



NGS: The First Fifty Years

Condensed by Shirley Langdon Wilcox from articles in the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, December 1953–March 1955.

The National Genealogical Society was organized in Washington, D.C. in 1903. The preliminary first meeting was held on 24 April and the formal organization effected 11 November. In 1953 in anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary, a committee was formed to compile a history. These excerpts are the work of that committee.

Dr. Albert C. Peale, Registrar of certain patriotic societies, published in the 13 April 1903 (Volume II, page 55) edition of the *Historical Bulletin*, the following: "As a genealogist, I suggest the formation of a local genealogical society of which your paper should be the official organ." Dr. Peale's proposition was taken up by Mr. Newton Leon Collamer the publisher of the monthly *Historical Bulletin* which existed from May 1902 to September 1906. During its existence it was the official organ of the National Genealogical Society.

After consultation with other genealogists, Mr. Collamer issued an invitation to interested persons to meet 24 April 1903, at his residence, 920 S Street, Northwest, Washington, D.C. Mrs. Ruth M. Griswold Pealer's published account of this meeting appeared in the Society's *Quarterly* for January 1918 (Vol. VI, page 76). According to her, the preliminary meeting was attended by six persons, Mr. and Mrs. Newton L. Collamer, Dr. Joseph G. B. Bulloch, Alfred Barbour Dent, Mrs. Pealer (Registrar General of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution), and Miss Eugenia Washington Moncure, its Genealogist. At that meeting an organizing committee was appointed. The committee mailed to genealogists throughout the United States a prospectus of the "American Genealogical Association," as it was at first designated.

Interest was generated and those desiring to be charter members remitted \$1.00. That summer a committee was formed to draft a constitution. At a meeting 14 November 1903, with twenty-four members present, the original constitution was adopted. At subsequent meetings, held on 15 and 21 December 1903, by-laws were adopted, permanent officers were elected for the ensuing year, and the complete formal organization of the Society was effected. The constitution fixed the name of the organization as The National Genealogical Society and laid down provisions for membership, officers and committees, dues, and the conduct of the Society's business in general.

All the members who were admitted and qualified before the end of the year 1903 were classed and listed as charter members. These were forty-eight in number, thirty residents, and eighteen non-residents. However, a belated exception and addition was

made in May 1904 when Miss Mary Desha (one of the founders of the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1890) was admitted as a "charter member."

In order to give the Society a legal status, incorporation was necessary. At first a charter from Congress was desired but as this was unobtainable, the Society was incorporated on 16 June 1904, under the laws of the District of Columbia with forty-nine charter members. In 1905 the obtaining of a charter from Congress was again considered and attempted, but without result.

The beginning of the publication of the Quarterly of the National Genealogical Society in April 1912 may be regarded as an epochal point in the history of the organization, setting off the decade from 1903 to 1912 as a special preliminary or formative period, a period of trial and error.

There were three classes of membership: Resident (those residing in the District of Columbia and vicinity), Non-resident or Corresponding members (those located elsewhere in the country), and Honorary membership for distinguished personages, consisting of "those admitted to such membership" by vote of the Council or the Society. The admission and control of members were vested in the Council and Board of Management.

The general control and conduct of the Society and the incumbency of the chief officers were placed in the hands of the resident members; but the non-residents were empowered to vote by mail for officers and amendments to the constitution, a month's previous notice having been given. The national scope, always in the background aimed at it the organization and implied in the name of the Society, was at that time realized by the admission of corresponding members located throughout the country in general; and in the Constitution of 1911 more specific plans were attempted for the organization of auxiliary Branches in the States, which were followed up and amplified in subsequent years.

The officers consisted of a President, Vice-Presidents, Recording Secretary, Corresponding Secretary, Treasurer, and Editor, with a Herald added in 1910. Officers were elected at the annual meeting in November and served during the following calendar year beginning 1 January. The Constitution of 1903 provided for two Vice-Presidents, that of 1906 for six, and that of 1911 for three, with State Presidents. The resident officers constituted an Executive Committee renamed "Board of Management," in September 1904 which continued in more or less unsatisfactory operation until 1912, when it was abolished. In addition, a Council was established, consisting of the above officers together with six Councilors, two being elected annually for three-year terms.

Annual meetings were held in Washington on the second Saturday of November in each year and in 1903 monthly meetings were instituted, on the second Saturday of each month from October to May. The Council held its regular meetings quarterly, on the second Saturday in March, June, September and December. The Board of Management met as needed for the transaction of the current and interim business of the Society under the direction of the Council and between its meetings. The meetings were held at the offices or residences of the members.

By 1912 there were thirty-seven resident members, forty non-resident and twenty-three honorary. Of the original forty-nine charter members of 1904 only twenty-one remained living or in active standing in 1912. The number of non-resident members came to exceed the numbers of those resident.

