

Mount Vernon--The Work of American Women

The ignorance in regard to Mount Vernon, the home of Washington, is deplorable and information concerning it should be given to grown folks as well as to children. It is not, we dare say, generally known that the women of America bought Mt. Vernon in 1858—just fifty years ago—and have restored and maintained it ever since without a penny from the United States or from any state. This great accomplishment is strong evidence of woman's administrative and executive ability, and the men of America should give recognition and acknowledgement to the great fact. In order to give the readers of *The Commoner* some idea of the work accomplished by these patriotic women *The Commoner* reproduces an address made recently in the city of Omaha by Mrs. Charles F. Manderson. Mrs. Manderson is vice regent of the Mount Vernon Ladies' association. Speaking before the Woman's club of Omaha Mrs. Manderson delivered the following address:

Mount Vernon, endeared to every American as the home of George Washington, and sacred to all who have love of the country of which he was the chiefest citizen, has a history deeply interesting and because of the life spent there and that it is the last resting place of the father of his country, the estate will ever remain the Mecca of all who rejoice that they are citizens of the great republic, founded by him and those who wrought with him in the creation of our self-governing nation.

Located on the west bank of the broad Potomac river in a province renowned for its fertility and productive power one does not wonder that Washington selected it at an early period in his life as a desirable possession. That he fondly cherished it after it was acquired can not be doubted by any one who reads of his care for it and sees at this time the material evidences of his pride in it and fondness for it. So long as he lived that provident care was exercised and the great estate remained without loss or damage. After his death there came decay and destruction that nearly reached utter ruin. Those to whom it passed, although of his blood, were not of close kinship or direct descent, and many acres were sold, until at last there remained but a few hundred acres, upon which stood the historic home and the modest tomb. George Washington died December 14, 1799, and for half a century Mount Vernon seemed neglected and forgotten. In 1854 John Augustine Washington, owner of the estate, made repeated efforts to sell the property to the United States and to the state of Virginia. Every effort failed. At last a noble and patriotic spirited woman of South Carolina, Miss Ann Pamela Cunningham, conceived the idea that the women of America should acquire the estate and restore Mount Vernon, that it might be cherished and respected. The offer to the general government and to the state was to convey the property for \$100,000, but when the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union sought the purchase and care of the two hundred acres the price demanded was \$200,000; an immense sum when the date is considered and the equivalent now of probably five times that sum. The money was raised by the women of that time, their greatest help being the orator of that day, Edward Everett, who by his lectures on Washington raised \$70,000. I read from a report made by Mrs. Hudson, the vice regent from Connecticut, that which tells better than I can narrate the history of the Mount Vernon association:

"The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union" was founded in 1854 by Miss Cunningham of South Carolina, the first regent. She appointed as vice regents one lady from each state.

The immediate object of this first woman's society was to raise funds for the purchase of two hundred acres of the Mount Vernon estate, including the mansion and the tomb wherein repose the mortal remains of General Washington. The ultimate design was to teach the people of the United States to remember Washington and his great achievements. To attain this result and bring the people into sympathy with this great man and his daily life, here, in this home so dear to his heart, there must needs be a faithful restoration of the surroundings and conditions existing during his residence, while above and beyond all was the fervent hope that Mount Vernon should become a shrine whither all liberty-loving pilgrims should resort in reverence and veneration.

The association appealed to the country for \$200,000, the price demanded for this portion of Mount Vernon. The pledge given was the preservation and restoration of the home of Washington. How has the association redeemed its pledge?

It is needless here to recount the disasters and discouragements which attended the initiative efforts of this small band of devoted women. One formidable cause of opposition, scarce credible in our day, was the prejudice then prevailing against women as workers in any public affairs.

But, inspired by the enthusiasm of Miss Cunningham and guided by her marvelous ability and executive talent, each state was canvassed and officered, and enthusiastic interest awakened, with the result that the sum required was collected, and that in 1858 Mount Vernon became the property of the Mount Vernon association.

Once in possession, the association realized that their work had but begun, for ruin and decay showed on every side. Nothing daunted, repairs were instituted, a small steamboat was leased for the conveyance of visitors to Mount Vernon from Washington—the gate fee being twenty-five cents; and there was much to encourage the hope that in a few years Mount Vernon would be restored to order and beauty.

Alas, civil war burst upon us! The government took possession of the Mount Vernon steamboat, and all means of self-support ceased. The superintendent alone was left in charge, all work was necessarily stopped, and through those terrible days and years the place stood isolated, with hostile armies surging up and down past its gates. With no defense, Mount Vernon stood self-protected; no harm came near it. Officers and soldiers in grey and blue knocked at the gates, which were opened to them. Their arms were stacked outside, while they entered and sought the tomb, where they met as brothers. A few hours later and these men were again arrayed in battle against each other!

