



S.C. Hall of Fame Transcript

Ann Pamela Cunningham

Narrator: How did a 37-year-old semi-invalid woman from rural South Carolina save Mount Vernon, home of the founder of our country—George Washington?

Gottshall: It does sound improbable that Ann Pamela Cunningham would have, in the 1850's, she was uh, I think, 37-years old, semi-invalid at this point, she'd had a riding accident, she lived in rural South Carolina at Rosemont Plantation, I mean, the idea that she would wind up leading this movement, is kind of improbable. But, it's not as improbable when you go back, and you look at her family background, her education, and the associations that she had.

Narrator: Ann Pamela Cunningham was born at Rosemont Plantation in Laurens County, August 15th, 1816.

Gottshall: She went to what was popularly called The Barhamville Academy, outside of Columbia. Its proper name was The South Carolina Female Institute. And this was not a "finishing school." They taught these girls astronomy, chemistry, botany, geometry, foreign languages, history, English of course, so she was there and really received a rigorous intellectual training.

Narrator: Through her mother, Ann knew the Washington family and developed a fine appreciation for the "republican virtue" of George Washington, during an era of intensifying sectional conflict. When she heard that Washington's home on the Potomac River was in a dilapidated state, she was inspired to act.

Gottshall: Her goal was very concretely to acquire Mt. Vernon and then to restore it. But beyond this seemed to lurk more. There was a sense that she saw the preservation of Mt. Vernon as a way to rekindle the republican virtue of George Washington himself, and perhaps bring the country back together again.

Narrator: In 1856, Cunningham negotiated the sale of Mount Vernon with George Washington's great-grandnephew, John Augustine Washington.



Gottshall: Anne Pamela Cunningham was really pretty smart. She did enlist some really significant help on this whole project. Edward Everett had been going around the country at this point and he gave actually 130 speeches on the character of George Washington. He was the great orator of his day. He of course gave the principle address at Gettysburg, when the cemetery was dedicated in 1863. She got him to agree to donate the proceeds of his speeches, to the \$200,000 purchase price for Mt. Vernon.

Narrator: Other helpers included Alabama Senator William Lowndes Yancy and South Carolina lawyer James Louis Petigru.

Gottshall: And it was James Petigru who really suggested that in order to make this a national appeal, that the Mt. Vernon Association be called The Mt. Vernon Ladies Association of the Union. So it was through his advice that she added the word “ladies” —because it was a ladies’ organization, and “union”—to be able to attract help from all over the country.

Narrator: The Association took possession of Mount Vernon on Washington’s birthday in 1860. As First Regent, Cunningham immediately began restoration and preservation efforts.

Gottshall: Ann Pamela Cunningham, as war was approaching, left Mt. Vernon and went back to Rosemont. She had also managed to get both the North and the South to agree not to trespass on Mt. Vernon during the Civil War. There was some real fear that Washington’s tomb itself might be violated somehow through the war, but that did not happen. Both armies stayed away.

In 1868, Cunningham returned to Mount Vernon and resumed supervision until her death.

Gottshall: I would say that Ann Pamela Cunningham is the first lady of preservation. I mean, she really got it started. She founded this organization, which still exists today and owns and operates Mt. Vernon. She really did at a time, when women were restricted, move into the public arena. And I would say, frankly, that she would be my nominee for the most famous woman in the South, Scarlett O’Hara notwithstanding.