

## CHAPTER ONE

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# Founding the National Museum of Dance and Hall of Fame

The rich history of the National Museum of Dance and Hall of Fame began with a long-held, highly ambitious idea developed by Lewis A. Swyer, general contractor and chairman of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center (SPAC), one of the country's most vibrant summer dance and music festivals. In the early 1980s, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, led by Commissioner Orin Lehman, initiated a feasibility study and actively sought proposals for the reuse of the historic Washington Baths located within the Saratoga Spa State Park and within walking distance of SPAC. In 1984, together with SPAC's president and executive director Herb Chesbrough, Swyer presented his concept to philanthropist and dance enthusiast Marylou Whitney at her Cady Hill estate in Saratoga Springs. Mrs. Whitney immediately embraced and supported the idea and the three submitted a proposal to establish the first hall of fame and museum of dance in the United States. The Dansmuseet in Stockholm, Sweden, the only other dance museum in the world, was founded in 1953 by Rolf de Maré, director of the avant-garde Ballets Suédois.

FACING PAGE:

Lewis A. Swyer, Marylou Whitney, and Herb Chesbrough at the May 12, 1986 press conference to introduce the Museum.

## FOUNDING THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DANCE AND HALL OF FAME

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By the mid-1980s, Saratoga Springs had become a hub for both ballet and modern dance, and therefore, Swyer, Whitney, and Chesbrough considered it an ideal location for such a venture. The opening of SPAC in 1966, with the New York City Ballet (NYCB) as its founding resident dance company, was pivotal in creating a culture and audience of and for dance in the region, with Saratoga Springs at the epicenter. For twenty years, NYCB had been performing masterworks from their repertory for four weeks in July, with eight new works receiving world premieres at SPAC.<sup>1</sup> George Balanchine, founder and ballet master of NYCB, had tremendous admiration and respect for Saratoga Springs and believed its audiences should experience the same caliber of work found at Lincoln Center. As SPAC was in development in the early 1960s, so too was the Capital Area Modern Dance Council (CAMDC). Formed in 1963, CAMDC brought some of the most influential modern dance companies to the region to perform and conduct master classes, including the Tamiris-Nagrin Dance Company, Erick Hawkins Dance, Paul Taylor Dance Company, and Paul Sanasardo Dance Company. In 1969, CAMDC was newly headquartered at the Spa Little Theater in the Saratoga Spa State Park. Under the programming umbrella of SPAC, CAMDC offered a four-week summer school of modern dance led by choreographer Paul

Sanasardo and initiated a festival that would present modern dance concerts by trailblazing companies such as Alvin Ailey, Murray Louis, Twyla Tharp, and José Limón.<sup>2</sup> Notable summer dance intensives located in Saratoga Springs further underscored the city as a focal point for dance in these early years. With the encouragement of Balanchine, the Briansky Saratoga Ballet Center was founded in 1965 by celebrated dancers Oleg Briansky and Mireille Briane. It welcomed students from around the country and the world for some forty-seven years. The New York State Summer School of the Arts (NYSSSA) School of Ballet was founded in 1976 and housed at Skidmore College.<sup>3</sup> NYSSSA's School of Dance would subsequently be established in 1989. Skidmore College began to create its own dance program in the late 1960s, thus enabling it to host these summer intensives and various influential guest artists.<sup>4</sup> The city's reputation as a dance community was no doubt bolstered by the presence of newly retired NYCB principal dancer Melissa Hayden, a Skidmore faculty member from 1973 to 1976. In addition, proximity to Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Becket, Massachusetts, added in part to the development of Saratoga Springs as a dance destination with artists and audiences traveling between these two centers.

LEFT AND RIGHT:

George Balanchine with Susan Pilarre and Colleen Neary at the July 15, 1977 George Balanchine Day parade in downtown Saratoga Springs. BALANCHINE is a Trademark of The George Balanchine Trust.

Dancer on a temporary stage at the George Balanchine Day parade in downtown Saratoga Springs, July 15, 1977.



