

***“It has remained for a woman to take the first steps...”***

## **Two Alden Women and the Preservation of the Alden National Historic Site**

By Peggy M. Baker

The Alden Kindred and the Alden National Historic Site have been molded by the devotion of generations of women. In this, the Aldens are not alone. The entire movement to preserve America’s historic homes began with a woman.

In 1853, Ann Pamela Cuning, a single lady of “indeterminate middle years” from South Carolina, started the first campaign to purchase and preserve a purely domestic building. Mount Vernon, then in disrepair, was owned by John Augustine Washington Jr., a great-great-nephew of George Washington. Although he was not in a financial position to care for the estate, John dearly wanted it preserved as an historic site. In order to bring this about, Ann Pamela formed a private nonprofit called the Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA). She spread a wide net for her board members, called “regents,” recruiting women from across the country. By 1858, the MVLA had raised the \$200,000 needed to purchase Mount Vernon and two hundred surrounding acres. Ann Pamela’s organization is still Mount Vernon’s governing body.



Ella Alden  
*Founder of the Alden Kindred*

Some fifty years later, another single lady of “indeterminate middle years” began a correspondence campaign to gather together the descendants of John and Priscilla Mullins at a grand family reunion. According to the *Boston Sunday Post* of 1 September 1901,

“It has remained for a woman to take the first steps in the present initiative. This is Miss A. Ella Alden of North Middleboro, a descendant in the 8<sup>th</sup> generation. As soon as she started the ball rolling others of the family warmly seconded her plans.”

In 1901, some 100 Aldens converged on Highland Park, a seven-acre destination park in Avon, with an outdoor dance pavilion, a band stand, merry-go round, gardens and grounds laid out in scenic walks. There decision was made to form a family organization, the Alden Kindred.

Miss A. Ella Alden (she seldom used her given name of “Asenath”), the driving force behind that first 1901 reunion, was particularly well-suited for the task of mobilizing her “cousins.” She was capable, sociable and outgoing, with well-honed communication skills.

Ella had been born in Middleborough in 1848, the daughter of two Alden descendants, Andrew and Olivia (Murdock) Alden. At Andrew's death in 1883, even though Ella's slightly older brothers lived in Middleboro, Andrew named Ella his sole executor. Although the census records persist in using that wonderful Victorian phrase "at home" to describe Ella's occupation, she also wrote about community affairs for her local newspapers, albeit without a by-line and probably for minimal (if any) compensation. According to her obituary in the April 1930 issue of the *Alden Kindred Quarterly*, she "always enjoyed the work, which brought her in touch with people of the community in which she lived for many years and in which she was well known."

The year after "Ella's reunion," the newly-formed Alden Kindred held another reunion. Over 700 Aldens gathered at Alden House in Duxbury at the invitation of the Alden who was then in residence. Much like Mount Vernon, the Alden House (originally built by John and Priscilla's son Jonathan) had remained continuously in the possession of Alden descendants.

Then, in 1907, the Alden Kindred was able to purchase the house. The Alden family in residence was allowed to remain until 1921, when the Kindred leased the house for twenty years to Charles Alden. He agreed to improve and manage it as an historic house, guaranteeing that the Alden Kindred could continue to assemble there. Which they did! And Ella Alden personally attended every annual reunion until her death in 1930. In the newspaper notices published about those reunions, she was always named as the "founder of the Alden Kindred."

Admittedly, Ella may have written the press releases herself – and she did seem to have a gift for "presentation." In response to a notice published in the Brockton paper which described a marvelous quilt made of 700 pieces (no two alike), the *Middleboro Gazette* of 2 February 1912 reported that

"Miss A. Ella Alden of North Middleboro has a quilt which she pieced nearly 40 years ago which is made of 1,840 pieces and no two are alike, and all are calico."

That little piece of one-upmanship was probably written by Ella herself. When this same *Middleboro Gazette*, her hometown paper, published Ella's obituary on 7 March 1930, it added a slight qualifier to Ella's proclaimed status, writing that

"she claimed to have been the founder of the Alden Kindred of America..."

The Alden Kindred, however, was a tightly-knit family. They gave Ella full and unqualified credit and, in 1925, an award of \$50 which, by then, she genuinely needed.

