Effective: August 1, 2021

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL SOCIETY

OF THE SONS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Formation of the National Society SAR

In 1876 there were many celebrations to commemorate the centennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. As part of this patriotic fervor, individuals formed several organizations of Revolutionary War descendants whose purpose was to honor those men and women who gave their “lives, fortunes, and sacred honor” to securing independence from Great Britain. The National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution is an outgrowth of these Revolutionary War inspired lineage organizations.

*Society of the Cincinnati*

To understand much of the formation of later societies of Revolutionary War descendants, one must acknowledge the formation and membership requirements of the Society of the Cincinnati. The Society of the Cincinnati, formed in 1783, was open to (1) an officer of the Continental Army or Navy who (a) served to the end of the war as an officer with a Line (not Militia or State) regiment, (b) resigned with honor after a minimum of three years’ service, or (c) was rendered supernumerary or was honorably discharged after three years of service; or (2) an officer who served with the French forces under Rochambeau or DeGrasse. The Cincinnati provided for hereditary membership following the line of the eldest male in each generation, using the rule of primogeniture, for descendants of these Original Members.

In 1854, the Cincinnati expanded its membership to include those descendants of officers who could have, but did not, become Original Members. Hereditary membership for this class also follows the line of the eldest male in each generation, using the rule of primogeniture.

If a direct male descendant is lacking, a collateral male descendant may be eligible for membership, if properly qualified and approved by the Cincinnati. Only one male descendant may represent an eligible officer at any time.

*The Sons of Revolutionary Sires*

Instituted October 22, 1875, the Sons of Revolutionary Sires appears to be the first organization that actively encouraged membership by descendants of all Revolutionary War patriots. For years following the American Revolution, surviving veterans would participate in Independence Day parades; by 1876, none of these veterans remained. James P. Dameron, of San Francisco, conceived the idea of a group of Revolutionary patriot descendants participating in the Centennial Fourth of July celebrations in honor of these departed veterans. On June 29, 1876, the Alta California published the following notice:

1776 1876

ATTENTION! DESCENDANTS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY PATRIOTS.

Headquarters Centennial Committee

212 Kearney Street

San Francisco, June 28, 1876

You are hereby requested to meet at the Headquarters of the Grand Marshal, No. 212 Kearney street, at 8 o’clock p.m., on Thursday, June 29, for the purpose of making arrangements to participate in the celebration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Nation’s Independence.

CHAS. L. WIGGIN,

Chief of Staff to the Grand Marshal.

As requested in the notice, about twenty-five descendants of Revolutionary War patriots met on the evening of June 29, 1876 for the purpose of organizing themselves to participate in the Centennial Fourth of July celebrations. The assembled group resolved to call themselves the Sons of Revolutionary Sires (“SRS”) for participation in the celebration and elected General Adolphus M. Winn – the first Mayor of San Francisco in 1849 and 1850 – as chairman.

On July 1, 1876, the SRS met at the Palace Hotel to accept an official invitation to march in the Fourth of July parade. After accepting an additional thirty-one members, the SRS adjourned until July 4, 1876. At 9:30 in the morning on the Fourth of July, the members of the SRS – now totaling about eighty – gathered at the Palace Hotel to participate in the parade. Following the parade, the SRS returned to the Palace Hotel where Mr. Dameron delivered an address and congratulated the assembly on the success of their effort to commemorate their ancestors’ deeds. It was at this meeting that the assembled members unanimously resolved to officially organize the Sons of Revolutionary Sires. The SRS met on July 9, 1876 to elect officers (including electing General Winn as the first SRS president) and again on August 2, 1876 to approve a constitution, bylaws and articles of incorporation.

Following its formation, the SRS endeavored to publicize its formation and establish other branches throughout the United States with the cooperation of other Revolutionary War descendants. Although generally unsuccessful in establishing societies outside California, the SRS provided copies of their formation documents and annual bulletins to several prominent individuals, including Major Asa Bird Gardiner of the New York Society of the Cincinnati. Instead of forming a SRS society in New York, Major Gardiner opted to assist in the organization of the New York Society of the Sons of the Revolution.

Shortly after the organization of the National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, the SRS began reorganizing itself in strict conformance with the new SAR Constitution and Bylaws. On March 22, 1890, the SRS officially renamed itself the California Society of the Sons of the American Revolution.

