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History's Housekeepers: Gender, Museums and the Historic Preservation Movement in Nineteenth Century America

Devon Zotovitch

After the dawn of the new Republic, early nineteenth century Americans explored what it meant to be an American. America was the New World and its inhabitants desired to break their ties with Europe, along with their pasts. Although Americans wanted to be free of all things European, they desperately desired the legitimization of their country's status in the world. Elite male scholars and politicians concentrated on the future of the young nation, and formed ideas and beliefs that were unique to America. Americans did not glorify their very recent history. Instead, they extolled the optimistic outlook for their new civilization.

Even though America was a new democracy, the Constitution did not provide equal rights for all. As American society and culture developed, a gendered division of sexes ensued, creating separate spheres for men and women. These gender roles defined men's place in public and women's place in private. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the ideologies of Republican Motherhood and the Cult of True Womanhood developed to keep women in their designated roles. Republican Motherhood stated that it was the responsibility of women to nurture the next generation of patriotic Americans.¹ Similarly, the Cult of True

¹ Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 229.

Womanhood asserted that women were the paragons of virtue. These two ideas characterized women as the more morally upright of the sexes, a belief that would plant the seeds of its own destruction.

Although Republican Motherhood and the Cult of True Womanhood fostered the limitations of women in American society, women embraced these ideologies. Women used the same precepts that prevented their involvement in activities outside of the home to justify their entrance into the male public sphere. As the moral backbone for the new Union, upper and middle-class white women participated in social reforms as a civic duty. Volunteer activities operated within women's prescriptive roles, as it was viewed that women should extend the grace of their Christian homes to causes in need of aid. These activities were manifested in the public sphere, including suffrage, temperance and the abolition of slavery.²

Several women's organizations founded in nineteenth century focused on preserving the new history of the nation. After Ann Pamela Cunningham and the Mount Vernon Ladies Association successfully obtained and restored George Washington's Mount Vernon estate in 1860, other women's groups rapidly emulated their success. As a result, women's groups protected cemeteries, landscapes and historic buildings, while also collecting American artifacts.³ By the middle of the nineteenth century, these groups ignited a historic preservation movement. Preserving historic homes

² Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 20.

³ Gail Lee Dubrow and Jennifer B. Goodman, *Restoring Women's History through Historic Preservation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 17-18.

and the collections of artifacts that accompanied them created the institution of the house museum, the first museums of American history.⁴ Women's groups spearheaded the historic preservation movement, using the skills and knowledge they acquired through Republican Motherhood and the Cult of True Womanhood, conserving America's history for generations to come.

Women's Roles in Early America

During the colonial period in America, men and women worked in parallel, sharing tasks in and outside the home. Although a sexual division of labor existed, men and women worked as partners to ensure the survival of their families. Men generally worked in agriculture, and women managed the household as well as home industry. The essential duties colonial women performed resulted in "a position of unprecedented importance and equality within the socio-economic unit of the family." Colonial women enjoyed rights that differed from British common law. For example, in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, women held property and voted in town meetings.⁵

Following the Revolutionary War, colonial communities lost their administrative authority as the powers of the Republic were consolidated. Republican ideology reordered America's political structure and defined politics as a "strictly male arena" using the ancient Greek model. Women lost many of the legal and economic rights granted to them before the war and

⁴ Dubrow & Goodman, 22.

⁵ Joan Hoff-Wilson, "The Illusion of Change: Women and the American Revolution," in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred Young. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976) 394.

suffered new limitations under the Republic. Aristotle's philosophy stated only men possessed the ambitious and aggressive qualities necessary to be political beings in the public sector. "Women were thought to make their moral choices in the context of the household, a woman's domain that Aristotle understood to be a non-public, lesser institution that served the polis."⁶

As men took on their role in the public sphere of the new Republic, women assumed their new identity within the home. Women were banned from participating in public politics, but mothers obtained a "political" role inside of the home through their new task of nurturing virtuous male citizens. Kerber refers to this new role as "Republican Motherhood." In their domestic sphere, women avoided the evils and corruption of public politics, allowing them to maintain their religiousness and virtue that they, by nature, ostensibly possessed. The purity and honor associated with women's sphere enabled them to be the perfect instructors of republican values to the next generation of patriots.

Social theorists at the time recognized the significance of women's influential role in the home and encouraged women to gain knowledge of republican ideology to incorporate those values in their homes. As one social commentator observed in 1787, "It is of the utmost importance, that the women should be well instructed in the principles of liberty, in a republic. [T]he first patriots of ancient times, were formed by

⁶ Kerber, 7.

their mothers.”⁷ Additionally, prescriptive literature assured women, “The solidity and stability of the liberties of your country rest with you. Your country therefore demands... that you exercise all you power and influence in this cause.”⁸ Women, the more pure of the sexes, were morally obligated to raise sons to be responsible voters, ensuring the survival of the Republic. Republican Motherhood created a political context in which private female virtues comfortably coexisted with the civic virtue, increasing the stability of the new nation.⁹

During the period of 1815 to 1865 in America, the division of male and female spheres widened. Men’s work took them out of the home into realm of business and enterprise. America evolved from a pastoral society to an increasingly modern way of life with the industrialization of manufacturing and agriculture.¹⁰ Middle-class women’s domestic responsibilities expanded, as their role in the agricultural and commercial economy shrank. In early America, men were the “movers, the doers, the actors,” while “woman’s place was unquestionably by her own fireside- as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother.”¹¹ Through

⁷ Sidney, “Maxims for Republics,” *The American Museum; or, Repository of Ancient and Modern Fugitive Pieces and c. Prose and Poetical* 2 (1787): 80. www.proquest.com (accessed February 8, 2005).

