning a layout. The fabrics chosen could be repurposed from an old garment, remnants from another project, or purpose-bought new material. Once the pieces for the top had been cut and sewn together, it was time for the quilting itself—the process of stitching together the three-layer sandwich of top, filling, and backing—which distinguishes a quilt from other types of bed covers.

While the piecing might be done primarily by the quilt designer alone, the quilting was traditionally a shared activity, to which relatives and friends were invited. Women gathered for intensive stitching sessions—“quiltings” or “quilting frolics”—and then celebrated with feasting, and occasionally, dancing with both sexes. “Fine eating and merry quilting,” summed up one such event in the life of a young Virginia woman, Francis Baylor Hill, in 1797. Alternatively, quilting might proceed more slowly, with friends and relatives encouraged to contribute whenever they came to visit. In either case, the quilt, with layers basted together and the design marked on its top, was mounted in a rectangular wooden frame with adjustable sides, and then placed table-like on temporary supports. Stitchers gathered around to work. Once the stitching was completed, quilters undid the frame, bound the edges, and sometimes added a decorative fringe. It was then ready for use or display.

There are no known documentary accounts of quilting parties at Mount Vernon, but surviving objects offer important clues. The first of the three quilts, and the only one fully completed by Mrs. Washington, has become known as the Penn’s Treaty quilt, so named because the center depicts “William Penn’s Treaty with the Indians,” a scene from the founding of Pennsylvania in the early 1680s. Considered one of Benjamin West’s most notable history paintings, Penn’s Treaty was popularly disseminated via both prints and copper-plate-printed textiles (or toiles). Reproduced as a quilt, the top was pieced in a framed center-medallion format, with the design centered on a large square set within a series of surrounding borders. The quilter worked from the center outward, adding borders until reaching the desired size. Similar surviving quilts attest that this was the most popular composition for high-style, fancy quilts in the Chesapeake region during the Early Republic period.

All told, Martha’s Penn’s Treaty quilt contains at least 20 different printed or painted fabrics. Most appear to be English prints, and a few may be imported Indian chintzes. They are cut and pieced into diamonds, triangles, stars, and pineapples, and the quilting is artfully laid out in scrolls, stylized flowers, and fleur-de-lis, and chevron borders. At least one of the fabrics, a red-and-blue printed plaid, is also found in a surviving garment, a banyan, or dressing gown, once worn by George Washington. Several of the fabrics also appear in the other two surviving quilts, and they raise the intriguing question: Do the quilts present a sampling of fabrics worn in the Washington household or used in its furnishings? Perhaps, but further analysis is needed of the fabrics’ sources and dates before we can declare these quilts to be the Rosetta Stone to Mount Vernon’s fashions and interiors. At the very least, they document a range of textiles available to elite American consumers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Analysis of the sewing threads and stitches might one day enable us to estimate how many hands participated in the quiltmaking. Two of the possible contributors were nieces of Mrs. Washington: Frances Bassett Washington Lear and Frances Dandridge Henley Lear, who...
were respectively, the second and third wives of George Washington's secretary Tobias Lear. Both nieces (both nicknamed Fanny) spent extended time at Mount Vernon in the 1780s and 1790s, and both would have observed, and most likely joined their aunt in her needlework. Someone else present at Mount Vernon during this period, and a possible contributor to the quilt, was Mrs. Washington's adopted granddaughter, Eleanor (Nelly) Parke Custis Lewis. Letters and reports also document that Mrs. Washington relied on Caroline Branham, Charlotte, Alice, and Alley, the enslaved seamstresses at Mount Vernon, for certain articles of clothing and accessories for the Washington household, and this may at times have extended to working on the quilts as well. Finally, visiting female family and friends may also have lent a hand in its creation.

