The Weaker Sex in War

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Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union

Writing to the Marquis de Lafayette in February 1784, George Washington confessed his “heartfelt satisfaction” upon returning to his beloved Mount Vernon after the War of Independence,

I am become a private citizen on the banks of the Potomac, and under the shadow of my own Vine and own Fig-tree, free from the bustle of camp and the busy scenes of public life, I am solacing myself with those tranquil enjoyments, of which the Soldier who is ever in pursuit of fame, the Statesman whose watchful days and sleepless nights are spent in devising schemes to promote the welfare of his own, perhaps the ruin of other countries . . . can have very little conception.¹

Washington could have hardly predicted that far from being his refuge from the American Revolution, Mount Vernon would lie on the front lines of the American Civil War: not only as a physically vulnerable site just across the Potomac River and Union forces in Washington, D.C., but as an unwitting ideological battleground to assert and maintain an official position of neutrality against allegations of Confederate loyalty. With the advent of the Civil War, Mount Vernon became a nexus of military and political debates surrounding claims to neutrality, debates that encompassed soldiers and statesmen alike, from the enlisted Confederate to the commanding general of the Union army: Who were the rightful heirs to the country’s revolutionary legacy, the Union or the Confederacy?

George Washington played a crucial role in forging the collective identity of the Confederacy through memory. The official Confederate seal depicted Washington on horseback, and Jefferson Davis’s second inauguration took place on Washington’s 130th birthday, at the foot of a statue of Washington in the Confederacy’s new capital in Richmond. Davis began his address: “On this the birthday of the man most identified with the establishment of American
independence, and beneath the monument erected to commemorate his heroic virtues and those of his compatriots, we have assembled to usher into existence the Permanent Government of the Confederate States.”2 This identification and reverence of Washington as a means to build a cohesive Confederate national identity was not restricted in its usage to Confederate elites. Significantly, women on the home front often called the celebrated generals Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and P. G. T. Beauregard “second Washingtons” in their letters and diaries; these Southern women also undertook new wartime roles through organizations such as the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, which forms the focal point of this chapter.

The legacy of the American Revolution and the Founding Fathers were central to definitions of Confederate nationalism. Depicting themselves as the rightful inheritors of 1776 was one of the core ways in which the Confederate elites tried to coalesce the lower classes around the Confederate cause. To compel nonslaveholding whites to support a war and economic policies that did not benefit them as individuals, the Confederacy portrayed itself as more than just a union of slaveholders but as the legitimate successors of the American revolutionary tradition, safeguarding core American ideas that had emerged at the end of the eighteenth century.3 The memory of the American Revolution was an inclusive exercise all white Southerners across gender and class lines could engage with and feel a sense of shared belonging in a collective identity. In terms of defining Confederate nationalism through an invention of tradition and shared culture ideologically embodied in Washington, the Confederacy crafted a message with the potential to resonate with and hold real meaning for the masses.

This is not to say that the legacy of Washington was not important to the Union. Lincoln issued a presidential proclamation on February 19, 1862, the same month as Davis’s second inauguration, to celebrate Washington’s birthday; the tableaux, Columbia at Washington’s Tomb, was popular in the Union during the Civil War years; and Union soldiers frequently diverted their journeys for the opportunity to visit Mount Vernon and Washington’s tomb throughout the war. While the Confederacy was forceful and prolific in its use of the memory of Washington to bolster its nationalist cause, the Union also valued Washington’s legacy in the Civil War.

Given the significance of Washington to both sides of the conflict, who held the right to safeguard Washington’s legacy during this tumultuous chapter in American history? Or, more specifically, as this chapter addresses, was the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association (MVLA) capable of preserving the memory and integrity of the Father of the Nation in the context of the American
Civil War? Wartime Mount Vernon offers a nuanced lens to examine issues surrounding the gendered politics of loyalty, neutrality, and nationalism. While the MVLA physically occupied the mansion throughout the duration of the war, it had to defend itself against claims of Confederate loyalty. These rumors of Confederate loyalty became more frequent and more scandalous in the spring of 1861. Mount Vernon was in a militarily strategic position on the Potomac River south of Washington, D.C. Indeed, a steamer service had connected Georgetown and Mount Vernon in the antebellum years. During the war, U.S. secretary of war Edwin Stanton terminated the steamer service citing its potential security threats. Had the Confederate military or Confederate sympathizers in the region been given access to the Potomac River in such close proximity to the nation’s capital, civilians as well as government officials in Washington, D.C., would have been physically threatened – and Mount Vernon could have been used to bring the war to the Union capital.