*The New York Society of the Sons of the Revolution*

The formation of the New York Society of the Sons of the Revolution stems from the membership criteria of the Society of the Cincinnati. On June 16, 1873, Horatio Gates Stevens, Vice President of the New York Society of the Cincinnati, died. His eldest son, John Rhinelander Stevens was admitted into the New York society in his father’s place. The next year John Austin Stevens, half cousin of John Rhinelander Stevens, petitioned the society for membership, proposing that the Cincinnati accept junior lines and multiple descendants per officer. The New York Society of the Cincinnati rejected the proposal.

In December 1875, John Austin Stevens informally organized the Sons of the Revolution in New York City and held a meeting on January 15, 1876 at the New York Historical Society for the purpose of organizing descendants “of officers or soldiers of the Revolutionary Army” to participate in the Philadelphia Centennial Independence ceremonies. The group saw little growth until 1883, when Major Gardner assisted with the formation of the New York Society of the Sons of the Revolution. On December 4, 1883, the New York Society held a dinner in the “Long Room” of Fraunces Tavern commemorating George Washington’s farewell dinner to his officers, which was held in the same room of Fraunces Tavern in 1783. The New York Society of the Sons of the Revolution met on April 19, 1884 to adopt a constitution and bylaws. The society incorporated in New York on May 3, 1884.

The April 19, 1884 constitution contained two provisions that would later result in the formation of the National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution. The first was a provision that seven individuals living outside the state of New York could petition the New York Society to create an “auxiliary branch” of the society in their respective state. The second provision at issue deemed those individuals who had an office in New York to be residents of New York for membership purposes. A third provision of the Society’s constitution, adopted on April 11, 1889, required an “auxiliary branch” to be bound by the provisions of the New York Society’s April 11, 1889 constitution, “without power to alter or amend the same.”

By April 2, 1889, there were societies of the “Sons of the Revolution” in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Connecticut and Vermont. Only the Pennsylvania Society, which was formed in March 1888, was officially recognized by the New York Society of the Sons of the Revolution. Both the New Jersey and Connecticut societies’ charters had been rejected.

*The Society of the Sons of the Revolution of New Jersey*

Several members of the New York Society of Sons of the Revolution resided in New Jersey. In February 1889, some of these individuals called upon all New Jersey-resident members of the New York Society to meet on March 7, 1889 in Newark, NJ for the purpose of organizing a New Jersey branch of the New York Society. Josiah C. Pumpelly, Alexander Wilder and William O. McDowell attended the March 7, 1889 meeting and organized the New Jersey Society of the Sons of the Revolution, including adopting a constitution and electing certain officers (although they postponed the election of a President). The members also adopted the following resolution:

Whereas, There are now organized Societies of the Sons of the Revolution in the States of New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey; and

Whereas, It is desirable, in view of the approaching one-hundredth anniversary of the Inauguration of George Washington as first President of the United States, that there shall be sister societies organized in every State and Territory in the Union, particularly in the thirteen original States, that their members may participate in this Centennial Celebration;

Resolved, that the President of this Society, when elected, and the two Delegates to the National Society are hereby appointed a Committee to invite the appointment of a like Committee from the New York and Pennsylvania Societies, to co-operate with them and to meet with the descendants of Revolutionary ancestors in the different States and Territories, and assist in organizing Societies whose membership shall be composed exclusively of descendants of Revolutionary Statesmen, Soldiers and Sailors.

Immediately following the meeting, five more individuals joined the New Jersey Society. On March 8, 1889, having satisfied the New York Society’s requirement of seven individuals residing outside of New York, J.C. Pumpelly, Secretary of the New Jersey Society, forwarded a notice of formation to the New York Society, request for issuance of a charter and copies of the above resolution. On March 21, 1889, the members elected General William Scudder Stryker, Adjutant-General of the State of New Jersey, President of the New Jersey Society.

The New York Society declined the New Jersey Society’s application, asserting that the application did not conform to the requirements of the New York Society’s constitution. The primary objections from the New York Society were that not all of the New Jersey members were members of the New York Society and the New York Society and the Pennsylvania Society were sufficiently close to New Jersey such that the formation of a separate New Jersey Society was not necessary.

The New Jersey Society did not agree with the action of the New York Society, but continued to reach out to the New York Society and offered to reorganize the New Jersey Society in such a way as to be satisfactory to the New York Society. The New Jersey Society also requested that the New York Society, as the first society of the Sons of the Revolution, call a convention of other state societies for the purpose of forming a national society of co-equal state societies of the Sons of the Revolution. On April 16, 1889, the New York Society again rejected the New Jersey Society’s request for a charter and declined to organize a national society.

