

A Brief History of the Cosmos Club

The Cosmos Club was founded in 1878 in the home of the visionary Civil War soldier, Grand Canyon explorer and scientist John Wesley Powell. Powell and the other original members envisioned the club, located in the nation's capital, as a nexus of thought and action. In a time of great change, the federal government was expanding its role in areas where the applied sciences had greater relevance. The Club's founding members were a group of men with strong scientific backgrounds, an interest in public service and an affinity for the exchange of ideas. The Club was born of an impulse to harness science and technology to the growth of post-Civil War America. In addition, the Club served as the founding venue for important institutions such as the National Geographic Society, the Wilderness Society and the Washington Academy of the Sciences.

In 1943 on the 65th anniversary of the Club's founding, Waldo Clifford Leland, influential in the establishment the National Archives, said "the Cosmos Club provides the place, the occasion, and the opportunity for that informal meeting of minds . . . The most fruitful [such meetings] . . . must take place in an atmosphere conducive to free exchange of views . . . where many intellectual roads cross and where ideas of the most different sorts will encounter each other. Such a place is the Cosmos Club." Indeed.

The impulse for public service still animates the Club and it has adapted to the profound changes in our society since 1878. In particular, racial and gender barriers for membership were broken in the mid-twentieth century, but not without controversy. The first African American member was admitted in 1962 and the first women in 1988.

The Club's membership today consists of men and women from many disciplines and backgrounds, including the law, public service, the arts and literature, as well as from science, mathematics and engineering. Over the years, many prominent Americans have been members, including three U.S. presidents, senior political and government officials, Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winners and recipients of the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

A few years after its founding, the Club was headquartered in the former Dolly Madison home on Lafayette Square near the White House. In 1950 the Club purchased and renovated the Townsend mansion on Massachusetts Avenue, its current headquarters. Today this venue, on the National Register of Historic Places and designated as a District of Columbia landmark, allows groups of members to meet in large and small dining rooms, two casual bars, and small meeting rooms. In addition, sleeping accommodations are available for visiting members and guests.

A core feature of the Club is its twenty subject-matter standing committees which engage some 300 members annually in service to the Club. The committees, along with groups and tables, offer members participation in discussions on subjects as varied as astronomy, American history, architecture, engineering, the Civil War, international relations, personal investments, chess and Shakespeare. They stimulate serious discussion on topics of importance and interest led by knowledgeable and curious members. The impressive array of intellectual and cultural programs includes musical concerts, lectures, art exhibitions, language tables and affinity groups.

The Club's history provides a strong foundation for addressing critical issues of our own time from climate change to domestic reconciliation. The tradition of civil dialogue and informed discussion across disciplines is a key element of our nation's—and the Club's—future success.

For additional information on the Cosmos Club's history, see:

Washburn, Wilcomb E. *The Cosmos Club of Washington: A Centennial History 1878-1978*, Published by the Cosmos Club, Washington, DC, 1978, and *Beginning the Second Century 1979-1994*. Available in the Club library.