Mount Vernon’s geographic position also held an emotional symbolic meaning: This was the Father of the Nation’s home. According to Thavolia Glymph, Southern white womanhood was defined and created in the plantation household. Washington’s plantation household magnified this construction of Southern womanhood and gave it a national audience. The women of the MLVA were not just campaigning for Washington’s legacy, they were performing the conventions of good Southern womanhood through a familiar framework of the household, but to a new audience far beyond their own family and enslaved persons. Furthermore, within individual plantation households, white women’s pursuit of domesticity was often reliant upon yet always “greatly complicated” by slavery and slave labor. Likewise, in their work to preserve and cultivate Washington’s home along mid-nineteenth-century standards of civilization, the MVLA contended with Washington’s and Mount Vernon’s historic ties to slavery, as well as individual organizational members’ ties to slavery, making issues of home and slavery deeply intertwined for Southern white planter women in the antebellum and wartime South.

Given this geographic and symbolic importance of Mount Vernon, visible and outspoken Confederate supporters occupying George Washington’s home would have given a great deal of credence to the Confederacy. Such an acquisition would have illustrated Confederate claims to be the rightful inheritors of the American revolutionary tradition, and in doing so, strengthened Confederate nationalism. If the MLVA were to have shown such partisanship, Confederate leaders would likely have harnessed their words and actions to support the Southern wartime agenda; the organization and its women members could
easily have become a symbol of Confederate nationalism, like other women discussed in this book. However, the organization meticulously avoided its appropriation as a symbol for the Confederate cause. On a highly visible stage, brimming with emotion and tradition and projected to a national audience, the women of the MVLA actively championed and performed the neutrality of the nascent organization. This performance of neutrality was necessary to appeal to the entire nation and to ensure the organization’s postwar survival, even if individual members were not wholeheartedly committed to neutrality and many likely supported secession. The MVLA’s civic actions held political meaning and the organization became a symbol of not only the preservation of George Washington’s legacy but also of wartime neutrality. The women of the MVLA controlled their contributions to and performance of this campaign for neutrality and played active and eager roles to intervene and help determine the wartime status of Washington’s estate.

Historians have examined the early years of the MVLA (1856–59) and its role as a mediator in the late 1850s sectional crisis before the outbreak of war. Chronologically, this chapter picks up where this scholarship concludes to provide the first comprehensive analysis of the role of the MVLA in the Civil War. Available studies do not include an engagement with the MVLA during the war years other than a brief reference that the MVLA “remained neutral” during the war. Indeed, as Prince Napoléon Joseph Charles Paul Bonaparte reflected on his visit in August 1861, Mount Vernon was “removed from the scenes of conflict, yet surrounded by them. . . . this little corner of the earth was kept sacred, neutral ground! . . . it was a fact by itself in the history of the World, and the wars of the world.” As the prince’s reflections show, by August 1861, after General Order 13 was issued by the commanding general of the Union army Winfield Scott on July 31 establishing the estate’s nonpartisan status, neutrality was the defining feature of wartime Mount Vernon for both contemporary observers as well as historians.

But what about the early months of the conflict, from South Carolina’s secession in December 1860 to the issuance of Scott’s order on July 31, 1861? In order to chart the MVLA’s path to neutrality, this chapter offers the first examination of the MVLA during the first few months of the war, when the organization faced allegations of Confederate loyalty. This was a time when Northern recognition of its self-declared neutrality and the avoidance of Union occupation seemed unlikely. To simply state that Mount Vernon was neutral during the war obscures the fraught realities this organization grappled with in the first months
of the conflict. The MVLA understood the significance of neutrality in terms not only of military engagement (i.e., the physical safety of Mount Vernon) but also of wider civic sentiment (i.e., the ideological battle for hearts and minds on the home fronts). To promote organizational neutrality, the women of the MVLA forged new relationships with and lobbied their cases to Union leaders, for example, the veteran Massachusetts Whig politician and the 1860 vice presidential candidate for the Constitutional Union Party, Edward Everett. In these ways, these women adopted new and expanded roles in civic society to petition leaders in the political sphere for neutrality.

As an organization, the MVLA understood that it needed to appear neutral, even if many of its individual Southern members may have supported the Confederacy. Neutrality was a realpolitik strategy for the organization to survive the war and not necessarily a reflection of the individual convictions of its members. Such a distinction testifies to these women’s growing consciousness of political culture and their eagerness to engage with broader issues than they had in the antebellum period. These women did not enjoy full rights of citizenship, nor did they seek them, but in the wartime context they forged more direct and less mediated relationships and exchanges with male leaders in the political and military sphere.

It is important to recognize that, unlike the rest of the women in this book, the women of the MVLA did not champion Confederate nationalism. However, the strategies and partnerships pursued by the conservative women of the MVLA in the secession crisis and first three months of the war are similar to the efforts undertaken by nationalist women during the war. Beginning this book by exploring the MVLA in the secession crisis from December 1860, before Confederate women’s wartime organizations and causes were established (as discussed in chapters 2 through 5), shows the trajectory of conservative Virginian women’s agency and engagement with political culture from secession to the Lost Cause.

