

The New Criterion

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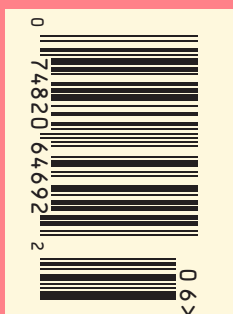
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Reflections

American treasures

by Genevieve Wheeler Brown

If the men of America have seen fit to allow the home of its most respected hero go to ruin, why can't the women of America band together to save it?

—Louisa Bird Cunningham to her daughter Ann Pamela Cunningham, 1853

These incendiary words, penned by Louisa Bird Cunningham on seeing the deteriorating remains of Mount Vernon, George Washington's home in the Virginia countryside, speak to the impassioned response that historic property can elicit. Quickly rising to her mother's challenge, Ann Pamela Cunningham not only launched the first national campaign to save this iconic property, but also founded America's first historic preservation organization, the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, in 1853. Unwittingly, she had ushered in the beginning of the American historic preservation movement.

Perhaps it is assumed that symbols of our national identity such as Mount Vernon have always been protected. Last year, over a million visitors made the pilgrimage to Washington's estate, walking its gravel paths to admire the mansion's rusticated façade, red painted roof, and imposing piazza. The current sparkling condition of the house and its grounds belies a not-so-distant period of neglect and near-loss. Many historic properties across the United States, including Mount Vernon, were virtually abandoned in the nineteenth century due to lack of support or plans to preserve them. During that period of Civil War and eventual Reconstruction, historic properties were hardly the nation's primary concern.

The decades immediately following the founding of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association saw the proliferation of organized advocacy groups—mostly led by women—who aimed to reclaim historic buildings and sites. Visit any historic property in the United States, and more than likely you will discover that women were responsible for its preservation—a striking legacy.

What exactly drew women to historic preservation? Barred from voting and discouraged from higher learning or positions in politics and finance, many women sought a part in shaping the American experience. Preservation provided an organic role within institutional confines. This wave of female-led preservation was characterized by the founding of numerous women's groups of various sizes, origins, and purposes. Perhaps the most famous is the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). Founded in 1890, the DAR initiated national campaigns to save such patriotic shrines as Independence Hall in Philadelphia, the Bunker Hill Monument near Boston, and Washington's military camp at Valley Forge. The DAR is also an example of the many groups inspired by popular sentiment and celebrations surrounding the Centennial International Exhibition of 1876, an event that drew close to ten million visitors.

This patriotic spirit was also manifested by individuals like Helen Pitts Douglass, who, with limited resources, perpetuated the legacy of her husband, Frederick Douglass, in preserving their home, Cedar Hill, in Washington,

D.C. She would go on to found the Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association in 1900.

Whether working alone or in formal networks, these women shared a common passion for protecting what they believed had inherent educational value. They had the ability not only to raise the funds but also to influence politicians — who provided much of the funding for conservation — and set precedents that would lead to the later development of such institutions as the National Park Service in 1916 and the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1949.

As the twentieth century progressed and federal preservation programs expanded, Congress took on an increasingly active role in historic preservation with the introduction of legislation including the Historic Sites Act of 1935 and the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Having adeptly created sustainable models of operation, women's preservation groups moved into a phase of less visible but still unwavering stewardship. Awareness of the role of women in historic preservation efforts began to wane. By the end of the twentieth century, the record of women in preservation, though impressive, had become mostly overlooked.

One of the greatest, though little-known, proponents of American historic preservation has been the National Society of Colonial Dames of America (NSCDA). The origin of the Dames can be dated to April 8, 1891, at the Philadelphia home of Fanny Hollingsworth Arnold. A history enthusiast and the treasurer of the Associate Committee of Women at what is now the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Arnold was joined by a group of women with similar philanthropic experience, including Elizabeth Duane Gillespie (a great-granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin and the president of the Women's Committee of the Centennial International Exhibition of 1876), to establish the founding society of the NSCDA. Once launched in Philadelphia, the NSCDA quickly grew into one of the most effective nationwide preservation organizations. Today the organization is an unincorporated association of forty-four state societies with

over fifteen thousand female members. Membership is based on lineage and a commitment to the Society's three main objectives: historic preservation, patriotic service, and education.

The NSCDA first assumed the title of historic property steward in 1896, when the organization's New York Society undertook the preservation and management of the Van Cortlandt House (*ca.* 1748), the oldest surviving building in the Bronx. As per the name of the organization, the NSCDA's initial efforts reflected a narrow focus on architecturally important or culturally significant properties related to colonial America.

