

# A HISTORY OF SARAH JOSEPHINE MEREDITH LANGSTAFF and DAUGHTERS OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN THE USA



For over one hundred years the Daughters of the British Empire in the USA has been a common bond for women of British and Commonwealth of Nations heritage living in America. Members, joining together in fellowship, contribute significantly to the good of their local communities and support the four retirement homes for men and women established by the DBE.

The DBE is a non-profit, non-political American organization and membership is extended by invitation to women residing in the U.S. who are of British or British Commonwealth of Nations heritage by birth, naturalization, or ancestry and to women whose spouses or partners are of British or Commonwealth of Nations birth, naturalization or ancestry.

Throughout the twentieth century, members have maintained an extraordinary standard of volunteer work, spanning two World Wars, the Depression, right up to the present, and have a history of service to be duly proud of.

This American-based society was founded in 1909 by a remarkable woman, Mrs. J. Elliot Langstaff. Sarah Josephine Meredith Langstaff was born of English parents in the Canadian town of St. Catherine's, Ontario, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, 1849. As an infant, she was adopted by Bridgewater Meredith, an Oxford man of Magdalen College, and his American wife, Caroline Arnold of New Jersey. Josephine Meredith grew up in New Jersey and in 1884 married Dr. John Elliot Langstaff, also Canadian-born, and took up residence in the City of Brooklyn, New York.

Josephine Langstaff's interest extended beyond her home. She had in her heart sympathy for British people and she realized that a group of British-born women in a foreign country united in a common cause could be a power for good, both for themselves and for the country in which they lived. This was the vision which culminated in her founding the Daughters of the British Empire.

It was on a visit to Montreal that Josephine Langstaff became acquainted with the work of the [Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire](#). So impressed was she by the aims and camaraderie of this Canadian-based organization that she proceeded to organize along similar lines in the United States. Thus, the Charter Chapter of the American organization, "King Edward VII" was formed in New York on March 15, 1909.

From its inception, the organization grew rapidly and Chapters were formed in numerous States.

In order to achieve legal status as an American organization, application was made to the State of New York for a corporate charter. This was granted on December 8, 1910, under the name "Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire in the United States of America."

All Chapters received their charters from the New York organization until 1919 when a more flexible type of administration was devised to give each state financial independence and local self-government. The plan provided that each State Society should be incorporated in its own State and subscribe to a National Covenant. All States proceeded with reorganization, except the State of New York. On April 14<sup>th</sup> 1920, at a meeting held in Philadelphia, the Covenant was signed by representatives of the States of Illinois, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota and Ohio, thus bringing the National Society Daughters of the British Empire in the United States of America into being.

Joining later were the States of New York, California, Washington, Indiana, Wisconsin, Alabama, Idaho, and Oregon, and more recently Tennessee, Maryland, Massachusetts, Arizona, New Mexico, Missouri, Delaware, Texas, Hawaii, Virginia, Louisiana, Kansas, Georgia, South Carolina, Colorado, Nevada, North Carolina, Northern California, Mississippi, Rhode Island, Oklahoma, and Kentucky, as well as the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and San Diego & Imperial Counties, later named Southern California.

The first National President of the DBE was Mrs. George Cooke Adams, CBE, and the first Annual Meeting of the National Society, DBE, was held in Detroit, Michigan, on May 5-6, 1921.

April 14, the birth date of Mrs. J. Elliot Langstaff, as well as the date of the signing of the National Covenant, has been declared "Founders Day" and observed each year by all States.

In 1920, shortly after the reorganization of the DBE as a National Society, the governments of Canada and the United States initiated plans for the creation of a Garden of Peace on both sides of the border between two countries, to be a living memorial to the long-established friendship between the United States and Canada. The Province of Manitoba and the State of North Dakota together donated 2,300 acres of land in the Turtle Mountains. This area became the [International Peace Garden, Inc.](#), symbolizing the peace and harmony existing along the longest unfortified boundary in the world. The National Society Daughters of the British Empire in the USA and the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire in Canada became Charter Members of this great enterprise and their contributions over the years have helped in the development and maintenance of this unique and noble concept.

