

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

THE TOWN HALL

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: The Town Hall

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 123 West 43rd Street

Not for publication:

City/Town: New York

Vicinity:

State: New York County: New York Code: 061

Zip Code: 10036

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X
Public-Local:
Public-State:
Public-Federal:

Category of Property

Building(s): X
District:
Site:
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

Noncontributing

buildings
sites
structures
objects
Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

Designated a National Historic Landmark

MAR 02 2012

by the Secretary of the Interior

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ____ nomination ____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ___ Entered in the National Register
- ___ Determined eligible for the National Register
- ___ Determined not eligible for the National Register
- ___ Removed from the National Register
- ___ Other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: Recreation and Culture; Social Sub: auditorium; clubhouse

Current: Recreation and Culture; Education Sub: auditorium; school

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Classical Revival

MATERIALS:

Foundation: concrete

Walls: brick

Roof: tar paper

Other: stone

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Statement of Significance

Town Hall is nationally significant under NHL Criterion 1 for its association with the history of American public affairs radio broadcasting. From this site, *America's Town Meeting of the Air (ATMA)*, called "the most famous civic education program of the 1930s," originated and was broadcast between 1935 and 1956.¹ The development of radio, with its potential to reach citizens in their homes, was an exceptionally important event in American culture, and many believed it held the promise of democratizing cultural exchange. Among numerous radio programs conceived in this spirit, *ATMA* was extraordinarily successful. Conceived to promote the free, fearless debate and open discussion of public issues, the show unflinchingly brought differing opinions over a wide range of controversial topics before the American public. More than simply the location of the show, Town Hall was an important component of the broadcast itself drawing on its own long association with public education and historic imagery familiar to all Americans. Town Hall has exceptional value in representing the history of *ATMA*, an important program in the radio era and a social phenomenon of immense importance in shaping and giving voice to American culture.

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

Town Hall is located on the north side of West 43rd Street in mid-town Manhattan, occupying a mid-block location between 6th Avenue and Broadway in New York's theater district. The building is sited close to the street between a narrow four-story, late nineteenth-century, mixed-use building to the west, and a tall, multi-story ca. 1970s office building to the east. Immediately across the street is a contemporary parking garage. The building to the west, once owned by the Town Hall predates the nominated building, and was known as the annex and was used for office space. The building is now under separate ownership; however, Town Hall retains the use of space on one floor, which is accessible by a wall opening in the mezzanine. Other than this one access point, the buildings are totally separate structurally and mechanically. The former annex is not included in the nomination. Although newer buildings have been constructed east and south of Town Hall, the street itself, with its mix of nineteenth- and twentieth-century buildings, some of which are used as theaters, presents an appropriate setting for the resource. Today, the auditorium survives with near perfect integrity to the period of significance, preserving an outstanding association with the important events that took place here.

Exterior

The Town Hall is four stories tall and nine bays wide. It is constructed of brick laid up in Flemish bond and trimmed with limestone. On the west, the façade is flush with the adjacent building, while on the east, the façade treatment wraps around the corner of the building which was originally exposed. Because the contemporary building to the east has a deep setback, a portion of the east wall of Town Hall, built of common brick and originally concealed, is now visible. The rear elevation abuts a building on West 44th Street and cannot be seen.

The Town Hall façade is divided into three primary sections separated by limestone belt courses with Greek key moldings and topped with a limestone frieze, cornice, and balustrade. The lowest level takes in the building's entrances and mezzanine. This section is characterized by a seven-bay arcade of two-story limestone fluted arches with keystones flanked by undecorated end bays. Each arch contains double-entrance doors, glass within wood frames, surmounted by transoms with decorative multi-pane glazing. Because the building site slopes slightly to the east, the entrances are approached by either one or two limestone steps from the sidewalk. Each

¹ Douglas B. Craig, *Fireside Politics: Radio and Popular Culture in the United States, 1920-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 25. Note: although the program was broadcast until 1956, the period of significance ends at 1952, as explained in the narrative that follows.