In addition to the collection and presentation of genealogical and historical data, in the beginning years of the Society particular stress was directed to two fields of activity, namely, the promotion of a so-called "Clearing House" project and Heraldry. The clearing house project, aimed at the collection from active genealogists of a great mass of index cards presenting data on individual intermarriages. The National Genealogical Society was brought into this movement by the formal establishment, among its regular committees, of a Clearing House Committee to obtain and contribute data for the card-index bureau or collection. Much attention was also given to heraldry.

At first the proceedings of the Society related mainly to the transaction of business matters, conducted by the annual meetings of the members and the quarterly and monthly meetings of the Council and Board of Management. The interest and effort displayed by the officers and members fluctuated and, after two or three years, apathy and indifference developed. In 1908 the president, Louisa A. Dent, called for a special meeting of members to determine whether the Society should disband. Instead of dissolution, there was a rebirth and revivification.

The chief activities by which the Society seeks its objective of promoting genealogical knowledge is through its Quarterly and other publications, and the presentations of formal papers in its regular meetings on pertinent subjects. During its first decade, until the formation of the Quarterly in 1912, the Society issued a series of official "Leaflets" and other circulars giving accounts of its transactions and other information. The minutes of the Society's transactions prior to 1940 are missing or lost.

After the adoption of its original Constitution in 1903, several revisions and changes were made and published in 1906, 1911, and 1912. A complete revision of the Constitution and Bylaws was made in 1931 and again in 1948.

A Seal was adopted for the Society in the original constitution of 1903, consisting of two concentric circles, the words "National Genealogical Society" between them, the year "1903" between them at the bottom, and an oak tree as a charge within the inner circle. This seal was 30 millimeters in diameter. It was in use by the Society through 1910, a change being made in 1911 by the constitution adopted that year.

In 1911 the National Genealogical Society adopted the Seal which has been used ever since. It has been specified in the constitutions as consisting of the bearings of the Society ("argent, three acorns gules, within a bordure azure") displayed on the breast of a conventional eagle, below which is a ribbon or scroll containing the motte "Non Nobis Solum," and above, a similar ribbon with the words "The National Genealogical Society," all contained within two concentric circles, and the date of the founding of the Society, "1903," in figures between the eagle's claws.

The adoption of Insignia for the Society, for use on stationery, was a matter of discussion and consideration in the early months of 1904 and the motto "Non Nobis Solum" (not for ourselves alone) was then adopted. The design for the insignia was later changed to a form corresponding to that for the seal which was adopted in 1911, that is, with three acorns instead of an oak tree. The insignia was first offered for sale in 1909 in the form of a pin or badge, of about the size of a silver 25-cent piece.

At its beginning, one of the chief aims of the Society was the organization of auxiliary or subordinate State or Regional Branches or Chapters under its control; and in its early years keen effort and desire were devoted to the attainment of this end. As a concession to the non-residents the constitution of 1906 provided for the annual election of six vice presidents, four or five of which in the annual lists of officers to 1910 were non-residents. In 1911 and 1912 definite steps and plans were adopted looking to the formation of auxiliary branches in the several States. In 1912 a new office of "Organizer of Societies" was added. The title was dropped after 1918 and revived in 1922, only to be dropped again in 1926.

In the early days it was ordained that the National Genealogical Society's "headquarters shall forever remain at Washington, D.C." Later constitutions specified that the meetings were to be held in Washington, District of Columbia. The nominal post office address in that city until 1952 was at 905 Massachusetts Ave., NW (the office of Dr. Gaius M. Brumbaugh).

Monthly meetings were instituted in 1908 on the second Saturday of each month from October to May, inclusive. In 1912 the time was changed to the first Saturday of these months. Mid-month meetings were instituted in 1930, on the third Saturdays. These were at first called "Round Table Sessions," and attendance was limited to Society members. From this beginning, mid-monthly meetings, open to general attendance, developed.

The annual banquet, held in public dining places, originated in 1910. The banquets became a regular feature of the Society's activities. They were suspended briefly during World War II then resumed in 1949. In the early period, meetings were held in private residences or offices. From 1924-28 the meetings were held in the Methodist Building (110 Maryland Avenue, NE). From 1929-30 they were at the Mount Pleasant Branch of the Washington Public Library. During the 1930's they were held in rooms of the Young Women's Christian Association (Seventeenth & K Streets, NW). In 1940 they began meeting at the Mount Pleasant Branch Library (corner of Sixteenth & Lamont Streets, NW). Because of wartime restrictions, the meetings were temporarily held in the Archives Building in 1945 and 1946.

The office of Librarian was established in 1912. The first donation which initiated the library collection was thirty-one volumes of the Pennsylvania Archives. Books were at first stored in the basement of the residence of Miss Cora C. Curry at 1020 Monroe St., NW. In 1940 permission was given by the Mount Pleasant Branch of the Washington Public Library, to install the Society's library in the same quarters. The size of the library has fluctuated, because of the varying number of new accessions and the disposal of duplicates. In December 1954 it contained 1,485 bound volumes.