There is but one act of desecration recorded in these years. An eagle which surmounted the iron railing of the tomb was stolen. This was returned two years ago as mysteriously as it had disappeared.

As soon as peace was proclaimed the association was called together by the regent, for consultation and to devise ways and means to recommence the repairs at Mount Vernon. At this juncture the condition of the estate was appalling. The mansion showed rotten timbers, leaking roof, decayed floors, and not a stick of furniture. The great barn held up a roof like a sieve, through which the rain poured down upon crops and stock; there had been no new roof since Washington's day.

The roads were almost impassable, the wharf unsafe, the servants' houses scarce habitable, and above all the channel of the river was nearly filled up. Where to begin work in this chaotic ruin was the question. Another steamboat was leased, friends arose on every side, material aid flowed in, if not in money, in building material, in fertilizers, in food for the stock—assistance came in all shapes. The press throughout the land stood by the association. The Masonic lodges responded to the call to save the great Mason's home from destruction. Wall Street's brokers' board sent money, while little children clubbed together to rebuild a gate. Others to rebuild the colonnades. The work of repair progressed steadily year by year. The association had adhered strictly to two rules: "Do thoroughly whatever is to be done, and, no debts."

The necessary repairs accomplished, then came the task of restoration. In the mansion the replacement of such furniture as was owned by Washington has been accomplished where possible; when this was not obtainable, furniture of historic value and of the past century style has been placed in the rooms. The bedstead on which General Washington died stands in his room, mirrors are restored to their former positions. Nellie Custis' piano stands in the music room again and Washington's flute lies upon it. Clocks are returned to their mantels, chairs, tables and a sideboard have resumed their places. The large silver-mounted plateau, used at Washington's state dinners, is now returned to Mount Vernon, a recent gift from a vice regent, herself a great granddaughter of

Martha Washington. There are also in the cabinets laces of Mrs. Washington, jeweled buckles of General Washington, fans, china, etc. The collection of original letters from Washington and the rare collection of engravings of his generals are most valuable and interesting. Each room in the mansion is in charge of a vice regent, who furnishes it in the name of her state, and through whose personal exertion and expenditure it is maintained. A most valuable acquisition has been received this year from a vice regent—an exact architectural plan of the mansion, detailed in a book of fifty-six pages, of minute measurements, wherein every niche is given, every decoration, bit of carving, ornamented ceiling and chimney-piece, and elevation of each floor, so complete that should any accident occur, the mansion could be restored with entire fidelity.

The association has sought and obtained every possible means to guard against the destructive work of fire. A comprehensive water system is in operation, also a steam engine that raises the water from the Potomac. A large chemical fire extinguisher plant is placed under ground. All of these safeguards can be operated upon three minutes' notice by a well drilled fire brigade of employes.

Many of the large improvements are the result of the generosity of the vice regents. The last extensive work has been eliminating the swamp near the boat landing. This tangle of trees, undergrowth and morass was the foul center of the malarial fevers always incident to Mount Vernon. These twelve acres have been reclaimed and reduced to a meadow of sweet clover, from which the river is shut out by a substantial water wall. The cost has been over \$6,000 for reclaiming this land.

This board of willing, quiet workers is governed by the one principle: The preservation of the home of Washington. Now the roads are in fine order, the fences are all good, the drainage is sanitary and excellent. A fine new wharf with a commodious pavillion receives the thousands of visitors brought to Mount Vernon on a large steamer; and the eighteen and more cottages and outbuildings are all in perfect condition. The garden is as Washington left it, with the quaint box-wood hedges and borders. The old-time roses, pinks, lilies, mignonette, sweet-William, lilacs, magnolia trees, and acacias, and even the green houses and servants' quarters are restored and are as Washington saw them. The lawns he loved, the trees he planted, all are there, silent but eloquent.

The dream of the enthusiastic founder of the Mount Vernon association is realized. The home of Washington is restored, and has become the shrine of liberty-loving pilgrims from home and foreign lands. His tomb is religiously cared for by women who love and revere his memory. Washington is remembered, and never can be forgotten while his home and tomb are there to appeal to the heart and soul of all. Follow him through the winding walks, under the trees he planted, and into his library surrounded by his books or seated before his secretary. Then pass into his room; stand by the bed on which he died. At last, go over to his tomb, there reverently bow; for you have communed in spirit with George Washington, the great and good, the brave and wise!

Has not the Mount Vernon association redeemed its pledge given to the country?

I close with this extract from the farewell address of the founder of the association to her women associates, given after twenty years of service, on June 1, 1874:

"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 our be saved from change.

"Upon you rests this duty.

"When the centennial comes, bringing with it thousands from the ends of the earth, to whom the home of Washington will be the place of places in this, our country, let them see that, although we slay our forests, remove our dead, pull down our churches, remove from home to home, till the hearthstone seems to have no resting place in America—let them see that we do know how to care for the home of our hero."