

MIDDLETOWN TRANSCRIPT

Cooch's Bridge DAR marks national milestone, celebrates local members

By Delaware News Desk

Posted Nov 7, 2019 at 9:00 PM

This fall, the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution will surpass 1 million total members who have joined the organization since its founding in 1890, and the Cooch's Bridge DAR Chapter — based in Newark and founded in 1902 — is celebrating this milestone by spotlighting chapter members through the years.

The DAR is a women's service organization whose members can trace their lineage to an individual who contributed to securing American independence during the Revolutionary War.

Throughout Cooch's Bridge Chapter's 117-year history, its membership has included many remarkable women from the community. The charter membership was 13 ladies, 1/3 of whom were members of the Cooch family.

Current chapter member Marilyn Fox Gleber joined in 1945 — a membership of 74 years. Another current member, Edith Coleman, is 101 years old. Coleman is a past regent from New Jersey and recently celebrated her great-granddaughters becoming members, continuing the family tradition.

Current Regent Sarah O'Donnell earned her Ph.D. in zoology in 1978 at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, specializing in ecology/limnology, despite resistance from what was then a male-dominated science. O'Donnell's career included 25 years in the Bell system, a professor position at Montclair State University and teaching high school biology, environmental science, AP biology and AP environmental sciences.

O'Donnell's background was perfect for a recent DAR service project at the Head of Christiana cemetery, where 16 people spent a Saturday morning removing harmful mosses and lichens from Revolutionary War-era gravestones. Upon

retirement, O'Donnell and her husband, Bruce, moved to Middletown, where they maintain a historic home on North Cass Street. They are proud to contribute to the preservation of Middletown's historic homes.

A newer member, Jan Ekoniak, was raised with seven siblings on an Indiana tenant farm, and her father hoped she would become a local farm wife. Her mother, a high school valedictorian, encouraged her to pursue academics, and with a Hoosier scholarship to Purdue University, she became the first female in the family to earn a college degree. When she was 26, her first husband, a Purdue engineering graduate, was lost in an Air Force tragedy, qualifying her for membership in "Gold Star Wives of America." After initially teaching school and earning a Master of Science at Purdue, Ekoniak enjoyed a 28-year career with ICI/Zeneca, the first woman hired into a professional position in the Agricultural Research and Development Division. With her present husband, a fellow scientist and U.S. Air Force veteran, they have three sons, two of whom are U.S. Navy veterans. Ekoniak did her graduate work at both Purdue and at Villanova and achieved a coveted Professional in Human Resources credential through the Society for Human Resource Management. She retired as the global head of human resources from QPS, a pharmaceutical testing startup. Several of Ekoniak's ancestors were Quaker, arriving in America via New Castle as early as 1680, then settling in Philadelphia. Now living part-time in both Indiana and Delaware, Ekoniak is active in DAR in both states. She chairs the Community Classroom Committee for both chapters, as well as the Delaware State Society DAR. She also has a local connection — a fifth great-uncle, Capt. William Darke, fought at the Battle of Cooch's Bridge.

Michelle West, who joined the Cooch's Bridge chapter in 2018, is chair of the "American Spirit" Magazine Committee and the Historic Preservation Committee, as well as being a member of the DAR State Committee on Continental Congress week. West was raised as an only child in a one-parent household, and her interest in genealogy sparked from a longing to feel connected to other people, as well as the desire to provide a connection to the past and a family history for her children. West has traced her American ancestry back to 1608, to Capt. Thomas Graves of the Jamestown settlement. Graves sat as the representative of Smyths Hundred on the House of Burgesses, the first democratically-elected legislative body in the American colonies. Also of particular interest, West is participating in a volunteer case study for a project

that the University of Pennsylvania is conducting on early Chesapeake settler migrations. She had a 33-year career as a supermarket industry professional and travels throughout the Mid-Atlantic region while remaining an active member in the chapter.

The Cooch's Bridge DAR Chapter focuses much of its efforts on supporting veterans, helping to preserve historic properties and other service projects, such as the Taylor's Bridge School in Townsend, co-hosting the "This Place Matters" series at the historic Hale-Byrnes House in Stanton, and cleaning Revolutionary War-era gravestones at Head of Christiana Cemetery in Newark.

Women interested in exploring DAR membership should visit dar.org and darcoochsbridge.org.