

The Organization of the Scottish Diaspora in America

A Quick Overview

By John King Bellassai*, President, COSCA

[This article appears in abbreviated form in the current issue of Scots Heritage Magazine. It is reprinted here in its entirety with the permission of the editors of that publication.]

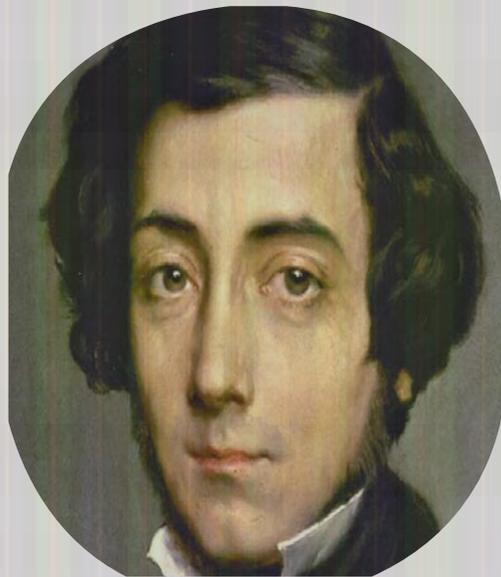
When it comes to understanding how the Scottish Diaspora in the USA is organized and operates, our friends and cousins back home in Scotland tend to throw up their hands and roll their eyes, saying it's all hopelessly muddled and chaotic. In fact, when viewed from the top down, rather than horizontally, it is all fairly logical and ordered—certainly to the extent that it can be understood and navigated by an outsider. The purpose of this article is to give the reader a quick, thumb-nail overview of the heritage-oriented organizations which together “keep the flame alive” for the large Scottish Diaspora in America.

Unlike Britain (notwithstanding the ongoing process of devolution in Scotland), America is not a unitary state. From the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1789, we have enjoyed a federal system of government, with various enumerated powers granted to our national government, but others “reserved” to the (50) states, and yet others to the local (county or even city) level. This sort of decentralized governance is endemic to the America character, and it also shows up in our civil society.

In *Democracy in America*, published in 1835, the noted French writer and traveler [Alexis de Tocqueville](#) wrote of his earlier travels in the USA—at a time when westward expansion and Jacksonian democracy were both radically transforming the young United States. In the process, de Toqueville identified one of the unique aspects of American society—the large role played by voluntary, private associations in the organization of social,

political and economic affairs. Ever a keen observer of the human condition, de Tocqueville thought that through “associating”—the coming together of people for a mutual purpose—Americans are able to overcome selfish desires, thus making for an active and vibrant civil society. As de Toqueville observed,

“Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds . . . As soon as several of the inhabitants of the United States have conceived a sentiment or an idea that they want to produce in the world, they seek each other out; and when they have found each other, they unite. From then on, they are no longer isolated men, but a power one sees from afar; whose actions serve as an example; a power that speaks, and to which one listens. . . . Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France and a great lord in England, count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States.”



Alexis de Tocqueville
(1805 - 1859)

De Toqueville’s observations about the American penchant for forming and joining a myriad of voluntary organizations remain as true today as they were almost two centuries ago. And this is certainly the case with regard to the organization of the Scottish Diaspora in America.

At the national level, dating back to the mid-1970s, there is [The Scottish Coalition, USA](#)—a loose consortium of seven heritage-oriented national organizations, each in

and of itself a nonprofit charitable organization with its own membership, mission and programs. These include the *American-Scottish Foundation* (ASF), the *Caledonian Foundation, Scottish Heritage, USA* (SHUSA), the *Living Legacy of Scotland*, the *Scottish-American Military Society* (SAMS), the *Association of Scottish Games & Festivals* (ASGF), and the *Council of Scottish Clans & Associations* (COSCA). The ASF is the oldest of the seven, founded in 1956 by Lord Malcolm Douglas-Hamilton and his American wife, the former Natalie Scarritt-Wales of Massachusetts, to be a “bridge” between the people of Scotland and those of the USA. ASF puts on a wide range of cultural programs, most of them in and around New York City, where it is based, as well as coordinating the Annual Tartan Day Parade in downtown Manhattan.