⁸ “Female influence” *The New York Magazine* May 1795. 297.

⁹ Kerber, 10-12.

¹⁰ Ellen Perry Berkeley and Matilda McQuaid, eds., *Architecture: A Place for Women* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989.), 7.

¹¹ Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 27, 31.

Republican Motherhood, women were acknowledged as the civilizers of the nation. This concept further evolved during the early nineteenth-century, extolling the virtuousness of women's place inside the home and its morally uplifting effect on society. Historian Barbara Welter refers to this phenomenon as the cult of True Womanhood or the cult of domesticity. The True Woman possessed the "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity."¹² These attributes prescribed that women's sphere was in the home.

Women's Benevolence Societies

Early nineteenth-century women embraced the cult of True Womanhood and took their prescribed roles very seriously. For many women during this period, religion was the cornerstone of their existence. Clergymen preached that religion belonged to women by divine right and their piety was a gift from God.¹³ However, women's gift of spirituality was not to be shared from the pulpit, as only men were permitted to hold leadership positions in churches. Nonetheless, clergymen encouraged women to share their piousness with the community by creating charitable societies. Women's church groups appeared in America as early as 1790, and by the 1830s, most churches had a women's group supporting the congregation. These women's groups ran Sunday schools, visited the poor, and most importantly, raised the funds necessary to carry out their charitable actions. The women who created charitable societies structured their groups in a methodical manner and communicated with newly

¹² Welter, 21.

¹³ Welter, 22.

formed women's societies, instructing them on how to organize, elect officers, operate meetings and publish reports.¹⁴ The effective, business-like manner in which women carried out their charity work was all done without violating the boundaries of the woman's sphere. These behaviors would later contribute to women's capability in forming historic preservation societies.

Although the ideology of True Womanhood was designed to keep women in the home, the moral authority granted to women through this ideology led women to reach out to those in need outside of their homes. Women learned the skills necessary to organize and fund other social reform societies from their participation in church based charity groups. The woman's sphere started to expand beyond the family and church, extending to those in American society whom they considered morally depraved. As the guardians of all that was good and decent in society, women believed that they were morally responsible for the betterment of American culture. By the 1820s social critics insisted that "women assume a unique responsibility to disseminate Christian values and counter the materialism and greed of the nineteenth-century male."¹⁵ The virtues that were inherent in women were needed to provide balance in the industrialization and urbanization of the country. The American government was not at that time invested in the task of enforcing moral standards. Women, therefore, assumed the duty of preserving social order.¹⁶ One of

¹⁴ Ginzberg, 36-38.

¹⁵ Ginzberg, 14.

¹⁶ Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *American Historical Review* 89 (1984): 621.

the first challenges women's benevolence societies undertook was that of temperance. These groups were successful in their mission to reduce drinking and expanded their benevolence to other areas of society. By the 1830s, women's groups had also organized to eliminate prostitution, slavery and crime. Women wanted to perfect society and protect it from the downfalls they believed to characterize Europe. As a result of the benevolence societies' concentration on the well-being of women, children, the household and the community, women formed a significant public role by working from their private sphere.¹⁷

Although nineteenth-century women were encouraged to join social reform organizations, the participation of women who had young children was frowned upon. The duties of women within their homes as prescribed by the cult of domesticity demanded a lot of time. Social critics at the time feared married women might neglect their families in the process of supporting their causes. Nineteenth-century society held that women with grown children, young unmarried women, and women without children were best suited for membership in benevolence groups. However, unmarried women's participation in these groups only lasted for as long as they were single. Once married, they would have to drop out of their particular organization to tend to their new homes and husbands.

The Development of Women's Involvement in Historic Preservation

By the middle of the nineteenth-century, women's benevolence societies took on a new cause, that of

¹⁷ Baker, 630.

historic preservation.¹⁸ Following in the footsteps of women's abolitionist and temperance groups, women's historic preservation societies publicized, fundraised, bought and restored properties to save some of the nation's most important landmarks. "Nineteenth-century women saw preservation as an avocation and as an amateur, in the best sense of that word, pursuit."¹⁹ Women's preservation societies became directly involved with sites and structures related to the young history of the nation. These groups took their responsibilities seriously and aimed to preserve historic properties as accurately as possible, thus filling visitors with patriotism when visiting these sites. While the most notable sites were associated with the founding fathers, women's societies protected cemeteries, landscapes, gardens and historic buildings, while also collecting artifacts pertinent to American history.

Americans were taking notice of historic properties at this time, but women's preservation groups appeared to have spearheaded the movement. "Women were at the forefront of the historic preservation movement from the earliest effort to commemorate the nation's origins."²⁰ The first instance of women organizing to preserve the nation's historic past occurred in 1830 when Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey's Ladies Book*, organized a committee of women to raise funds for the incomplete Boston's Bunker Hill Memorial which had been started by a men's preservation society. Hale and her many readers set up fundraisers for the cause and eventually paid for more than half of

¹⁸ Barbara J. Howe, "Women in Historic Preservation: The Legacy of Ann Pamela Cunningham," *The Public Historian* 12 (1990): 31.

