

FACTS CONCERNING THE MANAGEMENT OF CONSTITUTION HALL
DATING FROM 1929 to 1940.

By the Manager, Fred E. Hand

The first concert given in Constitution Hall was held under the management of Mrs. Wilson-Greene on November 2, 1929. Prior to this time the Executive Committee on October 20-23, 1929, passed a ruling setting aside a small group of seats for negroes who wished to attend concerts. So far as I know, this is the first time that any theater or auditorium in Washington, catering to a white clientele, recognized that negroes should be permitted to hear world renowned artists.

In the summer of 1930 a blanket contract was entered into with Mrs. Wilson-Greene for a series of concerts wherein the artists were not named. By the terms of that contract Mrs. Wilson-Greene presented Roland Hayes, celebrated negro tenor on January 31, 1931.

In December, 1930, the Metropolitan Musical Bureau of New York applied for use of the Hall for a concert to be given by Paul Robeson, negro baritone. On December 10, 1930, the Executive Committee refused this request.

In February, 1931, this Society entered into a contract with the T. Arthur Smith Concert Bureau for a concert to be given by the Hampton Institute Choir (colored) on March 21, 1931, the proceeds of which were to be used to erect a Negro War Memorial in the District of Columbia. By the terms of this contract sale of seats to negroes was restricted to two hundred in Sections H and O of the Tiers, the lessee agreeing to refund purchase price of tickets held by negroes in other parts of the auditorium. So much pressure was brought to bear upon the committee sponsoring this concert that the Daughters of the American Revolution waived its contractual rights in the matter and permitted the sale of tickets to negroes in any part of the auditorium.

A few days later an open letter in the New York Tribune severely criticized the D.A.R. for not cooperating with the negroes. All of the facts contained in this letter were untrue and based on the terms of the original contract rather than of the actual happenings. This letter was signed by an official of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

As a result of this criticism and the unwillingness of the original sponsors of the concert to restrict the sale of tickets as per their contract, an application made in April, 1931, for the use of the Hall by the Columbian Educational Association (colored) for a convention to be held in July, 1931, was refused by our Executive Committee on April 11, 1931.

From that time forward we had several applications for the use of the Hall by colored groups and for the presentation of colored artists, so that on March 23, 1932, the Executive Committee by ruling instructed the Manager of Constitution Hall to insert the words "White Artists Only" in all contracts for the use of Constitution Hall.

On April 5th, 1932, we received a letter from Walter White, Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, requesting the use of the Hall on Sunday, May 22nd, 1932, for a colored mass meeting at which time Mr. White was advised that the Hall was not available.

On January 14th, 1936, V.D. Johnston, Treasurer of Howard University, requested the use of the Hall for a recital by Marian Anderson, at which time I suggested that he address a communication to the National Board of Management, National Society, Daughters of the American Revolution. So far as I know the application to the Board was never made and there was no further comment from Howard University on the subject.

About the middle of January, 1939, Mr. Johnston and Mr. Cohen, of Howard University, called on me to make oral application for the use of Constitution Hall on Sunday, April 9th. It was explained to them that the Hall would not be available to them on that date because of a contractual obligation with the National Symphony Orchestra. They then proposed to make an effort to change the date, at which time I advised them that it would be impossible for me to book Miss Anderson in the Hall because of the restriction placed upon me by the Executive ruling of March 23rd, 1932, and I suggested to them that if they sought a waiver of this ruling that they address a letter to the National Board of Management which would meet early in February.

About two days later in the Washington Herald an open letter signed by V.D. Johnston appeared, criticising the D.A.R. for its stand without an effort having been made to get the permission of our Board of Management.

On January 25th, I received a letter from Mr. S. Hurok, Miss Anderson's Manager, telling me that he had been advised that the concert could not be held on April 9th because of our policy of not permitting the appearance of negro artists. I replied to Mr. Hurok's letter on January 25th telling him, as I had told the original applicants, that the Hall was not available on April 9th and suggested that if he wished to request a waiver of policy that he address a communication to Mrs. Robert, our President General. This is the only communication that I have ever had from Mr. Hurok, despite his statement to the press to the contrary.

On February 9th, I received a Registered letter signed by Mr. Charles C. Cohen, requesting the use of the Hall on April 8th or 10th for Miss Anderson's concert and in reply on February 10th, I advised him that the Hall would not be available on either date. Before any of these letters had been received by me, numerous open letters in the press had appeared.

I wish to call particular attention to the fact that a change of date was never actually suggested to me officially by any representative of Miss Anderson until after our Board of Management had taken official action in the matter and that up until the time of this official action the date was actually booked by a contract signed more than a year before.

Since this application was refused it is well known that the Board of Education of the District of Columbia refused a similar application for the use of one of the high school auditoriums. It is not known, however, and I am reliably informed that it is true, that applications were made to the Belasco Theater, the National Theater, the Rialto Theater and Loew's Capitol Theater in Washington for this concert and that each of these applications was refused. I stress this merely because the attack has been made on Constitution Hall only.

I would also like to call to your attention that at 1215 U Street N.W., Washington, the Lincoln Theater, catering to colored trade, has a seating capacity of 1,800, which is approximately the same as our high school auditoriums or any of the theaters mentioned except the Capitol which is larger, hence, I am inclined to believe that this application for a concert in a white theater or auditorium was based more on the desire to hold it in such a theater rather than through the necessity for a larger seating capacity.

I might also call to your attention that our experience with negroes has been that they resent segregation, whereas at the Marian Anderson concert two years ago, given in the negro high school, Mrs. Hand, together with the other white members of the audience, were seated apart from the negro audience.

It might be well also for you to remember that Mr. Ickes, in charge of national parks, maintains a cafeteria in Department of the Interior, where negroes and whites are served alike and yet within a matter of two blocks of the Lincoln Memorial, which is under his supervision, he maintains separate golf courses for the two races.

Various artists have been quoted in the press as to their opinions, etc., and it might be worth your while to know that after this incident occurred Mr. Toscanini and his N.B.C. Orchestra held a concert in Constitution Hall on March 14th, 1939, the contract having been signed on February 24th.

Likewise, Mr. Tibbet had a contract to appear here on March 5th, 1940, and, of all things, Sol Hurok, Manager for Miss Marian Anderson, had contracted to present his Ballet Russe on March 12th and 13th, 1940.

It is only at commercially operated events where we have ever pressed any restrictions on the seating of negroes in Constitution Hall. At conventions, mass meetings, etc., negro delegates and participants in programs are given the same treatment as any white member of an audience and only recently a colored clergyman made a prayer from our stage at a religious mass meeting.

As for this incident hurting the use of the Hall, I can make the following statement: April 1st, 1938 to March 31st, 1939, was the biggest year we have ever had and at the present time I have in hand signed contracts for 75% of that year's business. Other negotiations now pending indicate that the current year will be just as big if not larger.