Encouraged by its first foray into preservation, the NSCDA assumed its first ownership of a historic property in 1900, with the Whitehall Museum House (*ca.* 1729) in Middletown, Rhode Island. Other acquisitions and collaborative stewardships quickly followed, including The Powder Magazine Museum (*ca.* 1713) in Charleston, South Carolina's oldest government building; the Dorothy Quincy Homestead, first built in 1686 in Quincy, Massachusetts; and Stenton (*ca.* 1723), the country home of James Logan, a colonial mayor of Philadelphia. In 1907 the NSCDA sponsored the rebuilding of the Memorial Church at Historic Jamestown.

But seeing the educational value in widening its collecting purview outside the strict "Thirteen Colonies" scope, the NSCDA in the 1920s and '30s began the process of expanding its footprint across the United States. Exploring the broader American experience, purchases were made in Florida (the Ximenez-Fatio House Museum, *ca.* 1798, in St. Augustine) and Wisconsin (the Historic Indian Agency House at Fort Winnebago, *ca.* 1832, in Portage). Provided with abundant collecting opportunities owing to the financial crises of the Great Depression, the NSCDA added thirteen new major properties, most significantly Dumbarton House (*ca.* 1799) — the only Federal-period house museum in Washington, D.C. — to serve as the NSCDA's national headquarters.

During this interwar period, the NSCDA also began to commission works by several preeminent contemporary American architects, including the renowned team of McKim, Mead

& White, which designed and constructed the granite neoclassical memorial canopy over Plymouth Rock in 1921. Collaborating with other preservation organizations even outside the United States, the NSCDA in 1939 initiated the endowment of Sulgrave Manor, George Washington's ancestral home in Oxfordshire, England, with the donations of over thirty-five thousand subscribers.

Once again re-examining its collecting approach in the 1940s and '50s, the NSCDA recognized the inherent importance of pursuing additional post-colonial examples. During this period the group took on ten additional properties, most of which date from the 1800s, including the San Francisco historic landmark Octagon House (*ca.* 1861), built at the time when the American preservation movement itself was nascent.

By the 1960s, with a large and comprehensive portfolio of properties and objects, the NSCDA gradually slowed its pace of expansion, concentrating its efforts on curatorial and educational initiatives. To this day, acquisitions (including the Stephen Hopkins House, *ca.* 1708, in Providence, Rhode Island, the home of the colonial governor and signer of the Declaration of Independence) continue, though at a slower pace. The organization's most recent purchase, in 2013, was the François Valle House, a French-colonial example (*ca.* 1792) in Ste. Genevieve, Missouri.

The 125th anniversary of the NSCDA in 2016 brought the opportunity for the organization to reflect on its legacy and consider women's role in historic preservation for the next century. The organization committed to disseminating the NSCDA's institutional knowledge, gleaned over more than a century of historic preservation. Great American Treasures, a new initiative of the NSCDA is, essentially, a museum consortium, separate from the NSCDA but operating with guidance from the organization. It will be a platform for sharing resources—from curatorial best

practices to collections data—all headed by one of the unsung heroes of the historic preservation movement. Bringing together ninety-two seventeenth- to twentieth-century historic properties and collections open to the public across the United States, Great American Treasures is the result of the NSCDA's long commitment to honoring America's rich heritage. Of institutions participating in the Great American Treasures program, forty-two of these significant historic properties are owned outright by the NSCDA, forty-two are on the National Register of Historic Places, and twenty-one are National Historic Landmarks. The only American organization that owns or supports more historic properties than the NSCDA is the National Park Service.

In addition to comprising historic properties, Great American Treasures will also involve more than fifty equally significant collections of American, European, and Asian fine and decorative arts, books, manuscripts, and historic memorabilia. Many of these items were donated directly by the families of the original owners, and highlights include such items as Dumbarton House's *Stoddert Children* by Charles Willson Peale (1789), still with its original frame by James Peale. The encyclopedic array, which continues to grow, stands in excess of 184,000 objects.

Over time the NSCDA has evolved from a philanthropic educator-collector to a significant steward of American culture. Great American Treasures, though guided by the NSCDA, will include museums and collections beyond the Dames' own holdings. By facilitating the communication of ideas across museum partners, the program will aid the houses and collections in carrying out their missions. Well-run venues will serve as gleaming advertisements for the educational value of historic-house museums across the United States, thereby engaging the public in the mission of historic preservation. And if successful, the program will recognize women as some of the original "shapers" of our national memory.