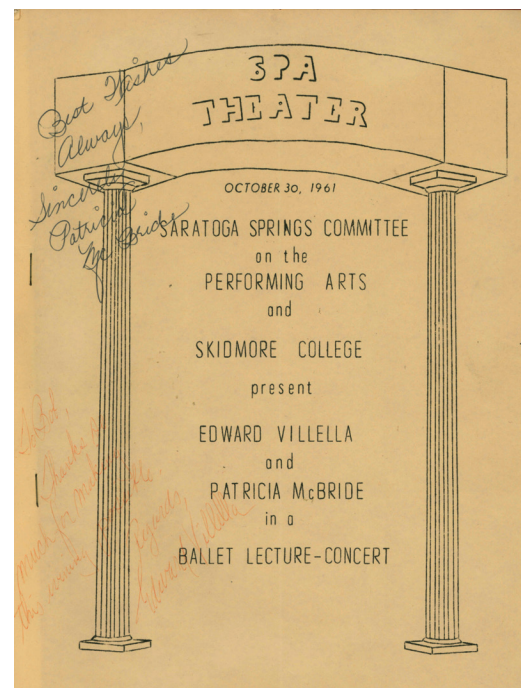
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## FOUNDING THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DANCE AND HALL OF FAME



New York State ultimately determined Saratoga Springs to be an excellent spot for this proposed cultural institution. In July 1984, the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation awarded the newly incorporated National Museum of Dance and Hall of Fame a twenty-year lease of the Washington Baths and its ten-acre site in the Saratoga Spa State Park, with the option for a twenty-year extension, at an annual cost of one dollar.



FACING PAGE:

Oleg Briansky teaching ballet class at the Briansky Saratoga Ballet Center, circa 1960. Gift of Oleg Briansky.

LEFT:

Mireille Briane and George Balanchine in Saratoga Springs on George Balanchine Day, July 15, 1977. BALANCHINE is a Trademark of The George Balanchine Trust.

RIGHT:

Program signed by Patricia McBride and Edward Villella from an October 30, 1961, Ballet Lecture-Concert at the Spa Theater, presented by the Saratoga Springs Committee on the Performing Arts and Skidmore College. This concert was integral in promoting the development of SPAC.



NEW YORK  
STATE RESERVATION  
WASHINGTON RATHS

# Washington Baths



The effervescent mineral waters distinct to Saratoga Springs have been in regular use as a health curative through drinking and bathing since the end of the eighteenth century. Over the course of the nineteenth century, Saratoga Springs became a popular and fashionable destination for health seekers to “take the cure.” At the same time, the privately owned mineral springs were increasingly exploited for commercial profit, including the manufacture of carbonated beverages. To prevent the continued overextraction of carbonic acid, a process that significantly depleted water levels and the therapeutic value of the waters, legislation was written in 1909 that allowed New York State to purchase the vast majority of the mineral springs and wells in the city. The Saratoga Springs Commission and the State Reservation at Saratoga Springs were created to preserve and protect the waters and make them available for public use.<sup>5</sup> To this end, four new bathhouses were planned for the State Reservation, much of which became the Saratoga Spa State Park in 1962.

The Washington Baths were established in a turn-of-the-century structure originally built for the Natural Carbonic Gas Company, which in the 1910s was leased to fine furnitremaker Saratoga Wood Craftsmen, Inc. The renovation and reconstruction of the building for the Washington Baths, designed by the state architect of New York, Lewis F. Pilcher,

FACING PAGE:  
Front drive of the Washington Baths, 1931.

RIGHT:  
Entrance to the Washington Baths, 1934.

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began in October 1918. A heating plant was also constructed on the property that year that would control not only the steam and electric power to the adjacent Washington and Lincoln Baths but also the massive supply of mineral water. This building corresponded stylistically to the Washington Baths. The first wing was opened to the public for use during the last two weeks of August 1919 and was fully operational for the 1920 season.