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entrance is surmounted by a limestone panel. Above the impost blocks, each arch is filled with a recessed tripartite window grouping which lights the mezzanine. Three deep iron and glass canopies, which are suspended from large iron rods, extend over the sidewalk to provide shelter for each of the end entrances and the three in the center; the two intervening entrances are without canopies. The underside of each canopy is outlined by rows of light bulbs, which are concealed by a continuous row of opaque glass shades. The arch at the east end is the box office entrance; the five in the center mark the theater entrances, and that on the west provides access to the upper floors. Flanking the arcade, each of the end bays has double metal equipment doors recessed within rectangular openings with splayed brick lintels. These doors provide access to long narrow corridors that lead to the backstage areas. Each set of doors is surmounted by a single window with double-hung multi-pane wood sash.

Most of the middle section of the façade, which fronts the theater space, is without openings. The central feature is a large, rectangular limestone plaque within a molded surround. The plaque is engraved: "The Town Hall Founded by the League for Political Education, 1894-1920. Ye Shall Know the Truth and the Truth Shall Make You Free." The plaque is flanked by two double-height niches within limestone enframements. Their round arches with keystones mimic those of the arcade below. Above the plaque and niches, a row of double-hung, six-over-six wood sash windows with brick surrounds and limestone sills denotes offices.

The upper section is characterized by a row of large, double-hung, six-over-six wood sash windows with brick and limestone enframements. Each window has an iron grille across the bottom and a limestone lintel with keystone. Windows are separated by recessed brick panels with diamond-shaped limestone lozenges in their centers. The row of windows is flanked by larger recessed panels, each with a recessed circular window at its center. The frieze is a limestone band with incised Adamesque decoration. This is surmounted by a row of dentil moldings and a projecting limestone balustrade.

Plan and Secondary Spaces

The interior plan was designed to accommodate the theater and its associated spaces on the lower floors and club facilities above. The large, semi-circular theater fills a double-height space at the center of the building; lobbies, a box office, elevator bays, stairways, backstage areas, and dressing rooms surround it. Long narrow corridors along each outer wall of the building connect the backstage area with the street. Five sets of doors provide access to the narrow, ground level lobby, which features terrazzo floors, classical pilasters, and a paneled ceiling. Although the lobby is generally rectangular in shape its inside wall follows the slightly curved rear wall of the theater. Centered on this wall is the main entrance to the theater, a tripartite grouping of double doors flanked by marble, engaged Ionic columns, pairs of windows, and Doric pilasters. The entrance is flanked by two broad, sweeping marble stairways with slender, wrought-iron classical balusters and walnut hand railings. Additional entrances to the theater are located beneath each set of stairs and are accessed through low, arched hallways. Double sets of multi-pane glass doors at each end of the lobby provide access to the small, square box office on the east and to the short hallway and block of elevators to the upper floors on the west. The two stairways lead to the mezzanine, which is essentially a narrow, curving hallway featuring entrances to the loge and balcony, stairs to the upper level of the balcony, restrooms, and a small center lounge.

Theater

The theater is a large, semicircular space without intervening structural members. There are two levels of seating, a main floor, and a cantilevered balcony with loge. The stage is relatively shallow; however, its outside edge is curved so that it projects slightly into the auditorium. Walls are marble on the lowest level and rusticated artificial stone above. Corners are marked by fluted, gilded pilasters with Composite capitals. The

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stage is set within a semi-elliptical proscenium arch decorated with Greek key moldings and a foliate keystone and supported on pilasters with Renaissance-inspired ornament and Composite capitals. The cornice is supported on tapered modillions with guttae and features gilded acanthus leaves. The coffered ceiling is outlined by Greek key and guilloche moldings and marked by a large central medallion with delicate, gilded Adamesque decoration. A large ornamental light fixture hangs from the medallion, and similar but smaller fixtures are found throughout the auditorium. Two recesses on each side wall are marked by arches that mirror the proscenium. The most decorative features are the large, round-arched organ screens flanking the stage. Each arch rests on a narrow shelf supported by scrolled brackets and decorated with foliate ornament. The arches contain pedimented tripartite screens surmounted by garlands and swags. Although the organ has been removed, the current trompe l'oeil design replicates the original pipes. Below each arch is a large rectangular marble panel. The exterior wall of the balcony is a curved, decorative wrought-iron screen. Original seating survives except in the loge, where original wicker chairs have been replaced with theater seats. The original projection booth also survives; this simple box is decorated with fluted pilasters.

