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The Hall of Fame for Great Americans: Organizational comatosis or hibernation

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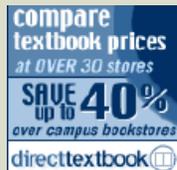
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The Hall of Fame for Great Americans: Organizational Comatosis or Hibernation?

By William N. Thompson and Ernita Joaquin

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The world's first organization that has been specifically designated as a "Hall of Fame" was established in New York City in 1900. The Hall of Fame for Great Americans honors 102 Americans. It has served as a model for hundreds of other "halls of fame," the most prominent being baseball's Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, established in 1939. While the Hall of Fame for Great Americans remains the original icon in a history of popular culture museums visited by millions each year, the Hall today is little known, visited by scant few, and in a state of both physical and organizational decline. This article is a call to reawaken this institution from, depending on how you see it, comatosis or hibernation.

The Hall of Fame came about by accident. Henry MacCracken, President of New York University (NYU), wanted to establish a new campus in a rural area of the Bronx. He found fifty acres on a bluff rising above the Harlem River. He secured funding for the building project in a gift from Helen Miller Gould, daughter of business tycoon Jay Gould. He chose renown architect Stanford White to design the central building--the Gould Library.

White and MacCracken desired to exploit visual effects of the building by putting it as close to the bluff as possible. To do so required a massive retaining wall. Otherwise the library structure might slip over the precipice. At the same time, a wall would create somewhat of an eyesore defining the glorious building above it. The retaining wall needed something at its top that would add a positive visual quality. White determined that there should be a terrace above the wall behind the library. But what to do with the plaza? MacCracken put his mind into high gear, and unveiled his idea. American needed a pantheon to honor its greatest citizens. That pantheon would be a hall of fame. The plaza has a ten foot wide walkway with columns. It extends for 630 feet, having space for 102 plaques and statutory busts between the columns. Today there are 98 busts in place.

MacCracken's inspiration came from Westminster Abbey in London, the Ruhmeshalle near Munich, Walhalla Temple in Regensburg, Germany, and Pantheons of Paris and Rome. He also considered Statutory Hall in the Capitol in Washington, D.C. Yet he wanted something unique.

In a 1900 essay, MacCracken outlined features to make the Hall distinctly American. First, membership would be selected through elections, not by royal decree or by chief executives or legislative bodies. Choices for membership would be made by electors

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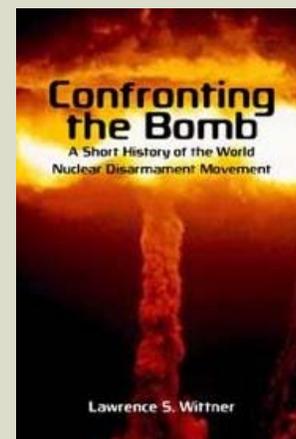


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chosen for this function. Second, the Hall would not be reserved for political leaders, but rather for those displaying greatness in several fields. Third, electors would be chosen from every state of the union. These would be university presidents, professors, authors and editors, and judges. Fourth, elections were to be held each five years. Fifth, the operation was to be governed by the Senate of NYU.

Elections began in 1900. The general population submitted names to the Senate. These were reviewed, and 234 names were presented to 100 electors, who each were asked to cast 50 votes. Those selected had to win a majority of votes. They had to be native born and deceased for at least ten years. The result found 29 elected. George Washington was elected unanimously along with Jefferson. Lincoln, Franklin, Fulton, Audubon, Emerson, Asa Gray, James Kent, and George Peabody. Protests ensued that no woman was elected. These were abated somewhat as five women won election in the 1905 and 1910 elections. There were protests that foreign born Americans were excluded. In 1915 the Senate revised rules and permitted their consideration. Over time eleven women were elected including Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan B. Anthony, Mary Lyon, Jane Addams, Lillian Wald and Clara Barton. Foreign born entries include Alexander Hamilton, Louis Agassiz, Roger Williams, Simon Newcomb, Thomas Paine, and Andrew Carnegie.

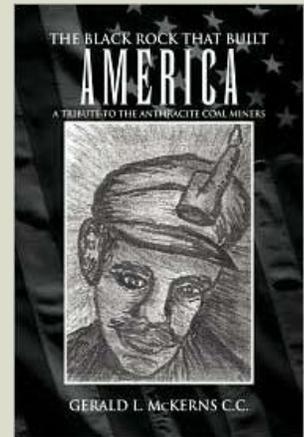
In 1925 it was required that members be deceased for 25 years. That requirement held, with one exception. Wilbur Wright was allowed early election, so that there could be a ceremony installing him with his brother Orville. From 1925 through 1940, election required a three-fifths majority of votes. In 1940 only Stephen Foster was elected. This caused concern, as it was felt more names were needed so there could be more installations—and more public attention for the Hall. Then in 1945, as the counting of ballots progressed, it was realized that Booker T. Washington was the only nominee winning three-fifths support.

It can be noted that John James Audubon won election in 1900 even though he was born in Haiti, an oversight. He also had a “Creole” mother, so it was likely he was the first American of African heritage installed. Nonetheless, it was considered that Washington was the first African American elected. But was an African American to be honored as the only new member in 1945? Quickly, the Senate met and changed election rules (mid-count) back to the original requirement of majority vote for selection. Five joined Washington as newly elected members. These included Sidney Lanier, nominated by the Daughters of the Confederacy. In 1946, the two enjoyed “separate but equal” installation ceremonies.

