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 GOD, HOME AND COUNTRY

# ‘A Limitless Horizon’

## The Vision of the DAR’s First Leaders and the Legacy They Built

By Emily McMackin

On the afternoon of October 11, 1890, a group of 18 women met at the Strathmore Arms hotel in Washington, D.C. They included suffragists, socialites, single women with office jobs, wives of prominent men, and widows who supported their families as teachers and businesswomen. They came from modest as well as privileged backgrounds, and hailed from cities and rural

areas in both the North and the South. Despite their differences, they shared a heritage and a cause that brought them together: the bloodline of Patriots and the desire to honor and advance the legacy of ancestors who fought for American independence.

Under this banner, these ladies formed the Daughters of the American Revolution, a lineage society devoted to historic preservation, education and patriotism. The mission that drew these

first Daughters together 125 years ago continues to propel the organization forward today.

“They had remarkable vision; the objectives they came up with at the very beginning are the ones we still adhere to,” said Ann Arnold Hunter, author of *A Century of Service: The Story of the DAR* (NSDAR, 1991), who served as DAR Historian General from 2010–2013.

Service has always been the backbone of the DAR, which has attracted nearly 1 million women to its membership since 1890, and it remains crucial to its survival and success.

“The Founders were adamant that DAR be based on service,” Mrs. Hunter said. “We serve, and we have served from the beginning.”

That was true from the first organizational meeting, when the women discussed raising funds to help the Mary Washington Memorial Association complete a monument at the grave of George Washington’s mother, Mary Ball Washington—a site at risk of being sold at public auction. The Daughters would

go on to contribute nearly three-fourths of the \$11,000 for the monument, which was dedicated in 1894, bringing to a close a project initiated by the U.S. Congress more than a century before.

At that first meeting, the Daughters also voiced support for legislation to mark Revolutionary War sites and set plans into motion to exhibit Colonial-era relics at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Drawing 27 million attendees, the event would give the group its biggest platform for spreading the word about the DAR across the country.

### REVOLUTIONARY REVIVAL

The DAR came into existence during a time of renewal for the nation. More than 25 years had passed since the Civil War ended, but the wounds of that conflict were still fresh.

With the tension between the North and the South still unresolved, “the women who founded the DAR were very eager to help bring about a reconciliation,” Mrs. Hunter said. “It was the right idea at the right time. These women had a love for the United States, a sorrow that the nation had gotten off on the wrong foot [with the Civil War] and a desire to bring people together.”

One of those women was DAR Founder Eugenia Washington, whose experience during the Battle of Fredericksburg gave her compassion for women on both sides, and also a desire to unite them. While trying to escape the Virginia town after tending to injured soldiers in 1862, Miss Washington and her invalid father were caught on the battlefield and forced to hide in cannon ruts until the fighting ceased.

Like many who survived that era, the Daughters were anxious to put those dark days behind them and to direct their efforts toward building a brighter future for America.

“They wanted a society that would focus on America as it was founded, not America as it was at the time,” Mrs. Hunter said.



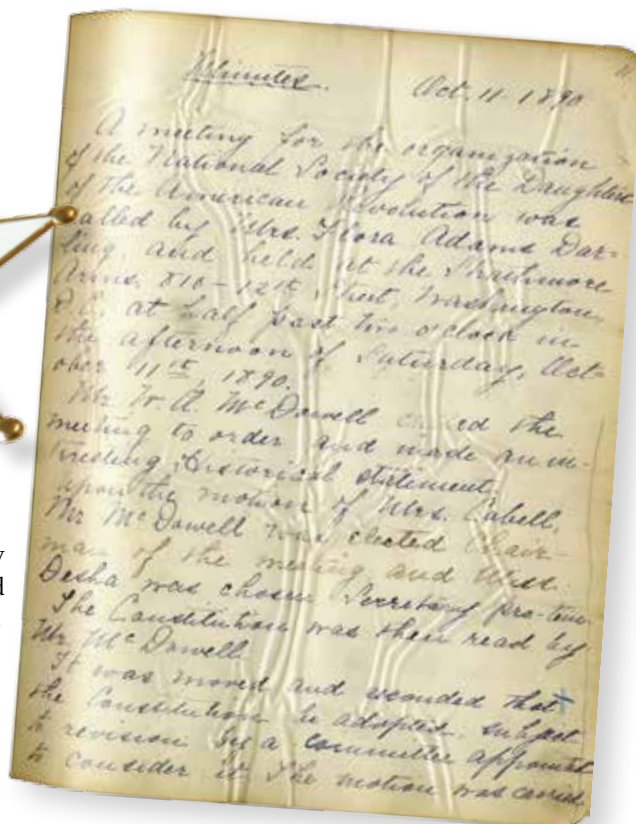
As the turn of the century drew near, Americans found plenty of reasons to look ahead. Industrialism was driving rapid economic growth. The last battles on the frontier were advancing westward expansion. Inventions that would transform society, including the telephone and first gasoline-powered car, were in the early stages of development.