Club

Former club rooms are located on the second, third, and fourth floors and are accessed from the small elevator hall west of the entrance lobby. As originally designed, the second and third floors featured offices, a library, a lounge, a bar, and dining rooms. The fourth floor included a kitchen, food storage space, and locker rooms for employees. The plan of the upper floors was compromised when these spaces were adapted for later uses; however, many of the original finishes and decorative details survive and are identical to others seen throughout the building. These include plaster walls and ceilings, a wrought-iron stair with slender balusters like that in the lobby; large, square paneled piers with Doric capitals; and neoclassical moldings and trim. The integrity of the upper floors is not essential to the significance documented in this nomination.

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**SUMMARY STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Town Hall is nationally significant under NHL Criterion 1 for its association with the history of American public affairs radio broadcasting. From this site, *America's Town Meeting of the Air (ATMA)*, called "the most famous civic education program of the 1930s," originated and was broadcast between 1935 and 1956.² The development of radio, with its potential to reach citizens in their homes, was an exceptionally important event in American culture, and many believed it held the promise of democratizing cultural exchange. Among numerous radio programs conceived in this spirit, *ATMA* was extraordinarily successful. Conceived to promote the free, fearless debate and open discussion of public issues, the show unflinchingly brought differing opinions over a wide range of controversial topics before the American public. More than simply the location of the show, Town Hall was an important component of the broadcast itself drawing on its own long association with public education and historic imagery familiar to all Americans. Town Hall has exceptional value in representing the history of *ATMA*, an important program in the radio era and a social phenomenon of immense importance in shaping and giving voice to American culture.

SUMMARY OF AMERICA'S TOWN MEETING OF THE AIR

The development of radio broadcasting was immensely important in the cultural history of the United States. In the decades before World War I, westward expansion, the growth of cities and an influx of immigrants led American culture to become more diverse. Within this diffuse culture, providing opportunities for civic education became more difficult. For many, the development of radio, revolutionary in its ability to reach an immense, scattered, and varied audience, held the promise of democratizing cultural exchange by virtue of its ability to reach people in their own homes. Radio could, it was believed, strengthen social connections among all Americans, eradicate hierarchies created by location, class, income, access to education, and other social and environmental factors, and create a better informed electorate. These goals motivated some of the earliest radio broadcasters, many of whom were associated with nonprofit and educational institutions. However, early efforts to win government sponsorship for the new medium failed, and as radio became increasingly popular, the 1920s and 30s were marked by continued tensions between public service and economic interests. Bolstered by the Radio Act of 1927, which created the Federal Radio Commission (FRC), radio broadcasting evolved from a decentralized network of amateur operators into a corporate enterprise based on commercial sponsorship. As content was increasingly developed and controlled by commercial sponsors and advertising agencies, nonprofit broadcasters were marginalized, and the educational programming that had dominated early broadcasts gradually faded from the airwaves.

In the early 1930s, as debate intensified over a successor to the 1927 law, broadcast reformers began an active campaign to restore radio to the public domain by advocating legislation to preserve a percentage of channels for non-commercial broadcasting. It was in this period that commercial networks, eager to demonstrate their commitment to education and avoid the loss of revenue-producing channels, undertook an ambitious agenda of public broadcasting, increasing the number of shows developed and produced by the networks themselves and donating free airtime and production support to nonprofit and educational groups. The period between 1930 and 1938 witnessed some of the most prestigious and ambitious experiments in public service broadcasting of the era, as networks introduced numerous programs designed to combine civic enrichment with entertainment. Shows such as *American School of the Air* (1930), *University of Chicago Round Table* (1931), *The American*

² Craig, *Fireside Politics*, 25. Note: although the program was broadcast until 1956, the period of significance ends at 1952, as explained in the narrative that follows.

