Reflections on the Patriotic Order, Sons of America

The Patriotic Order, Sons of America (POSA) organization still occupies a well-preserved building on the west bank of Valley Creek just upstream of the Route 23 bridge , and many who have seen the building wonder about it. The following informative 1992 article from the *Daily Local News* provides some useful background and an interesting perspective.

Flying High

Fraternal organization fights to protect the red, white and blue

by Lorett Treese, *Daily Local News*, 1992

This time of year it can be pretty chilly in Flag Hall, the headquarters of the Patriotic Order, Sons of America.

Harvey Stoehr, the organization's state secretary, makes faint puffs of breath as he points out the Easton flag, a curious, early interpretation of the stars and stripes in a corner section where one generally finds stars.

Flag Hall occupies most of the second floor of a building at Valley Forge National Historical Park just west of Valley Creek in Schuylkill Township, which serves as the National Headquarters and Service Center of the Patriotic Order, Sons of America (the POS of A). Twenty-seven reproduction flags are displayed there and 23 more are in storage. They represent the flags flown in America from the earliest days of European colonization.

The flags also bring bright colors to this old-time lodge hall, where other furnishings recall fraternal life in an earlier era. Benches handmade by a member line the walls. An altar-like structure is positioned in the room's center where it holds a hefty Bible. And there is room for marching.

The POS of A is a national society that was organized in Philadelphia in 1847. Its original goals were to promote patriotism and good citizenship, to protect American institutions, and to defend and protect the American flag. Stoehr also notes "Fraternal life was very important. That was before TV. The lodge was where people got together in those days."

The organization's early growth was cut short by the Civil War. It is still pointed out with pride in POS of A literature that most members joined the armed forces during the conflict, except for a group of disabled men in Reading who kept the order alive.

The POS of A was re-established after the Civil War and continued to grow. In 1892, The *Daily Local News* reported, "The order in Chester County has never been in what you would call the best condition but ... is now in better shape than ever before and rapidly gaining ground."

Many men joined the order in the years just prior to World War I, as Americans enlisted to serve their country. POS of A literature notes, "This order altogether had 27,413 of its members enlisted." More than 500 of them perished in the first World War.

Since then, membership had declined—although according to Stoehr, there is still a member in each state except Montana, where the last member died.

The POS of A is organized into a National Camp within which there are State Camps and Subordinate Camps. The local camp at Valley Forge is called Washington Camp #150, chartered in 1871. It has 14 active members and is looking for more.

The POS of A has done a lot for Valley Forge. In 1886, POS of A leader H.J. Staget presented a check to a local group called the Centennial and Memorial Association of Valley Forge, enabling that organization to pay off the mortgage at Washington's Headquarters. The Centennial and Memorial Association had been formally chartered in 1878 to commemorate the Valley Forge experience and purchase Washington's Headquarters to serve as lasting memorial to this historic event. Patriotic ladies, organized under Anna Morris Holstein, had failed to raise enough money until the POS of A got involved.

POS of A members then joined with the Centennial Association in administering this landmark until Valley Forge State Park took it over around 1905.

Washington Camp #150 originally occupied another building in the village of Valley Forge, but the state park condemned this earlier lodge hall in 1918 and demolished it in 1920. The Park offered the POS of A a property then known as the "Riddle Mansion." The park commission minutes noted that "Patriotic Associations are very helpful in many ways and set an example of reverence for the historic field which is very acceptable and congenial to all visitors to the sacred shrine."

The "Riddle Mansion" was really a remodeled multi-unit tenement housing originally built for workers at the mills that once operated along Valley Creek. Stoehr recalls that one man who later became active in the POS of A lived on one of its units. The POS of A gentrified their building with the addition of a two-story colonnade which made it look like Mount Vernon, home of George Washington, who spent the memorable winter of 1777–1778 at Valley Forge.

In nearly 150 years of existence, the POS of A has supported and defended the public school system. In 1887 its members initiated the practice of presenting flags to public schools.

Members also petitioned for the establishment of Flag Day and erected various historical monuments and markers. POS of A literature records that members worked to save the Betty Ross House around the turn of the century and honored Betty Ross's grave with a memorial in 1923.

When the POS of A was founded in the mid-19th century, Irish and German immigrants, many Catholic, were flooding America. These newcomers tended to cluster themselves in separate communities, making older-stock Americans suspicious and fearful that they posed a threat to American society. Feelings of nativism, of "America for Americans," were very strong.

