

Association: A Testament to Women's Preservation Efforts and Social Reforms in the 19th Century

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Abstract. The Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA), founded in 1853, stands as a testament to the pivotal role women played in the preservation of America's historical landmarks. This paper delves into the intricate history of MVLA's unwavering commitment to preserving President George Washington's historic home, Mount Vernon, amidst the broader backdrop of women's evolving roles and their increasing involvement in social reforms during the 19th century. By examining the association's preservation efforts, the paper highlights the intertwined narratives of historic conservation, women's empowerment, and the broader socio-political transformations of the era. Through a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by MVLA, the support from key figures like Edward Everett, and the innovative strategies employed to maintain Mount Vernon, this study underscores the significance of MVLA not just as a preservation entity but as a beacon of women's resilience, determination, and contribution to American history.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment; Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA); Historical Authenticity.

1. Introduction

Mount Vernon, once the residence of President George Washington, is more than just a historic home nestled in Virginia; it is a testament to America's foundational years and the legacy of its first president. However, the preservation of this iconic landmark might have been a forgotten cause if not for the relentless efforts of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA). Founded in 1853, the MVLA emerged during a time when women's roles were undergoing significant transformation. The 19th century was marked by a surge in women's involvement in social reforms, driven by the broader socio-political changes of the era. Amidst this backdrop, the MVLA's mission was not just about preserving a historic site; it was a statement of women's capability, resilience, and their rightful place in shaping the nation's historical narrative.

The association's dedication to recreating and preserving Mount Vernon as it appeared after George Washington's death has provided invaluable insights for museums, artists, historians, and the general public. Through their efforts, a more nuanced understanding of Washington's life, character, and contributions has emerged. Furthermore, the MVLA's journey reveals a nearly forgotten history of how women, both from the southern and northern states, used preservation as a tool to restore and assert their power in a society that often marginalized them. This paper aims to unravel the intricate tapestry of MVLA's history, its pivotal role in preserving Mount Vernon, and how its endeavors intersected with the broader women's movement of the 19th century. Through this exploration, we gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of historic preservation, women's empowerment, and their collective impact on American history (West, 1999).

2. Literature Review

The preservation of historic landmarks in the United States, particularly Mount Vernon, and the role of women in such endeavors, has been a topic of scholarly interest for decades. The Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA) stands out in this discourse, given its unique position at the intersection of historic preservation and women's empowerment during the transformative 19th century.

West's (1999) seminal work, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*, offers a comprehensive exploration of the MVLA's foundation, mission, and the challenges it faced in preserving Mount Vernon. West underscores the MVLA's role not merely as a preservation entity but as a platform for women to assert their influence during an era marked by significant societal changes. This perspective is further enriched by Dubrow and Goodman's (2003) exploration in *Restoring Women's History through Historic Preservation*, which delves into the broader contributions of women to historic preservation. They highlight how women, despite societal constraints, played pivotal roles in preserving key landmarks, ensuring that future generations could witness and learn from the past.

Furthermore, the significance of Mount Vernon extends beyond its association with George Washington. As highlighted by Bell (2020), Mount Vernon became emblematic of American values during the 19th century. Washington's image and legacy, as represented through literature, songs, and paintings, transformed Mount Vernon into more than just a historic site; it became a symbol of American heritage.

In synthesizing these works, it becomes evident that while there is a rich tapestry of information on the MVLA, women's roles in the 19th century, and the significance of Mount Vernon, there remains a gap. This paper aims to weave these intertwined narratives together, offering a more holistic understanding of the MVLA's contributions against the backdrop of 19th-century American history.

3. Woman's Involvement in Social Reforms in the 1800s

The 19th century witnessed profound socio-economic shifts in the United States, particularly following the first Industrial Revolution (Snyder, 2004). As urban areas expanded and modern capitalism took root, traditional self-sufficient households, especially in the southern United States, began to wane. This transformation, while elevating the living standards for many white southern families, posed unique challenges for women (Christensen, 2013).

Previously, southern American women worked alongside their husbands on family farms. However, the changing dynamics pushed them towards urban employment, often limiting them to roles in domestic service or teaching (Morton & Odem, 1996). This shift not only altered their professional trajectories but also set the stage for them to become influential figures in social activism, particularly through education.

The growing emphasis on women's education, especially among the middle and upper classes, became a catalyst for advocating equal rights (Rice, 2001). As women became more educated, they grew increasingly aware of the legislative boundaries imposed on them. This awareness, coupled with societal restrictions, fueled a desire for change. Many women, driven by their religious convictions and educational backgrounds, began to see the incongruence between societal practices, like slavery, and the principles of equality and justice (Braun & Kvasnička, 2013). This realization propelled them into social reforms, especially the abolition movement.

Despite their significant contributions to the abolition movement and other social reforms, women's efforts often went unrecognized (Skocpol, Abend-Wein, Howard, & Lehmann, 1993). This lack of recognition, combined with societal constraints, ignited widespread protests by the late 19th century. Many women, particularly from the middle and upper classes, were motivated by a desire to demonstrate their political prowess and make meaningful contributions to the nation. This spirit of progressive ideals and the desire to make a mark on the nation's historical and cultural landscape laid the foundation for groups like the MVLA (West, 1999).