¹⁹ Dubrow and Goodman, 17-18.

²⁰ Berkeley and McQuaid, 159.

the memorial. Furthermore, women's traditional exclusion from politics and economics suggested their lack of interest in personal gain in preserving historic properties. American society, in fact, viewed women as beings incapable of selfishness, and acknowledged that women's preservation societies undertook their task with the best interests of the nation at heart.²¹

Women's involvement in historic preservation fell in line with the precepts of Republican Motherhood and the cult of domesticity. Republican Motherhood supported the importance of preserving national sites in order to imbue a sense of patriotism in future generations. Additionally, the cult of domesticity led to the creation of new domestic tasks for nineteenth-century women. With men's work removed from the home, women of the emerging middle-class had to make their homes into a sanctuary in order to relieve their spouses of the pressures from the public world. To recreate their domestic environment, women became experts in the "domestic arts" including housekeeping, decoration, and antique collecting. The skills that women used in their domestic sphere equipped them for the tasks of preservation and restoration of America's historic properties. These skills, as well as women's later involvement in Sanitary Fairs and the Colonial Revival, provided women with the knowledge and desire necessary to take on the cause of historic preservation. Although women did not receive a formal education as men did, they were not ill prepared for their huge undertaking of historic preservation.

The cult of True Womanhood manifested itself in many forms in the nineteenth-century woman's

²¹ Baker, 625.

household. Beautifying the home was of special importance to women; housework became almost an art form. Housework shielded women from the evils of idleness, keeping them busy throughout the day. Additionally, the results of good housekeeping created a happy home for husbands, sons and brothers so that they did not have to go in search of a good time somewhere else, such as in bars or brothels.²² Proper housekeeping was an essential element in the restoration and maintenance of historic homes and properties. As this task was clearly within the bounds of the woman's sphere, women were best suited to carry out this work.

The cult of True Womanhood not only groomed women to be excellent caretakers of the home but also to be skilled decorators and designers, skills that would later be put to work in historic preservation in the public sphere. The decoration of homes rose to a new standard for middle-class women, as there was less labor-intensive work for the lady of the house to participate in, because most middle-class women had the help of servants. In the middle of the nineteenth century, several form of prescriptive literature was published to instruct middle-class women on the proper upkeep and design of their homes. Louisa Tuthill, a close friend of Sarah Josepha Hale, published the first book on American architecture titled *History of Architecture from the Earliest Times; its Present Condition in Europe and the United States* in 1848. Tuthill dedicated her groundbreaking book "to the Ladies of the United States of America, the acknowledged arbitrators of taste."²³ Tuthill recognized

²² Welter, 31.

²³ Berkeley and McQuaid, 5, 7-13.

women's interest in home design and architecture. She wrote her book to promote American styles of architecture with women, and appealed to them to improve the architecture of the American landscape.

Andrew Jackson Downing's *The Architecture of Country Houses* and *Godey's Ladies Book* also described the ideal home for American women. A regular feature in *Godey's Ladies Book* was "The Model Cottage." This column strongly influenced middle-class women's perceptions of fashion for thirty years, while also describing the moral uplift that proper home decoration and style provided.²⁴ "Aesthetic moralism," emerged in the 1850s that embraced, "the power of properly designed homes to mold character and stabilize the American Republic."²⁵ Morals and taste were combined to construct a morally based domestic architecture. As Americans transitioned from a traditional culture to a modern one, the home was the place where old and new ideas were reconciled under the careful eyes of women.²⁶ The blending of notions of women's morality with the notion of women's design ability would be used to justify their involvement in historic preservation. When nineteenth-century women started to preserve historic homes, they would apply their experience in architecture and design to successfully restore properties.

An essential aspect of mid nineteenth-century decorating was the collection and display of American antiques within a middle-class home. Antiques successfully merged the old and new in the American home, reminding American families of their glorious

²⁴ Berkeley and McQuaid, 7.

²⁵ West, 2.

²⁶ Berkeley and McQuaid, 7.

revolutionary past. Women collected antique furniture, flatware and other artifacts of America's golden age. Women bought and sold antiques, and their role within antique collecting equaled that of men. "Women could move seamlessly from decorating their homes, to collecting, to dealing on a par with men."²⁷ The familiarity that women attained with antiques in their homes added to their breadth of knowledge in historic preservation. Women's capability in acquiring antiques for their own homes led them to be effective collectors of American historical artifacts, an important task of women's historic preservation societies.

Women Domesticating American History

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 played a significant role in women's involvement with benevolence organizations and the displaying of antiques. Starting in 1863, women's societies worked on behalf of the US Sanitary Commission, holding "Sanitary Fairs" to raise money and supplies for soldiers. Women's fairs to raise money for charity were a long standing institution of women's benevolence. Women's church groups organized fairs, selling food as well as hand-made crafts, to fund various social causes. The Sanitary Fairs women arranged during the Civil War were quite popular with the public and generated a significant amount of money for the Sanitary Commission. By supporting the Union through their fairs, women lent their moral authority to the cause, creating patriotism and support for the war.²⁸

²⁷ Steven M. Gelber, *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 144-145.

²⁸ West, 40.