Most of the other six Scottish Coalition member organizations were founded in the 1970’s: The Caledonian Foundation specializes in supporting the performing arts in Scotland (Scottish opera and the Theatre Royal in Glasgow) and special projects such as the restoration of Abbotsford— Sir Walter Scott’s ancestral home, down on the Borders. SHUSA has long worked in partnership with the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) and makes small grants to Scottish heritage organizations, mainly in the Southeastern states, where it is based and where Scots ancestry is commonplace, but it also makes larger donations to the NTS. The Living Legacy of Scotland, based in Washington, DC, has an educational mission to promote a better understanding of the many contributions made by Scots and Scottish Americans to the formation and growth of the United States. Membership in SAMS, which is essentially a nationwide service organization, is limited to Americans serving in, or who have previously served in, any branch of the U.S. Armed Forces. The Association of Scottish Games & Festivals (ASGF) represents the various highland games organizations scattered across the country, of which there are currently over 75 (though not all are ASGF members). Likewise, the Council of Scottish Clans & Associations (COSCA) is essentially the national professional association for the clan societies in the USA, of which there are now about 140 (though again, not all of these are members).

These clan societies have chapters in states all across the nation and among other things, staff tents at the various Scottish games. Most have close ties to Scotland and have established relationships with their respective clan chiefs, who tend to serve as honorary patrons. (For a definitive

list of all the known clan societies active in the USA, whether or not COSCA members, see the list posted on the COSCA website, at www.cosca.scot.) COSCA maintains a very close, symbiotic relationship with the Standing Council of Scottish Chiefs (SCSC), which represents the clan chiefs back home in Scotland, while COSCA represents the clan societies here in the USA.



**St. Andrew’s Society
of New York**

A primary focus of the Scottish Coalition, USA over the years has been to promote the National Tartan Day holiday celebrated everywhere in the USA on 6 April each year—the anniversary of the Declaration of Arbroath. To that end, the Coalition maintains a network of volunteer State Tartan Day Coordinators, active in over 30 States of the Union. In fact, the Coalition was instrumental in getting 6 April recognized as National Tartan Day by the U.S. Senate back in the 90’s, patterning the U.S. holiday on its Canadian counterpart, which had already been enacted into law north of the border. Each year the Scottish Coalition makes its Tartan Day Award to a deserving Scottish-American, for the past several years doing this in conjunction with the annual Tartan Day celebration at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, DC.



**St. Andrew’s Society of
Philadelphia**

At the local level across the USA, there are close to a hundred St. Andrew’s societies—all independent of each other organizationally, but sharing a common mission going back to colonial times, when Scottish immigration to America was heavy—to provide aid, support and comradeship to Scots and the descendants of Scots. (Their common motto is, “Relieve the Distressed” and most feature an image of St. Andrew, Scotland’s patron saint, or his emblem, the saltire, in their logo or coat of arms). Most St. Andrew’s societies in America were organized in port towns along the eastern seaboard, or along the northern border with Canada—both areas being major entry points for Scottish immigrants in those early years. A number of the older societies date back to the 18th century, some to colonial times, prior to the American Revolution. This is the case for the

Philadelphia, PA, New York State, Savannah, GA, and Charleston, SC St. Andrew's societies, while the roots of the Washington, DC society are almost as old—dating to 1783, right after the conclusion of the Revolutionary War. A number of other St. Andrew's societies—for example those of Baltimore, Detroit and Chicago—were



St. Andrew's Society of Washington, DC

founded soon thereafter, in the first half of the 19th century, during the period of rapid American expansion westward. But new ones emerge even today.

As a general rule, the older St. Andrew's societies tend to be the larger ones; some boast 400 – 500 members, though others are much smaller; regardless

of size, all draw their members primarily from their own locales. Many (though certainly not all) require genealogical proof of descent from a Scottish immigrant ancestor as a condition of membership. Today, most St. Andrew's societies still focus on charitable and educational missions, but now these typically have evolved into scholarship programs to support young Scots who want to study in America and young Americans wishing to study in Scotland. At the same time, these societies invariably sponsor Scottish cultural programs such as Burns Suppers, Tartan Day parades, Scottish-themed lectures—often delivered by visitors from Scotland—and musical programs.



Caledonian Club of San Francisco

Side by side with the St. Andrew's societies in cities and towns across the USA are a plethora of Caledonian clubs and Robbie Burns societies—generally with a more relaxed, social purpose, not geared specifically to Scottish immigrants but to all who appreciate Scottish culture. Some

of these Caledonian clubs have a long history dating back to the mid-19th century, such as those in New York City, San Francisco, CA and Sarasota, FL. The Burns clubs focus even more narrowly on celebrating the life and writings of Robert Burns—especially in the season leading up to the annual “Burns Nicht suppers” held all across the USA in late January and early February.