The Children's Games top, pieced by Mrs. Washington but never quilted, is the most vibrant of her works. Granddaughter Eliza Parke Custis Law inherited it and carefully packed it in a trunk with other Washington garments and accessories. Protected from light and pests for more than a century, it retains its luminosity, incorporating 19 patterns in a rainbow of colors: sunflower yellow in hourglass blocks, rich purple in the squares near the center, mesmerizing blue stripes, deep green polka-dot diamonds, and cherry-red globes in the outer borders. Several of the fabrics sport their original glazed finish, giving the quilt a shimmer of contrasting surfaces.

Four large-scale printed vignettes in each corner give the top its name, and are taken from c. 1795 English furnishing fabric with scenes of children's games. The top incorporates fabrics from a range of periods, including a delicate Indian painted cotton chintz from around 1770. Mrs. Washington clearly valued the imported textile and its workmanship. A dress of this same fabric fashioned in a style of c. 1810, likely its second or third generation of use, is also in the Mount Vernon collection, and attests to the care she took with such precious materials.

Because this pieced top was never quilted, it provides a rare opportunity to examine the backside, and to take a closer look at the skill of the cutting and stitching. Last year, Mount Vernon invited expert quilter Cecilia Ann Marzulli to reverse-engineer and re-create the quilt top using modern fabrics to simulate the visual effect of the original. After analyzing the quilt's construction, Marzulli observed: “Martha was a person of great precision. She accurately cut her fabric to enhance the design depicted. Today we call this attention to detail ‘fussy cutting.’” When it is finished later this year, Marzulli's quilt top will go on exhibit to raise awareness of Mrs. Washington's work and funds for the conservation of the three quilts.

The third quilt by Mrs. Washington, a recent gift to Mount Vernon, is the most dynamic of the three. Appliqued circles on the center diamond, borders, and inner corners create repetition and movement, while inward-pointing triangles act like arrows, drawing the eye back to the center. The neoclassical swags, near the outermost border, lend a harmony to the robust rhythm of the appliquéd motifs. As with Mrs. Washington's other quilts, this one incorporates at least one known Washington dress textile—a printed and woven stripe. The bodice of the dress made from the fabric and worn by Mrs. Washington still survives, also preserved by granddaughter Eliza Law. Mrs. Washington died without completing the top, but as Eliza Law explained in a note accompanying it: “This Quilt was entirely the work of my grandmother as far as the plain borders. I finished it in 1815 and leave it to my Rosebud [Law's granddaughter, Eliza Law Rogers].”

In addition to the quilts, two sets of quilting frames owned by Mrs. Washington survive in private collections. Both were listed in the inventory of household goods from...
the Mansion taken after her death, and were likely the work of the plantation’s indentured and enslaved carpenters. The largest frame can extend to accommodate a 9’ x 11’ quilt, and may have been used for the Penn’s Treaty quilt. The smaller frame fits a 5.5’ x 7.5’ quilt. No quilts of this smaller size by Mrs. Washington are known, but the presence of multiple frames suggests that there may have been more quilting activity at Mount Vernon beyond the three.

Mrs. Washington’s quilts place her within a larger quilting community in Virginia and the Mid-Atlantic during the 18th and 19th centuries, one that emerges as we look beyond her own work to that of other members of her family and community. One of the earliest quilts in the Mount Vernon collection—a rare, double-sided silk patchwork—links two generations of Dandridge women through its fabrics—Francis Orlando Jones Dandridge and her daughters, Martha Dandridge Custis Washington, Anna Maria Dandridge Bassett, and Elizabeth Dandridge Aylett Henley. Additional surviving quilts or documentary references attest to the quilting of granddaughter Martha Parke Custis Peter and nieces Martha Washington Dandridge Halyburton and Frances Ann Washington Ball. Add to that the still unknown quilting hands of many other women who may have worked with Mrs. Washington, whether at her home or another’s, whether a few stitches or many—and the network, or patchwork, of relationships widens.

For historians, quilts offer tantalizing threads of information that lead to an understanding of social connections and relationships that might otherwise go undetected. For at its core, the process of quilting is intrinsically about stitching together diverse people, materials, and concepts to create a new unity—e pluribus unum.

