

# DAR CONSTITUTION HALL

## *Planning for the Future of a Historic Gathering Place*

By Courtney Peter

Every growth spurt is followed by a period of adjustment. The Daughters of the American Revolution faced such a situation in 1924. Just 34 years after its founding, the National Society's total membership topped 142,000. And although Memorial Continental Hall, its Washington, D.C., headquarters building, was less than 20 years old, the auditorium was already too small to comfortably house Continental Congress, the organization's annual convention. The Society simply needed more space.

Emboldened by their numbers, as well as the successful completion of Memorial Continental Hall, Daughters elected to add a new, larger auditorium to their headquarters complex. The resulting 3,702-seat Constitution Hall, "quickly became the unofficial cultural center of the nation's capital and a nationally known focus for all forms of the performing and literary arts," according to a report recently compiled by Quinn Evans Architects.

Now, 85 years after the first Continental Congress held in Constitution Hall, the historic building faces a significant restoration.

### **'A Tremendous Piece of Work'**

Having identified a need, the National Society quickly worked to find a solution. A committee created in 1924 was charged with recommending building plans and potential financing methods to the 34th Continental Congress the next year. In a letter dated August 21, 1924, President General Lora H. Cook (1923–1926) explained

that, on the advice of U.S. Commission of Fine Arts Chairman Charles Moore, she decided to obtain suggestions from several leading architects, even though she suspected members would prefer to hold a design competition, as was done for Memorial Continental Hall.

The National Society ultimately secured the services of prominent architect John Russell Pope, who also designed Washington, D.C., fixtures such as the Jefferson Memorial and the National Archives building. Initially, Pope presented plans for a structure that was too large for both the building site and the budget, but his revised design was a better fit. Employing a Neoclassical style that referenced elements of Roman Classicism, Colonial Revival and Federal design, Pope used a combination of Alabama marble, decorative plasterwork, terrazzo flooring and other distinctive flourishes to bring Daughters' vision to life.

The total cost of building the auditorium was estimated at \$1.8 million—approximately \$1 per cubic foot, or \$13 per member. In her address to the 34th Continental Congress in 1925, Grace Brosseau, chair of the Auditorium Bond Committee, recommended that the National Society raise 50 percent of the building's estimated cost and borrow the rest. She outlined a plan for retiring the debt incurred to build Constitution Hall by selling bonds in denominations of \$50 and \$100. The National Society also solicited voluntary gifts and memorial contributions to fund various auditorium features—each chair cost \$150 and each box cost \$1,500.

"This is a tremendous piece of work for any women's organization to undertake, but the will to do means accomplishment in the end," Mrs. Brosseau wrote in a letter to state committee leaders. "Failure has never been recorded against us in any of our undertakings."

Funding was not the only obstacle to overcome. The charter issued to the National Society by the United States Congress limited the organization's holdings to a total of \$1 million. The National Society petitioned Congress

to amend the charter, resulting in the passage of the Enabling Act that increased the cap to \$5 million.

With the necessary financing and legislation in hand, construction began. Excavation commenced August 24, 1928, and the cornerstone was laid on October 30, 1928. First lady Grace Coolidge spread it with mortar using the same trowel used to lay the cornerstone of Memorial Continental Hall, and Mrs. Brosseau, then serving as President General, tapped its four corners into place with the gavel George Washington used to lay the cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol.

September 25, 1929, letter to DAR member Mabel Hutton Goode. A DAR press release announcing its opening described Constitution Hall as “monumental in execution, but purely utilitarian in purpose.”

### A Capital City Cultural Hub

Constitution Hall filled a void in the social and cultural landscape of Washington, D.C. From the early planning stages, Daughters intended to rent the building to the public when not in use by the National Society, and the public



**Clockwise from above:** Constitution Hall under construction. •As described in an October 23, 1929, press release announcing the opening of the Hall, “The interior resembles a stadium in form, with tiers of seats rising on three sides from the auditorium floor.” The original glass skylight seen here was covered in the 1950s. • Constitution Hall hosted the world premiere of the film “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” on October 17, 1939.



Less than a year later, the building was finished. The National Society consecrated Constitution Hall in a vesper service held October 23, 1929. Although the service was small and the guest list was limited, a portion of the event was broadcast on the radio.

“The opening of this magnificent hall is a matter of widespread interest in the capital, and your splendid organization deserves unbounded praise for bringing this monumental work to a happy consummation,” wrote Bishop James E. Freeman, who delivered the consecration address, in a

immediately obliged. “Prior to the building of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Constitution Hall served as Washington’s premier auditorium,” NSDAR assistant historian Nicholas J. Steneck wrote in a history of Constitution Hall compiled in the 1990s.

Renters quickly booked the venue for a wide variety of events and ceremonies. The Women’s Patriotic Conference on National Defense took place at the Hall in 1930, George Washington University regularly used the facility for commencement, and a celebration of the Sesquicentennial of



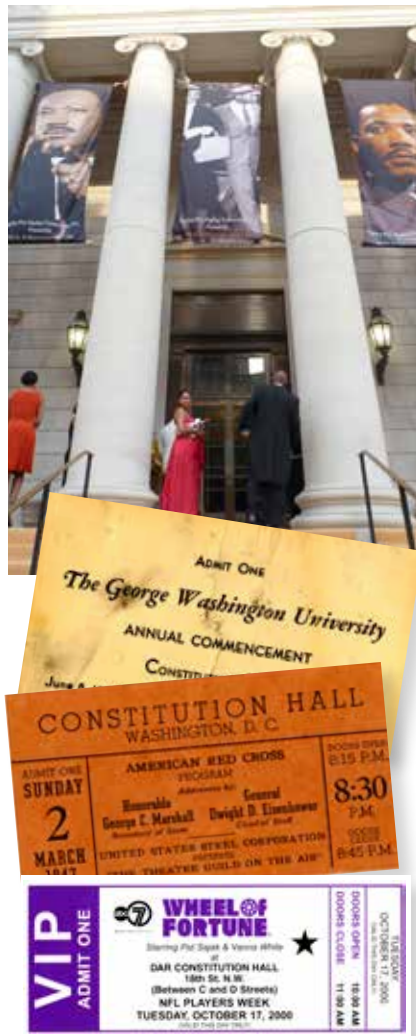


the U.S. Constitution was held in its namesake building in 1937. Nearly 300 congressmen were in the audience for the world premiere screening of the film “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,” starring Jimmy Stewart, in October 1939. Both the National Symphony Orchestra and the National Geographic Society’s film lecture series called the venue home for more than 40 years.