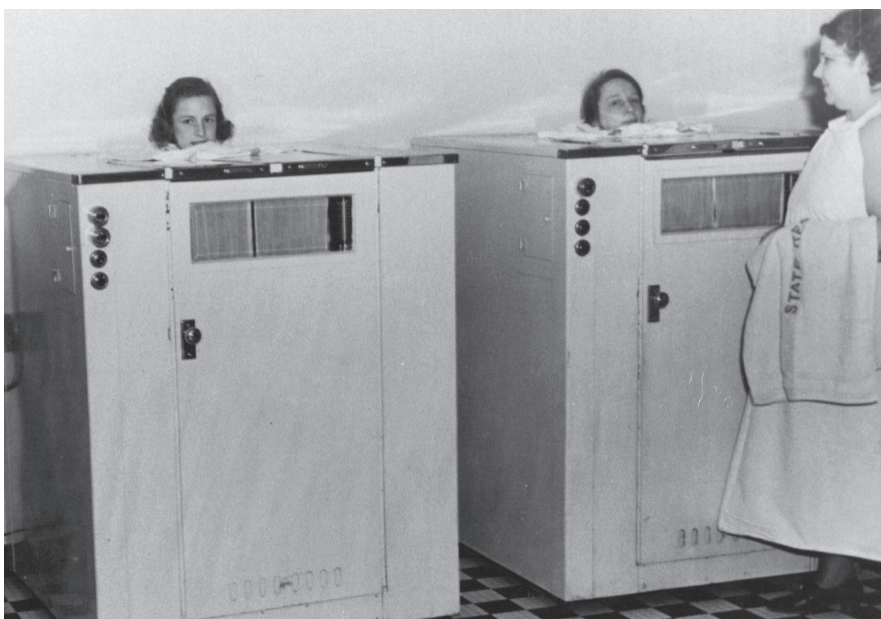
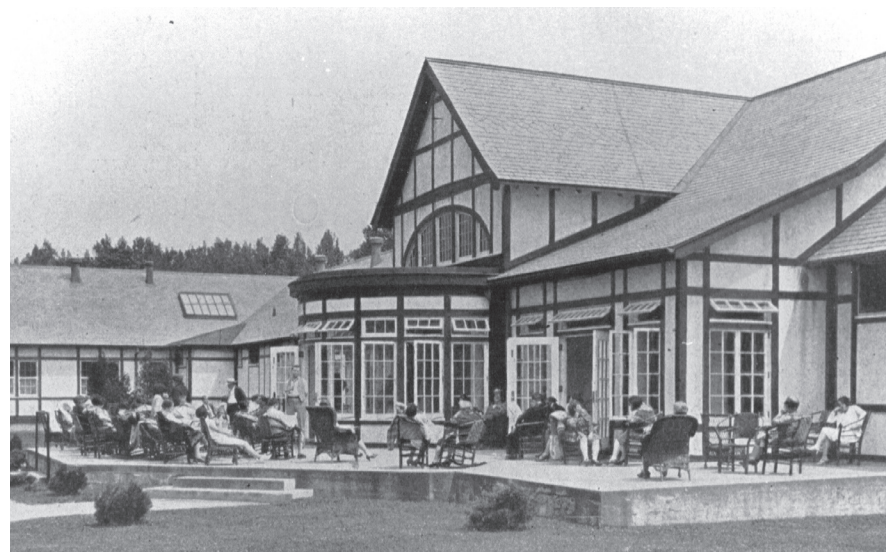
In its heyday, the Washington Baths rivaled the great therapeutic spas of Europe. The H-shaped building boasted eighty-four semiprivate and twenty-four private rooms in two wings, one for men and the other for women. The resplendent, light-filled Beaux Arts foyer housed the reception area and offices for the superintendent and the medical staff. This state-of-the-art spa offered both hydrotherapy and mechanotherapy including a range of cabinet treatments, colonic irrigation, Turkish baths, massage, salt and alcohol rubs, cardiac therapy, and infrared treatments, in addition to the widely prescribed mineral baths. Terraces in the front and back of the bath house allowed patients to rest and take the “sun cure.” After nearly sixty years in operation, the Washington Baths closed in the summer of 1978 due to a widespread decline in the use of mineral waters for health, wellness, and rehabilitation.



RIGHT:  
Bottled Saratoga Geyser mineral water.  
FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:  
The northeast terrace of the Washington Baths.  
Patients taking the “sun cure” on the back terrace.  
A private treatment room including a mineral bath tub.  
Cabinet treatments.



• WASHINGTON BATHS





SITE CONCEPT for  
**NATIONAL MUSEUM  
OF DANCE**  
SARATOGA SPRINGS, NEW YORK.  
PREPARED BY THE SARATOGA ASSOCIATES  
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS - ARCHITECTS-PLANNERS

## Development of the Dream



FACING PAGE:  
Museum founders Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney and Lewis A. Swyer at the May 12, 1986 press conference.

LEFT:  
Museum brochure from the 1986 preview season.

RIGHT:  
The Museum's first director, Alison Moore, at the 1986 press conference.

The founding mission of the National Museum of Dance and Hall of Fame was “to cultivate, promote, foster, sponsor, and develop among its members and the community at large, the appreciation, understanding, taste, and love of the Musical Arts, especially the Dance; to create a National Hall of Fame for the advancement of such purposes; to secure the interest of the patrons of these Arts, and to promote and encourage the study of these Arts and the history thereof and provide the means for popular instruction and enjoyment thereof.”<sup>6</sup> The overarching idea was that all forms of dance were to be honored and that the Museum should be living, with dancers taking class and choreographers creating new work right on the property. This mission translated into a three-phase plan developed by the founding board of directors, each phase to be completed as funds were raised.