Acquisition of Mount Vernon

In 1853, Louisa Bird Cunningham, upon seeing the ruinous state of George Washington’s Mount Vernon estate from a steamer traveling on the Potomac River, wrote to her daughter, Ann Pamela, that if the men of the country could not keep Mount Vernon in repair, it was up to the women to do so. Accordingly, Ann Pamela soon began a fundraising effort to save Mount Vernon. Writing
under the name “A Southern Matron,” Cunningham published a patriotic and
gendered appeal addressed to “The Ladies of the South” in the December 2,
1853, edition of the Charleston Mercury:

Ladies of the South, can you still be with closed souls and purses, while
the world cries “Shame upon America,” and suffer Mount Vernon, with
all its sacred associations, to become, as it is spoken and probable, the seat
of manufactures and manufactories; noise and smoke, and the “busy hum
of men,” destroying all sanctity and repose around the tomb of your own
“world’s wonder?”

The fundraising effort soon spread to a national scale and Cunningham erected
an organizational structure to reflect its geographic scope. At the head of the
national organization would be a regent and each state organization would be
directed by a vice regent: a federalist division of power applied to a civic orga-
nization. Sarah Agnes Rice Pryor described an early meeting of the Virginia
chapter of the MVLA as “a meeting of ladies—yes, ladies! Making speeches and
passing resolutions like men.” In 1856, the Mount Vernon Ladies Association
of the Union charter was accepted and incorporated by the state of Virginia.
Initially, the women selected “Mount Vernon Association” as its name. How-
ever, their advisors, led by Charleston lawyer James Louis Petigru, suggested the
insertion of “Union” in the title to highlight their commitment to unionism
in the context of the sectional crisis. It is likely that “Ladies” was also added in
order to highlight the apolitical agenda of the organization and its abstention
from sectional political affairs. In addition, the inclusion of “Ladies” could also
dissuade possible critiques of the MVLA as an infringement on public sphere
masculine affairs. Women’s work in civic society could not been seen as over-
shadowing men’s work in the public sphere.

Nominally, Mount Vernon had been in the hands of John Augustine Wash-
ington III since 1841, when his mother gave him managerial control of the es-
tate. He became the estate’s legal owner upon his mother’s death in 1855 and
unsuccessfully tried to sell it to both the U.S. Congress and the state of Virginia.
In 1858, the MVLA bought the estate from Washington with a $18,000 down
payment on the $200,000 (with interest) agreed sale price for 200 acres of the
Mount Vernon estate, including the house and tomb. The MVLA paid Wash-
ington four more equal installments over the next four years to complete the
sale. Three years later, in 1861, the Civil War broke out with its founding regent,
Ann Pamela Cunningham, at the MVLA’s helm.
While she came from a distinguished slaveholding South Carolina family, Ann Pamela Cunningham, founding regent of the MVLA, was far from the ideal of elite antebellum Southern womanhood of wifely and maternal domestic duty, as discussed in the introduction. Following a horseback riding accident, she was a semi-invalid and often debilitated by various health issues. In fact, in the first MVLA fundraising lectures in Richmond delivered by Washington scholar and MVLA surrogate Edward Everett, Cunningham was too ill to sit in the audience. Pryor recalled that “At the last moment a small sofa—chaise lounge—was pushed on the platform, and upon this the devoted woman [Cunningham] was laid, and forgot all her weakness.” Furthermore, she never married, her prominent paternal ancestors were Loyalists in the American Revolution, and she strayed from the domain of female civic duty into more male politically charged issues several times over the course of her life. John C. Calhoun had tutored her father Robert Cunningham in the study of law. However, during the Nullification Crisis of 1832, they came to a public disagreement when Cunningham advocated a staunch Unionist position. This disagreement filtered down to their daughters in early 1832 when Ann Pamela Cunningham and Anna Maria Calhoun were roommates at Barhamville, an elite female academy near Columbia. In letters to his daughter, Calhoun was dismayed at the selection of her roommate, and he told her to abstain from political debates with Ms. Cunningham.