At a meeting on April 20, 1889, the New Jersey Society changed its name to ally itself with the Sons of Revolutionary Sires because the New York Society objected to the use of ‘‘Sons of the Revolution” by the “unauthorized” New Jersey Society. The members of the New Jersey Society reiterated their resolve to form an independent national society and crafted a statement to be sent to other state societies of the Sons of the Revolution regarding their grievances with the New York Society.

Because of the New York Society’s reluctance, the New Jersey Society spearheaded the formation of a national society and issued the following “Call for a Convention to Organize a National Society of the Sons of the Revolution” on April 10, 1889:

The special committee of the “SOCIETY OF THE SONS OF THE REVOLUTION of New Jersey,” to whom was referred the duty of inviting the organizing of a co-equal sister Society in every State and Territory in the Union and in France, each Society electing delegates to organize a National Society, made up of the president, one delegate-at-large, and one delegate for each one hundred or fraction of one hundred, exceeding fifty, members; every Society to be entitled to at least three representatives, hereby calls a meeting of such delegates to the National Society, elected or to be elected, to take place at 9 A. M., April 30, 1889, the one hundredth anniversary of the inauguration of George Washington as first President of the United States, in Fraunces’s Tavern, New York, corner of Pearl and Broad streets, in the room where General Washington made his farewell address to the officers of the Revolutionary Army (which has kindly been placed at our disposal by the proprietor for that purpose). It is hoped that every Society will be fully represented.

WM. O. MCDOWELL, Chairman.

WM. S. STRYKER,

W. C. PUMPELLY,

*Special Committee.*

The Special Committee sent the above notice to each of the thirteen state societies in existence by April 30, 1889, including California, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Connecticut, Vermont, South Carolina, Massachusetts, Maryland, Ohio, Missouri, Kentucky, and New Hampshire. In addition, the Special Committee forwarded the following message to the Governors of those states who did not have a society of the Sons of the Revolution.

National Organization of the “Sons of the Revolution,”

No. 20 Spruce Street, Newark, N. J., April 19th, 1889.

In the organizing of the National Society of the Sons of the Revolution, April 30th, 1889, the Centennial day of our government, it is, in the opinion of this committee, very desirable that every State and Territory in the Union, and the French Society, shall be represented at the meeting called for 9 o’clock a. m., that day, at Fraunces’s Tavern, on the corner of Pearl and Broad Streets, N. Y., in the room where General Washington made his farewell address to the officers of the Revolutionary Army; and, in view of the fact that the time is too short in which to complete the organizing of a Society of “Sons of the Revolution” in every State and Territory in time, so that they can elect delegates to this meeting, it has been decided by this committee, to request the Governor of every State and Territory in which a Society of the “ Sons of the Revolution “ shall not have been organized on the date of the receipt of this, to appoint three delegates, descendants of a Revolutionary ancestry, by either the male or female line, to represent those in their State entitled to membership at the organization of the National Society, and after the adjournment to take charge of organizing their State Societies. It has been further decided to invite the Centennial President, Governor of every State and Territory, and President of each of the great American Colleges, in so far as they are eligible to membership, to participate in this meeting, as special delegates. Governors will please telegraph the names and addresses of the gentlemen they appoint as soon as possible to our Chairman. If they cannot name residents of their State that can arrive in time, if they will telegraph authorizing this committee to appoint representatives for them, we will select descendants of distinguished Revolutionary Soldiers and Statesmen to represent them. The meeting after organizing will adjourn until after May 1st to complete its work. Successful Societies have already been formed, or are forming, in the States of California, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, South Carolina, Kentucky, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, Maryland, Missouri and New Hampshire.

WM. O. MCDOWELL, Chairman.

WM. S. STRYKER,

J. C. PUMPELLY.

Special Committee of the Sons of the Revolution of New Jersey, appointed for this purpose.

In response to these messages, every existing society of the Sons of the Revolution, except the New York Society, sent delegates to the April 30, 1889 meeting at Fraunces Tavern. In addition, the following states also sent delegates to Fraunces Tavern: Indiana, Delaware, West Virginia, Arkansas, Alabama and Illinois.

*Formation of the National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution*

At the call of the New Jersey Society for a national convention, the assembled delegates met at 9:00 a.m. on April 30, 1889 in the “Long Room” of Fraunces Tavern. The date marked the centennial of George Washington’s inauguration as the first President of the United States.

