

MARY WASHINGTON MONUMENT
Washington Avenue Historic District
1500 Block of Washington Avenue
Fredericksburg
Virginia

HALS VA-61
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

MARY WASHINGTON MONUMENT

HALS NO. VA-61

Location: 1500 Block of Washington Avenue, Fredericksburg, Virginia

Part of the Washington Avenue Historic District

Latitude: 38.305846 Longitude: -77.46891 (Standing directly in front of monument, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)

Significance: The Mary Washington Monument in Fredericksburg, Virginia, is significant as the “first memorial ever erected by women to a woman.”¹ This site preserves the memory of George Washington’s mother, a woman so respected in her day that the nation went into mourning upon her death and would spend the next century to ensure she was properly remembered. However, it is also a testament to the dedication and perseverance of the two Memorial Ladies’ Associations who would raise the funds from women throughout the country to make this monument possible, to the first caretaker, Mrs. Frances Goolrick, and to the beautifying efforts of The Garden Club of Virginia, who financed the landscaping in the 1930s.

Description: The Mary Washington Monument was built in a field on property that was originally part of the Kenmore plantation. Behind the monument and small Gordon family cemetery is the rock outcropping that Mrs. Washington would frequent to pray and meditate. Below this feature, the land slopes steeply down to mature trees buffering a neighborhood park and tennis courts.

When the Mary Washington Memorial Association of Fredericksburg acquired the property in 1890, the ruins of a partially completed monument stood “in a field of stunted briars; a melancholy spectacle, wholly without protection.”² However, this women’s group, along with the National Mary Washington Memorial Association, were busy raising funds to build a new monument, and by the time the dedication ceremony took place in May of 1894, a granite and wrought iron fence surrounded the new edifice and a brick wall contained the cemetery. In 1895, construction began to the south of the monument on the stone lodge for the caretaker,³ and by May of 1899, a low granite coping enclosed the property.⁴

¹ Susan Riviere Hetzel, *The Building of a Monument* (Lancaster, PA: Press of Wickersham Company, 1903), 65.

² *Ibid.*, 42.

³ *Ibid.*,

⁴ *Ibid.*, 208.

In 1937, The Garden Club of Virginia hired a landscape architect to beautify the grounds around the monument.⁵ The property was graded and brick steps, walks, and a wall were constructed.⁶ Alden Hopkins, the landscape architect chosen for the project, designed the planting beds to include species native to Virginia, recommending specimens that "will take the least amount of care and attention and do best if undisturbed, yet will give a fine effect in color of foliage, scent, flower or old time atmosphere."⁷ Laurel, mountain andromeda, azalea, and Virginia rose fulfilled this requirement, and American boxwood lined the brick walk to the monument.⁸ Native ornamental and shade trees, such as flowering dogwood, honey locust, American holly, and red oak were planted on the surrounding grounds.⁹ The landscape was refreshed in 1987 with ornamental trees to replace some that had been lost over the decades, and extensive tree work and renovation pruning of the boxwoods was also done at this time.¹⁰

Currently, the site is barren of much of the earlier landscaping. Beds of liriopie have replaced the boxwoods lining the walk to the monument, and a few mature oaks and a crepe myrtle survive nearby. A simple wrought iron fence encloses the monument now, and there are erosion issues from a well-used path to Meditation Rock and on the hill leading to the park below.

History: Mary Ball Washington chose this spot northwest of Kenmore Plantation for her final resting place because it was near a natural outcropping where she would often go to pray for her son and her country during the Revolutionary War. She would be buried here by her daughter and grandchildren on August 28, 1789.¹¹ When the Gordon family (responsible for naming Kenmore) bought the plantation in 1819,¹² they placed their family cemetery next to Mrs. Washington's grave. In 1833, seven years after the initiation of a movement to mark "the ashes of this good American mother," a cornerstone was laid for a suitable monument, which, despite several false starts before and after the Civil War, was never completed.¹³

⁵ The Garden Club of Virginia Historic Restorations Project. Mary Washington Monument. <http://www.vahistorical.org/gardenclub/marywashingtonmmt.htm>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hetzel, *The Building of a Monument*, 5.

¹² The George Washington Foundation, http://www.kenmore.org/genealogy/gordon/gene_gordon.html (accessed March 21, 2012).

¹³ National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Section 8, 21, 22.

http://www.dhr.virginia.gov/registers/Cities/Fredericksburg/1115262_Washington_Avenue_HD_2002_Final_Nomination.pdf (accessed March 21, 2012).

In 1888, George W. Shepherd, Sr., a local businessman, bought several parcels, including the lot with the unfinished monument and the cemetery.¹⁴ In February of 1889, he issued an option to purchase the lots to a Fredericksburg real estate agency, Colbert and Kirtley, who, according to some accounts used this opportunity to draw attention to the uncompleted and shameful state of Mary Washington's monument.¹⁵ A broadside was posted that same month that advertised nationwide the sale of the "Grave of Mary, the Mother of General George Washington" at public auction in Washington, D.C.¹⁶ The ploy worked—the nation was outraged, Mr. Shepherd revoked his option, and the real estate agents sued.¹⁷ After a contentious trial, the judge found in favor of the defendant.¹⁸ Mr. Shepherd promptly sold the lot to the women of the Mary Washington Memorial Association of Fredericksburg on January 24, 1890. In February of 1891, the local association deeded the lot to the National Mary Washington Memorial Association, another woman's group who had been raising money from women throughout the country to build a new monument.¹⁹

