

Ms. Rachel D. Bliven
Manager, Regional Heritage Interpretation
Mohawk Valley Heritage Corridor Commission

Testimony
Before the Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on H.R. 305, Kate Mullany National Historic Site Act

September 14, 2004

Committee on Resources

National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands Subcommittee Hearing

September 14, 2004

Statement of Rachel D. Bliven

H.R.305, Kate Mullany National Historic Site Act

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Christensen and members of the subcommittee: Thank you for including H.R. 305 in today's hearing, and for allowing me to testify on behalf of the bill to establish the Kate Mullany National Historic Site in Troy, New York. I thank Congressmen Michael McNulty for his long support of the Mullany House and for introducing this bill in each of the last four Congresses. This bill has a broad base of support in the community, the state, and throughout the nation.

Kate Mullany was a working class Irish immigrant woman whose story is nationally significant. In 1864 she organized and led the all-female Collar Laundry Union in Troy, New York, the first continuously organized women's union in this nation. Under her leadership the laundry workers' union succeeded in achieving worker objectives, and its membership was active beyond its own industry in support of labor unions. Kate Mullany's leadership was publicly recognized at the National Labor Union convention in 1868, when President William Sylvis appointed her to coordinate national efforts to form workingwomen's associations. She was the first woman ever to serve in a labor union's national office.

Kate Mullany's story, however, is more than a labor union story. She is an early example of an immigrant woman working out her own destiny in the industrial boom of Civil War America. She built the double row house at 350-352 Eighth Street with the wages she earned so that her family could have security in future generations. There could be no better National Park Service site to commemorate the aspirations and the efforts of generations of otherwise invisible women, workers and immigrants who built this nation and shaped our society. We now seek designation of the Mullany House as a National Historic Site within the NPS system.

Kate Mullany came to America as a young girl in the mid-nineteenth century. Her family settled in Troy, New York, a few miles upriver from the state capital in Albany. Located at the junction of the Hudson and the Mohawk Rivers, at the eastern end of the Erie Canal, Troy was a booming crossroads in a transportation network that linked the seacoast to the Great Lakes and the interior of the American continent. On the eve of the Civil War, this region was the industrial heartland of America. Factories in and around Troy created almost everything a person could use for daily life, travel or work.

The local workforce was large and diverse. Nearby communities like Cohoes were textile towns built and managed by single industries. Troy was known as a worker's city, dominated by two major industries: the iron works that made stoves, railroads and iron products for a national market; and collar factories that manufactured detachable shirt collars and cuffs – the crisp white collars that first distinguished management and the middle class from manual workers.

The detachable collar was invented by a woman, Hannah Lord Montague, in Troy in 1829. By the 1860s, Troy produced almost all of the collars and cuffs demanded by fashion in America. The industry employed 3,700 women, almost half of Troy's female work force and by far the single largest employer of women. Thousands more women sewed and turned collars by hand at home as piecework. Fifteen collar manufacturers employed female machine operators in collar factories ranging from 25-550 employees each. Fourteen collar laundries operated in the city, employing about 600 women who worked in small shops in groups of ten to twenty.

Laundering was an essential part of the manufacturing process for shirts and especially for collars and cuffs, easily soiled by the many processes done by hand. Washing, starching and ironing the collars involved boiling water, chloride and sulfuric acid bleaches, layers of starch, drying and finally pressing with hot, heavy irons. The procedure required a special knowledge of the materials and techniques, physical endurance, strength and manual dexterity. An 1865 description of a Troy laundry vividly depicts women standing at wash tubs and ironing tables between furnaces for twelve to fourteen hours a day, steaming wet fabric into shape with the room temperature averaging 100 degrees, for merely two dollars a week, the cost of a pair of shoes.

This was Kate Mullany's world. By 1863 she was the primary wage earner in her family, supporting a widowed mother and at least two sisters. In a city where one out of every four people was an Irish immigrant, more than half of the working class was Irish. Typically, the immigrants shared a tradition of hard work and collaboration for mutual support. Many Irish women found work in the collar laundries, while their fathers and brothers worked in the iron foundries. Irish iron molders organized as the Troy Iron Molders Union #2 and became one of the most influential groups in the International Iron Molder's Union in the decades between 1860-1880s.