The most popular areas at Sanitary Fairs were the historical exhibits women set up to sell their goods. Women recreated domestic scenes from America's colonial period to attract customers as well as to instruct their patrons in American history, reasserting the nation's stability during a time of conflict. Women constructed "old tyme" or "colonial kitchens" to sell the traditional dishes of the region, such as "Yankee" fare in Indianapolis and "Knickerbocker" cuisine in New York. The actual kitchens were decorated in the simple style of the colonial period, and women further authenticated the kitchens by furnishing them with objects from their own antique collections. In addition, the women who directed these kitchens wore the traditional dress of colonial women, sometimes wearing the old dresses of their great-grandmothers. Several women's groups had an auxiliary "relic room" to complement their colonial kitchens, usually with an old-fashioned fireplace and spinning wheel, as well as antiques. These historical recreations were among the first attempts of American women to gather evidence and present a historical narrative. Thus, they are important not only in the historical preservation movement but also in the development of women as creators of history.²⁹

Antique collecting reached an almost obsessive popularity following the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876, a fair marking the one hundred year anniversary of America. Again, one of the most popular attractions of the exposition was Miss Emma Southwick's "New England Kitchen," modeled on the colonial kitchens of Sanitary Fairs. Furthermore, the concept of period-styled rooms created by women for

²⁹ Marling, 38.

the Sanitary Fairs expanded at the Centennial Exposition into life-size recreations of colonial homes and log cabins. These colonial reconstructions captured the fascination of the ten million people who visited the exposition. Visitors were captivated by the furniture, food and relics from an earlier time, paying close attention to old and curious objects such as hundred year old tea kettles or wax flowers. Not only did visitors pay to see these historic objects, but they wanted to purchase them for themselves. Cultural historians refer to this fascination with objects from the colonial and revolutionary period as the "Colonial Revival."³⁰

Nineteenth-century women played an integral role in the Colonial Revival in addition to collecting objects of Americana. Even before the Centennial Exposition, women's groups such as the Ladies' Centennial Committee of Salem, Massachusetts collected and displayed antiques to raise money for their cause. This women's organization showcased "Rare Colonial, Provincial and Revolutionary Relics" to fund the Massachusetts exhibition at the Centennial Exposition. Women continued to collect and display antiques in their private homes but also furnished and decorated their homes in colonial style. The virtue of domesticity associated with the Colonial Revival appealed to women, allowing them to incorporate history into their everyday lives. They held "Martha Washington Teas" and "Washington Balls" as fundraisers for their various causes. When attending one of these fundraisers, participants often dressed up in colonial garb or as figures in American history. "Women were the primary custodians of the American

³⁰ Marling, 32.

heritage in its tangible manifestations, the keepers of the flame that burned upon the ancient hearth of the colonial past... [T]heir position of leadership in the colonial revival of 1876 is not surprising.³¹ Women embraced the Colonial Revival as the nation underwent startling changes after the Civil War. Using their domestic ties to American history, women sought to preserve the threatened social order as the nation faced reconstruction and urbanization.

As a result of the prescribed roles for women in the nineteenth century, it is a logical progression that women became deeply involved in the historic preservation movement, and ultimately, the development of house museums. After the efforts of pioneering women's organizations, historic preservation was viewed as consistent with women's private, domestic role as well as their desire for social reform. Additionally, "nineteenth-century concepts of women, which held that their proper sphere was the home but included their traditional role as culture bearer and preserver... [made] the preservation of the historic houses... a sanctioned, even exalted activity."³² Women absorbed in the cult of True Womanhood took the skills they used in their own homes and brought them into the neglected historic homes of the nation, creating a historic house museum movement.

The Development of the Historic Preservation Movement in America

The concept of historic preservation came to America from innovations in conservation that devel-

³¹ Marling, 44, 51.

³² Edith P. Mayo, "Women's History and Public History: The Museum Connection," *The Public Historian* 5 (1983): 65.

oped in Europe. Fearful of the possibility of revolutionary destruction, the French government, responding to the violence of the Revolution of 1789, used historic buildings to stimulate national pride and provide psychological stability for the volatile country. Buildings of historic or architectural significance were placed under government protection, preventing their destruction or modification. These structures were inventoried and classified by the Monuments Historiques, beginning in 1830. The architect employed by the French government, Eugene Immanuel Viollet-le-Duc, conceived the concept of restoration as well as the techniques to restore old buildings.³³

The organization and funds the French government provided for historic buildings would not occur in America for decades. Although nineteenth-century Americans felt the need to preserve historic buildings at the beginning of the century, they rarely acted on these sentiments. Preservation historian Charles Hosmer states that usually “the forces of commercialism triumphed,” and buildings recognized as historically significant often “fell before the wrecker.”³⁴ The few, though considerable, efforts of historic preservation in Europe did not serve as a sufficient example for Americans. Furthermore, Americans at the time were not inclined to be troubled with the past, but rather were likely to aggressively push onward to develop industry and business in the new nation. The preservation of buildings was not a moneymaking enterprise, and securing the means to preserve a historic building

³³ Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, 83.

³⁴ Charles B. Hosmer, *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States Before Williamsburg*. (New York: G.P. Putman's Sons, 1965), 29.

often cost a sizeable amount.