Amanda Isaac is Mount Vernon’s associate curator.
Getting to Know Martha

George Washington’s wife is front and center in this classroom

Traditional textbooks have often relegated the history of women to the sidebars of the page or ignored their stories all together. But not in my classroom at Monta Vista High School in Cupertino, California, where the stories of women take center stage in my U.S. History class. Because we teach chronologically, colonial history and the founding of the new nation are in some of the earliest lessons of the year, so my students get to know Martha Washington early on.

My goal for my students is to have them understand the complexities and nuances of American women’s history, and Martha Washington makes the ideal lens. I wanted to create lessons that would bring Mount Vernon to the classroom and give students the chance to look critically at colonial women’s history through three key lessons: private versus public spheres for women, coverture and colonial family ethic, and slavery. The Life Guard Teachers’ Fellowship awarded to me by Mount Vernon allowed me to utilize the rich resources available at the estate and library.

Women’s history is often delineated into public and private spheres. Recently, historians have been exploring how these two seemingly separate worlds interacted and influenced one another. My goal is to have my students, in roles as the next generation of historians, analyze the primary sources for insight and clues. Reading the letters to and from Martha Washington helps students to puzzle out an interpretation of colonial history.

During George’s presidency, Martha held Friday evening drawing-room gatherings at the couple’s temporary home in Philadelphia. Both men and women regularly attended. This evening gathering, known as the Republican Court, was a symbolic gesture in which the male-dominated world of politics intertwined with the private female-dominated world of the family sphere. Though Martha Washington became friendly with prominent women such as Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren, she often bristled against the expectations placed upon her by the public. Her letters to family members, especially to her niece Frances “Fanny” Basset, demonstrate this tension. Students examine these letters to shape a portrait of Martha Washington and how she both conformed to, as well as dissented, against the limitations placed on her. When reading Martha Washington’s actual words, they get it. Students then move on to learning about colonial family ethic and coverture to understand the constraints under which free women in the 18th century lived. Governing their lives throughout the various geographic regions of Britain’s North American colonies was a system whose four basic principles were marriage, complementary roles for helpmeets (spouses), child bearing and child rearing, and literacy. Remarriage after the death of a spouse was expected, because too many unmarried women of childbearing age was viewed as destabilizing to a community.

Coverture was the system of laws governing women’s place in society and ensuring it was subordinate to that of men. Widow Martha Custis understood this pressure when she married George Washington. My students read letters from Widow Custis acting as the business manager to her deceased husband’s estate and a letter in which Mrs. Washington provides her niece Fanny advice about whether or not she should marry. This comparison allows students to create a nuanced picture of Martha Washington under colonial family ethic and coverture and also see the same woman shrewdly conducting business and pushing the boundaries of her gender.

Lastly, students examine how Martha Washington, as the mistress of a plantation, participated in and perpetuated the brutality of slavery. After Daniel Parke Custis’s death in 1759, Martha Dandridge Custis was entitled to the use of one-third of her husband’s estate, including the enslaved men and women, their labor, and the wealth produced from their work, for the duration of her life. Under the laws of coverture, these enslaved people were known as dower slaves, as they were considered part of her widow’s share. After marrying George Washington in 1759, control of the dower slaves fell to Martha’s new husband. Many of the Custis enslaved people were brought to Washington’s Mount Vernon estate. By comparing Martha Washington’s will to George Washington’s will, students can think critically on the ways in which Mrs. Washington embodied the southern plantation mistress. Her letters to Fanny Basset on the plans to move several of the enslaved from their presidential home in Philadelphia back to Virginia highlight how the Washingtons worked to ensure they could continue to benefit from slavery. It is important that students confront the unvarnished side of history and see the Washingtons as they truly were.

Martha Washington is often relegated in history to having “George Washington’s wife” as her only achievement of note. But with students looking through the lens of women’s history, the woman behind the man is at last able to step forward.