In one of their brochures, the POS of A is still subtitled, "Our Nation's Oldest Patriotic Society of Native Americans." Stoehr

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After acquiring the lease on the property, the Patriotic Order, Sons of America (POSA) built a front facade on the building, as shown in this c. 1930 postcard image. POSA also made many improvements to the interior of the building (see the accompanying articles concerning POSA). The photo on which this postcard is based would have been taken after 1920, when the State Park demolished the dam. *Courtesy of Robert Cohen and TEHS Archives.*

acknowledges that the term Native American is now generally used to those who were formerly known as Indians; however, the POS of A has been using the term to mean those born under the American flag.

Among the speeches made when the POS of A held a quarterly convention in Coatesville in 1893, one member stated "We are not opposed, as some people think, to foreign immigration but we are opposed to those who come here and criticize our flag."

Over the years, the POS of A has supported certain limitations and restrictions on immigration and still does. The organization's current attitude is expressed in its literature with the statement, "We cordially welcome all foreigners who come to this country with the honest desire of this becoming loyal American citizens, and who sincerely disavow all allegiance to foreign governments."

The POS of A still requires that its own members be born under the American flag. One must also be at least 16 and male to join.

Interested women can join an affiliated group called the Patriotic Order of Americans or participate in the organization of a "Defenders Unit," a group of at least eight people who meet regularly at various locations.

Members must also subscribe to the POS of A's "Platform of Principles" which includes some tenets as belief in God, allegiance to the flag and responsible citizenship. Stoehr reports that the POS of A has not been politically active since around 1910 or 1911.

Today, the POS of A supplies American flags to Independence Hall, Washington Crossing Historic Park, and Valley Forge National Historical Park, where the flags that its members donate fly at the National Memorial Arch. For the use of schools and other groups, the POS of A prints materials like its recent booklets on the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. And sometimes POS of A members take flags from their collection to schools where they discuss the flags' meanings and symbolism.

In 1993, as Valley Forge celebrates the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the park, POS of A will participate in activities on the June 19 and will open Flag Hall to the public on Sunday afternoons around 2 pm through June.

According to Harvey Stoehr, POS of A members will plant a trail of little flags up the driveway to the building with the white columns perched above Valley Creek. Visitors will be able to mount the steps to Flag Hall and step into a perfectly preserved and still functioning lodge, enjoy the flag collection and sample the aura of fraternal life of yesteryear.

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The Patriotic Order, Sons of America organization is still active as of this writing in 2022, and maintains offices in Leesport and Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. For more information, please visit their website at **http://www.nationalposofa.org** — the following informative historical summary was found there, and provides another point of view.

PATRIOTIC ORDER SONS OF AMERICA (P.O.S.of A.)

The Patriotic Order Sons of America (P.O.S. of A.) is one of America's oldest patriotic and fraternal societies still in existence. It once had several hundred Camps (lodges) with several thousand members in the United States of America and its territories, but is now only found in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, New Jersey and Louisiana. Its motto is "God, Our Country and Our Order."

Origin of the Order:

The Order of the Junior Sons of America was founded December 10, 1847 in Philadelphia, PA, by Dr. Reynell Coates (December 10, 1802 - April 27, 1886). Dr. Coates was a surgeon, scientist, statesman, naturalist, teacher, poet, lecturer and essayist, and wished to found a fraternity for American boys to serve as a "High School of American Patriotism."

The organization was open to American boys aged sixteen to twenty-one years of age. Upon turning twenty-one, their membership would be transferred to the United Sons of America, the parent organization of the Junior Sons. Dr. Coates was the organizer and chief promoter of the Junior Sons of America, wrote the constitution and by-laws, the ritual and ceremonies, and chose the Order's songs which still remain in use.

The first meeting of the Junior Sons of America was conducted on December 10, 1847, on Ridge Road, near Spring Garden Street, Philadelphia, PA.

Dr. Coates devised the Order on the Masonic lodge system, with local units called "Camps," meeting around fraternal altars on which the Holy Bible was placed. Secret modes of recognition, such as hand signs, grips or secret handclasps, and passwords were devised and taught to the members.

Early Growth:

Immediately after lighting the first Campfire of the Order, the Order expanded throughout the great Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and by 1859, the Order of Junior Sons of America was established in twenty States and Territories of the Union. The Roll Call of the Order consisted of Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New York, Indiana, the District of Columbia, Illinois, New Jersey, Connecticut, Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, Rhode Island, Vermont, Delaware, New Hampshire, Maine, Iowa, and Texas.

The first national convention of the Junior Sons of America was convened in Philadelphia, PA, August 12th and 13th, 1857. The second was conducted in New York City on the second Tuesday of August, 1858, with eight States and the District of Columbia represented.