After calling the meeting to order, William O. McDowell was nominated to chair the meeting and the assembled delegates resolved to organize a national society of the Sons of the Revolution. Based on comments received from a Pennsylvania Society delegate, Mr. McDowell recommended that the convention organize a national society on a temporary basis and then adjourn to a more convenient date. The Pennsylvania Society delegation advocated this course of action as well as the wholesale adoption of the New York Society’s Constitution, which would have required the assembled state societies to become “auxiliary branches” of the New York Society. During the ensuing debate, the delegates from Connecticut, New Hampshire, Maryland and South Carolina opposed any delay stating that: delegates had come to New York to form a national organization; that attending an adjourned meeting would be inconvenient for many of the current delegates; and that adoption of the New York Society constitution was unacceptable.

The delegates appointed a Committee on Constitution and Bylaws and a Committee on Nomination of Permanent Officers and then adjourned until the following day.

On May 1, 1889, the delegates assembled at 9:30 a.m. at the Produce Exchange. The proposed Constitution and Bylaws of the National Society were read, section by section, and unanimously adopted by the delegates. The delegates also elected officers and instructed the officers to incorporate the national society in Connecticut.

The delegates also debated as to the appropriate name for the National Society. The New Jersey Society and the California Society of the Sons of Revolutionary Sires advocated for the adoption of a National Society of the Sons of Revolutionary Sires. The assembled delegates instead chose “The National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution.” While “Sons of the Revolution” would have been the most obvious choice (given its use by all of the assembled state societies with the exception of California), the New York Society had demonstrated its reluctance to allow the New Jersey Society to use the name. Further, the delegates felt that adopting a completely different name would be burdensome to the majority of organized state societies and would operate as a barrier to an ultimate unification with the New York Society. Despite these concerns, the delegates believed that the difference between the New York Society and the new national society needed to be formally indicated. The National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution was born.

*Important Milestones in the History of the SAR*

The first social meeting of the SAR was held at Delmonico’s Restaurant in New York City on March 1, 1890, with 110 compatriots present from throughout the United States.

The first SAR National Congress was held in Louisville, Kentucky, on April 30, 1890. A refined Constitution and other major issues were decided. Membership required lineal descent from a Revolutionary Patriot. At the end of the first year, the membership of the SAR was 2,500 in 28 Societies. The first membership certificate, National Number 1 was assigned to William Osborne McDowell of the New Jersey Society. Annual dues were set at 25 cents.

In 1893, the Elizabethtown Chapter, the first chapter in the Sons of the American Revolution, was formed by the New Jersey Society.

During the term of President General Edward S. Barrett of the Massachusetts, the French Society was formed in September 1897. In 1918 it became the custom, inaugurated by the French Society, of flying the American flag continuously over the grave of the Marquis de Lafayette in the Picpus Cemetery in Paris. During World War II, German forces respected the tradition and the American flag flew over Lafayette’s grave every day. In May 1945 the French Society was reorganized and every year since has participated in a ceremony at the grave of Lafayette.

An early SAR resolution resulted in the United States Congress passing a law directing the War Department to collect and properly store Revolutionary War Records.

The Massachusetts Society initiated a program to suitably mark the graves of Patriots. In 1894, a marker was placed on the grave of Marquis General de Lafayette in Paris, France, and in 1896, a marker was also placed on Benjamin Franklin’s grave in Philadelphia. The decade of 1900 to 1910 was a period when the SAR erected hundreds of tablets and monuments to commemorate the deeds and memories of Revolutionary War events and patriots. Many of these memorials were imposing tributes. Today, SAR members seek out Patriot graves to place the SAR marker. Other chapters and societies conduct wreath-laying ceremonies at Patriot graves.

In 1926, during the 37th SAR Annual Congress, an action was initiated to secure a national Headquarters in the nation’s capital. Fifty-three years later our National Headquarters was moved to 1000 South Fourth Street, in Louisville, Kentucky. At the Trustees/Leadership meeting in the spring of 2008, the SAR voted to purchase a building in the museum district of Louisville to be the new headquarters and SAR Education Center and Museum.

Harold Putnam and Harold Marshall wrote the SAR Pledge that is said at the beginning of each meeting. It was first adopted by the California Society in 1939 and later adopted by the Trustees of the National Society at Washington, DC, in 1954.

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Source: *Official Handbook, Volume VII, Summary History of the SAR*. Available at [www.sar.org](http://www.sar.org). Accessed online on 14 December, 2022.