A Celebration of Marjorie Merriweather Post
Highlights CDA Year

by Sharri Whiting De Masi

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Since 1890 The Colonial Dames of America (CDA) has dedicated itself to historic preservation and education, with emphasis on keeping alive understanding of the history of the United States. The cornerstone of these efforts is preserving the Mount Vernon Hotel Museum & Garden (“MVHMG” or “Museum”) in New York City, where thousands of visitors and schoolchildren come to learn more about a slice of American history that began not long after the country was founded (1826-1833). During that period, the Museum was operated as a day hotel that provided a country escape from the crowded city south of 14th Street.

The Society holds an annual benefit to support the work of the Museum, the eighth-oldest building in Manhattan, which is wholly owned and operated by CDA. The 2016 benefit brought in record contributions to the MVHMG.

In an exciting departure from tradition, the Dames held the 2016 benefit in Washington, DC, in September, at the Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens, former home of Marjorie Merriweather Post. The event celebrated the life of Mrs. Post, who was a Dame (Chapter XVII-Palm Beach), a consummate hostess, businesswoman, and collector. She left assets in trust to preserve the 25-acre estate, museum and gardens she had developed for appreciation by future generations. Today the handsome property serves as a reflection of Mrs. Post’s exquisite and wide-ranging tastes.

Brantley Carter Bolling Knowles, CDA Second Vice-President General, chaired the evening event, held September 22, 2016, and brought together a stellar list of committee members and benefactors. Honorary Chair was Ellen MacNeill Charles, granddaughter of Mrs. Post and President Emerita of
During the benefit evening, the guests were given a tour of Hillwood’s 13 acres of formal gardens, as well as an opportunity to see the magnificent mansion, where Mrs. Post’s own gold CDA insignia pin was on display. Speaker for the evening was Estella M. Chung, head of Oral History and Curator of American material culture and historian at Hillwood. Music was provided by The Champagne Consort Trio. Designer Marisol Deluna and Garden Committee Chair Charlotte Squarcy wore the colorful new Dames garden scarf.

In her welcoming speech at the benefit, CDA President General Sharon Worthing Vaino noted, “Marjorie Merriweather Post was a visionary. She saw potential where others did not, and had the energy and means to bring that potential to pass.” For example, she salvaged thousands of art treasures from the former Soviet Union under Stalin, restored them, and displayed them at Hillwood, creating one of the finest collections in the world. She was a generous charitable benefactor and was named to the French Legion of Honor.

Sharon added, “Mrs. Post was a trail blazer, who, as a corporation president, transformed the breakfast cereal empire she inherited from her father into a publicly traded, global foods business. Hers is a female success story that should not remain buried in the archives of history.”

Marjorie Merriweather Post was well-known as a grande dame of society in New York, Washington, Palm Beach and beyond. As an active member of CDA Chapter XVII in Palm Beach, she often entertained the Dames at her Mar-a-Lago estate, which has now become the Winter White House. Frances Middendorf (Chapter X – Rome, Italy) remembers childhood visits to Mrs. Post’s Adirondack estate, Camp Topridge, where young visitors were brought in by boat from around the lake and entertained with movies screened in the living room.

This memorable benefit evening underscored The Colonial Dames of America’s dedication to historic preservation, the cornerstone of the Society’s mission. The Dames headquarters in Manhattan serves as the repository of the archives, amassed over the more than 127 years since the founding of CDA. First Vice-President General Beverley Tucker Wahl Sherrid is Chair of the Archives Committee, which protects and manages important documents and historic artifacts. Beverley believes “the most compelling aspect of the CDA archives is hearing the interests and personalities of the early Dames so vividly expressed in their own words. Their letters bring the Gilded Age to life in a way that no history or novel has ever done. It is vitally important to preserve these unique pieces of American history.”

Consulting Archivist Martha Foley says, “Of all the collections on which I’ve worked, the archives of the Colonial Dames is my favorite. The voices of the founders, especially
May Van Rensselaer, just leap off the pages. It is such a treasure to have this collection of women’s voices uniting for common purposes, whether for saving a building, putting up a plaque to commemorate an event, giving awards and scholarships, organizing book drives in Paris for wounded WWI soldiers and then supporting a French war orphan, or publishing George Washington’s correspondence.”