In February 1864, Kate Mullany and about 200 of her fellow female workers decided to follow the example of Trojan ironworkers. They organized the Collar Laundry Union and went on strike for better wages and working conditions. After a week, they were able to secure a 25% wage increase. Their union has been cited as the first "bona fide" women's union in the United States, because it did not disband once its demands were met. The Collar Laundry Union continued to function as a force in the collar industry for more than five years.

Equally important, the woman's Collar Laundry Union was active in supporting other local workers. They were prominent among the 4,000 attending an 1864 picnic celebrating working class unity. In April 1866, they donated \$1,000 from their treasury

to assist the striking Iron Molders Union of Troy. Their efforts were acknowledged by the Troy Trades Assembly who invited them to become affiliated, adding a section of books related to women to its Labor Free Library and Reading Room.

Two years later, the Collar Union gave \$500 to sustain the New York City Bricklayers' strike. Mullany praised the abilities of her union members "who were just as competent as gentlemen" and offered to pay the expenses of sending women from Troy to New York City to help women there to organize.

William H. Sylvis, the Philadelphia iron molder who turned the Iron Molders' International Union into one of the largest and most effective trade unions of the period, was equally supportive of the working women of Troy. In 1868 he was elected president of the National Labor Union, the first nationally known labor leader in the United States. At the same congress of labor unions, delegates praised Mullany for "having shown great business ability in organizing and rendering prosperous the establishment of which she is the head" and for her work for the bricklayers.

The membership then elected Kate Mullany to be second vice-president of the National Labor Union. While that action had to be annulled since the first vice-president was also from New York State, William Sylvis recognized their wishes to put Mullany into a position of leadership. He appointed her Assistant Secretary, responsible for corresponding with working women and coordinating national efforts to form workingwomen's associations. This was a significant milestone in the history of working women: Mullany was the first female ever appointed to a national labor union office.

In his closing remarks, Sylvis told his colleagues, "We now have a recognized officer from the female side of the house – one of the smartest and most energetic women in America; and from the great work which she has already done, I think it not unlikely that we may in the future have delegates representing 300,000 working women."

The 1868 National Labor Union Congress also adopted a report of the Committee on Female Labor that urged extending the eight-hour day demands to women workers, equal pay for equal work and trade unions for working women.

By the time of Mullany's selection as an officer in the National Labor Union, the Collar Laundry Union had grown to over five hundred members, and they had succeeded in raising their wages from two dollars to eight and even twelve dollars a week. The highly skilled ironers held a strategic position in the laundering process and the individual laundry owners accommodated their demands by raising the prices they charged collar manufacturers. In 1869, however, the collar manufacturers took the initiative, forming an association of their own and combining with the laundry proprietors to break the union. The Collar Laundry Union strike for the right to organize brought national attention. It was generously supported by workers in Troy and by almost every union in New York City. The iron molders pledged \$500 a week for the duration of the strike.

The New York State Workingmen's Assembly also gave the strike their unqualified support, noting "Workingmen, will you stand idly by and see this without lending a hand to their support? This is the first time in the annals of our history that you have been appealed to for aid and support in behalf of a female labor organization."

The striking laundry workers turned into entrepreneurs, starting their own Cooperative Laundry, and then creating the Cooperative Collar and Cuff Factory to make collars. A. T. Stewart, a major merchant in New York City, agreed to purchase all the goods manufactured by the union cooperative and place them on sale in his store.

William Sylvis sent a letter praising "the Troy Girls for working hard, doing what they could in a practical way to work out their own salvation." Unfortunately, only a few days later, Sylvis died after a short and sudden illness. The National Labor Union never recovered from his death, and in the ensuing tailspin at NLU headquarters, union financial aid to the striking workers was temporarily suspended.

The Laundry Union was forced to dissolve in early September 1869 and ironers went back to work at their old wages. The Cooperative Collar and Cuff Factory continued to operate for at least a year with Kate Mullany as president and Dougald Campbell, a founder of the iron molder's cooperative in Troy, working as its first agent.

