On January 27, 2005, at the invitation of the U.S. Postal Service and the family of Marian Anderson, the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution co-hosted the unveiling of a commemorative United States postage stamp honoring the operatic and concert star at the Society’s headquarters in Washington, D.C. There were so many in attendance for the event that cameras broadcast the ceremonies to the DAR Library to accommodate the overflow. Special guests included Deputy Postmaster General John M. Nolan, who dedicated the stamp; James DePriest, Anderson’s nephew and Director of Conducting and Orchestral Studies at the Juilliard School; mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves; soprano Kathleen Battle; Dr. Allan R. Keiler, musicologist and Marian Anderson biographer; and performers from the Duke Ellington School of the Arts.

For many in the audience, the ceremony represented a touching time of healing and at last hopefully a happy ending to a painful chapter in history. As President General Plessey Merritt Wagoner emphasized in her remarks:

Ms. Anderson’s legendary concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial will always be remembered as a milestone in the Civil Rights movement. I stand before you today wishing that history could be re-written, knowing that it cannot, and assuring you that DAR has learned from the past. On this day we celebrate the life, the talent, and the legacy of Marian Anderson. America is a better place because of her dreams and her sacrifices. As a nation, we can be grateful that she opened so many doors to the DAR after the 1939 incident despite that was denied to her.”

Although Marian Anderson would perform at Constitution Hall on numerous occasions from 1943 to 1969, including the first performance of her farewell American tour in 1964, in 1939 she was denied the opportunity to perform her Easter concert there. The years of outrage that would follow have often eclipsed not only the talents of Anderson but also the significant contributions of the DAR. In a February 2006 interview, Dr. Keiler, author of Marian Anderson: A Singer’s Journey published in 2000, said, “The most important reason she and her family allowed me to have free access and were so open about documents is that I believed the same thing they did—that Miss Anderson’s connection to civil rights, to politics, overshadowed her greatness as a singer. That side, the artistic side, had grown dim compared to her symbolic status in life as part of civil rights. I wanted to restore balance and record her importance as a singer.”

Keiler agrees that something similar happened to the DAR after the 1939 incident despite every effort they have made to right that wrong. He summed up the feelings of many of those at the stamp unveiling in 2005: “A lot of us, when we were invited, talked about the irony of it. It was exciting. We were very moved to be inside Constitution Hall. We didn’t think of it as a place that was denied to her.”

The President General’s remarks were even more compelling to Keiler. “I was incredibly moved,” he acknowledged. “It was very courageous. And they had gone to such effort to create this program for the stamp occasion, probably much more than most stamp dedications tend to be. My impression was that the DAR was very pleased to be able to do this, that the DAR is different now. The feeling I saw was pride. They wanted to do this for Marian Anderson.”

The Honored guests applaud after the unveiling of the stamp commemorating Marian Anderson, one of the greatest classically trained singers of the twentieth century and an icon in the struggle of African Americans for racial equality. President General Wagoner emphasized in her welcoming remarks, “The beauty of Marian Anderson’s voice, amplified by her courage and grace, brought attention to the eloquence of the many voices urging our nation to overcome prejudice and intolerance.” Those pictured include (left to right) the Honorable Jukka Valtasaari, Ambassador of Finland, where Anderson enjoyed her first successes in Europe; civil rights pioneer Reverend Walter E. Fauntroy; soprano Kathleen Battle; Dr. Allan R. Keiler; James DePriest; Deputy Postmaster General John Nolan; DAR President General Plessey Merritt Wagoner; ABC News reporter Angela Russell, ceremony emcee; mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves; and soprano Mattiwilda Dobbs.

Although inconceivable now, initially the Daughters wrestled mightily with whether they should take on such an enormous project as the construction of Constitution Hall, having already invested so much in the construction of Memorial Continental Hall and the then-new Administration Building. Ultimately, of course, the Daughters voted to proceed. Their investment would

a National Historic Landmark for its national significance in commemorating the history of the United States of America.

The array of luminaries who perform at Constitution Hall continues to grow, including such headliners as the British Royal Philharmonic and the Bobbiot Ballet, Tom Brokaw and Art Buchwald, Maria Callas and Van Cliburn, Leontyne Price and Lena Horn, and such old favorites as B. Hope and Brel Ivanoff. From highbrow to hard rock—from Frankie Avalon to Yo-Yo Ma, and from the B-52’s, Jimmy Buffet, and Fleetwood Mac to Frank Zappa—the Hall has hosted them all. The two halls (one of which is now, of course, the DAR Library) are no longer the only popular sites at the DAR complex. Portions of it, both inside and out, so closely resemble the White House that it is a favorite location for filming movies and television specials and series, such as Suspect, starring Cher, and The Wiz Wing. A popular Washington guidebook features the NSDAR in its chapter titled “Hollywood on the Potomac.”

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▲ President Ronald Reagan quips with then-Vice President George H. W. Bush (far right) at an event in Constitution Hall in the 1980s. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger is second from right.