Phase One included the restoration and enhancement of the foyer, which would house one of four exhibitions in a 1986 preview season and become the permanent home of the Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney Hall of Fame beginning in 1987. The renovation and construction of two 5,000 square foot galleries on either side of the foyer was also included in first phase, as well as the building of administrative offices and the museum shop. Phase Two called for the construction of a one hundred-seat theater for lectures and film screenings in the southeast section of the Museum. A library and resource center with individual study rooms were to be built in the Museum's northeast wing.<sup>7</sup> Phase Three was reserved for the construction of a separate building behind

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the Museum to house three state-of-the-art dance studios, reflective of the dimensions of NYCB's stage at Lincoln Center.<sup>8</sup> The intent was for Museum visitors to view professional dance training and live performance, and to provide a home for NYSSSA's Schools of Ballet and Dance. Plans beyond the first three phases included a dance therapy facility within the Museum in which mineral water could be accessed and utilized for rehabilitation, a sculpture garden, and a full, removable stage situated among grassy, graduated levels behind the Museum that could accommodate an audience of up to five hundred for outdoor performances of dance and music.

The founding board of the Museum was comprised almost entirely of SPAC board members with the full intention that the Museum and SPAC would operate in close collaboration with one another, including shared advertising and public relations, and initial directorship of the Hall of Fame.<sup>9</sup> It was decided that Lewis A. Swyer would serve as chairman, Marylou Whitney as president, Herb Chesbrough as executive vice president, Nancy Norman Lassalle as secretary, and Jacob Schulman as treasurer, in addition to William E. Murray, W. Barnabas McHenry, Gordon Ambach, Orin Lehman-Ex Officio, and Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney-Ex Officio. The board of directors expanded at once to include SPAC trustee Lillian Phipps and Charles V. Wait. Through its affiliation with SPAC and board member Nancy Norman Lassalle, the Museum was somewhat inherently connected to NYCB at the outset. Lassalle served on the boards of SPAC, NYCB, and the School of American Ballet and





was involved with several exhibitions showcasing NYCB at the Museum between 1988 and 1999. She has remained a presence on the Museum's board throughout its history and her legacy is manifest.<sup>10</sup> So too is the tremendous legacy of the Whitney and Swyer families who have served on the board from its inception.<sup>11</sup>

Since 2005, current president of the board Michele Riggi has guided the National Museum of Dance with great vision and acumen. Through her extraordinary generosity, the founders' original three-phase plan was completed with the construction of the Mr. and Mrs. Ronald A. Riggi Theater in the northwest wing of the Museum in 2014. The forty-eight-seat black box theater hosts film screenings and lectures, as well as opera, music, comedy, drama, and dance performances, and counts The Creative Place International as its resident theater company.

FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Anne and Lewis Swyer.

Marylou Whitney at the 1986 press conference.

Nancy Norman Lassalle and Merce Cunningham at his June 20, 1993 induction into the Hall of Fame. Cunningham's stained glass award was designed and made by the artist Hope Hawthorne.

Herb Chesbrough at the 1986 press conference.

LEFT:

Michele and Ron Riggi at the grand unveiling of the Mr. and Mrs. Ronald A. Riggi Theater, July 24, 2014.



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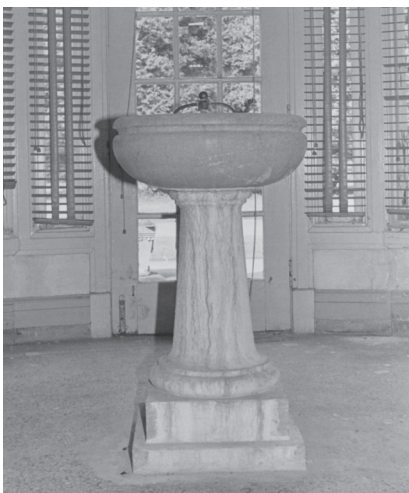
# FOUNDING THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DANCE AND HALL OF FAME

## Reconstruction



The lease agreement with the State of New York stipulated that the Museum was to be responsible for the complete renovation, operation, and maintenance of the Washington Baths building. The project budget for the three-phase plan was estimated at between \$3.5 and \$5 million, all of which was to be raised through private donors. Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney were the lead funders, contributing a total of \$650,000 by 1986. Founding board member William E. Murray and board chairman Lewis A. Swyer were the other major funders at this stage.

