

The Origins of the Sons of the American Revolution

As our nation marked its 100th birthday in 1876, a spirit of reflection and gratitude swept across the country. In San Francisco, a group of men—descendants of veterans of the American Revolutionary War—gathered to celebrate the centennial of the Declaration of Independence and the founding of the United States. More than a celebration, it was a tribute to the courageous men and women who pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor in the struggle for independence from Great Britain.

From that gathering emerged the Sons of Revolutionary War Sires, the first organization formed for descendants of Revolutionary patriots. While this early society shares a common spirit with the later Sons of the American Revolution (SAR), there is no direct organizational link between the two—except that members of the earlier group were welcomed into the SAR after its founding in 1889.

From New York Roots to a National Vision

The broader movement for hereditary patriotic societies can also be traced to the Sons of the Revolution, organized in New York City in 1876. Founded by John Austin Stevens, the society was envisioned as an aristocratic and hereditary organization modeled after the prestigious Society of the Cincinnati.

However, not all shared this exclusive vision.



In 1889, William O. McDowell, a New Jersey financier and businessman, organized the New Jersey Society of the Sons of the Revolution. McDowell objected to the requirement that state societies remain subordinate to the New York organization. More importantly, he believed membership should reflect a broader, more inclusive movement—welcoming all qualified descendants of Revolutionary patriots rather than functioning as a selective social club.

Determined to establish a national society built on these principles, McDowell founded the Sons of the American Revolution on April 30, 1889, at Fraunces Tavern where George Washington bid farewell to his troops in 1783. The date was especially meaningful, marking the centennial year of the 1789 inauguration of George Washington as the nation's first president.



Fraunces Tavern

McDowell became the organization's first member, setting in motion what would become a nationwide patriotic institution dedicated to preserving American history and honoring Revolutionary War patriots.

His efforts to promote inclusive patriotism did not stop there. Working alongside six women, McDowell helped organize the Daughters of the American Revolution, ensuring that women descendants of Revolutionary-era figures also had a national organization dedicated to historical preservation and patriotic service.

A Congressional Charter

The national significance of the Sons of the American Revolution was formally recognized on June 9, 1906, when the organization was granted a congressional charter under Title 36 of the United States Code. The act was signed into law by President Theodore Roosevelt—himself a member of the society.

From its beginnings in post-centennial reflection to its establishment as a nationally chartered organization, the Sons of the American Revolution stands as a testament to generations of Americans committed to honoring the enduring legacy of liberty first secured in 1776.