A sense of possibility hung in the air, and nowhere was that stronger than in the emerging Progressive Movement, which ushered in an age of social reform and activism, especially among women who were beginning to look beyond their households for purpose.

“They believed in education, opposed child labor and wanted the right to vote,” Mrs. Hunter said. “It was a time when women were starting to feel strong and powerful.”

At the same time, Americans were reconnecting with their own roots and drawing inspiration from their founding history as part of a Colonial Revival movement sweeping the nation. Originally sparked by exhibits at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia that harkened to a simpler time in America, the movement spurred a fascination with Colonial-style architecture, art, design and landscaping, and the creation of several patriotic organizations, including the Sons of the American Revolution, founded in 1889.

The S.A.R.’s mission of perpetuating the memory of Patriot ancestors



**Opposite page:** Daughters at the First Continental Congress. **Inset:** Mary Washington Monument pin, originally sold as a fundraising item  
**This page:** Minutes from the first DAR meeting on October 11, 1890

resonated with women who shared that heritage and wanted to join their society. Some S.A.R. groups welcomed them at first, but when they put the matter to a vote in the spring of 1890 at a national meeting in Louisville, Ky., the majority decided against inviting women.

### SPARKING A SOCIETY

News of the ban incited headlines in papers nationwide, infuriating women and setting off a chain of events that would inspire the DAR’s formation.

“It became apparent that if women were to accomplish any distinctive patriotic work, it must be within their own circle, under their own leadership,” noted President General Letitia Green Stevenson in a 1906 account of the DAR’s founding. (Mrs. Stevenson held the office of President General twice: 1893–1895 and 1896–1898.)



One woman who took exception to the ban was Mary Smith Lockwood, the widow of a Union soldier and a women's rights advocate. She fired off an editorial to the *Washington Post* printed on July 13, 1890. Mrs. Lockwood wrote: "Were there no mothers of the Revolution; no dames as well as sires whose memories should be commemorated?"

Her piece struck a nerve—and not just with women. The *Post* received a flood of letters in response, including one from William McDowell, Registrar General of S.A.R.

"In the hands of the women of America, patriotic undertakings have never failed," McDowell wrote in a July 21, 1890, editorial. "Why not, therefore,



Mary Smith Lockwood's editorial to the *Washington Post*

invite the formation of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution?"

He invited "every woman in America who has the blood of heroes of the Revolution in her veins" to send her name and address to him. Six women answered his call, including Miss Washington and Kentucky native Mary Desha, also a DAR Founder.

Both pledged their support to help get the organization going. Miss Desha wrote that she was good "for any amount of work," so McDowell reached out to her first, sending her the names and addresses of those who had replied so she could rally them.

Informal meetings were held throughout the summer of 1890, including an August gathering at the home of Ellen Hardin Walworth, another of the four DAR Founders. Attendance was sparse due to a rainstorm that night, but the few who made it volunteered for leadership positions and made decisions that set the course of the organization. Using materials borrowed from the S.A.R. as a blueprint, they agreed that the DAR should have national reach and permit eligibility for any woman descended from an ancestor who aided the Patriot cause, regardless of rank or station.

An August 17 notice in the *Post* announced the formation of the society, calling for eligible members to send their names to acting Registrar Miss Washington. Goals stated for the society included: "to gather materials for history, preserve souvenirs of the Revolution, to study the manners and measures of those days, to devise the best methods of perpetuating the memories of our ancestors and celebrating their achievements."

At their first official meeting in October, timed to coincide with the anniversary of Christopher Columbus' discovery of America, the women adopted a preliminary constitution, selected officers and began planning projects. Several S.A.R. members, including McDowell, attended as advisors, and 11 members paid their dues, giving the organization \$33 in the bank. Organizing members further defined their goals in the Society's bylaws, emphasizing their commitment to service through the prisms of historic preservation, education and patriotism.

As Mrs. Walworth would later write in the February 1893 issue of *American Monthly Magazine*, the DAR's first



**Above:** Founding members Mary Cabell, Caroline Harrison, Eugenia Washington, Mary Desha, Letitia Stevenson, Ellen Walworth, Mary Lockwood and Cornelia Fairbanks. **Right:** Four applications from founding Daughters.

national publication, and a precursor to *American Spirit*: "It is not a social organization ... it is an order patriotic, historical, genealogical, and holds itself closely to these objects."