One of the first instances of nineteenth-century Americans taking interest in the historical importance of a building took place in Philadelphia in 1812. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania planned to demolish Independence Hall and sell the land to commercial developers. Citizens petitioned the state government to save the structure, stating that the building still had a functional purpose, such as being used as a headquarters for elections. In addition, protestors cited the momentous activities that took place at Independence Hall, the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the creation of the Constitution. In spite of the many public objections, two wings attached to the structure were torn down, and irreplaceable wood paneling ripped out where the Declaration of Independence was signed. Finally, after the citizens of Philadelphia appealed to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for three years, the governor finally persuaded the legislature to allow the historic structure to remain standing, despite the projected economic gain of its destruction and sale of the land to developers.³⁵

After the rescue of Independence Hall, other attempts to preserve historic buildings ensued in New England. These endeavors were organized, but most of the preservation attempts did not succeed. Individuals concerned with America's short past petitioned state governments to preserve monumental buildings, and they set up subscriptions to raise money for the cause. Much to the dismay of these public-minded individuals, insufficient public support could be

³⁵ Hosmer, 29-30; Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996) 4-5.

garnered to pay for the preservation of the buildings they hoped to save. Historian Mike Wallace attributes “this exuberant and cavalier demolition of the remains of the past” to the flourishing real estate market and the “antihistorical bent” of many Americans.³⁶ Numerous noteworthy buildings were lost during the first half of the nineteenth-century to make way for the advancements of industrialization.

For example, several residents in Deerfield, Massachusetts formed a committee to conserve the Old Indian House, the last home standing after of the famous massacre in 1704. They organized town meetings and published petitions in the local paper, but the group failed to collect the \$2000 necessary to save the house where it stood. The historical value of the Old Indian House could not compete with the commercial value of the property. Even though the cost to dismantle the house and reconstruct it at another location was only \$150, that small amount could not be raised and the historic house was torn down in 1848.³⁷

There were some minor successes in preservation by the middle of the nineteenth-century. Mounting fears of civil war between slave and free states encouraged the rise of sentimentality attached to the buildings associated with the founding fathers of the Republic. Akin to the French motives for preserving historic structures following the French revolution, white middle-class Americans held that memorializing historic buildings might serve as a remedy for the increasing disunity among Americans. From their perspective, all Americans could unite by actively

³⁶ Wallace, 5.

³⁷ Hosmer, 31-39,

constructing and remembering their shared past.

The fear of political disunity was illustrated with the preservation of Hasbrouck House in Newburgh, New York in 1850. New York Governor Hamilton Fish appealed to the New York State Legislature to provide the funds to conserve the house, which had served as General Washington's headquarters for the last two years of the Revolutionary War. The legislature submitted to Fish's request and added that Hasbrouck House was an exemplary site for Americans to come together and, "chasten their minds by reviewing the history of our revolutionary struggle."³⁸ The success of Hasbrouck House furthered the efforts of white middle-class Americans to preserve historic structures.

Each of these attempts to preserve structures was undertaken by public officials who recognized the political benefit of constructing a past through tangible material evidence like buildings. Private individuals had motives for historic preservation as well, many of them parallel to the state. In the 1820s, private individuals as well as some small groups recognized the importance of preserving America's historic buildings, although a historic preservation and house museum movement had not yet emerged at that time. Funding the preservation of historic structures was the movement's greatest obstacle, and far more buildings were demolished than saved. No standards were established until Ann Pamela Cunningham and the Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA) set out to conserve the decaying home of George Washington at

³⁸ Richard Caldwell, *A True History of the Acquisition of Washington's Headquarters at Newburgh by the State of New York* (Salisbury Mills, New York, 1887), 21, quoted in Wallace, 5.

Mount Vernon in 1853.³⁹ Furthermore, by taking on the task to save Mount Vernon, Cunningham set a series of nation-wide precedents. Cunningham's organization to save Mount Vernon was the first occurrence of a national preservation movement, the first national museum movement, and one of the nation's first successful women's organizations.⁴⁰

Ann Pamela Cunningham and the Mount Vernon Ladies Association

Ann Pamela Cunningham first became interested in Mount Vernon after learning of its deteriorated condition from her mother, Mrs. Louisa Bird Cunningham. Mrs. Cunningham viewed the estate as she traveled by steamboat down the Potomac in 1853. Appalled at the neglect of the first President's home, she asked her daughter, "Why was it that the women of his country did not try to keep it in repair, if the men could not do it? It does seem such a blot on our country!"⁴¹ The Mount Vernon property was in a terrible state of disrepair, and the current owner, John Augustine Washington was unable to keep up the large estate. Also in 1853, rumors emerged that John Washington intended to sell the property to hotel developers. This incident undoubtedly sparked the desire to preserve George Washington's home as a history museum, protecting it from commercial development.⁴²

Mrs. Cunningham's idea to save Mount Vernon from deterioration was not a new suggestion. Attempts to secure Mount Vernon as a national shrine

³⁹ Hosmer, 31; Orosz, 182.

⁴⁰ Dubrow and Goodman, 20.

⁴¹ Mrs. George W. Campbell to Mrs. S.E. Johnson Hudson, September 1897, quoted in Hosmer, 45.