The local and national Memorial Associations were part of a nationwide movement by women eager to become involved in activities outside the domestic sphere, instigated by Ann Pamela Cunningham and the Mount Vernon Ladies Association in 1856. The Ladies Association, whose members were generally well-to-do white women, felt that the feminine ideals of domesticity could remediate what they saw as an increasingly vitriolic and amoral national atmosphere by rescuing and preserving the historically and symbolically important home of the first president of the nation. This movement developed more significance in the years after the Civil War as Ladies' Associations throughout the South began to establish cemeteries and monuments to the nation's war heroes in an effort to deal with the devastation and human toll this war had exacted. The Mary Washington Memorial Association of Fredericksburg was organized by the Ladies' Memorial Association, who had already worked to re-inter thousands of Confederate soldiers who had died in Fredericksburg battles. Therefore, rallying to the cause of Mary, the mother of General Washington would seem to be a cause especially dear to women nationwide, and locally, her shrine would be a symbol of the town's reincarnation following the Civil War.²⁰

¹⁴ Bargain and Sale Deed from George G. Shepherd and Sallie Shepherd to the Mary Washington Memorial Association of Fredericksburg, January 24, 1890, Deed Book CC, page 235.

¹⁵ National Register, 26.

¹⁶ Mrs. Vivian Minor Fleming, Brief Personal Sketch of the Mary Washington Memorial Association of Fredericksburg, Virginia, Central Rappahannock Regional Library, Virginiana Room, Fredericksburg, Virginia.

¹⁷ Melissa Plotkin, "Long hast thou slept unnoted," *The Virginia Cavalcade*, Summer 1995, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3, 4.

¹⁹ National Register, 27.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

The cornerstone for the new monument would be laid on October 21, 1893, and on the afternoon of December 22, the obelisk was secured to the plinth.²¹ The grand dedication ceremony, attended by President Grover Cleveland, took place on May 10, 1894.²² In February of 1896, a stone lodge on the grounds was completed that would house the custodian of the monument, Mrs. John (Frances) Goolrick, secretary of the National Mary Washington Monument Association and President of the Ladies Memorial Association.²³

The National Mary Washington Monument Association of Fredericksburg contacted The Garden Club of Virginia in 1937 to fund a project to landscape the Monument grounds. Garden clubs had evolved throughout the nation as an outlet for women to “stimulate the knowledge and love of gardening among amateurs; to share the advantages of association through conference and correspondence, in this country and abroad; to aid in the protection of native plants and birds; and to encourage civic planting.”²⁴ Some of the projects that the Virginia chapter had or would take on were restorations of gardens at nearby historic houses such as Kenmore, and later, the Mary Washington House and Belmont. These restoration efforts were funded by tours of private and public gardens during Virginia’s now historic annual Garden Week.

The local Memorial Association conveyed the property to the City of Fredericksburg on June 25, 1966, which assumed responsibility for upkeep of the Monument and Lodge. A joint deed and Resolution was recorded at the city clerk's office with the stipulation that “an advisory board shall be appointed to advise the City on matters pertaining to the maintenance and preservation of the property and improvements.”²⁵ The city continues to maintain the monument property today.

Sources: Bargain and Sale Deed from George G. Shepherd and Sallie Shepherd to the Mary Washington Memorial Association of Fredericksburg. January 24, 1890. Deed Book CC, page 235.

Bargain and Sale deed from the Mary Washington Monument Association and the National Mary Washington Monument Association to the City of Fredericksburg. June 25, 1966. Deed Book 131, page 500; Resolution, pages 506 and 507.

²¹ Hetzel, *The Building of a Monument*, 127, 130.

²² *Ibid.*, 137.

²³ Mrs. Francis B. Gollrick, Obituaries, *Fredericksburg (VA) Free Lance Star*. January 4, 1929.

²⁴ The Garden Club of America, A Timeline, <http://gcamerica.org/about-history.cfm>

²⁵ Bargain and Sale deed from the Mary Washington Monument Association and the National Mary Washington Monument Association to the City of Fredericksburg, June 25, 1966. Deed Book 131, page 500; Resolution, pages 506 and 507.

Fleming, Mrs. Vivian Minor. Brief Personal Sketch of the Mary Washington Memorial Association of Fredericksburg, Virginia, Central Rappahannock Regional Library, Virginiana Room, Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Hetzel, Susan Riviere. *The Building of a Monument*. Lancaster, PA: Press of Wickersham Company, 1903.

Mrs. Francis B. Goolrick. Obituaries. *Fredericksburg (VA) Free Lance Star*. January 4, 1929.

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http://www.dhr.virginia.gov/registers/Cities/Fredericksburg/1115262_Washington_Avenue_HD_2002_Final_Nomination.pdf (accessed March 21, 2012).

Plotkin, Melissa. "Long hast thou slept unnoted." *The Virginia Cavalcade*, Summer 1995.

The Garden Club of America: A Timeline. <http://gcamerica.org/about-history.cfm> (accessed July 28, 2013).

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The George Washington Foundation.
http://www.kenmore.org/genealogy/gordon/gene_gordon.html (accessed March 21, 2012).

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July 22, 2013
2013 HALS Challenge Entry: *Documenting the Cultural Landscapes of Women*



Mary Washington Monument, view to southwest (Leslie Bird, July 22, 2013).

