

# GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT ★ VERNON

## THE DRAMATIC RESCUE OF GEORGE WASHINGTON'S ESTATE

Long before the campaigns for women's rights and decades before the heyday of the environmental movement, the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association was breaking new ground in both of these areas. But the formation of the Association was much more than a chapter in women's history or the first step toward the rescue of America's most important historic home – it marked the emergence of the national preservation movement in America.

After George Washington's death in 1799, the ownership of Mount Vernon changed hands among family members five times. Residing in the home of Washington proved to be more of a hardship than a privilege. Like most Virginia plantations, Mount Vernon suffered from the exhaustion of the soil from over-farming and the constant fluctuation of market forces, to the point that profits all but vanished. At the same time, Washington's heirs were burdened by hoards of travelers who arrived at Mount Vernon, eager to see what was rapidly becoming a national shrine.

John Augustine Washington III, George Washington's great-grandnephew, owned the Estate beginning in 1829. As his funds dwindled and the wear and tear of hundreds of visitors began to take its toll, Washington could do little to maintain the Mansion and its surroundings. Several columns on the piazza rotted away completely, so the roof was propped up with the masts of old ships. Not surprisingly, Washington was approached by speculators who hoped to develop the property into a commercial enterprise. Washington revealed that his best offer for the property was \$300,000, yet he could not consent to sell

Mount Vernon without an absolute assurance that it would be protected as is for future generations.

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

The Mansion continued to decline. Thus it happened that, on a moonlit evening in 1853, Louisa Dalton Bird Cunningham stared out from the deck of a passing steamer and saw the first president's house in near ruin. Cunningham was making the long trip home to South Carolina from Philadelphia, where her 37-year-old daughter, Ann Pamela, was being treated for severe spinal injuries she had suffered when she was thrown from a horse as a teenager. For 21 years, Ann Pamela Cunningham had been "confined to her couch" at Rosemont, a plantation in rural South Carolina. The pain from the injury was ever-present, limiting her ability to participate in the active life of plantation society, and she quickly became isolated, depressed, and lonely.

So when she received a letter from her mother (some accounts insist that it was soaked in tears) describing the shocking condition of George Washington's home, Ann Pamela was seemingly ill-equipped to face such a formidable challenge. But her mother's message was an inspiring one: if the men of America are allowing the home and burial place of its most respected hero to go to ruin, why can't the women of America band together to save it?

In fact, Ann Pamela Cunningham's unusual circumstances made her take risks that few other women in the nineteenth century would have considered. In an age when it was scandalous for a woman's name to appear in a newspaper – unless it was to announce her marriage or her death – Ann Pamela Cunningham initiated a daring public campaign to

rally thousands of women around a noble cause. With few prospects for a fulfilling life as a wife or mother, she made a conscious decision to focus her energies on rescuing Mount Vernon.

Ann Pamela Cunningham's first hope was to gather enough contributions from patriotic women, primarily in the South, to allow the Commonwealth of Virginia to purchase and manage the property. Her initial letter of appeal, published in December 1853 in the *Charleston Mercury*, was full of the flamboyant and overwrought language that pervaded mid-nineteenth-century journalism. With references to vestal virgins, souls aflame, and vultures, it is understandable that Cunningham felt obligated to maintain her anonymity. She signed the letter "A Southern Matron."

Although several other newspapers picked up the letter, the governor of Virginia, Joseph Johnson, was far from an enthusiastic partner in the campaign to solicit funds to purchase Mount Vernon. In all probability, the vast majority of American men quietly disdained this bold appeal initiated by and directed to women. Ann Pamela Cunningham correctly judged that, with or without the approval of men, she had gone too far to turn back. She discarded the disguise of "A Southern Matron," organized the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, and began to accept contributions directly. As more and more newspapers published her appeals, and a variety of extremely influential women agreed to become the original Vice Regents, Cunningham found herself a most unlikely celebrity.

Several men outside the realm of government, including lawyers, judges, and bankers, expressed a willingness to help Cunningham. The most indispensable was Edward Everett of Boston, known as the most respected orator of his time. His résumé was exceptionally distinguished and his lectures were celebrated with great fanfare across the nation. On George Washington's birthday in 1856, Everett delivered a lecture at the Mercantile Library Association in Boston entitled, "George Washington, Builder of the Union," a topic fraught with deep meaning as the conflict between the North and South began to escalate. Ann Pamela Cunningham attended the same two-hour lecture in

Richmond and convinced the silver-tongued Everett to adopt her cause. Over the next three years, Everett delivered the Washington lecture 129 times, in almost every corner of the nation. In the end, Everett's efforts resulted in contributions totaling over \$69,000 - more than a third of the purchase price.

By the spring of 1858, in large part due to Everett's phenomenally successful speaking tour, Ann Pamela Cunningham was so confident that the Association would reach its goal that she arranged to meet with John Augustine Washington III, hoping to bring closure to the purchase of Mount Vernon. According to Gerald W. Johnson in his book *Mount Vernon: The Story of a Shrine*, Cunningham found Mount Vernon's owner in "the worst of tempers." Washington was cordial but firm in his refusal of Cunningham's offer, and after listening to "all the arguments she could bring to bear . . . with cold civility, he left her and she went to bed in a state of collapse."

After a nearly sleepless night in the historic residence she now envisioned slipping through her grasp, Cunningham started anew the following day, this time calling upon the sage advice of Washington's wife. The result was inevitable. Several hours later, on April 6, 1858, Washington signed a contract of sale with the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union for \$200,000. According to the Association's annual report of 1858, the terms were \$18,000 down, with an additional \$57,000 to be paid no later than the first of the new year. The remaining balance was to be paid in three annual installments.

Within the next two years, thousands of people donated to the fund, including President James Buchanan. The Association paid Mount Vernon's purchase price in full on December 9, 1859 - more than two years ahead of the deadline - and took possession on the 128th anniversary of George Washington's birth, February 22, 1860.

With the purchase of Mount Vernon behind them, Cunningham and the Vice Regents of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association began the challenging task of restoration. Fortunately, Ann Pamela Cunningham possessed the sensibilities of a true

preservationist. She immediately dismissed all proposals to tear down Washington's outbuildings or to transform the landscape. The words of her farewell address to her fellow board members would establish a concise and eloquent mission statement that would serve as a guide for future historic preservation sites and which continues to be followed at Mount Vernon today:

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