⁴² West, 5; Hosmer, 42-45.

had begun as early as 1846. A group of concerned citizens sent a petition to Congress to save Washington's home with the distinct purpose of preventing the plantation from falling into the hands of speculators. The petition included a statement from John Washington proposing that the Washington family sell the property to the federal government for \$100,000.⁴³ Two additional petitions to preserve Mount Vernon were sent to Congress in 1848 and 1850, but nothing came of these requests. In 1851, the Army wanted to buy the property to create an asylum for handicapped and injured soldiers. To the dismay of the Army board, John Washington raised the price of the estate to \$200,000, a price that the board could not pay. The exorbitant price that John Washington set for the property, which would be \$4,784,000 by today's standards, prevented the State of Virginia from purchasing Mount Vernon as well.⁴⁴ Governor Johnson appealed to the state legislature on December 5, 1853 to buy the property, stating that it could be converted into a school of some sort. Nevertheless, the legislature attested that Mount Vernon was priced far beyond its commercial value, and the State refused to pay that price.

Although George Washington's former home had lost most of its aesthetic grandeur, people were drawn to the site because of its association with the Revolutionary hero. Americans had treated Mount Vernon as if it was a patriotic shrine for several decades. Ameri-

⁴³ Hosmer, 41.

⁴⁴ John J. McCusker, "Comparing the Purchasing Power of Money in the United States (or Colonies) from 1665 to Any Other Year Including the Present," *Economic History Services*, 2004, <http://www.eh.net/hmit/pppowerusd/>

can and foreign tourists alike visited the grounds and picnicked on the lawns, despite objections from the current owners who desired their personal privacy. Often, visitors entered the house without invitation and stole whatever they could get their hands on; the pales from the balustrades of staircases and projecting ornaments from fireplaces were often taken as mementos. These intrusions caused a considerable amount of damage to the property.⁴⁵ Mount Vernon Ladies Association spokesman Edward Everett described the popularity of the estate, "It is quite natural that the People should wish to visit Mount Vernon, but if they insist on doing it in numbers that put to flight all ideas of private property... they ought to be willing to acquire a right to do so."⁴⁶ Everett supported the goal of the MVLA, maintaining that a house museum should be established, and the property should be opened to the public in a true democratic fashion, to educate and reform the masses fascinated by Washington.⁴⁷

Ann Pamela Cunningham was determined to save Mount Vernon from commercial development and preserve it for future generations, despite the many failures of other hopeful conservators before her. Cunningham was a Southern lady from a distinguished and well-connected family. She was born on the prosperous Rosemont Plantation in Laurens County, South Carolina on August 15, 1816 to Louisa Bird and Captain Robert Cunningham. The

⁴⁵ Edward Everett, *Mount Vernon Papers* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1860), 6. Everett acted as a spokesman for the MVLA during its fundraising campaign, as women in the nineteenth century were not permitted to speak in front of audiences of both men and women.

⁴⁶ Everett, 7.

⁴⁷ West, 6.

Cunninghams provided their daughter with the best education available to women at this time; Ann Pamela had a governess throughout her childhood and later attended the South Carolina Female Institute, an exclusive boarding school at Barhamsville. With her prestigious lineage and education, Ann Pamela was groomed to be the classic Southern belle, a genteel and well-bred matron. However, at the age of seventeen, Ann Pamela was thrown from a horse and sustained a life debilitating spinal injury. Though not paralyzed, Cunningham was confined to a couch and experienced numerous health problems as well as persistent pain.⁴⁸

Although Cunningham's accident severely damaged her body, it did not impair her mind. In fact, one could argue that her injury freed her of the societal expectations of the woman's sphere. Because of her excessive health problems, Cunningham was excused from marriage and childbearing, the focal point of most women's lives during the nineteenth century. She remained single and had the financial support of her wealthy family. This freedom allowed Cunningham to focus on her intellectual interests, history in particular. Cunningham published a history of Tories in America in 1845 and contributed to Elizabeth Ellet's three-volume *The Women of the American Revolution*. Cunningham was confident in her writing and knowledge; "mind," she said, "has no sex."⁴⁹ Cunningham's fascination with history, coupled with her relative freedom, enabled her to take up the cause of preserving Mount Vernon.

Despite the release from many constraints of the woman's sphere, Cunningham still retained the

⁴⁸ Alexander, *Museum Masters*, 179-180.

⁴⁹ West, 7.

characteristics of her gender prescribed through Republican Motherhood and the cult True Womanhood. As a nineteenth-century woman, she had a responsibility to preserve the dignity of the nation as well as its history for future generations. Even though Cunningham did not have children, she nevertheless fully absorbed this requirement of her sphere. Cunningham used the ideologies of both Republican Motherhood and the cult of True Womanhood when she called on the women of the South to save Mount Vernon in the *Charleston Mercury* on December 2, 1853:

Can you... suffer Mount Vernon, with all its sacred associations, to become, the seat of manufacturing ... destroying all sanctity and repose around the tomb of your own "world's wonder"? One of your countrywomen feels emboldened to appeal in the name of the Mother of Washington... retain his home and grave as...a shrine where at least the mothers of the land and their indignant children, might make their offerings in the cause of greatness, goodness, and prosperity of their country.⁵⁰

Moreover, as the political division between the North and South widened in the 1850s, Cunningham argued that women needed to project their civilizing influence now more than ever. In her letter, Cunningham reminded women of the legacy of Repub-

⁵⁰ Pamela Ann Cunningham, "To the Ladies of the South," *Charleston Mercury*, December 2, 1853, quoted in Peter Hannaford, *The Essential George Washington: Two Hundred Years of Observations on the Man, the Myth, the Patriot* (Images From the Past, Incorporated, 1999), 92-95.

lican Motherhood by evoking the imagery of the literal mother of the republic, Mary Ball Washington. She wanted women to be inspired by the deeds of the patriotic women in America's history and reclaim their position as the moral protectors of civilization. West claims that, "[Cunningham] set forth a public role for the republican woman based on [their] participation in the American Revolution as 'a vestal' guarding the 'fire of liberty,' linking patriotic action to preserve Mount Vernon to the threat of Civil War."⁵¹ By preserving Mount Vernon, women could create a tangible place for Americans to recollect the glorious events of their nation's history.

