

Kate Mullany House
Troy, New York
7/15/98

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Kate Mullany House
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I just want to be sure that everyone can see this wonderful presentation. It is a detachable collar and a souvenir of Troy, New York -- a postcard -- and it's in this house probably before 1827, the shirt collars were first made and the collar industry originated by Hannah Lord Montague who lived between 1794 and 1878 -- the engender and manufacturer. So a woman invented the detachable collar as well.

I am so happy to be here and to see all of you this morning. It is a great pleasure. I want to thank you for gathering for this celebration, and Mayor thank you for being here. I understand that Mayor Pattison is the first elected mayor of Troy in over thirty years and I am proud to be here with him. I want to thank you for being part of the program this morning. I know that we all join together with our best wishes and prayers for Congressman McNulty who was taken to the hospital this morning, but I am sure that all will be well and I will be calling to check in on him after the program. I want to thank Laura Kasen, this young woman who just gave me this presentation. She claims Kate Mullany had rushed across the stage college play. I am delighted she could be here.

I also want to thank Mrs. Mary Lou McGuirk, the owner of the Kate Mullany house. I mean it is a little bit strange to have someone call and say would you mind if we had a few people over and right in front of your house, because we want to make sure that everyone knows the historic significance of it.

I want not only to thank her, but also all the residents of 8th and 9th who are out here and are being our host and hostesses. I, too, want to thank Paul Cole, the Secretary Treasurer of the New York State AFL-CIO, his staff and all the member unions. I know that there was a lot of work that went into this particular day and I am very grateful to all of you. I wasn't able to hear them play but I saw them as I came in and I want to thank the Albany Police pipes and drums, the Bethel Baptist Church Choir and the Troy Asian Order of Hibernian Pipe Band for their being part of the program. Let me especially thank Josephine Sano, the President of the Albany Central Labor Council. I was delighted when she took out that detachable cuff and collar to show us because it is an extraordinary story that we are here to celebrate today.

You know, when a newspaper claimed, many years ago, that there weren't enough women in New York to be labor organizers, Kate Mullany said confidently: "You show me the women and I'll turn them into organizers." And she did. Now we often don't think of women, a hundred or more years ago, having that kind of confidence, but there were many such women. Women who went out to work every day. You know, I am so surprised when I read stories, as I often do, about how surprising it is that so many women work. Women have always worked-

inside the home, outside the home, for as long as we have been around.

There have been very few women with the talents and vision of a Kate Mullany. Who was not only working hard for her own family -- as all of us have done at some point or another -- but she also worked hard to make it possible for other women to have better wages and better working conditions so that they too could contribute to the well-being of themselves and their own families. That is why it is such an honor to be here to participate in this National Historic Landmark ceremony at the home of someone literally transformed the lives of women in her time and for all times.

It is especially fitting that we would hold this celebration today, because tomorrow I will be in Seneca Falls to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Seneca Falls Convention. And I'll talk tomorrow about how the women who gathered at Seneca Falls 150 years ago were like Kate Mullany and like so many of us here today; women who were wives and mothers; women who were supporting themselves; women who had nothing that their neighbors might point to as extraordinary except they believed that they were capable of having a dream and fulfilling it. And when they said these words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal," they proclaimed the truth, but they were considered radical. They were considered far ahead of their times.

That is an important chapter in American History. On this Save America's Treasures Tour, I wanted to be sure that we included the history of all Americans. Too often history is seen as just the stories of great military victories, or political leaders, and of course that's important. But as the Mayor said, it's not just the steps that are taken, the heroic measures that determine a nation's future; we can look to these people -- as I did yesterday when I visited George Washington's Revolutionary headquarters in Newburgh -- we can look to them with pride, and admiration, and awe, and even affection because of what they have done for us. But we can never forget that a great country is measured not just by its heroes, or well known people, but it is measured by what all of us do.

I would argue that the real difference between the United States of America and every nation that has ever existed, is not that we had great Generals because others have as well; not that we had great political leaders, because others have as well; not even that we had great business leaders or great creative geniuses, because you can find those in any society, in any country throughout time. It is because more than any other effort in the entire history of human civilization, we have empowered average men and women -- working men and women -- we've given them the reason to believe that they too can make something out of their lives; that they can walk and live and work with dignity and confidence. That is what has made America different; that is what has made America great.

A major part of that story is the history of the labor and women's movements in our story. Because both the women's movement and the labor movement reached out and included all Americans. Giving hope to people who were new immigrants; giving hope to people who

were former slaves and sons and grandsons and daughters of slaves. Telling people that if you organize, if you're part of a community, you can have a claim on the American dream.