Bonnie Belshe is a George Washington Teacher Institute alumna and Life Guard Teacher Fellow. She teaches at Monta Vista High School in Cupertino, California.
73rd Annual Birthnight Supper and Ball

On February 16, 200 guests gathered for the 73rd annual Birthnight Supper & Ball—Mount Vernon’s longest-running fundraiser. This tradition celebrates the birth of our founding father, George Washington, and this year paid special tribute to the women in General Washington’s life, including those who helped preserve his legacy.

Gala cochairs, Karena and Martijn Rasser, welcomed guests, who enjoyed a cocktail reception, seated three-course dinner catered by Design Cuisine, a live auction, online auction, entertainment, and dancing. A highlight of the evening included a birthday toast delivered to General Washington by his beloved wife, Mrs. Washington.

Organized by the Neighborhood Friends, this sold-out event and pinnacle fundraiser raised more than $150,000 to support the restoration of the Mansion. Mount Vernon thanks the many generous supporters who contributed to this event, which proved the most successful gala to date.

Above: Karena & Martijn Rasser, Gayla & Scott Kaiser, Erin & Neil Saltung
(Photos by Dan Chung)

Left from Top: John and Ruth Huber, Chris Massey, Vince & Nicole Sampson, Stacey & Chip Brown

Right from Top: Neighborhood Friends Steering Committee Cochairs, Tracy & Barry Hutchison, Joseph & Christa Doherty, Jacob & Elizabeth Snodgrass, Ann & Joseph Somersett, Mary & Jonathan Biegel, Audra & Matt Gannon, Matt & LeAnne Murrell, Carmen Trummer
Birthday Huzzahs

On Saturday, February 22, nearly 200 of Mount Vernon’s generous donors and friends gathered to honor the life and legacy of George Washington on the 288th anniversary of his birth. Highlights of the annual Birthday Dinner celebration included historical addresses by General Washington’s closest confidantes, the Marquis de Lafayette, Dr. James Craik, and Martha Washington; an engaging conversation between patriotic philanthropist David Rubenstein and Pulitzer Prize–winning author Rick Atkinson; and a heartfelt message on the importance of an educated citizenry from General Washington himself. (Photos by Dan Chung)
Martha Washington was an elite, slave-owning, estate-managing, debt-paying widow who conducted business from her home, Mount Vernon. She managed thousands of acres and hundreds of enslaved people throughout her lifetime, but especially during her two periods of widowhood. Patriarchal legal codes in 18th-century Virginia gave only unmarried women explicit power to control property. A look at Martha’s two periods of widowhood reveals how the former Mrs. Custis, and then the former Mrs. Washington, exercised this power. Her experiences demonstrate how these codes affected her and her family’s inheritance, and the lives of the enslaved people she owned.

In 1750, at age 18, Martha Dandridge married 39-year-old Daniel Parke Custis. Daniel came from one of the oldest and wealthiest planter families in Virginia. Daniel and Martha were married for seven years. They had four children together, although only two of them—a son, Jacky, and a daughter, Patsy—survived into early adulthood. Daniel Parke Custis died suddenly in 1757. His death made 25-year-old Martha one of the wealthiest widows in Virginia. Because Daniel died without making a will, which would have stipulated who exactly would get which property of his, the common law of “dower share” applied to Martha. She had the legal right in her lifetime to control, but not own, one-third of Daniel’s wealth. The other two-thirds of his wealth was held in trust to Daniel’s heirs. The two-thirds share (until Jacky reached adulthood). Thus, because of feme covert laws, George came to control all of Martha’s property.

After a brief courtship, 28-year-old Martha married 27-year-old George Washington in 1759. George brought his own enslaved people to the marriage. According to the common law, once a widow remarried, the new husband now controlled her one-third dower share. Since Martha’s male child was still a minor, George also controlled the two-thirds share (until Jacky reached adulthood). Thus, because of feme covert laws, George came to control all of Martha’s property.

Before states legislated what were called Married Women’s Property Acts during the mid-19 century, women fell under the common law of feme covert upon marriage. Feme covert, or “covered woman,” meant that women relinquished ownership of all moveable goods to their husbands. While women retained ownership of any realty, their husbands managed their real estate. But, if a woman remained unmarried, or became a widow, she fell under feme sole status. While she lacked the power to vote or serve on a jury, she retained the same property rights as a man. So, happily remarried and once again a “covered woman,” Martha moved into George’s Mount Vernon home with her children.