Swyer was one of the region's most prominent builders, responsible for SPAC, the Edward Durell Stone-designed First Unitarian Society Church in Schenectady, and a number of Albany's landmarks. He was also a stalwart patron of the arts as chairman of SPAC and a founding member of the New York State Council on the Arts.<sup>12</sup> Dance was his first love, and he believed that the National Museum of Dance and Hall of Fame had the potential to help make Saratoga Springs and the region a world center for dance.<sup>13</sup> The Lewis A. Swyer Company oversaw the renovation and reconstruction of the Washington Baths for the Museum, designed



**FACING PAGE:**

The foyer prior to the bathhouse reconstruction for the Museum, circa 1985.

**TOP:**

Water-damaged ceiling of the foyer prior to reconstruction, circa 1985.

**BOTTOM:**

Original mineral water fountain in the foyer.

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by Saratoga Associates, with Swyer himself the driving force behind its completion for the 1986 preview season. Sharing the singular spirit they had together created in the Museum, he wrote to Marylou Whitney the following year, "I want you to know how very grateful I am for your interest that never flags and always brings its own very special brand of excitement and stardust, enhancing our efforts to make this a truly outstanding museum and dance center."<sup>14</sup>

The Washington Baths, a National Historic Landmark, is a wood-frame, single-story structure comprised of concrete and stucco panel with half-timber work and a patterned slate roof. Its architectural design is an amalgam of the arts and crafts (bungalow), Tudor, and neoclassical styles. Concrete columns with wood pergolas, and semicircular terraces stand on the exterior of each of the two wings of this highly distinct H-shaped building that totals nearly 33,000 square feet. A larger third terrace stands at the back of the structure, directly behind the foyer.

Between the time of the Washington Baths' closing in 1978 and its repurposing for the Museum in 1986, the building had fallen into complete disrepair. The initial phase of restoration and reconstruction of the Washington Baths included exterior repair and landscaping, and extensive interior repair due to water damage. Original bath fixtures were removed and some retained for projected future display. Insulation and climate control were installed, and scores of windows were replaced.



TOP LEFT AND RIGHT, BOTTOM:  
Reconstruction and restoration of the bathhouse began in the mid-1980s.

FACING PAGE LEFT TO RIGHT:  
Interior restoration, 1987.

Employee entrance prior to exterior renovation, 1985.

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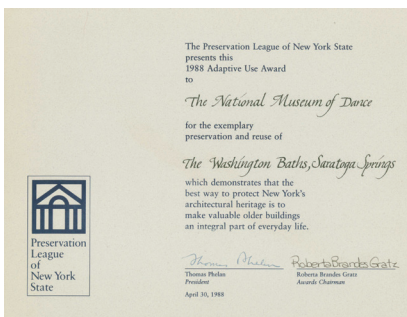
The Beaux Arts foyer was restored to its 1920s splendor. Its terrazzo floor was maintained, along with a mineral water fountain, no longer in use.<sup>15</sup> Wicker furniture original to the bathhouse was restored and repurposed. This elegant space was further enhanced with brass and crystal chandeliers given as a gift to the Museum by Mrs. Whitney. Two 5,000 square foot galleries flanking the foyer were constructed. Designed by Marty Bronson, gallery director at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), the gallery walls were painted charcoal grey, intended to create an atmosphere of drama found in theaters.<sup>16</sup> In 1988, the Preservation League of New York State honored the National Museum of Dance and the Lewis A. Swyer Company with the Adaptive Use Award for the exemplary preservation and reuse of the historic Washington Baths. Today, this wonderfully unique building is a highly coveted venue for weddings and other special events, representing a significant portion of the Museum’s annual income. The Museum provides use of its space free of charge to several not-for-profit organizations for fundraising events each year.

*Athena*, located in the front circle, is an iconic representation of the many forms of dance celebrated by the Museum.<sup>17</sup> This seven-foot-tall, scrap metal steel sculpture, created by the renowned American artist Judith Brown, was donated by Swyer’s widow, Anne, in 1990. Brown’s work is held in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Museum, and was largely inspired by classical sculpture and dance, especially the movement of Martha Graham.<sup>18</sup> An exhibition of her work, *Figures in Motion*, was presented at the Museum in 1989. Brown’s *Athena* is the model from which sculptor Alice Manzi has created the current Hall of Fame awards since 2015.

FACING PAGE:  
The Museum foyer today.

TOP:  
The front entrance of the Museum today with Judith Brown’s *Athena* in the foreground.

BOTTOM:  
The Preservation League of New York State 1988 Adaptive Use Award was given to the National Museum of Dance and the Lewis A. Swyer Company for the preservation and reuse of the Washington Baths.



*THE WEEKEND PREMIERED with style and  
grace in Midtown Manhattan on the fifth of  
June, as 15 antique carriages stopped traffic  
along their 3 mile route at the noon hour.*

