

# Sisterhood of Blood: The Will to Descend and the Formation of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

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## **Sisterhood of Blood: The Will to Descend and the Formation of the Daughters of the American Revolution**

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### Abstract

The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), one of many white lineal societies that emerged in the late-nineteenth century, promoted a fantasy of the nation as an extended white family, united by blood. Yet the DAR faced internal and external challenges before it could transform documented Revolutionary blood into political capital. The organization accomplished this by asserting its biological credentials selectively, not just in racial and class terms, but also in reference to the fitness of its ancestors and descendants. The DAR's "will to descend," and the ambition of its leaders, meant that patriotic character had to be demonstrated as well as celebrated. By narrating a compelling, ethno-nationalist interpretation of U.S.

history—inclusive and elitist, democratic and demonstratively exclusionary—the DAR began to exercise a marked influence over political culture within a decade of its founding, culminating in its enthusiastic support for the War with Spain.

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## SISTERHOOD OF BLOOD

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Carolyn Strange

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The 1890s was a particularly bloody decade in U.S. history, opening with the massacre at Wounded Knee and closing with a quick and victorious war against Spain, followed by a protracted assault against Philippine resistance fighters. A different kind of bloody campaign characterized the decade as well: the homegrown craze for tracing bloodlines. As one measure of this new interest in genealogy, in 1900 the journal *Patriotic Review* listed seventy heritage societies, half of which had emerged since 1890. The citizens who searched for blood relatives in family attics, graveyards, libraries, and archives, were as likely to be women as men, and they joined historical and genealogical societies by the tens of thousands. Ancestral research provided a bridge into public life for women, particularly those with the documentation required to join the National Society of Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). Founded in 1890, the DAR quickly became the largest women's descent society, and one of the country's most prominent women's organizations. Five years after its establishment one of the DAR's co-founders, Ellen Hardin Walworth, proudly declared "genealogy affords a field of study where men and women have an equal interest and a common bond."<sup>1</sup>

The Society, and a crop of similar organizations that sprang up in the 1890s, sought to affirm another bond: the organic and indissoluble link



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