With the advent of the Internet and now other social media organs such as Facebook and Twitter, it is quite

easy to identify and contact any of these numerous Scottish Diaspora organizations from locations overseas, as well as from anywhere here in the States. (*Google* searches on key words like “St. Andrew's societies”, “clan societies”, or “Scottish-American organizations” generate hundreds of hits.) All but the smallest ones have websites which typically lists their officers and give ways to contact them—mailing addresses, email addresses and often phone numbers. (Unlike the strict privacy laws in the UK which make it hard to get personal contact information, it is ubiquitous on American organizations' websites, usually under the “contact us” tab in the drop-down menu on their respective home pages.)



St. Andrew's Society of Chicago

Most clan societies and many other Scottish-American organizations also advertise in *The Highlander Magazine*; a long list of Scottish societies in the USA and how to contact each of them is always listed in the back of each edition of this popular U.S. publication. Many of these groups have a Facebook Page, too, with extensive followings. Quite a few can be followed on Twitter, as well. Significantly, virtually all of these organizations are staffed by volunteers who serve without remuneration but instead out of that same sense social commitment identified almost two hundred years ago by the visiting De Toqueville as a hallmark of American social enterprise.

In recent years, the annual Scottish North-American Leadership Conference (SNALC) has begun to play a more influential role on the Scottish-American scene. Founded some 20 or more years ago by the American Scottish Foundation out of NYC and the St. Andrew's Society of Illinois (“Chicago Scots”), the St. Andrew's Society of Detroit (“Detroit Scots”) later got involved as a key player, as well. Over the years, SNALC has had a mainly mid-western orientation, providing speakers and workshops about issues important to the management and administration of nonprofit organizations—of which virtually every Scottish-American organization we have focused on is one. That said, participation in SNALC over the years has remained decidedly regional, which has limited its impact and notoriety.

More recently, however, SNALC's Steering Committee has decided to truly “go national”, actively recruiting

any and all other Scottish heritage organizations from across the country to join the organization and send representatives to its annual Leadership Conference. In this regard, COSCA last year joined the organization's steering committee and the St. Andrew's societies of Minnesota and St Louis, MO also became active organizational players. And SNALC has begun to broaden its reach in other important ways, too: In 2015, it invited former First Minister of Scotland Henry McLeish to attend as its keynote speaker and for 2016, it has invited Lord Thurso, the new Chairman of *VisitScotland*, to do the same.

No discussion of the organization of the Scottish Diaspora in America would be complete without mentioning the *Friends of Scotland Caucuses in the U.S. Congress*—one in the Senate, the other in the House of Representatives. Founded in 2004, the House Caucus is by far the more active of the two, with over 50 elected members of Congress from both parties signed up as Caucus members—most of whom proudly claim Scottish descent.



National Capital Tartan Day Committee, Inc.

It hosts visits from delegations of MPs and MSPs, and on occasion sends delegations of its own members to Scotland. On or about 6 April of each year, the House Caucus sponsors an annual Tartan Day Reception, open to the public, to celebrate the National Tartan Day holiday, which is embodied

in standing congressional resolutions of both the Senate and the House of Representatives. To support the efforts of the twin congressional Scottish caucuses and to promote the Tartan Day holiday, a nonprofit educational organization exists in Washington, DC—the National Capital Tartan Day Committee, Inc (NCTDC)—staffed by volunteers who plan and convene educational symposia and open-air festivals to celebrate Tartan Day. NCTDC also co-hosts the annual Tartan Day reception held at the U.S. Capitol, together with the congressional Friends of Scotland Caucus in the House—an occasion which the Scottish Coalition uses to present its annual Tartan Day Award each year to a deserving Scottish-American who has been active in Diaspora activities.

** John King Bellassai lives and works in Washington, DC. His maternal grandfather, John King, after whom he is named, emigrated to New York City from the Loch Lomond-side town of Killearn (of Rob Roy fame) in Stirlingshire, Scotland, in 1910. He is President of the Council of Scottish Clans & Associations (COSCA) and Vice President of the National Capital Tartan Day Committee (NCTDC). He is also a Past President of the St. Andrew's Society of Washington, DC and is very active in his clan society, the American Clan Gregor Society, Inc.*



[American Scottish Foundation \(ASF\)](#)



[The Caledonian Foundation USA, Inc](#)



[Scottish Heritage USA \(SHUSA\)](#)



[Council of Scottish Clans and Associations \(COSCA\)](#)



[Living Legacy of Scotland, Inc](#)



[Association of Scottish Games and Festivals \(ASGF\)](#)



[The Scottish-American Military Society \(SAMS\)](#)