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Forum of the Air (1934), *America's Town Meeting of the Air* (1935), and *The People's Platform* (1938) were touted for their efforts to bring substantive issues of national importance before the American people, for the high caliber of their guests, and for their innovative formats.

George V. Denny Jr. of the League for Political Education created *America's Town Meeting of the Air* (*ATMA*) for the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in 1934. The league was founded in 1894 to provide an opportunity for citizens to acquire civic education. By the 1930s, it boasted a thirty-year commitment to public education built on its sponsorship of hundreds of lectures and classes on the philosophy and details of democratic government. In 1921 the league built its first permanent headquarters, Town Hall, on West 43rd Street in New York's theater district. Designed by McKim, Mead and White, Town Hall was specifically intended to be a community center for the city, a place where citizens could gather to discuss common interests and general welfare. During his long tenure at the league (1930-1952), Denny embraced and advanced civic education, continuing to sponsor a full program of lectures and classes at Town Hall as well as creating and hosting the radio show. Denny conceived *ATMA* to promote the free, fearless, and open discussion of public issues, and he took advantage of radio to bring these debates into the homes of Americans across the country. Each show featured brief presentations on important social and/or political issues by four speakers of opposing views, followed by a question and answer session with the live audience.

ATMA was one of the first radio shows to incorporate a live audience, and its participation was crucial to the show's success. The audience brought the voices of everyday people onto the airwaves to discuss issues of vital concern to the American public. Denny allowed audience members a great deal of freedom to engage with the presenters, and the unpredictable nature of their responses added both drama and intimacy, making the show livelier for the radio audience while also creating a sense of connection with the individual listener.

Throughout its twenty-two-year history, *ATMA* addressed a wide range of controversial topics, including civil liberties, totalitarianism, war, isolationism, interventionism, communism, and racism. Rather than attempt to solve problems, *ATMA* aimed to promote a broader and more informed consideration of them. In this, *ATMA* embraced some of the goals of the early twentieth-century forum movement, popularized by educators who provided Americans with a refresher course in democratic values designed to help them hone the tools that were needed to work toward the public welfare. These goals became especially important during the 1930s, as the threat of totalitarianism and impending war motivated educators to bolster citizen involvement in the difficult decisions facing the nation regarding American involvement in European affairs. *ATMA*, which drew its speakers from the highest echelons, was widely recognized in its own time. It was immensely popular, received a high volume of letters, and was among the few public affairs shows to be broadcast in primetime. It was highly regarded by critics and won numerous awards, including two prestigious Peabody Awards for excellence in broadcasting.³ In addition, its programs were frequently referenced in scholarly journals and widely recommended by American educators. Contemporary scholars of radio history consistently mention *ATMA* as among the most influential and educational public service shows of the 1930s to 1950s.

As the site of *ATMA*'s broadcast, Town Hall is outstandingly associated with the history of radio during its heyday (c.1930-c.1951). Beyond hosting this show, Town Hall was an important component of the broadcast itself. *ATMA*'s venue was key to its success. No other show became so closely identified with the location of its broadcasts. An announcer opened each *ATMA* broadcast by declaring "Live from historic Town Hall," and the show drew upon Americans' deep symbolic associations with the New England town meeting as one of the highest exemplars of the virtues of public discussion and direct democracy. Further, the radio show emanated from a building that had been specifically built to foster public education and democracy. *ATMA* was the

³ The Peabody Award is an international award for excellence in radio and television broadcasting sponsored by the National Association of Broadcasters and administered by the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Georgia.

