

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Mt. Vernon

In honor of the 100th anniversary of the opening of Mount Vernon as a national shrine, the Museum News has dedicated a complete issue to the various aspects of historic house museums. The cover, illustrated with a view of the west front of Mount Vernon, is one of three color lithographs printed in 1859 in aid of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

An article entitled: The Mount Vernon Experience, 1859-1959, written by Charles E. Wall, resident director of the historic house on the Potomac, is the leading article. Several lithographs, a reproduction of the cover picture, one of the banquet hall at Mount Vernon as it appeared just before the Ladies Assn. took over (from an illustration in Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book in 1832); and another of the ruins of the greenhouse in 1859. Accompanying these are photographs of the same settings as they appear today.

Of interest in Monterey is the story of the forming and work of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the corporation which owns the Casa Amesti on Polk street in Monterey, now the Old Capital Club for men. The author of this article, Richard Hubbard Howland, president of the National Trust, wrote: "Not every historic house can be or should be a museum; often an appropriate adaptive use can be found, which will provide a distinguished building with financial support derived from contemporary use.

"The Trust's 'Casa Amesti,' in Monterey, Calif., is occupied by a small men's club, an ideal arrangement for both groups. There is a provision for the public to visit this historic adobe, furnished with 18th and 19th Century furniture collected by its late owner, Frances Adler Elkins. The house is open each Friday afternoon from 4 until 5 o'clock.

The National Trust's own historic properties number only six, of which only four are currently open to the public. In general, the Trust encourages regional ownership and maintenance of historic sites and buildings, and works with local organizations to strengthen them, for such responsibilities. They will accept the gifts if the properties meet the Trust's architectural, historical, cultural, and financial criteria. Woodland Plantation was the first acquisition; near

Mount Vernon and on land which was a wedding gift of George Washington to his adopted daughter, Nelly Custis; the gardens have been planted by the Garden Club of Virginia.

The Trust's latest acquisition, "The Shadows on the Teche" in New Iberia, La., came by bequest of its owner, the late William Weeks Hail; this will be open to the public after renovations are completed; Decatur House in Washington, on Lafayette, Square opposite the White House, serves not only as an historic house museum but as a center for the secretary of the Navy's official entertaining; this carries out the wish of the donor, the late Mrs. Truxton Beale, who wished to perpetuate the naval tradition of this building that had been originally built to Latrobe's design, by Com. Stephen Decatur.

The National Trust is a charitable, educational, non-profit corporation; chartered as a private group, but by an Act of Congress in 1949, "to facilitate public participation in the preservation of sites, buildings and objects of national significance or interest."

It is difficult, writes Howland, to help individuals and communities save fine old buildings in the paths of our exploding federal-aid highway and urban renewal programs, but if the Trust is alerted in time it sometimes is helpful in effecting the adoption of a less destructive solution.

Legislation designed to protect historic districts, now in force in 19 cities, preserves important areas such as the Vieux Carre in New Orleans, the Moravian section of Bethlehem, Pa., and Georgetown in Washington, D.C. The Trust has acted in close cooperation with the framers of legislation that now protect Tombstone, Ariz., Beacon Hill in Boston and Nantucket.