#### CHARTING A COURSE

The Daughters knew they needed a prominent figurehead to give the infant society the gravitas necessary to attract a national membership, so they nominated first lady Caroline Scott Harrison, wife of sitting President Benjamin Harrison, as their President General.

Mrs. Harrison was hesitant to accept due to her busy schedule, but she was persuaded by Mary Virginia Ellet Cabell, who agreed to shoulder most of her duties. As Vice President Presiding, Mrs. Cabell led all the meetings, handled the daily responsibilities of the office and even opened her home as an early headquarters. After Mrs. Harrison's death in 1892, Mrs. Cabell was nominated to



first-generation daughters of Patriots, or Real Daughters, they recruited through local chapters nationwide.

### FORGING A POWERFUL CHAPTER NETWORK

The National Society grew rapidly in its first few years. As the stack of handwritten applications mounted, the constant reading and evaluation took a toll on Miss Washington, who later suffered severe vision problems as a result. By the end of its charter year, the DAR had 818 members, and membership rose to more than 1,200 by early 1892.

Chicago became the first city to organize a chapter on March 20, 1891. The ladies there heard about the fledgling society from Mrs. Lockwood, who was serving alongside them on the National Board of Lady Managers for the upcoming World's Columbian Exposition. Many were already members of the elite Chicago Women's Club, but the DAR's lineage and service focus intrigued them.

"They were excited about it because it was something men had no control over," said Peggy Becker, historian for the Chicago DAR Chapter.

Board president Bertha Honoré Palmer helped the women in their efforts to organize the chapter, offering her office as a meeting site. Originally appointed as chapter regent, Mrs. Palmer stepped aside when she was unable to find records to prove her Patriot ancestry, though she was later named an Honorary Illinois State Regent for her support of the first chapter.

The National Society appointed Effie Reeme Osborn, a Daughter who lived in Washington, D.C., but had family in Chicago, to take Mrs. Palmer's place. In the first meeting, Mrs. Osborn stressed the importance of unity among the group, noting that in the DAR "party lines and sectarian

differences were to be obliterated. It would know no North, no South, no East, no West." As word of the chapter spread throughout the state, women began traveling from cities as far away as Bloomington, Moline and Rockford to join its meetings before eventually forming chapters of their own.

"At one time we had 900 members because there were no other chapters in the Midwest," Mrs. Becker said. "Women came from all over Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin to be part of our chapter."

Chapter members were instrumental in helping the National Society collect Revolutionary War relics and period items, such as guns, swords, clothing, furnishings and letters, for a celebrated exhibit in the Women's Building at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. The Chicago Chapter hosted the exhibit, and Mrs. Palmer held a reception for Daughters

assume the role of President General officially, but she declined in favor of passing the honor to Mrs. Stevenson, wife of then-Vice President Adlai Stevenson, to keep the DAR in the national limelight.

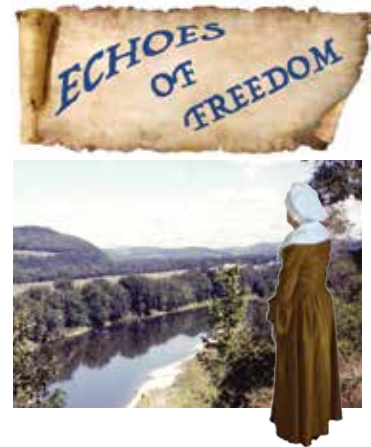
Early on, the Daughters weathered speculation about the intentions of their Society. Some people feared it would encourage a rebellious aristocracy, while others worried about it glorifying women. DAR leaders countered that perception by choosing the motto, "Amor Patriae (Love of Country)," which they revised months later to "Home and Country," and finally to "God, Home and Country" in 1978.

With its focus on service, the National Society soon began attracting an illustrious group of women to its membership, including Progressive leaders such as suffragist Susan B. Anthony, temperance reformer Frances Willard and Red Cross founder Clara Barton. Even with such an accomplished roster, DAR leaders seemed most proud of the hundreds of

An 1892 issue of DAR's first national publication and precursor to *American Spirit*



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attending the event, inviting many distinguished women on the national and international stage as guests.

The chapter was also known for helping the city's influx of immigrants adjust to life in America by bolstering literacy and other skills. Its foreign settlement classes taught immigrant children how to read, write and care for their households. A newspaper writer later interviewed several boys in the program who had grown up to become doctors, lawyers and business executives.

"They said if DAR had not helped them learn to speak English, they wouldn't have gotten as far in life," Mrs. Becker said.

Early DAR chapters also flourished in Atlanta, New York City, Pittsburgh, Pa., St. Paul, Minn., and Lexington, Ky., and spread from Rhode Island to Ohio that first year. Society leaders helped form chapters in the beginning and tapped their own networks to find women in these communities to lead them.