Cunningham was aware of the importance of eliding sectional strife prior to the outbreak of war and ensuring the MVLA’s claims to neutrality after the outbreak of war in April 1861 with the Battle of Fort Sumter. Cunningham had planned to stay at Mount Vernon during the war to oversee its renovation. However, after the recent death of her father, the family was struggling to manage their Rosemont plantation in South Carolina. Obliging her mother’s wishes, Cunningham returned home in December 1860 after only living at Mount Vernon for a few weeks. In her absence, Cunningham selected Sarah Tracy, her personal secretary from New York, and Upton Herbert, a distant cousin of the Washington family from Virginia, to occupy the estate during the war: a Northern woman and a Southern man to safeguard the neutrality of Mount Vernon. Mary McMakin of Philadelphia joined Tracy at Mount Vernon as a companion for propriety’s sake. Tracy wrote to Cunningham in early 1861 that an association surrogate advised, “the presence of ladies there [Mount Vernon] would be its greatest protection.” Indeed, in several of the letters exchanged between Tracy and Cunningham during the war, the term “the presence of a lady” was used to
imply the ways in which gender—namely, the social construction of women as physically weak and ideologically apolitical—could be showcased to physically protect and ideologically preserve Mount Vernon during the tumultuous context of war. As such, “the weaker sex in war” warranted physical and ideological protection. These three wartime guardians of Mount Vernon slept in bedcham bers on upper floors and used Washington’s study as a dining room, endeavoring to keep as much as the house open to visitors as possible.16

While it is debatable whether Cunningham herself was a secessionist in the months leading up to Fort Sumter, from her secret work with the Ladies’ Confederate Naval Association it is clear that she held conservative beliefs and supported the Confederacy after the outbreak of war.17 However, Cunningham concealed from the public her involvement with the new organization so that it would not undermine the ideological neutrality of Mount Vernon. The founding regent of the MVLA could not be seen to publicly endorse the Confederate cause; her personal convictions, if made public, could compromise the collective objectives of the organization. There is no record of the Northern press critiquing her role in the Ladies’ Confederate Naval Association, though newspapers critiqued her partisanship, as explored below.

One day after Virginians voted to support secession, on May 24, 1861, Union forces entered Alexandria, a location close to the United States capital of Washington, D.C., with strong transport networks that would prove advantageous in the conflict. Union forces would occupy Alexandria for the rest of the war. Before the Union presence in Alexandria, Upton Herbert rejected several offers to join the Confederate army. According to Tracy, “Both his brothers, and every friend he has, have done so, and they wonder much that he has refused the command of every company offered. He says very little about it, but has, I know, made a sacrifice for Mount Vernon.”18 Or to put it another way, he sacrificed his Confederate allegiance for Mount Vernon’s neutrality.

In addition to Tracy, Herbert, and McMakin, free Blacks were present in daily life at wartime Mount Vernon. After the organization bought Mount Vernon from John Augustine Washington in 1858, the women decided not to use enslaved labor as its previous owner had (and he had been virulently criticized by William Lloyd Garrison in the Northern press for doing so). Instead, they hired the free children and grandchildren of one of George Washington’s former enslaved persons, and later free carpenter, West Ford.19 Again, the organization attempted to elide a loaded sectional issue in the name of civic duty. The employment of free Black laborers at Mount Vernon was a stratagem of the MVLA to dim the slavery issue.
However, this narrative obscures the fraught and more complicated relationship between the MVLA and slavery. While the MVLA may have averted direct financial support of slavery, it nevertheless indirectly financed the institution. Washington used his payments from the MVLA to purchase another plantation, Waveland, in Fauquier County and eight male enslaved persons to labor on this new plantation. Furthermore, while Washington sold the organization one-sixth of his ownership of the Mount Vernon estate, he retained the remaining five-sixths for farm use. This farmland relied on an extensive network of enslaved labor to render it profitable. An inventory dated June 8, 1861, details the property, including sixteen enslaved persons with a cumulative reported value of $16,600. Two of these enslaved persons, Jim Mitchell and Edmund Parker, would go on to work for the MVLA.

Furthermore, Cunningham as founding regent of the MVLA had been born into an elite slaveholding family. When Cunningham left Mount Vernon to return to her family in December 1860, she did so to help manage the plantation, and its 138 enslaved persons, in the wake of her father’s death. In this way, Cunningham prioritized her familial obligations, and implicitly her family’s obligation to plantation culture and slavery, over her obligations to the MVLA. Unsurprisingly, the Cunningham family’s slaveholdings, as well as the slaveholdings of the Southern state vice regents, was never publicized by the MLVA. Through selective presentation, the MVLA showcased a narrative that precluded the organization from any involvement or complicity with the institution of slavery. Again, the use of “ladies” in the organization’s name highlighted the ideal of the Southern lady and not the lived reality of the violence and social as well as economic power of slaveholding women.