After the outbreak of the First World War, chapters were formed in rapid succession with 76 being organized between 1914 and 1918. DBE members were responsible for the largest War Relief Fund raised by any British organization in the U.S.

The Second World War saw members in all states working unceasingly. Six ambulances and a mobile kitchen were provided. Members also worked with many other relief services.

During the early years, 1909-1915, much philanthropic work was done in local communities and assistance given on an individual basis to elderly British women who were in need. Mrs. Langstaff suggested that a home for the aged would serve as a “cohesive philanthropy in which each and all chapters could have a common interest,” and so was born the concept of “Homes for the Aged”.

The necessary funds for the first such Home grew slowly over a period of five years before [Victoria Home](#) at West New Brighton, Staten Island, New York, was opened in April 1915. The Home was incorporated in August 1916 with Mrs. Langstaff as its President. By 1925, a larger home was needed and funds were raised to purchase the McAlpin estate in Ossining, New York, and relocate Victoria Home. The house was remodeled to accommodate twenty-five residents and officially opened in 1928. Three years later a new Wing was added to accommodate a further 43 residents.

Plans proceeded for the establishment of “Homes for the Aged” in each of the [Districts](#).

The British Old People’s Home in Brookfield, Illinois was incorporated on February 2, 1920 and dedicated with sixty residents’ rooms on May 24, 1925. It was enlarged by an additional forty rooms in 1937 and by 1953 an infirmary building to accommodate twenty patients was built and formally dedicated. Mrs. George Cooke Adams working untiringly as the Home President until her retirement in 1955. Today, the [British Home](#) Life Services Corporation, DBA Cantata, has approximately 136 residents.

In California, [The British Home](#) in Sierra Madre was incorporated in 1930 and formally opened on September 22, 1930 by Sir John Adams, British Consul General. From a

modest beginning of one cottage with six residents, the Home now consists of five charming cottages for 37 residents with one of the cottages providing nursing care.

In 1927, plans for a Southern District Home in Jacksonville, Florida were started and in 1931 a corporation was formed. However, due to the Second World War and changes in the zoning laws the original plans were delayed until 1951 when “Bramfilles House” was formally dedicated. Twenty years later, difficulties arose in maintaining the building and it became necessary to phase out the Home. Bramfilles House was sold and the resulting funds transferred to Texas to be administered by a new Board of Trustees in Houston. Fundraising continued in the Southern District States and in late 1979 land was purchased in Highlands, Texas, where a new personal care retirement home was built. The new Southern District Home “[Mountbatten House](#)” had sixteen private rooms and later a new wing was built to accommodate eight more residents. Lady Wright, Honorary President of the National Society at the time, formally opened the Home on May 19, 1983.

Each District Home is incorporated in its own state and is governed by its own Board of Directors and has its own bylaws and rules of admission. The President and Officers of each Home Board are DBE members with few exceptions. They volunteer their time and talents to running the Homes.

Charitable support of the four British Homes and local nonprofits is the purpose of the DBE, and to this end diverse fundraising events are held which are supported by the community at large. Membership in the DBE is organized on a chapter basis and meetings are held monthly, usually followed by an informal get together over a cup of tea or coffee. This is the way friendships are formed and the mutual heritage becomes a comforting and familiar bond.

The wife of the British Ambassador to the United States is invited to be the Honorary President of the National Society. It is traditional that the wives of the British Consuls General, and often wives of the Commonwealth of Nations Consuls, become Honorary Presidents of the State Societies, lending valuable support to the chapters in their area and sharing the pride of members in the Daughters of the British Empire and the British Homes for retired men and women. The four District Homes continue to be updated and kept current with the times.

The Society continues to be affiliated with the [Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire of Canada](#), the [Victoria League](#) in London, and the [National Federation of Women’s Clubs](#), and is a contributing member of the International Peace Garden, Inc.