For example, Louise Ward McAllister, who served as New York State Regent from 1891 to 1895, traveled extensively across the Empire State during her time in office, scouting new locations for chapters and meeting face to face with local women to bring them on board. Transportation and communication posed significant challenges for these leaders in their quest to grow a network of chapters across America, but they found ways to overcome those obstacles.

"If those women had not been willing to organize chapters, we would not be the successful organization we are today," said Denise Doring VanBuren, DAR's Organizing Secretary General.

### BUILDING A HOME

By the time the First Continental Congress convened on February 22, 1792, at the Church of Our Father in Washington, D.C., the National Society was stronger than ever. In her opening



Memorial Continental Hall's  
13-column portico

address, Mrs. Harrison reflected on the Society's growth and charged delegates with nurturing it for the future.

"We now feel that this Society is firmly established and in good condition for continued success," she told the audience. "It remains with us all to see that it still lives and grows to greater and better ends. We have within ourselves the only element of destruction; our foes are from within, not without ... our hope is in unity and self-sacrifice."

Following Mrs. Harrison's speech, Mrs. Cabell addressed the next biggest challenge for the society: the building of its future home, Memorial Continental Hall. "The demand of our age is for something more tangible than any statement, however ennobling, something more practical," she told delegates. "This lesser thing, ladies, this outward and visible sign of what we believe to be an inward and spiritual grace is the building of a house—a house beautiful."

She envisioned it to be "the finest building ever owned by women," a fire-proof structure where the Society could store and exhibit the historical records and objects it hoped to preserve.

The entire project, from purchasing the city block of land to designing and constructing the building to funding construction, proved more daunting

than the Daughters expected, but their plans never wavered.

"They accepted these challenges as the price of fulfilling their dreams and goals for the Society," said Tracy Robinson, DAR Director of Archives and History. "They worked as if failure was impossible."

Within three years, the society raised \$100,000 through member donations to fund construction of the hall. The force behind that success was Cornelia Cole Fairbanks, who served as President General from 1901 to 1905. Mrs. Fairbanks spent her tenure traveling across the nation and speaking with members about

the significance of the project and its value to the DAR and the nation.

Local chapters contributed in creative ways. To raise the remaining \$20,000 to pay off the debt for the building, Anna Scott Block, a member of Chicago DAR Chapter, designed a "certificate of descent" that members could buy for \$1 to showcase the name of their Patriot ancestor.

When the Beaux Arts-style hall opened in 1905, it featured a portico flanked by 13 columns, each given by chapters and state societies of the 13 original Colonies. The element was a nod to President George Washington and his dream of building memorial buildings in the capital for each of the 13 original states.

"They knew that Washington had wanted this done, so they took him at his word and delivered," Mrs. Hunter said.

### SERVING ON ALL FRONTS

Though the DAR has built other impressive buildings and monuments over the past century, its most enduring accomplishment is its legacy of service. Daughters left a lasting mark on the Army Nurse Corps during the Spanish-American War, teaming up with the military to certify 1,081 nurses who traveled to the warfront to tend to the

wounded. They have distributed 10 million citizenship manuals published in multiple languages to immigrants arriving at ports of entry through the years, helping them navigate their way to the American dream. The “Revolutionary ladies,” as immigrants used to call them, spent countless hours at Ellis Island, providing those detained with diversions, education and comfort.

Through the wars of the past century, DAR members have supported freedom fighters in numerous ways, from rolling bandages, packing medical kits and supplying ambulances to buying war bonds, aiding war-torn villages, and showing love and gratitude to veterans on the front lines and at home.

They have founded schools for children in poor mountain regions, preserved trails in danger of disappearing, sustained the nation’s forests, and provided Americans with access to genealogical research. Their gifts to the nation have helped restore America’s most recognizable symbols of liberty, from the Valley Forge Bell Tower to the Statue of Liberty, and their efforts have brought Constitution Week to classrooms.

“It is hard to go to a community today and not find evidence of the DAR having been there,” Mrs. VanBuren said. “We have touched thousands of places across the country.”

Today the organization has more than 180,000 members in 3,000 chapters across all 50 states, as well as Washington, D.C., and abroad. Just as they did in 1890, women today find in the DAR opportunities to network, lead, develop friendships and give back in a lasting way. Some other lineage-based societies and social organizations founded at the same time have folded, but the DAR’s devotion to America has been its source of resilience and strength.

“We have an enduring purpose and passion for what we do,” Mrs. VanBuren said. “As time goes on, that mission becomes more important and more relevant than it ever was. For some societies, their time comes and goes. Ours doesn’t. Ours has a limitless horizon.” 🇺🇸

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