However, this strategy of selective memory and omission was not universally convincing. Women’s rights and abolitionist campaigners Elizabeth Chace and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were both invited by the MVLA to serve as state vice regents. Both rejected these offers as they felt their work for their reform movements was of far greater importance. They both published their refusal letters in the December 31, 1858, edition of William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*. Stanton proclaimed, “She labors hard to restore Mount Vernon and forgets that the good old Revolutionary Fathers, in declaring that ‘All men are created equal’ lost together all sight of the negro and the woman…. Until we give the world freedom, and a new type of womanhood, we have no energies to expend elsewhere.” Chase concurred, “How can the women of this
nation talk of commemorating that struggle [American Revolution], when, with their consent, and approval and aid, every sixth woman in the land is liable to be sold on the auction-block, and is often so sold, for the vilest purposes?" For these leaders of the fight for women’s rights and abolition, saving Mount Vernon was a frivolous cause and distracted from the urgent issues of gender and race reform in the mid-nineteenth century. Unlike the conservative women of the MLVA, Stanton and Chase lobbied for progressive reforms to secure the full rights of citizenship across race and gender lines.

On the other end of the spectrum, the women from the South who did accept positions of vice regents were also associated with other causes outside of Mount Vernon. These Southern women often held close associations to the Confederate republic, either through their families or their own actions as individuals. For example, Octavia Walton Le Vert, vice regent of Alabama (1858–77), was a socialite, published a book *Souvenirs of Travel* in 1857, and two years earlier traveled to Europe to represent Alabama at the Paris Exhibition. While she was not an ardent secessionist, she supported Alabama at the outbreak of war and nursed wounded Confederate soldiers. Mary Middleton Rutledge Fogg, vice regent of Tennessee (1858–72), worked for Felicia Grundy Porter’s Soldiers’ Aid Society to support Confederate soldiers during the war. A 1908 obituary of Letitia Harper Morehead Walker, vice regent of North Carolina (1859–1908), praised her service to the Confederacy: “Her life was spent with enthusiastic devotion to the Confederate cause—providing for sick and wounded soldiers, making clothes and comforts and blankets for their camps, and welcoming and entertaining them in the beautiful old home Blendwood.” The obituary went on to claim she sheltered “President Davis and family and Cabinet [,] Vice President Stephens, Generals Beauregard, Magruder, and other weary officers passing through Greensboro.”

Some vice regents were associated with the Confederacy in their marriage to Southern Democrats and later Confederate leaders. Catherine Morris Anderson McWillie, vice regent of Mississippi (1858–73), was married to the antebellum Democratic governor of Mississippi William McWillie (1857–59). As governor, McWillie supported slavery and states’ rights. He later supported the Confederacy. Sarah Frances Smith Johnson, vice regent of Arkansas (1859–62),
was married to the antebellum Arkansas Democratic senator and congressman Robert Ward Johnson. Johnson was a staunch advocate of slavery, served in the Confederate Congress, and was a strong supporter of Jefferson Davis. Mary Cox Chesnut, vice regent of South Carolina from 1860 until her death in 1864, was married to one of the wealthiest planters in South Carolina. Her son James Chesnut Jr. was a leading antebellum Democratic politician and served as senator from South Carolina from 1858 until the state’s secession and later brigadier general in the Confederacy. His wife, and Mary’s daughter-in-law, was the famed wartime diarist and Confederate supporter Mary Boykin Chesnut. Mary Cox Chesnut wrote an affectionate letter to Cunningham expressing her “admiration” for her “wonderful efforts” with the MVLA as its founding regent.27 This is not to say all of these women were steadfastly committed to Confederate nationalism. Yet in terms of optics to their wider communities, region, and even fractured nation, their voluntary work and/or visibility of family members as prominent supporters of the Confederacy associated them with the Confederate cause. Such actual or perceived associations of Confederate loyalty from its individual members could undermine the neutrality of the organization.

From the start of the war, Cunningham was concerned about the visibility of neutrality at the estate. She required that soldiers shroud any physical appearance of loyalty to either the Union or the Confederacy to be admitted to George Washington’s home. Within the first few weeks of the war, Tracy relayed an update to Cunningham on her instructions, “They have behaved very well about it. Many of them come from a great distance and have never been here, and have no clothes but their uniforms. They borrow shawls and cover up their buttons and leave their arms outside the enclosures, and never come but two or three at a time.”28 Despite these new measures, soldiers still seemed to take pleasure in visiting Mount Vernon and seeing the preservation of Washington’s estate. For example, in his diary, Private James A. Minish of the 105th Pennsylvania Regiment provided a detailed account of his 1861 trip to the estate, “we seen the [saddle] holster of Washington & several of the knapsacks used in the revolutionary war. . . . we were in the setting room of the general. . . . the building and grounds were kept in the same manner as they were during the life of Washington. . . . I will never forget the sights of Mt. Vernon.”29

Mount Vernon’s neutrality was also vulnerable to manipulation by some opportunistic civilians. In July 1861, Tracy learned that her Northern friends with Southern loyalties were trying to smuggle intelligence to Confederate general P. G. T. Beauregard via Mount Vernon. She wrote to the vice regent of Delaware
of the betrayal, “The only correspondence from Mount Vernon to the South are letters to Miss Cunningham, and a very neutral place it would be, if the Regent cannot be permitted to hear what is going on here!” Tracy’s “friends” sought to exploit Mount Vernon’s quest for neutrality for their own gain.

