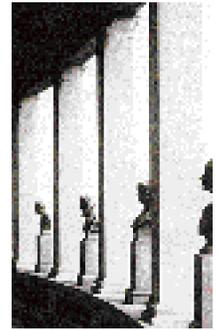


Sally Webster

# America Celebrates Its Past

## The Hall of Fame of Great Americans



The design of the Hall of Fame of Great Americans, as well as the portrait busts it contains, represent a traditional, academic style of art. Although currently ignored by historians and denigrated by supporters of modernism, this landmark remains an extraordinary example of one of the ways Americans have celebrated their past.

The Hall of Fame of Great Americans is a 630'-long open-air colonnade designed by Stanford White as part of an architectural ensemble connecting three buildings on a bluff overlooking the Harlem River in the Bronx, New York (figures 1 & 3). Originally part of New York University (NYU), it was deeded to Bronx Community College, City University of New York (CUNY) in 1973, when NYU consolidated its campuses at Washington Square in Manhattan. On each side of a curving pergola are 102 niches separated by Corinthian pillars that currently house 98 portrait busts (figure 2). The overall impression is of a graciously orchestrated pilgrimage through American history.

The Hall of Fame of Great Americans was conceived by Dr. Henry Mitchell MacCracken, New York University's chancellor at the turn of the

century, as a national patriotic and educational shrine. Together with White, he envisioned an American pantheon based on various European models—the Pantheons in Rome and Paris, Westminster Abbey in London, and the Valhalla in Regensburg, Germany.

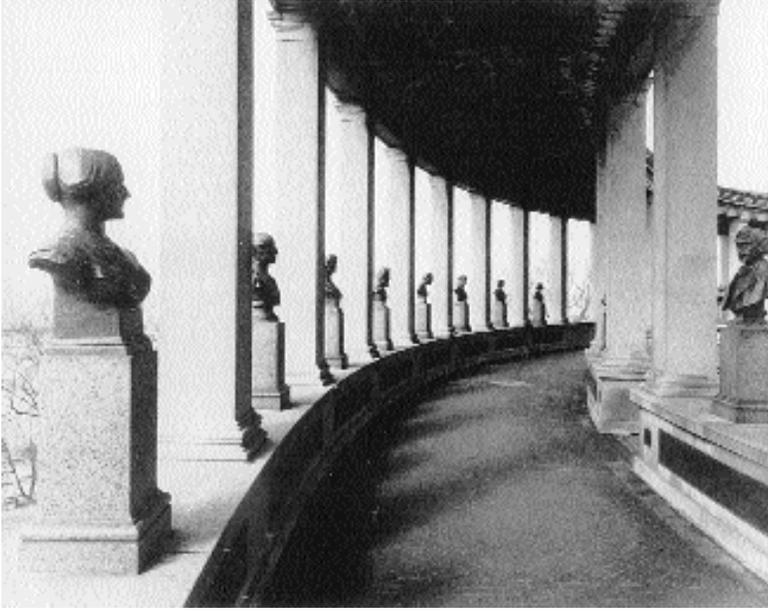
Today, if one thinks about Halls of Fame at all, it is probably in the context of the better-known Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York which is, in reality, a spin-off of the Hall of Fame of Great Americans. As of 1977, there were over 40 halls of fame in the United States and Canada, all of which trace their history back to the granddaddy of them all, the Hall of Fame of Great Americans in the Bronx. With its kitsch connotations and overt appeal to patriotism, the Hall of Fame is a difficult institution to defend in today's world. Also, its design, and the portrait busts it contains, represent a traditional, academic style associated with official art that may not have much resonance for modern viewers. While it may be largely ignored by cultural and art historians, this landmark demonstrates one way in which Americans have memorialized their heroes.

1. The Hall of Fame of Great Americans, Bronx, New York. Photo courtesy of the Hall of Fame.



Although MacCracken was the moving force behind the establishment of the Hall of Fame, another motivating factor was White's desire to include an architectural structure that would create a formal entrance to the west end of the campus. In order to justify the expense, MacCracken suggested the creation of a Hall of Fame as an extension of the university's educational mandate.