While the parent organization, the United Sons of America, had dissolved in the 1850's, the Junior Sons of America continued on. Pennsylvania always had the largest number of members and Camps. Each Lodge is called "Washington Camp #___," a tradition started by Dr. Coates to honor the great "Father of Our Country," General George Washington.

The American Civil War:

When the tragic American Civil War (1861-1865) broke out, the first Pennsylvania volunteer regiments were members of the Junior Sons of America. So many members volunteered that only one Camp in Pennsylvania remained active. Some camps enrolled into the Union Army as a whole, proving their loyalty and patriotic love of Flag and Country.

The Order disbanded and fell apart throughout the newly-formed Confederate States of America, and its Camps south of the Mason Dixon Line disappeared.

Reorganization:

Towards the conclusion of this unfortunate conflict, a convention was held by several Brothers of the Junior Sons of America in Norristown, PA on August 17th, 1864, to reorganize the Order. It was at this time that the name was changed to the Patriotic [Order] Sons of America (P.O.S. of A.) and the age limit of 21 was discontinued.

A State body, the "State Camp," was created in August 1866 in Minersville, PA, through whose efforts or reorganization saw some twenty-six subordinate Camps of the P.O.S. of A. represented by the time of the first annual session of the Pennsylvania State Camp in August, 1867.

The Order adopted a sash, worn from the right shoulder to the left hip, bearing the blue canton and white stars, and red and white stripes, of "Old Glory" as the official regalia for P.O.S. of A. brothers. Jewels of office, consisting of red, white and blue ribbons and silver emblematic devices, were adopted for the Camp's officers to wear on their sash.

In the Masonic tradition, a three-degree ritual was adopted by the Order, and was designated as the Red Degree, White Degree and Blue Degree.

Growth and Expansion:

During the period of 1870-1900, the P.O.S. of A. expanded rapidly, establishing Camps along the Eastern seaboard of the United States, and in States as far west as Wyoming and Colorado. The P.O.S. of A. participated in many parades and other social functions, and their Commandery units were always dressed in military style uniforms with plumed chapeaux, swords and black uniforms similar to the Knights Templars of the Masonic York Rite.

The uniform was later changed to more modern U.S. Army-style dark blue uniforms, with the round peaked cap bearing badges with the letters "P.O.S. of A."

Answering the Nation's Call to Arms:

The Brothers of the P.O.S. of A. have always been ready to serve our nation in times of war, and answered the nation's call to arms. 5,000 Brothers volunteered for military service during the outbreak of the Spanish-American War of 1898. Many made the ultimate sacrifice for our nation; they maintained their bonds of brotherhood during the war, and even held Camp meetings while on duty in Puerto Rico.

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In 1917, when the United States of America entered the First World War (1914-1918), 27,413 P.O.S.of A. Brothers enlisted; over 500 gave their lives.

When the United States of America was drawn into the Second World War (1939-1945), close to 5,000 Brothers served in the armed forces; more than 100 made the supreme sacrifice.

Accomplishments of the Order:

At the turn of the last century, the P.O.S. of A. helped purchase and restore General George Washington's Headquarters in Valley Forge, PA. Soon after, the State of Pennsylvania took it over as a park, and it was years before the P.O.S. of A. got the recognition for their tireless efforts. The P.O.S. of A. was also responsible for making Flag Day (June 14) a National holiday in the United States of America on August 3, 1949, the Congressman who drafted the legislation was Brother Francis E. Walter, a member of the Order.

The Order helped save the Betsy Ross Flag House in Philadelphia, PA in 1898, placed monuments and markers at key national shrines such as the birthplace of Francis Scott Key, author of "The Star-Spangled Banner," in Frederick, MD, Washington's Crossing in New Jersey, aided in the preservation of Mount Vernon, VA, and St. Paul's Church, New York, NY, and other notable activities.

The P.O.S. of A. also played a large role in having the U.S. battleship Olympia, Admiral Dewey's flagship from the Spanish-American War, preserved in Philadelphia. The Order continues to present flags to Valley Forge Park, and the flag that flies at Independence Hall comes from the P.O.S. of A.

The P.O.S. of A. stands for education, patriotism, respect for the American Flag. One of the main things we do is donate flags to local organizations and try to spread our love for America. The Order is still proudly in existence and is active in our respective communities.

A special "Thanks" to Brother Denis P. McGowan who provided the history of this Order. Brother McGowan is a dedicated fraternalist and student of the history of American fraternal organizations.



Society members Mike Bertram and Roger Thorne, along with Dave Madary and his father, were hosted on an invited tour of the POSA building in early April 2021, and Roger took these photos, one showing the exterior of the building as seen from the side facing Valley Creek, and the other showing Flag Hall on the upper floor. *Courtesy of Roger D. Thorne.*



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