Cunningham did not have to go far to convince the women of the nation of the need to protect America's history through the preservation of Mount Vernon. Women had incorporated history into their everyday lives since the days of Republican Motherhood. Women were already responsible for the task of preserving their individual family history through the collection of family heirlooms as well as collecting Americana antiques to decorate their homes. In addition, during the Civil War, nineteenth-century women showed an interest in American history, expressing it through their domestic endeavors. Women competently displayed their knowledge of American history with the colonial kitchens of Sanitary Fairs and later played an active and dominant role in the Colonial Revival. Although women in the nineteenth century were not permitted to take part in the metropolitan museum movement or hold memberships in male dominated historical societies, women, through their domestic involvement, became skilled

⁵¹ West, 7.

amateurs in American history.

Cunningham's letter created a response that even she was not prepared for. She never intended to take a leadership role in the preservation of Mount Vernon, but rather had written her letter as a rallying cry to gather the women of the South to take the act upon themselves. To her surprise, Cunningham's letter incited the interest of women from all over the nation. This unexpected coming together of women from slave and free states on the eve of the Civil War received praise from the *New York Express* in July 1854, recalling how the "Bunker Hill Monument was finished by our countrywomen, without regard to section or feeling... Northern and Southern women [are] joining hand in hand and with hearty good will, in this patriotic duty of making Mount Vernon the property of the nation."⁵² To solidify the mass following of her cause, Cunningham took a step that no other preservation movement had ever done, let alone a women's organization; she obtained a legal charter from the State of Virginia on March 17, 1856, creating the Mount Vernon Ladies Association.

Cunningham wrote her letter not only to rouse the interest of women, but to also justify the public endeavor in the eyes of society. During the nineteenth-century, women's names were not to be seen publicly in print except to announce their birth, death or marriage. Even without considering the content of Cunningham's letter, the act of writing her letter was risky in itself. Although the cult of domesticity permitted women's involvement in social reform activities such as the elimination of prostitution and poverty, some men were appalled at the thought of women

⁵² Dubrow and Goodman, 20.

being responsible for the preservation of George Washington's home. Nearly all Americans viewed Mount Vernon as sacred ground. The "leading men" who had earlier supported the preservation of Mount Vernon turned their backs on the movement after Cunningham and the MVLA began their campaign to save Mount Vernon, "because it was a women's effort, and they disapproved of women mixing in public affairs."⁵³ Cunningham and the women of the MVLA engaged in activities that were not usually part of the women's sphere: public speaking, money management, incorporation activities and publishing news articles.⁵⁴ The opposition to the MVLA suggests that some critics did not think women could be trusted to properly preserve Mount Vernon, a task that would give women power over the molding of the narrative of America's history.

Although not a lot is known of Cunningham's personal or political views of feminism, her desire to preserve Mount Vernon took her very private life as a handicapped woman into the public sphere. West claims that Cunningham had "enough of a feminist consciousness to spur her bold venture into the public realm."⁵⁵ As in the case of women's social reform organizations, Cunningham and the MVLA took advantage of the notion of women's superior morality to advance women's causes. They combated public disapproval by asserting women's moral activity above male commercial and political interests. Cunningham called attention to the mass industrialization and

⁵³ *Historical Sketches of Ann Pamela Cunningham* (Jamaica, NY: Mount Vernon Ladies Association, 1903), 48-49.

⁵⁴ Mayo, 66.

⁵⁵ West, 7.

urbanization of the nation that threatened the moral standards of American culture as well as Mount Vernon's status as a historical artifact. The nineteenth-century concept that women were the pinnacles of virtue supported the MVLA's claim that they would preserve Mount Vernon without any self interest or financial gain. Cunningham argued that the women of the MVLA were compelled to enter the public sphere to prevent the decay of integrity in society. On March 13, 1858, Cunningham won over her toughest critic, Mount Vernon's obstinate owner John Washington, using all of her womanly charms as well as exploiting her frailty as an invalid. John Washington stated that "the Women of the land will probably be the safest as they will certainly be the purest guardians of a national shrine."⁵⁶ On April 6, 1858, John Washington signed a contract committing the sale of Mount Vernon to the MVLA for \$200,000.

Later in 1858, Cunningham amended the original charter to authorize the MVLA to purchase, hold and operate the property at Mount Vernon, instead of the Commonwealth of Virginia. By altering the charter, Cunningham appeased the wishes of her Northern supporters who feared sectional differences. "Cunningham's foresight, historical sense, firm resolve, and outstanding organizational and leadership abilities ensured the preservation of the nation's premier historic site."⁵⁷ In addition, Cunningham structured a national grassroots campaign by electing vice regents all over the country from New York to

⁵⁶ John Augustine Washington to Ann Pamela Cunningham, 13 March 1858, quoted in The Mount Vernon Ladies Association, "MVLA-Letter,"

www.mountvernon.org/learn/collections/idex.cfm/pid/334/

⁵⁷ Mayo, 66.