During late 2016 and early 2017, Dames activities took place across the country and included the chartering of the new Chapter XXXVIII—Santa Barbara, California. Chapter President Kathi Hobbs Chulick and chapter members were joined for the official ceremony by presidents of two other California chapters, Susan Trau Johnson of Chapter V—San Francisco,

Right: Christopher Wolf, Chairman of the Social Register Association, and Lise Wolf (left) with Darci Knowles at an event in Palm Beach attended by many Dames and their guests.

Below: CDA President General Sharon Vaino (second right) and guests at the CDA Fall Benefit in Washington (left to right): Jenna Ebersole, son David Vaino, and husband Juan Vaino.
and Dorothy Peterson, past president of Chapter XX—Los Angeles. Another new chapter, Chapter XXXIX—Birmingham was chartered, with Connie Grund serving as Chapter President.

On December 1, the annual holiday party and tea dance was held at the Abigail Adams Smith Ballroom, part of the CDA headquarters in Manhattan. Kathleen Elizabeth Springhorn, Board of Managers member and Hospitality Chair, welcomed members and guests to this popular annual event, which kicks off the holiday season. Providing their assistance were CDA Executive Director Deborah Spaeder McWilliams and Mount Vernon Hotel Museum and Garden Director Terri Daly.

A Western Regional meeting was held in California in January of 2017, where chapters gathered together to discuss programs and plans. The meetings were led by Brantley Carter Bolling Knowles, CDA Second Vice-President General, who also serves as Chair of the Liaison and Chapter Development Committee, and by Board of Managers member Charlotte Christian.

February marked the annual gala and weekend of festivities hosted by Chapter XVII—Palm Beach, The Colonial Dames of America, and the Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Florida. The two societies jointly hosted the gala dinner dance, which was held at an historic private location. CDA Chapter XVII—Palm Beach held a Saturday meeting followed by a cocktail party hosted by past chapter president Bradley van Hoek.
and her husband, CJ, at their beautiful Palm Beach residence, while the Warriors put on an afternoon of polo.

Along with Dames from Florida, New York and beyond, the group welcomed Christopher and Lise Wolf. Chris is the new Chairman of the Social Register Association and the charming couple adds sparkle to social scenes around the country.

On April 20, 2017, The Colonial Dames of America welcomed Dames and guests to its third annual tea, held at a private club in Washington, DC, during lineage week. This event has become a much anticipated opportunity for Dames to gather before the Annual Meeting, which is held in New York on the weekend closest to April 30, the day when George Washington was inaugurated in 1789. Board of Managers member Charlotte Christian chaired this tea with elegance and grace.

The 2017 CDA annual business meeting and luncheon falls on Monday, May 1, providing an opportunity on the preceding Sunday for Dames to visit historic sites in lower Manhattan, the tour to include Federal Hall, the site of the inauguration of the first President of the United States, who was sworn into office 228 years ago. The CDA President General’s Award gala dinner was planned for the previous evening at a private club in New York City, where the winning chapter would be saluted for its historic preservation efforts.

As The Colonial Dames of America moves further into the 21st century, the

Top: Deborah Spaeder McWilliams, CDA Executive Director, and Allison White, Parent Chapter, at the CDA Fall Benefit in Washington.

Center: John and Christie Morris, Chapter XXI – Atlanta at the CDA Fall Benefit in Washington.

Right: CDA Fall Benefit Chair Brantley Carter Knowles and Co-Chair Kathleen Elizabeth Springhorn.
Society continues its commitment to preserving the history of those who have gone before and educating those who will lead in the future.

Sharri Whiting De Masi lives in Umbria, Italy, where she is President of CDA Chapter X—Rome, supports the historic Non-Catholic Cemetery (Old Protestant Burying Ground), and is Italian correspondent for Luxury Travel Advisor magazine. She serves as Chair of the Communications Committee, The Colonial Dames of America.

Left: From the CDA Archives, letters between Tiffany and CDA founder Maria “May” Demming Van Rensselaer (Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer) of New York, when Tiffany was designing the CDA insignia in 1890.

Below: At the CDA Fall Benefit in Washington, CDA First Vice President Beverley Sherrid (Parent Chapter), Isabel Wescoat (Parent Chapter), Cathy Brawer (Parent Chapter), and Terri Daly, Executive Director of the Mount Vernon Hotel Museum & Garden.