

Marian Anderson's Legacy

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 Presley 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 for all those who follow; and, as an organization, the DAR is genuinely pleased to pay tribute to her memory.

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



PHOTO BY SCOTT BRAUMAN

▲ 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 Presley Wagoner; ABC News reporter Angela Russell, ceremony emcee; mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves; and soprano Mattiwilda Dobbs.

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."



PHOTO COURTESY OF LIFE MAGAZINE

▲ Marian Anderson performs at Constitution Hall on January 7, 1943, before a capacity audience of four thousand, "a third of them Negro," as reported in the January 25 *Life* magazine article published two weeks later. "Whites and Negroes sat side by side." Also filling the audience were Eleanor Roosevelt, Supreme Court justices, the Attorney General, ambassadors, senators, and cabinet members. Described the *Life* reporter, "When [Marian Anderson] walked out on the stage of Constitution Hall, as always, she sang simply and beautifully."