The obituary published by the Kindred paid tribute to

"... her great interest and tireless effort which first led to the organization of the Alden Kindred. She attended every one of the annual reunions and greeting her and having a cheery talk with her, was one of the highlights for the "Cousins" on these occasions. Last summer, although very feeble, she made a special effort to attend the reunion and although failing in physical health, was as mentally and spiritually alert as ever.

She was of a sociable disposition and was never so happy, especially in her declining years, as when old friends called upon her or remembered her in word or deed. Visiting the Alden Homestead each year was one of her most cherished pleasures.”

It was shortly after Ella’s death that the financial crises caused by the Great Depression began to impact the Alden Homestead and “outsourcing” the management of the house began to run into problems. Modern amenities were added in order to make the house habitable for some members of Charles Alden’s family, while the dismal national economy ruled out necessary structural repairs. The situation did not improve during the war years.

With the end of the Second World War, however, America was ready, once again, for historic house museums. Everyone was working, everyone had access to automobiles, and it seemed that everyone had kids and wanted “wholesome” and worthwhile leisure activities. Seeing this new wave of interest, the Alden Kindred finally accepted responsibility for management of the homestead with the firm intention of transforming it from a reunion venue into a modern museum, with a new vision and a renewed dedication to its mission of serving the wider community.

The driving force was, once again, a woman. Helen Delano Howe.

In contrast to cheerful, sociable, impecunious unmarried Ella, the words used to describe Helen Delano Howe generally begin with “formidable.” And nobody ever downplayed her contributions (or her checkbook). An Alden descendant, Helen was born in Brookline in 1899. Her family moved to Duxbury, where they had deep roots, when Helen was ten. Helen married three times and, after her second marriage in 1943, divided her time between Duxbury and Coral Gables, Florida.

Helen was a joiner, and where she joined, she often led. She held offices in the Mayflower Society in the State of Florida, the Alden Kindred, the Daughters of Colonial Wars, the Women Descendants of the Ancient & Honourables and the Huguenot Society of Florida, and belonged to a myriad of other organizations. As the incomparable Peter Gomes said in his elegy at Helen’s funeral, her affiliations included “everybody but the Sons of Adam and the Daughters of Eve.”

She also joined organizations such as the Pilgrim Society and the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society because, as much as Helen loved genealogy, she also respected the history behind the lineage.

At her funeral in 1992, Peter gave us a vivid picture of Helen ...

“You would note first, I think, in seeing her come upon you like a great ship at sea, you’d notice the hair .... and then there followed the eyes – those piercing, no nonsense, don’t try to mess with me eyes. And then if that was not enough, there would be the voice that could cut through a fog bank or a northeaster...”

He also said, in sincere and deep appreciation,

“I never knew an occasion ... when, when asked, she did not fail to come forward and support the cause. With money, with ideas, with time, often with criticism, and always with care.”

When it came to the Aldens, Helen saw the conjunction of history and genealogy, understood the very specific need, and had an idea of how things could be changed and improved. So she stepped in, took charge and ensured that her vision became reality.

In 1955, the house was closed to visitors while structural repairs were made, the modern “improvements” removed and appropriate furnishings were purchased. The Alden Homesite reopened in time for the arrival of *Mayflower II* in 1957.

Helen was also key in saving the archaeological “First House” site where John and Priscilla lived when they arrived in Duxbury in 1627. The land on which it is situated is now owned by the Town of Duxbury, which was considering expanding the high school’s athletic fields. Preservation of the site required an archaeological survey to establish the site’s significance. Helen arranged – and paid for – that survey, which was done by renowned local archaeologist Roland Robbins.

The current Alden designation as a “National Historic Landmark,” received in 2009, was possible because both sites, the First House site and the later Alden House, were included, in an application submitted jointly by the Alden Kindred and the Town of Duxbury.

And then there is the future! Decades from now, when historians look at the progress of the Alden Kindred, they will surely make note of yet another woman leading the Aldens into uncharted territories. Pauline Kezer, current President of the Alden Kindred, has both Ella’s sociability and Helen’s energy and focus. Under her direction, the Kindred has opened its arms to the community and welcomed “non-Aldens” into full membership, while doubling the size of the property itself, with the acquisition of almost three acres, part of John Alden’s original 100-acre grant and directly adjacent to the Homesite.