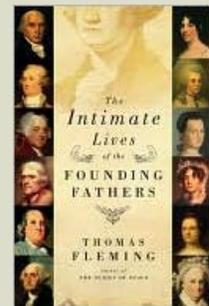
In 1960 Henry David Thoreau was elected, but his supporters balked at having an expensive ceremony. It was difficult to raise \$10,000 to sculpt his statue, but it was raised, and he was installed. In 1970 Franklin Roosevelt was denied membership in the only election he ever lost—on his own. He was elected in 1973. That was the year financial problems forced NYU to sell the



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Bronx campus to the state of New York. It was made the campus for Bronx Community College (BCC). Control of the Hall passed to Trustees, and it was to be financed by both NYU and BCC. There was an election in 1976—the last. After funding was withdrawn in 1977, the Trustees were disbanded. BCC gives custodial care and some security to the facility.

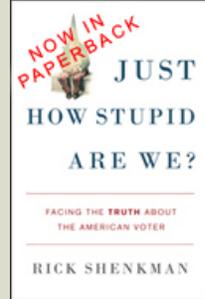
The Hall of Fame's slide toward oblivion began slowly. It monopolized the name "hall of fame" until 1939, when baseball's "hall" opened. Baseball offered another model of "fame," one closer to Andy Warhol's edict that we would all enjoy "fifteen minutes of fame." The population felt closer to "alive" baseball greats when they were enshrined, as they were not familiar with many of those enshrined in the Bronx. In the 1960s the nation was consumed with war protests and concerns about civil rights. Yet the Hall gave little attention to persons of peace or to minorities. Many of the women in the Hall were remote figures in history. The African Americans (Washington and Carver) were the two "negroes" whose achievements were taught to all white school children as examples of how America could be inclusive, when they really proved the opposite. Leaders like Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Dubois were totally overlooked. Sojourner Truth was nominated but did not receive a vote, Harriet Tubman received one singular vote. Moreover, the Hall was located in a neighborhood that was becoming "minority," and when the campus was transferred to the BCC, the students wandering through the Hall each day could not relate to the monuments surrounding them. The Hall did not contain any Hispanics, there were no Asian Americans or Native Americans, and there were no Roman Catholics. Only three of the enshrined were Jewish.

The Hall failed in sustaining itself with funding. Its eight directors—since the death of MacCracken in 1918—were older men who maintained their feet in other careers. They took the directorship for its honor--they could preside over ceremonies. Rather than seeking endowment funds, they confined fund raising efforts to money to sculpt busts of new members. NYU provided funds for day-to-day operations. The University did not expend money for more than custodial and clerical help. Yet the University gave the Hall prestige. All that ended in 1973 when BCC took over. An agreement at the time called for NYU and the BCC to give the Hall \$125,000 a year, but those funds ended in 1977, and operations stopped. One installation took place afterwards—in 1992 a statue of Franklin Roosevelt was unveiled. Some grants allowed restoration work in the 1980s and 1990s, but renewed efforts to raise more funds were failures.

Attempts to find another location for the Hall also failed: a state park in New Jersey, across from the Statue of Liberty, The Bronx Botanical Gardens, the Mall in Washington, the World Trade Center (that could have given the Hall renewed "fame"). All the locations were rejected, many due to moving costs. Today there are scant few who care. One man does. Art Zuckerman, renown in New York for his 71 walking tours, started the "Friends of the Hall of Fame" in 2007. With a small group of volunteers he conducts tours—many for schools, and he explores opportunities to improve the facilities and reach out for more funding.

So what can be done for this icon on 181st Street in the Bronx? Can it awaken from its hibernation, or worse, its state of comatosis? We offer five ideas for revival.

First, historical accounts of the institution should be enhanced. A



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valuable contemporary manuscript on the Hall was written by Clifford Colmer Nelson in 1990. It should be edited and published.

Second, the public should be made aware of the Hall's mission. This can be done by marketing and creating new uses for the Hall. Displays in Gould Library rotunda should be given over to other halls of fame. These should be allies and not rivals. The full range of halls should be recognized by a listing, and also for pictorial displays and information. There can be displays of concepts of greatness. This display area could utilize basement areas of the Library which were originally to be a museum.

Third, the Hall of Fame for Great Americans reflects values of the America of its electors, an America that is somewhat of a present but essentially is an America of a past. That past should not be denigrated, but it should be recognized as a time that has been "a changing," and that in any complete sense, is no more. The Hall of Fame should be a frozen as if an object in an historical museum. The 102 members should represent the complete collection. Busts of four members without statues should be finished.

Fourth, a contemporary virtual Hall of Fame For Great Americans should be created with new ongoing elections. Visitors to this new ongoing Hall of Fame should be allowed to cast votes, and vote totals should be displayed in Gould Library. The list should be posted and also available online.

Fifth, ownership and control of the Hall of Fame should go to a new quasi-independent authority, associated with the state-sponsored City University of New York. The name of the sponsoring college should be changed away from the generic "Bronx Community College," an entity that has had any existence only since the mid-1950s. That college should become known as "The Hall of Fame College of the City University of New York."

No doubt, there are plenty of other ways to make the Hall rise again. Ideas are needed. Our suggestions aim to re-awaken this important American institution at a time when our country struggles to conquer many divisions. A re-born Hall of Fame for Great Americans can be part of a national renewal of unity through historical appreciation.