

The Mount - Edith Waron Home
Lenox, Massachusetts
7/14/98

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Edith Wharton Restoration
Lenox, Massachusetts
July 14, 1998

Thank you. Thank you so much. You're very gracious. Thank you Stephanie for those kind remarks and for the tour that was much too short. I will have to come back and have a more proper amount of time to spend here. I want to thank everyone who has labored so diligently and with such commitment to ensure that this house and the woman who built it and who it so embodies will be here for so many more years to come. I would like to thank Jonas and all who have served on the board of the Edith Wharton Restoration. I'd like to thank Scott Marshall and appreciate the gift of the history of the Mount, William Galvin, the Secretary of the Commonwealth and Chairman of the Massachusetts Historic Commission.

I want to say a special word of appreciation to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. We are working with the National Trust and with Dick Moe, its President, and Nancy Campbell, its Chair, who is here with us. And when the Trust designated the Mount as a "most endangered historic site" that enabled the restoration to purchase this property in 1980. I also want to thank Judy McDonough, the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Historic Commission. There are a number of state and local officials, and I see your Congressmen here as well--many who have joined together in support of the cause of historic preservation, and in particular the cause of the Mount.

It's a wonderful feeling walking into the Mount -- those beautiful rooms that Edith Wharton designed, and especially going into her library. I can imagine the conversations and other activities that took place there. I am hopeful that some day the books that once graced those shelves will be returned to this library. I've heard that Edith Wharton called her father's library a "sea of wonder," and she wrote in The Decoration of Houses, "The general decoration of a library should be of such character as to form a background or setting to the books, rather than to detract attention from them." I know that one of your goals is to have those books that remain, twenty-four-hundred volumes, returned here to the Mount. You have a lot of work ahead of you, but I saw how the yellow windows are being filled in as the money is being raised to reach your goals. And that is what I have seen throughout the two days that I've been on this tour.

To highlight the White House Millennium Council and the National Trust's commitment to save America's Treasures, I've embarked on an old-fashioned bus, train, and motorcar tour of some of America's endangered treasures. Starting with the Star-Spangled Banner, including George Washington's Revolutionary War Headquarters, the Colonial Theater in Pittsfield, I will go on to Harriet Tubman's House and the M'Clintock House in Seneca Falls.

The point is that we are not just highlighting the famous, already well-known icons, such as the Star-Spangled Banner, although it is telling that even that particular monument to our

nation needs so much help and support from both the public and the private sector in order to endure as it endured on that night in September of 1814.

It is not just famous icons or even famous military and political leaders or even business leaders like Thomas Edison or scientific and creative geniuses, as he was as well. We have to look at the full range of human experience and American contributions to understand how we have become the people we are. So it is the scientists, the writers, and other creators who have transformed our lives; and it is the way they lived and what they lived with that can speak to us today -- the places, the books even the kitchen utensils, the photographs, all of which form the heart of our cherished history.

When the President and I began to talk about how we could mark the millennium, there were many things that we could have thought about. Other countries are doing some fascinating efforts to try to mark their passage through the millennium. Great Britain is building a huge dome that will be in Greenwich and will be used for all kinds of activities. Iceland is reenacting the passage from Iceland to North America of their famous explorers like Leif Eriksson. But as we thought about it, we thought that maybe we should try to engender interest throughout our country in our history in ways that would reach every community that we possibly could touch.

So as we began to plan we thought of a theme -- Honor the Past and Imagine the Future -- because clearly by honoring our past, we think about the values, the lessons, the ideals, the experiences, that we want to bring forward into the present, to use to build this imagined future together.

It was important for me as I began to talk about and highlight so many of these treasures to be sure that it touched the entire human experience. And so for instance I am here.

As we've already heard, only five percent of our national historic sites are dedicated to women. The last time I looked, women have constituted about 50% of our population since our beginning. Now some of those women are well-known, like Edith Wharton -- a pioneer in so many regards, an observer of American life, a designer, a decorator, a gardener, a writer. She wrote to a friend that she was a decidedly better landscape gardener than a novelist, but I don't think you could convince the Pulitzer Prize committee or the many, many of us who studied her work in years after that to believe it. She might have been as good a landscape gardener as a writer but that just told us a little bit more about her genius and how far it reached. But because of her example, she was not the last. Young women growing up could look to her experience and dream, themselves, of becoming writers of landscape gardeners.

As we look at the full range of the American experience, we need to remember women like Harriet Tubman or Kate Mullany, a labor leader from the middle of the 19th century. The women who gathered at Seneca Falls, where I will be visiting on Thursday, had the radical idea that men and women should be able to fulfill their own destinies. Every woman should really be able to think that American History includes her. That she could, if she's talented enough, write

her own House of Mirth or plant her own garden that would stand as a wonderful monument and bedazzle visitors like the Jameses.

So I thank all of you for being caretakers of Edith Wharton's gifts. Each of you has not only made the Mount an example of what caring, dedicated citizens can do, but you've made Lenox, Massachusetts a shining example of what every community and every citizen from kindergarten classrooms to corporate board rooms can do as well. This is an exciting venture for those of us involved in the White House Millennium Council, to come out into the country, to communities like Lenox, to sights like the Mount, and to really cheer all of you on. To try to lift up your work, to tell you that there are many, many people who support and applaud your efforts for what you are doing to preserve this treasure. And to draw more attention to those efforts so that you can enlist even more supporters in this worthy cause.

Just as I said in Pittsfield a few minutes ago, I do hope to return sometime to attend a performance in the Colonial Theater when it is totally rehabilitated and renovated, and I hope to return to the Mount at a time in the future when all of your dreams about the gardens and the house are realized as well. And to see those books that she lovingly had bound in Moroccan leather, once again, on the shelves where they belong.

This effort that we've undertaken is not just for a few Americans. There are some of you who have understood the importance of American History and have been preservationists and conservationists and historians for many years, and I applaud and thank you. But now I ask you, as we move toward the Millennium and the change of century, that will be upon us, to reach out and convince more of your fellow citizens why what you care about is important to them. Why preserving and restoring the Mount as a symbol of what a woman could do on her own -- designing a house, writing great literature, imagining a future -- is a lesson we want all of our children to learn and absorb. And as you reach out to your fellow citizens, telling them what has moved you to be part of this particular restoration effort, I know you will enlist even more supporters--people who understand that honoring the past and imagining the future is the American experience. We are constantly reinventing ourselves. We are constantly restoring the American Dream for a new generation, and I believe, the President believes, and you believe that we cannot imagine the future if we don't carry forward with us the ideas, the experiences, and all that was learned by those who came before.

So thank you for being pioneers, for caring deeply about Edith Wharton, about women's history, about the Mount, and thank you for making it possible for me to come here to highlight a very important treasure that needs all of us to help save it for the future.

Thank you all very much.