When I think about someone like Kate Mullany, I am also just amazed. She was only nineteen years old when she organized 200 women workers to form the Collar Workers Union. She also understood that unless people join together and have some common goals we could never achieve our individual dreams. And so when she formed that union she knew she was taking a big risk. Because most of the women who went on strike were the sole supporters of their mothers, of their younger siblings or their children. Imagine the commitment to justice and the courage it took to go on strike when so many family members depended on them. But because of Kate Mullany's leadership, they succeeded. They succeeded in getting a 25% increase in wages, putting their wages on par with men's wages--an astonishing achievement for 1864.

In fact she used those increased wages to buy the house we're standing in front of. What an incredible feeling that must have been for this young woman to be able to say to her mother, who was widowed, and her younger siblings, "We're going to be able to have our own house." Now that is part of the American dream, that is what gets so many of us up in the morning; going to work; worrying about our families; caring about our futures. She also did something else; she helped to improve the working conditions of women -- who were forced at that time to stand on their feet for eleven to fourteen hours a day, bending over washtubs and ironing tables in oppressive 100 degree heat for about, as Josephine said, two to three dollars a week.

Kate Mullany is an example to all of us. She's one of the women who comes from the Troy area that we've already heard about, who is really an example not just for the past but to the present and future. Think of all the people who have passed through this capital district who have not only changed history here, but changed American history as well. Harriet Tubman, the Moses of her people, helped bring the fugitive slave Charles Nalle to freedom here. Emma Willard founded the first school to give young women an education equal to that of young men. And I was also impressed to learn when I was doing my research for this stop that the city of Troy raised \$4,000 in taxes to make it possible for Emma Willard to have that school. Now that shows foresight even then that investing in education is the best investment that we can make for people.

We already heard about Hannah Lord Montague who invented the detachable collar. I can just imagine what was going through Mrs. Montague's mind, can't you those of you who have ever ironed a shirt, men and women. It was a lot harder in those days because you couldn't just plug in the iron, you had to heat it up and you had to keep heating it up. And I can just imagine Mrs. Montague standing there ironing those shirts because she had to wash her husband's entire shirt just to get the collar clean because lots of men's shirts don't get as dirty as their collars do, even today, and she thought there's got to be a better way. So she became an inventor, and a manufacturer, again when not many women were doing that. And others saw a business opportunity to go forward with that, and that's how we created this great industry that

stood on the banks of the river that brought so many people here.

I also heard that the first bakery, that still serves the people of Troy, was invented here because a man named Regional Friehofer saw a business opportunity because of the number of women who were working, they didn't have enough time to bake bread, so he created the opportunity for them to buy the bread. Now that's the sort of invention that all of us, who have ever been working women, really appreciate. So there's a lot that we have to be grateful for the people of Troy.

You know, we're not just celebrating the past; we are thinking about the lessons of the past and what they mean to us today and in the future. When the President and I started the White House Millennium Council, we did it because we knew that we were going to have a change of century and a change of millennium while Bill was still president. We thought what could we do to mark this time. Certainly they'll be room for a lot of great New Year's Eve parties and I'm positive they'll be products like Millennium toothpaste or millennium potato chips; but if that's all that happens I don't think we would make the best use of this opportunity. So in talking together, he and I thought maybe we could use this time for all of us to reflect about what it is that made us Americans, and why we're so grateful for the blessings and freedoms we have in our country. So we came up with a theme: to Honor the Past and Imagine the Future.

That is what this tour is really about. We are honoring the past--as we do here today in front of Kate Mullany's House -- but also imagining the future. Because the voice of Kate Mullany and all the women and men of Troy and this area continue to speak to us today. They fought for equal pay, for equal work and we do still today. They fought for better working conditions in the work place and we do still today. They fought for respect at work and at home and we do still today. And the women of Troy who worked with Kate Mullany struggled to balance the demands of work and family and we do still today. They fought for equal opportunity for women in places once reserved only for men as we do still today.

In 1869 another women labor leader, Augusta Lewis, president of the Women's Typographical Union, wrote about the Troy Collar Laundry Union as a model for working women through the ages. She wrote; "Others will be encouraged by their success and will be stimulated by their examples to elevate their own condition." Thanks to Kate Mullany and other brave women and men who led the labor movement and who took their rightful places in American history, we have examples to follow even today. All of us gathered here have many debts to those who came before; not only to our own families but to some many others who contributed to the improvements that we take for granted in America today.

I hope that all of us, as we move toward this new century and millennium, will think about ways we can honor the past and imagine the future. What gifts do we want to give to our children, our grandchildren and future generations. Well, there may be tangible gifts like Kate Mullany's house that we would want to pass on, that we hope that people will know and remember as a significant place because of the woman who lived here. But there will also be

intangible gifts; the intangible gifts of courage, a search for better opportunities and a commitment to our founding ideals: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and to form a more perfect union. And to that end, every single one of us has a role to play.