The “Theft” of Washington’s Body and General Order 13

One episode in particular illustrates this broad and multidimensional struggle for Mount Vernon’s neutrality: claims that George Washington’s body had been removed from Mount Vernon at the outbreak of war. After the secession of South Carolina and the departure of Cunningham, the MVLA was forced to respond to allegations of its secessionist sympathies. Tracy lamented, “I am constantly asked by people from every direction whether it is true that this Ms Cunningham is a ‘Secessionist?’ . . . I was told the other day that it would break up the Association.” Codifying these rumors in print, a January 25, 1861, article in the local Alexandria Gazette boldly claimed, “the Southern matron, is now at Barhamville. We are informed that her patriotic heart beats in ardent response to the great Southern movement, and that her only regret is that she cannot bring the tomb of Washington with the South.” While the article stopped short of accusing the MVLA of stealing Washington’s body, it did plant the seed of a rumor that would plague the association for the next few months and lay the blame squarely with Cunningham, the imperfect Southern lady.

These rumors soon spread to a national scale, and that spring several Northern newspapers raised the likelihood that Washington’s body had actually been removed on the MVLA’s watch. As stated on the front page of the New York Herald on May 18, 1861, following up on its previous front page story about the removal of Washington’s remains, from May 15, 1861, “a guard of honor, some three hundred strong, under the command of Captain Maury, was formed with a view to remove the entire sarcophagus of Washington and to transfer it to Lexington, Virginia.” The article went on to speculate on the likelihood of the theft, “If it has not been accomplished it will be strange, for it was the intention of many influential persons not to leave these precious ashes to the hazards or war.”

In response to these mounting allegations in the Northern press, the organization likewise responded in the court of public opinion, and vice regents wrote to their local newspapers to dispute these virulent claims. In a letter to the Philadelphia Evening News in response to a May 15 article that reported John Augustine Washington III had taken Washington’s remains and joined
the Confederate army, vice regent of Delaware Margaret Comegys expressed indignation that the body of Washington could have been moved from Mount Vernon. She even copied the relevant clauses from the contract between Washington and the MVLA to prove that there was no legal basis to the claims.

Similarly, Tracy responded to the New York Herald in a letter to the National Intelligencer, “the public, the owners of this noble possession, need for no molestation of this one national spot belonging alike to North and South. Over it there can be no dispute!” Tracy went on to praise the work of the MVLA, “The Ladies have taken every necessary precaution for the preservation of the place, and their earnest desire is, that the public should feel confidence in their faithfulness to trust, and believe that Mount Vernon is safe under the guardianship of the Ladies of the Mount Vernon Association of the Union.”

Validating these claims, the New York Times reported a Union army expedition was dispatched less than a week later to investigate these rumors. On May 26, 1861, the newspaper published an article aptly titled, “A Visit to Mount Vernon. The Tomb of Washington Unmolested.” According to the newspaper, Union general Daniel Sickles, who less than two years earlier had become the first person to use temporary insanity as a defense in U.S. legal history for the murder of his wife’s lover, sent three emissaries to investigate the whereabouts of Washington’s remains, “They found it [the tomb] had never been molested; cobwebs were on the bars of the gate, weeds had grown up from the ground in the interior of the vault.” While confirming the security and location of Washington’s remains, the entrance of the Union army into this rumor mill only fed fuel to the growing fire over both the vulnerability of Mount Vernon as a geographic location as well as the weakness of the MVLA as a newly established organization to safeguard Washington’s body. According to two leading New York newspapers, in articles published within one week of each other, both the Confederate and Union armies had visited Mount Vernon for very different reasons: theft and reconnaissance, respectively. Regardless of their accuracy, these journalistic representations introduced Mount Vernon as a site ripe for military intervention into the Northern public imagination.

This episode of the alleged theft of Washington’s physical body also reveals the deep structural weaknesses in disseminating Confederate nationalism to non-elites as early as the spring of 1861. Although this episode was a discrete snapshot of the aspirational ideological drive of Confederate nationalism—to take the legacy of American Revolution, in the physical form of Washington’s body, and transplant it in the South—other than the local Alexandria Gazette,
this rumor did not appear in the Southern press. While this rumor was soon proved to be false in the May 26, 1861, *New York Times* article mentioned above, it was printed in several Northern newspapers earlier that month. While this rumor was widely circulated in the Northern press, before this episode was discounted as false, the Southern press did not mention or reprint this story that spoke to the core tenets of Confederate nationalism.