Martha’s beloved husband of 40 years died in December of 1799, when the dower share reverted to Martha. George’s will stipulated that his own 12 enslaved people should be freed only after Martha died. George stated that while he “earnestly wished” to free his enslaved people upon his death, he thought that would be too painful for his enslaved people, who had intermarried and created families with the dower enslaved people, over whom he had no authority.

But Martha freed George’s 123 enslaved people early, on January 1, 1801. Why? The answer is as stark as it is simple: because she was worried that they would kill her. George’s enslaved people knew about his will; they knew that once Martha was dead, they would be free. So why not hasten Martha’s end? The enslaved people at Mount Vernon and the white man and woman who owned them had experienced absolute dependence on each other for their entire lives. But generally, freedom felt threatening to the owners—not to the owned.

For the final two years of her life, Martha was again a widow. Her business records during this time reveal things ran relatively normally at Mount Vernon, since her dower slaves were still working the plantation and its associated industries. Martha continued her domestic work. She purchased home improvement wares such as glass and oil. She paid Mr. Keating’s “balance due” with cash, herring, and whiskey.

But a slight change did occur: as a widow, Martha had to engage in the agricultural side of things at Mount Vernon, which had usually been George’s purview. As a widow, Martha was forced to dip into the more masculine world of industrial management.

Martha Dandridge Custis Washington died on May 22, 1802. The remaining one-third dower share thus returned to Daniel’s heirs, who should have been Jacky and Patsy. But since both children were dead by the time Martha died, this share was transferred to Martha’s four grandchildren. Her death proved devastating for the Mount Vernon enslaved community: George’s enslaved people had intermarried with the Custis-dower share enslaved people over those 40 years, and so at least 20 couples or families would be separated. Decades passed before the various divisions of black human “property” satisfied the many white Custis descendants.

The legal, cultural, and familial experiences of white women’s widowhood is woven throughout Mount Vernon’s history. The patriarchal legal codes differentiating married from unmarried women at this time absolutely mattered for every woman, as well as every man.

George was able to personally control Martha’s 153 enslaved people for 40 years because of these laws. Imagine how the productivity, even landscape, of Mount Vernon would be vastly different without them. And let us not forget: it was only after the widow of George Washington’s half-brother Lawrence died that George received ownership of his famous Mount Vernon.

Martha experienced widowhood twice. This meant she experienced two periods of irony, since these times were full of personal sadness, yet also, legal freedom...
This invitation to the wedding of Mount Vernon employee Sarah Johnson appears in the scrapbook of Margaret Sweat, Vice Regent for Maine (1866–1908). Johnson was born enslaved to John Augustine Washington III, the last private owner of Mount Vernon, in 1844. After the Civil War, Johnson returned to Mount Vernon to work for the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association with her husband, Nathan. She worked as the Mansion’s housekeeper, sold lunches and milk to visitors, and performed all manner of domestic chores around the estate. During her long employment with the MVLA, she earned the high respect of many Vice Regents and fellow employees. Mary Carver Leiter, Vice Regent of Illinois (1885–1915), purchased the wedding dress for Johnson’s second marriage to William Robinson in 1888. The wedding was held at Johnson’s house, on Mount Vernon’s grounds, after visiting hours. Superintendent Harrison Dodge reported to a Vice Regent, “the bride looked radiant in her yellow gown.” A year after her wedding to Robinson, Sarah Johnson purchased four acres of her own land just north of Mount Vernon, a plot formerly owned by John Augustine Washington III. The flag at Mount Vernon was flown at half-mast when she passed away in January 1920. 

Here Comes the Bride
I was painfully distressed at the ruin and desolation of the home of Washington and the thought passed through my mind: Why was it that the women of his country did not try to keep it in repair, if the men could not do it?

–Louisa Cunningham to Ann Pamela Cunningham, 1853