MacCracken was born in 1840 in Oxford, Ohio, where, as a precocious student, he graduated from its Miami University at the age of 17. He then worked briefly as a school administrator, but wishing to further his ambitions as an educator, he studied theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. Aside from a year's trip



2. Pergola and portrait busts of the Hall of Fame. Photo courtesy of the Hall of Fame.

to Europe where he “pursue[d] philosophical and theological studies...., visiting Tübingen and Berlin, the stronghold of Hegelian philosophy,” he lived in Ohio until 1881, when he was appointed Chancellor of Western University of Pennsylvania (now the University of Pittsburgh). Three years later he was hired by the University of the City of New York (renamed New York University in 1896) as professor of philosophy.

In 1885 he was appointed Vice Chancellor of NYU and six years later became its Chancellor. This was a watershed period for the University and MacCracken, an able administrator, had been promoted to oversee its expansion and development including the decision to create University College, an undergraduate campus for men, in the then-rural South Bronx.

Money for the construction of the new NYU campus buildings, including the Hall of Fame, was donated by Mrs. Finley J. Shepard (Helen M. Gould Shepard), daughter of Jay Gould, who was not enshrined in the Hall of Fame, but whose name was given to the library, the central building of White’s architectural ensemble.

MacCracken’s plans for the Hall of Fame were ambitious. He drew up a constitution that stipulated that national elections were to be held every five years. Furthermore, nominations should not be dominated by statesmen and the military, as was common in Europe, but represent a broad range of professionals including authors, educators, preachers, humanitarians, social and economic reformers, scientists, engineers, physicians, inventors, missionaries, explorers, judges, businessmen, philanthropists, artists, and actors, as well as politicians and soldiers. In order to insure that no one group with vested interests controlled the election, and to convey a certain dignity to the proceedings,

three independent bodies were charged with governance: a board of directors composed of college presidents; the Faculty Senate of NYU who would coordinate the nominations and election; and a board of 100 judges representing all states “chosen among these classes of citizens—University or College Presidents and Educators; Professors of History and Scientists; Publicists, Editors and Authors; and Judges of Supreme Court, State or National.” Regarding requirements for nomination, the constitution stated that no one could be elected who was not born in the United States and who had not been deceased for at least 10 years.

In order to garner public support of this new patriotic endeavor, MacCracken enlisted the efforts of newspaper editors and civic organizations. By May 1, 1900, more than 1,000 nominations had been received from the public, a figure that exceeded anyone’s expectations. These names were then forwarded to the Faculty Senate, which could nominate additional persons. This list was put to a vote and a select group of 234 nominees was passed on to the national judges. Their votes were the decisive ones, and as evidence of the seriousness with which these nominations were taken, 97 out of the 100 judges responded. The final list contained 29 persons who had been elected by the required majority vote.

The Hall of Fame was officially opened on Decoration Day (now Memorial Day), May 30, 1901, an anniversary now observed annually at the Hall. Chancellor MacCracken presided at the dedication ceremonies and in his opening remarks, he commented specifically on the public nature of this new institution: “the University regards itself only as a trustee of this national patriotic and educational shrine that belongs to all the people of the United States.” During its first decades, the Hall commemorated its inductees with plaques. The first of the 98 memorial busts that adorn the Hall of Fame was created in the early 1920s.

Originally, the honorees were to be categorized into 15 different sections (ultimately there would be 14). For the first election, however, only seven were created, beginning with the Statesmen’s Comer. Here seven men were honored: Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and Abraham Lincoln. The next section was the Jurists’ (now called Lawyers and Judges) where John Marshall, James Kent, and Joseph Story were honored. In the Soldiers’ Section (now called Military) were Ulysses S. Grant, Admiral David Farragut, and Robert E. Lee.

Then came a section called the Septimi Section, a name since abandoned, which originally included representatives from uncategorized professions such as George Peabody, Peter Cooper,

and Gilbert Stuart. The fifth was the Scientists' Section, still so named, where Robert Fulton, Samuel F.B. Morse, Eli Whitney, John J. Audubon, and Asa Gray were honored. Next, the Teachers' Section eulogized Jonathan Edwards, Horace Mann, Henry Ward Beecher, and William Ellery Channing. Finally, there was the Authors' Corner with tributes to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

As part of a public relations effort by the University, civic and patriotic institutions were invited to contribute to the expense of the plaques. Organizational sponsors included such varied groups as the Colonial Dames, the American Bar Association, the Grand Army of the Republic, the National Academy of Design, the American Society of Civil Engineers, the Botanical Society of America, and the National Education Association.