Benedict Anderson’s theory of nationalism emphasizes the circulation of a shared print culture in the formation of national identity. This shared print culture, and newspapers in particular, offered a crucial structural means to disseminate the Confederate nationalist message to the masses. However, most of the nation’s printing presses were in the North and transportation and communication networks were compromised in northern Virginia from May 1861 with the Union occupation. No matter how culturally connective and politically inspiring Confederate nationalism could be in its abstract definition and rhetoric (as an ideology), its failure to physically reach the masses severely compromised its efficacy (as a tangible lived reality). This was a missed opportunity for the Confederacy to make their abstract definition of nationalism more tangible to the masses; the South’s alleged repossession of Washington’s body for their cause would have been a touchstone for all Southerners to come together and meet on common ground across class lines.

From South Carolina, Cunningham was so vexed by these recent newspaper rumors she wrote to Edward Everett, a champion of the MVLA and its most successful fundraiser, to ask him to reconsider his wartime support of the Union and publicly assert his own personal neutrality to safeguard the Mount Vernon mission, given his well-known association with the project. Everett politely refused the request, “I felt that my relations with the community in which I live, perhaps I may venture to say with the country, forbade my standing neutral.” While Cunningham publicly prioritized organizational neutrality over her personal loyalty to the Confederacy, Everett could not commit to such a position. Women in civic society could lobby for neutrality after 1860, but Everett, the former vice presidential candidate of the Constitutional Union Party in the 1860 presidential election, felt the relationship with his local community was more important in May 1861. Nevertheless, Everett advocated privately for the neutrality of Mount Vernon and wrote to commanding general of the Union army, Winfield Scott. Scott was already familiar with the potential military significance of Mount Vernon. In 1851, Scott had joined President Millard Fillmore and other officials to evaluate whether Mount Vernon could be used as a hospital for soldiers. The U.S. government declined to buy Mount Vernon,
leaving the estate available for purchase by the MVLA five years later. Everett wrote to Scott about the prospect of Mount Vernon’s neutrality in May 1861:

I hope you will not think me too impertinent if I suggest the expediency of a General Order directing that special care should be taken to prevent injury by fire or otherwise to Arlington House where many articles of furniture and other personal relics of Washington are preserved and also ordering extra precautions for the preservation intact of Mount Vernon and its sacred precincts.⁴¹

In a postscript, Everett urged that in addition to the General Order 13 being issued by Scott, it also be published to the country. Now a national memorial to Robert E. Lee, Arlington House held strong links to both the Washington and Lee families. Lee married his distant cousin and the great-granddaughter of Martha Washington, Mary Custis, at Arlington House in 1831. Six of their children were born at Arlington House and this was their family home until the outbreak of war. Given the house’s vulnerable position on the Potomac River, the Lee family left Arlington House at the start of the war and the Union seized the house and grounds.⁴² Not only would Everett’s proposal target the Lee family, it would prove the case for Mount Vernon’s neutrality in the court of public opinion. This General Order was not just about soldiers respecting the physical objects of Arlington House and grounds of Mount Vernon, but also about the American people respecting the ideological stance of the MVLA. Cunningham, a conservative Southern woman, directly lobbied a Northern politician, who then presented her case to the commanding general of the Union military. In the context of war, Cunningham had more direct access to male leaders and was able to forge strategic relationships to further her own agenda.

In response to these ongoing rumors that did not seem to be nearing a resolution in civic society, General Winfield Scott issued General Order 13 on July 31 to assert Mount Vernon’s neutral status. As per Everett’s request, the order was widely publicized in the North. However, much to the MVLA’s dismay, in his order, Scott shamed Confederate forces and identified the Confederates as belligerents prompting government intervention:

Mount Vernon, so recently consecrated to the Immortal Washington by the Ladies of America, has been overrun by bands of rebels, who having trampled under the foot of the Constitution of the United States, the ark of our freedom and prosperity, are prepared to trample on the ashes of him to whom we are all mainly indebted for these mighty blessings.⁴³
Once again, Tracy resorted to the organization’s modus operandi and quickly penned a letter to the *National Intelligencer* stating that Scott was “misinformed” and no Confederate soldiers had even visited Mount Vernon since the occupation of Alexandria. She ended the letter underlining the importance of both the estate’s and organization’s neutrality, “The Regent is earnest and decided in her direction and request to those she has made responsible for the preservation of order and neutrality at Mount Vernon.” Tracy acted as an individual in her own right and took on a more public role to lobby for the interests of the MVLA in newspaper culture; she directly addressed the newspaper, and the newspaper printed her claims to its audience.