Kate Mullany was not unknown outside of labor circles. In early 1870 women's rights activist Susan B. Anthony visited the cooperative factory in Troy to meet Mullany for the first time. She spoke of her visit in later speeches and articles. Anthony referred to the dissolved Laundry Union as the best organized women's union she had known and expressed deep sympathy for "this working-women's venture." Mullany wrote to Anthony's publication *The Revolution* in April 1870 to report on the cooperative factory's plans and their progress in securing the needed capital of \$10,000.

While Anthony and Mullany did not seem to agree on the importance of women's suffrage, they did share concerns about women's needs as wage earners. Their relationship is illustrative of the many issues faced by women in every generation. Mullany's national significance within women's history has been recognized by her induction into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York.

On a map of the Northeast, the Kate Mullany House lies almost halfway between the Lowell National Historical Park commemorating the early farm girls in the textile mills of Massachusetts, and the Women's Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls. The Mullany site provides important opportunities to connect and continue their stories of women as workers and as citizens seeking equal rights. These three sites already appear together online on the NPS website in a National Register of Historic Places Travel Itinerary entitled "Places Where Women Made History."

After the formation of the Collar Laundry Union and its first success in 1864, Kate Mullany's mother purchased land on Eighth Street in Troy. Kate's newly enhanced wages were invested in the construction of a substantial brick duplex with three units in

each side of the row house. The family moved into one floor of 350 Eighth Street, the southern half of the building, in 1869 and rented out the other units. Many of their tenants and neighbors were also Irish immigrants, working in the iron mills, rail yards and collar factories within walking distance.

Then, as now, the American dream of home ownership represented the fulfillment of an immigrant's dream for stability and success. Income-producing property also represented a degree of independence for a single or widowed woman. In 1874, Kate Mullany's mother purchased another small wooden house at 356 Eighth Street (no longer standing). At her death in 1876, the three properties were willed to each of her three daughters. Catherine Agnes Mullany (Kate) inherited the property at 350 Eighth Street and "the rents profits and income arising from the three story brick dwelling house and lot ... during her lifetime." Family members lived in the house into the early 20th century.

Research has yet to provide definitive information about Kate Mullany's later years. She seems to have stayed in Troy for most of the rest of her life, at some point marrying John Fogarty. Kate returned to the house at 350 Eighth Street in 1903 after being widowed and she died there in 1906. At her death, her obituary listed her occupation as starcher, and court records indicate that she lived for a number of years on the rents from the property.

The National Park Service's theme study on American Labor History in 1997 recommended that the Mullany House be considered for inclusion in the NPS system because it illustrated previously under-represented stories, concluding that it met the criteria for national significance, suitability and feasibility. The Mullany house has been designated a National Historic Landmark. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton included the site in her "Save America's Treasures" tour in 1998. NPS reconnaissance studies and NPS comments on this bill to date have all acknowledged the national significance of the site.

The importance of such a site for interpreting American history was best expressed by historian Daniel J. Walkowitz in his letter of support for the Mullany House National Historic Landmark designation: "The 'autobiographies' of rank-and-file workers, and especially of women, can be read in a close reading of domestic and public spaces in which they lived and worked. Vernacular architecture, in this context, is a text in which worker hopes, values and daily conditions can be read. Not surprisingly, it is precisely houses such as Mullany's which have become major sites for popular new social history museums in cities around the world (i.e., the Tenement House in Glasgow and the Tenement Museum in New York's Lower East Side). A row house such as Mullany's provides a unique opportunity to document and illuminate the experience of the Irish-American worker beyond the clichés of 'shanty' or 'lace curtain.'"

The Kate Mullany House is located within a New York State Heritage Area, RiverSpark, whose primary interpretive theme is the story of labor and industry. The City of Troy lies within both the Hudson Valley National Heritage Corridor and the Erie Canalway

National Heritage Corridor where they overlap with their interrelated themes of industry, technology and transportation. The Mohawk Valley Heritage Corridor, a NYS regional heritage corridor, extends westward from the city and includes the interpretive themes of industry and immigration as part of its Erie Canal story. "The Collar City" itself has undergone a rebirth and revitalization in the last ten years, based on the historic fabric of its industrial and technological heritage.