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culmination of the League for Political Education's decades-long commitment to bolstering these ideals, carrying the league's late nineteenth-century ambitions into the modern age of electronic communication and extending its reach from Manhattan to the nation. The league's creation of a town hall building in the nation's largest city had a direct parallel to Denny's goal to establish a virtual town hall of the airwaves. The design of Town Hall's auditorium, with its clear sight lines and excellent acoustics, ensured that everyone could be included in the discussion. The period of significance (1935-1952) encompasses the era of *ATMA*'s greatest importance. This coincides with the period in which Denny, who conceived, developed, and hosted the program, was associated with it. Denny was replaced as host in 1952 and the radio show gradually faded in importance until it was cancelled in 1956.

HISTORY AND CONTEXTS

League for Political Education

In 1894, delegates to New York's constitutional convention defeated a proposal to grant women the right to vote. In the ensuing months, a group of six prominent New York women cited women's general lack of political education as instrumental in the defeat and they resolved to provide an opportunity for both women and men to acquire a more sophisticated understanding of political, cultural, and civic issues. On 16 November 1894, the League for Political Education was founded at the home of Eleanor Butler Sanders. Among its six founding members were Catherine A. B. Abbee, who also founded the City History Club; Lucia Gilbert Runkle, the first American woman to write for the editorial page of a major American newspaper; Adele M. Fielde, a former missionary; Lee Wood Haggin; and Mary Putnam Jacobi, a physician and outspoken advocate for women's rights. Within months of its establishment, the league had attracted nearly fifty members. The new organization quickly initiated a broad program of lectures on diverse topics, including literature and art, science and philosophy, and citizenship and public affairs. Professor Franklin H. Giddings presented the first lecture, "Some Duties of the Citizen," in January 1895.⁴ By 1899 the club boasted six hundred members, and it was incorporated in 1904. Although lectures were open to both women and men, the first programs were held in the mornings and drew mostly women. That changed in 1907, after the Economic Club of New York, an outgrowth of the league, was organized by Robert Ely and J. W. Beatson. The new club was founded to "aid in the creation and expression of an enlightened public opinion on the important economic and social questions of the day."⁵ The club, which counted a number of prominent men among its members, held its meetings in the evening and was responsible for significantly expanding the league's constituency. A third organization, the Civic Forum, also became a part of the league's extended family. The Civic Forum, also formed in 1907, aimed to "promote a finer national life and a better understanding of the peoples of other countries."⁶

Although the League for Political Education came into being through the vision of its founding female members, a number of prominent men assumed important roles in its early growth and development. Among the most influential were Elgin R. L. Gould, founder of the City and Suburban Homes Company, who served as chair of the board after 1905, and John Graham Brooks, a professor of economics at Harvard, who drew large audiences with his early lectures. Robert Erskine Ely (1861-1948), also of Harvard, who was invited to give a series of lectures in 1899, was of seminal importance in the league's history. After a brief stint as part-time director, Ely became the league's executive director in 1901 and served in that position until he retired in 1937. Under his leadership Town Hall was constructed and its auspicious programs of lectures and musical events were developed. Following Ely's retirement, George V. Denny Jr. became director. Denny had joined the staff

⁴ Some sources cite the first lecture as "Some Duties of Citizenship."

⁵ "Times Square to Have a Million-Dollar Town Hall," *New York Times*, April 27, 1919.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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in 1931 and in 1934 was responsible for the development of *ATMA*, and he remained host of the show until 1952.