4. Factors Contributing to The Successful Purchase of Mount Vernon

--- Like anyone can support feminism, anyone can support MVLA. ---

The acquisition of Mount Vernon by the MVLA was not a straightforward endeavor. It required a combination of strategic alliances, public support, and leveraging technological advancements of the era.

Edward Everett's Advocacy: A significant factor in the MVLA's success was the support of Edward Everett, a prominent figure in American politics and society. As a pastor, governor, senator, and congressman, Everett's endorsement lent credibility to the MVLA's mission (West, 1999). His nationwide lectures not only raised awareness but also garnered substantial funds for the cause. Everett's ability to bridge regional divides, especially during a period of heightened sectional tensions, was instrumental in rallying support across the country (Bell, 2020).

Technological Advancements: The 19th century saw rapid advancements in transportation, particularly with the advent of steamboats and the expansion of railroads. Everett leveraged these innovations, traveling extensively to deliver his speeches and garner support for the MVLA's cause. The steamboat made it feasible for him to travel from Boston to Richmond in a short span, while the railroads facilitated his movement across states, enabling him to reach a wider audience (Pasley, 2001).

Media and Public Perception: The press played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion during the 19th century. With the proliferation of newspapers and the increasing partisanship of the media, the MVLA astutely utilized the press to further their cause (Dubrow & Goodman, 2003). The association capitalized on the widespread admiration for George Washington, leveraging his image and legacy to rally support for the preservation of Mount Vernon. The strategic use of Washington's reputation, combined with the media's reach, significantly bolstered fundraising efforts (Brandt, 2016).

Collaborative Efforts: The MVLA's strategy was not just about individual efforts but also about fostering collaborations. The association worked closely with various stakeholders, including other women's groups, to amplify their reach and impact. The establishment of fundraising clubs, offering incentives like portraits of George Washington, and maintaining subscription books were innovative methods employed to engage the public and ensure a steady flow of funds (Historic Structure Report, 1993).

In essence, the successful acquisition of Mount Vernon was a testament to the MVLA's strategic vision, adaptability, and ability to harness the resources and sentiments of the era.

5. Maintenance of Mount Vernon

The MVLA's dedication to Mount Vernon transcended its initial acquisition, manifesting in a relentless pursuit to ensure the mansion and its surroundings authentically reflected George Washington's era. Over the years, this commitment has been evident in their meticulous preservation efforts, such as the restoration of the Old Chamber. When the MVLA first acquired Mount Vernon, the mansion was nearly empty. However, with a vision to recreate an 18th-century setting, they embarked on a mission to restore and furnish the rooms, drawing from historical records and expert consultations (West, 1999).

As visitor numbers surged in the mid-20th century, the association recognized the need to enhance the mansion's historical accuracy. Collaborating with historians, they revisited the interpretations of various rooms. One significant change was the reclassification of the Old Chamber as a bedroom, a decision influenced by documentary evidence presented by experts like Mrs. Mary Abigail Coolidge (Mount Vernon Furnishings, n.d.).

In the digital age, the MVLA has not shied away from leveraging technology to further its preservation mission. Dawn Bonner's initiative in digitizing visual collections of Mount Vernon stands as a testament to this effort. By making these collections accessible online, the MVLA has ensured that George Washington's history reaches a broader audience, offering insights into both his political achievements and personal moments (The Picture Lady, n.d.).

Through these endeavors, the MVLA has not only maintained Mount Vernon but has also enriched the narrative, providing visitors with a comprehensive understanding of George Washington's legacy.

6. Discussion

The preservation of Mount Vernon by the MVLA is not just a tale of maintaining a historic site; it's a narrative interwoven with the socio-political fabric of 19th-century America. The MVLA's efforts, rooted in the broader context of women's roles and societal shifts, offer a unique lens through which we can understand the complexities of that era.

In the 19th century, as women grappled with societal changes, their roles began to evolve. The rise of urban areas and the decline of self-sufficient households in the southern United States led to a redefinition of women's roles. While these changes presented challenges, they also opened doors for women to assert themselves in new domains, such as education and social activism. The MVLA's formation and its mission to preserve Mount Vernon can be seen as an extension of this broader movement of women seeking to carve out spaces for themselves in the public sphere (West, 1999).

The success of the MVLA in acquiring and preserving Mount Vernon also underscores the intricate dance between regional politics, societal norms, and individual initiatives. Edward Everett's involvement, for instance, highlights how individuals from diverse backgrounds came together for a common cause, bridging regional divides in a period marked by strident sectional tensions (Everett, 1860). His efforts, combined with the MVLA's strategic use of media and public sentiment, showcase the multifaceted approach required to achieve their goals.

Furthermore, the MVLA's commitment to historical accuracy in preserving Mount Vernon offers insights into the evolving nature of historic preservation itself. As the association navigated the challenges of maintaining authenticity, they also had to adapt to changing research standards, technological advancements, and public expectations. Their efforts to strike a balance between preserving the past and accommodating the present provide a valuable case study for modern preservationists (Historic Structure Report, 1993).

The MVLA's journey with Mount Vernon is emblematic of a broader American narrative. It reflects the nation's struggles with identity, the evolving roles of women, and the challenges and rewards of preserving history in a changing world.

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