From the July 31, 1861, issuance of Scott’s order, there was little further debate as to the Confederate loyalty of the MVLA. The neutrality of Mount Vernon was respected and guaranteed with little incident from the first summer of the war onward. However, the issuance of General Order 13 was not the beginning of the narrative of Mount Vernon’s neutrality, rather it was the ending point. Preceding it were months of writing letters to regional and national newspapers; building partnerships with leading politicians like Everett; and preserving and managing the estate for the recognition of Mount Vernon’s neutrality. This valence of neutrality was not just applicable in a military sense to soldiers who would come into physical contact with the estate during the war, but also, and perhaps more important, to a sense of civic duty the MVLA fulfilled to the American people that transcended regional loyalties, even during the Civil War.

**After the War**

The Civil War was an early test for the young organization and the stakes were high. If the neutrality of Mount Vernon had not been recognized, not only would its legacy and preservation have been compromised, but the longevity of the organization would have been thrown into jeopardy. This appearance of neutrality was not just about surviving the present war, it was also about ensuring the future success of the organization. The organization recognized the need to perform neutrality for its livelihood, regardless of the individual convictions of its members.

After the war, the MVLA used their track record of striving for neutrality in the war years as proof of their steadfast, unparalleled commitment to civic duty and rejection of regional allegiances. As a result of promoting their wartime history, the MVLA developed a far more extensive and far more Northern network of donors. In 1869, Cunningham successfully petitioned Congress for an
indemnity claim of $7,000 for loss of income during the war; a claim that may not have been successful if the MVLA had not made neutrality the cornerstone of its wartime agenda. The organization was able to pay off its wartime debts by the end of the 1860s; this was an unexpected feat that would not have been possible without this new sprawling web of donors and indemnity claim.

More broadly, the organization solidified its standing as nonpartisan in the Northern court of public opinion in the years following the war. Even though some members were active in the Lost Cause and the United Daughters of the Confederacy, these issues rarely penetrated official organization business. For instance, Georgia Page King Smith Wilder, vice regent of Georgia, 1891–1914, was an early member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in Georgia. The organization expected a separation between the interests of the individual member and the interests of the collective organization, just as it had during the sectional crisis and Civil War. In an aberrational appearance of Confederate memory in the records of the MVLA, in the 1900 annual meeting, Margaret Sweat, vice regent of Maine, memorialized former vice regent of South Carolina Lucy Holcombe Pickens, wife of South Carolina governor Francis Pickens, after her death in 1899, “After a brief dream of empire, to add a pathetic agony over the ‘Lost Cause’ to the many trials and sorrows that strewed her path for the rest of her life. The imaginary kingdom, which to many was only an ill-considered political experiment, was to her a glorious reality, a faith, a religion, and she gave it a loyalty that only strengthened as it became hopeless.” While the Lost Cause shaped Pickens’s postwar public and personal lives, it did not shape her work in the organization. Like George Washington himself, the organization strove to transcend political divisiveness in another postwar era. In other words, General Order 13 ensured the physical safety of Mount Vernon during the war, but the MVLA and its conservative women members’ performance of wartime neutrality secured its nonpartisan ideological status afterward.

This chapter illustrated how wartime Mount Vernon provided a new opportunity to interrogate the gendered relationship between neutrality and civic society on the Confederate home front. These women established new relationships and dialogues with Union journalists, politicians, and military officers, ushering the women of the MVLA into urgent Northern public sphere debates of loyalty and allegiance. As active agents, these women exercised a voice in civic society and helped to shape discourses surrounding the future of Mount Vernon’s neutrality. In the secession crisis and early months of the war, these women forged new partnerships with male leaders to advance their agenda; and they knowingly offered not only the physical site of Mount Vernon, but their organization,
as a representation of nonpartisanship. While most of its individual Southern women members held strong political and/or cultural associations to the Confederate republic and the Confederate elite, the organization itself professed neutrality. As stated earlier, although these women did not hold or lobby for the full rights of citizenship, they made a distinction between their associations with the Confederacy as individuals and their performance of neutrality as organizational members.

Like the rest of the women discussed in this book, these conservative women had a multifaceted and evolving relationship to the Confederate cause. Women, such as Maria Clopton, navigated new realities and opportunities posed by war. Maria Clopton was the founder and president of the Ladies’ Defense Association (LDA) in Richmond from 1862 to 1863. As discussed in chapter 2, the LDA was an ardent nationalist organization committed to supporting the Confederate military and raising funds to buy a gunboat. From 1864, Clopton appears to have lent her services to another cause: the MVLA. In her account book of household expenses from 1864, Clopton collected subscription fees to Mount Vernon from twenty-four individuals totaling $2,500. Just a year earlier, Clopton had spearheaded one of the most nationalistic causes in the Confederate war effort, but by 1864 she was volunteering for an explicitly nonpartisan, antinationalistic cause. Such a transition testifies to the agency of some women as individual actors in this narrative of gender and political capital; women could commit themselves to diverse, or even conflicting, causes. Crucially, these women brokered new relationships with male political and military leaders and held the capacity to change over time and shape Confederate society in different ways.