California. These vice regents acted primarily as treasurers who appointed "lady managers" to raise money on a local level, taking the movement to save Mount Vernon into every county, town and village in their state. By 1860, Cunningham had organized vice-regents in thirty states.⁵⁸ Cunningham and the MVLA managed to raise the \$200, 000 to buy Mount Vernon as well as to establish a fund to support the restoration of the estate.

Cunningham succeeded in making historic preservation a socially approved role for women. With Mount Vernon in their possession the MVLA faced the challenging task of restoring the aging estate. It was in this endeavor that the women of the MVLA, the "domestic goddesses" of the nineteenth century, showed their ability to not only create morally uplifting homes for their own families, but also for the nation, and, in the process, becoming what today are considered historians of material culture. When John Washington and his family moved out of Mount Vernon in 1860, they left the house practically bare. In their 1858 report, MVLA Secretary Susan L. Pellet stated, "a considerable amount [of money] will be necessary to repair the mansion-house, to restore it with the garden and grounds as nearly as possible to the condition in which they were left by the Great Proprietor."⁵⁹ To fund the restoration project, Cunningham established a twenty-five cent admission fee into the estate, another precedent for historic houses, allowing the property to be self-sustaining. Cunningham firmly believed Mount Vernon should be restored to look as

⁵⁸ Howe, 33.

⁵⁹ *Report of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union 1858*, (Baltimore: Press of the Friedenwald Co., 1896) 4.

it did when George Washington lived there to accurately portray its historic context. The historic atmosphere of Mount Vernon was intended to fill visitors with patriotism and pride, as well as to inform them of their nation's past. To accomplish this, Cunningham used historical research to discover the original colors, décor and furniture. For example, she had a document in Washington's handwriting that stated one bedroom upstairs was yellow. After slowly crawling up the staircase in the house, she discovered seven coats of wallpaper in one bedroom and peeled each layer back until she found the original wallpaper; it was yellow. The MVLA furnished the house as best as they could, filling it with antiques from Washington's era.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Cunningham's success at Mount Vernon sparked a national preservation movement and historic house museum movement. After the Civil War, women's historic preservation societies formed on the model of the MVLA developed at an incredible rate. Between 1860 and the 1890s about two house museums were founded each year.⁶¹ The list of women's historic preservation organizations speaks for itself: The Valley Forge Association, Ladies' Hermitage Association, Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, Daughters of the American Revolution, Colonial Dames of America, Daughters of the Republic of Texas, and Daughters of the Golden West were only a few that had been founded. These groups preserved historic properties such as Valley Forge, Andrew Jackson's house, Williamsburg Powder Magazine, Mary Washington's

⁶⁰ Alexander, *Museum Masters*, 194, 196-197.

⁶¹ West, 43.

house, the Alamo, Monticello, Betsy Ross's house, the Cowpens National Battlefield and the Yorktown Battlefield. These benevolence societies preserved cemeteries and gardens as well, while also creating landmark commissions. Nineteenth-century women had taken charge of America's historic properties.

The preservation of Mount Vernon affected the movements of historic preservation, house museums and metropolitan museums. The nineteenth-century museum movement in America had not yet developed the concept of a museum that focused on American history. Even after the Civil War, American museums struggled to define their purpose. Americans desired museums that shared the history of the nation, especially after the turmoil of the Civil War. In addition, the rise of immigration into America fueled the need for institutions to "Americanize" newcomers. The popular history exhibits put on by women's charity groups at Sanitary Fairs brought the need for museums of American history to light. The "Knickerbocker Kitchen" at the New York Metropolitan Fair was touted by the fair's organizers as a "perfect illustration of 1776, as this generation is likely to get, at least in the way of a museum."⁶² Despite these women's lack of professionalization, the period rooms they exhibited at charity fairs and later in historic homes fulfilled America's need for history museums.

Additionally, house museums reached an audience that museums located in large, busy cities did not. The nation-wide fundraising campaign of the MVL A brought the concept of museums and American history to the entire country in a way that had never been done by proprietary or academy-owned muse-

⁶² West, 41.

ums.⁶³ The historic house movement that followed introduced the museum experience to small American towns, as historic homes were not usually located in a bustling city; those that were usually had been torn down before the movement started. Nevertheless, these small house museums stressed popular education rather than professionalism in their operations, giving Americans throughout the nation a historical foundation.⁶⁴ It was not until the turn of the century that metropolitan museums addressed history, following the lead established by historic house museums.

Women held a domestic role in American history, displayed in their involvement in antique collecting, colonial kitchens at Sanitary Fairs, and their leadership in the Colonial Revival. The domestication of history was brought about by the ideologies of Republican Motherhood and the cult of True Womanhood, constructed by late eighteenth and nineteenth century society to keep women in the home. Ann Pamela Cunningham opened the door to let women into the public world of history. She established the prototype of the American house museum and conceived of the method of restoration that is still used today. Her efforts to preserve Mount Vernon propelled nineteenth-century women's knowledge of American history out of the home and in to the public domain.

⁶³ Orosz, 183.

⁶⁴ Orosz, 183.