Constitution Hall history also intersects with that of the Civil Rights Movement. In April 1939, the decision not to allow renowned singer Marian Anderson to perform at Constitution Hall prompted her historic concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The event sparked conversation and change, both nationally and within the DAR. Anderson later performed at the Hall several times, including at a 1943 benefit concert for war relief and the inaugural performance of her 1964 farewell tour.

During World War II, in addition to donating use of the auditorium for war relief programs, the National Society made portions of the building available to the American Red Cross, which used the basement as a nursery for children of enlisted men whose wives were working for the war effort.

The long and varied list of world leaders, dignitaries and artists who have visited Constitution Hall includes all U.S. presidents since Calvin Coolidge, the Dalai Lama, members of the World Bank Group, Muhammad Ali, George Carlin, Lady Gaga, Jane Goodall, Luciano Pavarotti, Chris Rock, Soundgarden and Frank Sinatra. The Hall’s



**Top left:** World-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma and Condoleezza Rice, then National Security Advisor to President George W. Bush as well as an accomplished concert pianist, performed a duet on the Constitution Hall stage during the National Medal of Arts and National Humanities Medal ceremony in April 2002.

**Top right:** As President General Lynn Young proceeds down the aisle, a large United States flag drops from the rafters of Constitution Hall on Opening Night of the 123rd Continental Congress in 2014, signaling the official beginning of the convention. **Center:** In August 2011, the fraternity Alpha Phi Alpha held a Tribute to the Life and Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. at the Hall to celebrate the dedication of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial. • The NSDAR Archives collection includes ticket stubs to various Constitution Hall events, such as George Washington University’s 1938 commencement ceremony, a March 1947 American Red Cross program featuring General Dwight D. Eisenhower and an October 2000 taping of the game show “Wheel of Fortune.”

eclectic agenda offers opportunities to see unique performances as well as recurring events. For example, each December various U.S. military bands perform free holiday concerts there, and the spring graduation season brings a parade of students in caps and gowns to Constitution Hall. The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places on September 16, 1985.

### The Past and the Future Guide Restoration Plans

In recent years, most of the National Society’s restoration projects have focused on Memorial Continental Hall. Now attention shifts to Constitution Hall, which must meet the demands of the thousands of people who visit each year

and the technological needs of the institutions, schools and performers that rent the facility for events, while simultaneously contending with the maintenance requirements of a historic building.

Quinn Evans Architects, which worked with the National Society to restore the DAR Library's historic lay light (covered in the July/August 2012 *American Spirit*), will also guide a multi-year restoration of Constitution Hall. Plans involve reviving the historic character of the building's public spaces—including the auditorium, the 475-foot-long lobby and the President General's Reception Room—to reflect the architecture and aesthetics of the period of design and construction. Additional upgrades will address the mechanical and air-handling systems and enhance energy efficiency to better align with modern standards. The first phase of the project is expected to cost more than \$4 million.

Some modern enhancements are already in place. For example, a solar panel array installed on the Constitution Hall roof in June 2014 significantly boosted the building's energy efficiency. The system is estimated to afford the National Society substantial savings in energy costs over a life span of approximately 30 years.

During the design phase, the project team, including experts from tenKsolar and Standard Solar, encountered several challenges related to the building's age. For instance, the exterior of Constitution Hall—including the roof—must maintain its historic



**Clockwise:** In the President General's Reception Room, the design of the custom-made Edward Fields rug mimics that of the decorative ceiling medallion. • The restoration aims to recapture the historic character of the signature features of Constitution Hall's U-shaped lobby, including the light fixtures and the plasterwork embellishments on the ceilings and pediments. • The Hall's custom-designed, award-winning rooftop solar panels are lightweight, energy efficient and invisible from the street, and they have a view of the Washington Monument.



integrity in order to comply with National Historic Landmark regulations. And because the Hall roof has a smaller surface area than a typical contemporary building, the solar panel array had to be light enough for the structure to support safely. Constitution Hall's custom-designed solar panel array meets both conditions by being not only lightweight, but also invisible from the street.

In recognition of the project's innovative design and execution, APS America named the Constitution Hall solar installation its 2014 Commercial Project of the Year.

"I am thrilled that our creative rooftop solar array solution can now help to serve as a replicable model for other historic properties that wish to become more sustainable," President General Lynn Forney Young wrote in a March 9, 2015, blog post.

the level of detail that could be recaptured by stripping away this buildup, which has partially obscured the original decorative elements.

When the restoration is complete, Constitution Hall's outward appearance will once again evoke the era of its origin. And its mechanical systems will function with the increased efficiency and sustainability that is expected of a modern facility, to better serve the needs of Daughters who take pride in their historic Continental Congress venue. The restoration's goal is not to reinvent the Hall, but rather to accentuate the distinctive features that made it a showpiece of the capital's cultural scene.

"We want to help show off the beautiful elements we already have," Mrs. Young says. 🏡