



## **The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association**

Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington, is owned and maintained by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, the oldest national historic preservation organization in the United States.

Founded by Ann Pamela Cunningham of South Carolina, the Association might never have come into existence were it not a tradition for ships to toll their bells when passing Mount Vernon. When in 1853 Miss Cunningham's mother was summoned to deck by such a bell, ringing in homage to the nation's first president, she was horrified at the sight of Washington's once grand house covered with peeling paint and overgrown weeds, its famous portico so dilapidated that it was propped up by a sailing mast.

"I was painfully distressed," she later wrote to her daughter, "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? It does seem such a blot on our country."

Inspired by her mother's conviction, Ann Pamela Cunningham launched a campaign to raise the funds necessary to purchase and preserve the home of Washington. The Association she founded in 1853—a nationwide organization of women—appealed to the American people for \$200,000 in an unprecedented grassroots fundraising campaign. The country responded, and five years later the Association purchased the Mansion, outbuildings and 200 surrounding acres from John Augustine Washington III, a great-grandnephew of George Washington.

Recognized as the first national preservation organization in America, the women who banded together in 1853 to form the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association were embarking upon a single-minded mission — to protect George Washington's home from commercial development. But the rescue of Mount Vernon was just the first chapter in a long and illustrious preservation story. Ann Pamela Cunningham, a South Carolinian who founded the Association, personally supervised critically-needed repairs in the beginning. The roof of the grand old Mansion was propped up with the masts of old ships and weeds had overtaken the pristine landscape so loved by Washington. Inside, the Mansion was almost empty – only a handful of Washington Family pieces were left behind. The challenge of preserving the estate at a time when there was no historic preservation standard was made even more daunting by the fact that the country was about to be torn apart by Civil War.

The women of Mount Vernon proved to be closely-watched pioneers in the evolving field of preservation. Room by room, garden by garden, and building by building, Washington's estate was returned to its former glory. Mount Vernon became an inspiration and guide to other preservation groups, often spearheaded by women, for protecting the homes of other founding fathers, inventors, and community leaders.

Mount Vernon is held by the Association under a charter from the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Association is led by a Regent (i.e., chairperson), and the charter provides for a woman representative from each state.

No tax dollars are expended to support Mount Vernon: the Association does not accept grants from the federal, state or local government. The Mansion and its grounds, outreach and education programs, and estate events and activities, are supported through the generosity of patriotic individuals, foundations and corporations, together with income from gate receipts and gift shop and restaurant revenue.

Under the Association's 149-year long trusteeship, Mount Vernon has been authentically restored to its original appearance. Today Mount Vernon is a national monument that is open to the public every day of the year, serving an average of one million visitors annually.