The election of women has a special history, since from the beginning women could both vote and be nominated. In the first election nine women were nominated but none received the required majority votes. However, in the next two elections three were chosen in 1905 and two more in 1910. In 1914, in an effort to give women further parity, the University (which had just begun to accept

Musicians, Actors); Harriet Beecher Stowe (1910, Authors); Maria Mitchell (1905, Scientists); Mary Lyon (1905), Alice Freeman Palmer (1920), Emma Willard (1905) (Educators); Jane Addams (1965), Susan B. Anthony (1950), Lillian D. Wald (1970), and Frances E. Willard (1915) (Humanitarians). As noted earlier, the 11th, Clara Barton, who was elected in 1976 in the humanitarian category, has yet to be commemorated by a bust portrait. Also, two African Americans have been elected: Booker T. Washington in 1945 (Educator) and George Washington Carver in 1973 (Scientist).

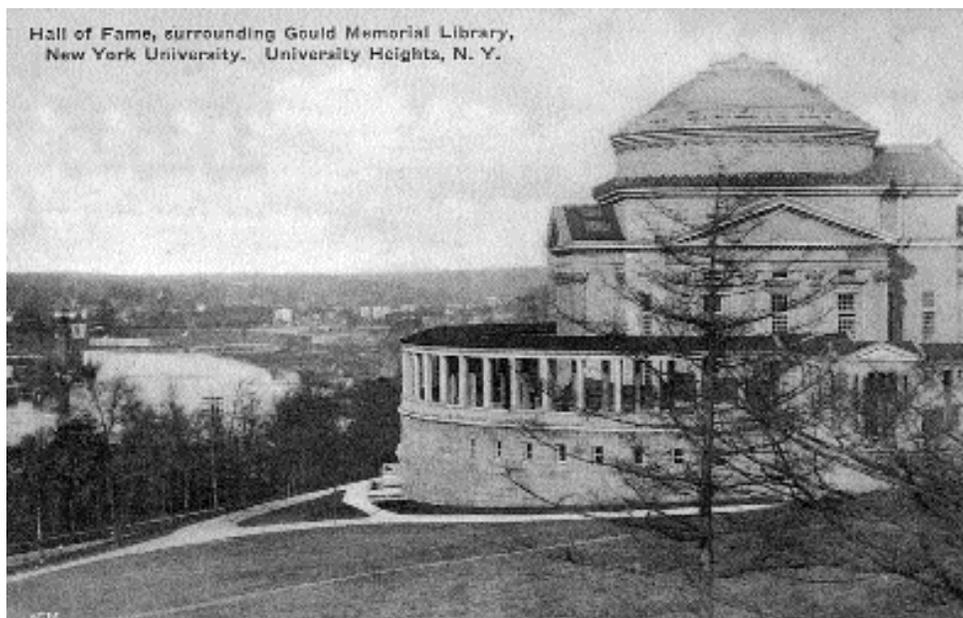
While less than half the persons enshrined in the Hall of Fame have been named above, one can begin to sense that their accomplishments in a variety of fields constitute an American canon, a roll call of individuals whose achievements have informed and defined our culture. Influenced by civic organizations, whose self interest can be easily documented, and with final selections determined by peer review, one could construct an argument that only the interests of the ruling elite were promoted. Yet in its time, this was an institution which encouraged the participation of the general public. Its stated goal being the creation, by national election, of an American pantheon to honor those persons whose accomplishments embodied and advanced democratic ideals.

Among the questions which remain to be asked are what lessons, if any, can be learned from a study of the Hall of Fame? Today it is an uneasy presence in the Bronx. Aside from groups of school children on field trips, there is no local or national audience for a project whose roots are deeply embedded in European culture, whose purpose contains values that are illusory for a late-20th century public, and whose sculpture exemplifies the academic ideals of an earlier generation. We are now suspicious of efforts to honor the few over the many. Yet the Hall of Fame may be useful as a way to explore current assumptions around cultural

issues against the backdrop of those established during an earlier era when a similarly urgent debate took place regarding national values.

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3. Postcard view of the Hall of Fame pergola, Gould Memorial Library and the Hudson River, ca.1920.



women) created a separate Hall of Fame for Women. Evidently, these plans and appointments did not materialize, since eight years later, and perhaps prompted by passage of the 19th Amendment granting suffrage to women, the University Senate voted to once again have joint elections of both men and women. Altogether 11 women have been elected to the Hall of Fame, although only 10 have been commemorated by bronze likenesses: Charlotte Saunders Cushman (1915, Artists,