While each of these overlapping authorities entities is working diligently to preserve and promote the larger historic context of labor and industry in the region, none can provide the focused attention and interpretation that the Mullany House deserves. This team needs a great quarterback to lead the efforts to a touchdown rather than chaos.

Recent developments have been promising. A not-for-profit organization, the American Labor Studies Center (ALSC), purchased the Kate Mullany House in the spring of 2003 with a grant from the office of New York State Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno. Senator Bruno, in whose district the house is located, has also committed funds to purchase the adjacent property south of the building to create Kate Mullany Park in honor of trade union women pioneers. They hope to eventually purchase the other half of the duplex and restore the back yards as well.

The American Labor Studies Center (ALSC) was created to promote the study of American labor history in our nation's elementary and secondary schools. They hope to make the site an integral part of the redevelopment of North Central Troy and provide educational opportunities for school children here and elsewhere to learn more about this region's rich industrial and labor history. ALSC will be located on the first two floors of the Mullany House, along with a library and reading room, conference room, and exhibit space.

ALSC wants to interpret the connections between immigration and the industrialization of our nation, including the history of Irish immigration, women's history and worker history. Plans are being made to preserve the third floor apartment where Kate lived, hopefully with the expert guidance of the National Park Service. The technical assistance and interpretive expertise of the National Park Service will be invaluable in developing this site to its full potential.

The preservation of the Mullany House has had extraordinary bipartisan support, ranging from the members of the local painter's union who painted the house when it received its Landmark designation to the many local citizens who contributed money to buy a gravestone to mark the place where Kate is buried. Historians and educators across America are interested in the site's ability to illustrate the realities of women's history and Irish American history. The Republican Majority Leader of the State Senate provided funding to assist in the acquisition of the House. Members of Congress from both parties, such as Congressmen Michael McNulty, Congressmen Sherwood Boehlert, Congressmen John Sweeney, Congressmen Jack Quinn and others, have supported this effort, beginning with the initiation of the Labor History Theme Study and continuing with this bill for the Kate Mullany National Historic Site. Senator Hillary

Rodham Clinton introduced the companion version of this bill earlier this year, co-sponsored by Senator Charles Schumer, which was amended and approved by the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources and reported to the Senate.

The American Labor Studies Center plans to work with all of these entities as partners to tell the extraordinary history of the ordinary workingmen and women who built America. The National Park Service is needed to join the team of partners to make sure the Mullany House is preserved, restored and beneficially used to provide the maximum advantage to all the citizens of our nation. There are no comparable sites within the system that so effectively offer the opportunity to tell the interrelated stories of women, workers and immigration in the years when America sought to redefine the nature of individual rights and freedoms within an expanding industrialized society. Designation of the Mullany House as a unit of the National Park Service will begin the process of honoring their efforts and educating future generations about their stories.

The National Park Service was founded to conserve, preserve, protect and interpret the natural, cultural, and historic resources of the nations for the public and to provide for their use and enjoyment by the public. The financial burden of this mission has been recognized in recent debates on the issue of the maintenance backlog in existing units of the park system. Yet the NPS has simultaneously developed a model of collaborative partnerships in the National Heritage Areas program, where NPS supports state and local conservation through federal recognition, seed money, and technical assistance. NHA lands do not become permanent federal obligations and designated federal funds are leveraged many times over through partnerships in order to accomplish nationally sanctioned goals.

If designation of the Kate Mullany House as a full National Historic Site proves to be an insurmountable obstacle for NPS, I believe that the local and state partners would agree to amend the designation of the site as an affiliated status. The federal designation and NPS expertise, coupled with authorized access to the planning, interpretive and preservation assistance of NPS staff, are paramount for the success of the site.

We all agree on the national significance of the Mullany House and the necessity of preserving it for future generations. Local and state partners stand ready to work with the National Park Service, but we need your help in moving the process forward. I urge you to support the designation of the Kate Mullany House as a National Historic Site. I thank the Chairman, Ranking Member and members of the subcommittee for your helping to make this happen by considering H.R. 305.

FOLLOW-UP ADDRESS:

Rachel Davis Bliven

Mohawk Valley Heritage Corridor Commission

66 Montgomery Street

Canajoharie NY 13317

Phone – 518-673-1045

Fax – 518-673-1078

History@mvhcc.org