The league's earliest meetings, including its very first lecture, were held at the home of Eleanor B. Sanders. However, as early as December 1894, the organization rented a room in the Berkeley-Lyceum building (23 West 44th Street) for club business meetings and classes, and held lectures in the building's theater. As membership and attendance increased, the league began to rent larger venues for its lectures, which, in addition to the Berkeley-Lyceum Theatre, were held in Aeolian Hall, the Engineering Society Building, the Cort Theatre, the Park Theatre, the Hudson Theatre, and Carnegie Hall. Additional classes were held in the Ladies Athletic Club. By 1911, the growth in league membership and the success of its programs led the organization to acquire a home of its own. A \$1,000 donation by Anna Blaksley Bliss (1850-1935) in 1912 (followed by a more substantial donation the following year) initiated the building program, and a group of the league's directors formed the Societies Realty Company to make the real estate transactions. In 1914 the *New York Times* reported that the league had an option on a site on the south side of West 49th Street and was planning to erect a twelve-story building. The building would house the society, the Economic Club and the Civic Forum, and, in addition to a hall and offices, the building would boast a gymnasium, swimming pool, baths, and a roof garden.⁷ The building had already been designed by the architect of City and Suburban Homes; this was presumably James E. Ware, who had designed the latter complex between 1898 and 1905. No building permit was filed for a Ware design, and in 1917 the real estate committee purchased a different site, a 125' x 100' parcel on the north side of West 43th Street on Times Square, for \$425,000. This time, news reports announced that plans for a four-story building had been prepared by McKim, Mead and White and that the building would house an auditorium and office space.⁸

The building parcel was located in a changing neighborhood. Times Square's rapid development as New York's theater district began around the turn of the twentieth century. For most of the nineteenth century, theaters had been located in a mixed neighborhood on lower Broadway. But as the city expanded northward, new forms of transportation, such as the Third and Sixth Avenue elevated railways and the New York subway system, as well as the opening of Grand Central Depot nearby, made the area a desirable place to locate attractions intended to draw visitors from the city and beyond. As early as the 1890s, construction of new playhouses and theaters began in what was then known as Long Acre Square (renamed Times Square in 1904 following completion of the New York Times Building). Businesses associated with the entertainment industry also began to locate in the area. These included rehearsal halls, offices of agents and producers, and businesses that were involved with providing costumes, lighting, and make up. Finally, a number of boarding houses, offering homes to aspiring actors, dotted the neighborhood. Between 1900 and 1920, a total of forty-three new theaters were built in the mid-town area, mostly on the side streets east and west of Broadway. By the onset of the Depression in 1929, an additional thirty playhouses had been built, and the theater district was generally defined as the area between 39th Street and Columbus Circle and Sixth and Eighth Avenues.⁹ On West 43rd Street, the parcel acquired for Town Hall was directly across from Henry Miller's Theater (recently renamed the Stephen Sondheim Theatre); this new building was designed by Allen, Ingalls, and Hoffman in 1917-1918. The *New York Times* noted that the site for Town Hall had been selected both because it was in the heart of the fast growing city center and because of its proximity to major transportation systems.¹⁰

⁷ "Societies to Put Up a 12-Story Building," *New York Times*, February 26, 1914.

⁸ "Times Square Million-Dollar Town Hall." It is not known what prevented the society from purchasing the West 49th Street site or what became of the plans said to have been prepared by James E. Ware.

⁹ Information about the history of New York's theater district largely drawn from Margaret Knapp, "Henry Miller Theater Landmarks Preservation Commission Designation Report," New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, LP-1357, 1987.

¹⁰ "Times Square Million-Dollar Town Hall."

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In July 1919, contractor Russell B. Smith began demolition of the rowhouses that occupied the site, and construction commenced on 10 October 1919. In January 1920, Colonel Theodore Roosevelt Jr. laid the cornerstone on behalf of his wife, Eleanor Butler Alexander, niece and namesake of the late Eleanor Butler Saunders, the club's first president.¹¹ Construction was completed during the following year and the building opened on 12 January 1921. The initial cost of the land and building was \$1,350,000. Although the program for the four-story structure constructed in 1921 was considerably scaled down from that described in the 1914 article, the first building campaign raised only enough money to complete the exterior of the building, the auditorium, and the lobby. However, another gift from Anna Blaksley Bliss (\$500,000) in 1922 spurred a new subscription drive, which secured the funds necessary to complete the upper floor interiors and eliminate the building's \$600,000 mortgage. More than four thousand people donated to the construction of the building, and the league, which boasted six thousand members in 1921, prided itself in being historically "free from political influence."¹² An important factor in ensuring the success of the endeavor was the plan's evolution from a hall for the League for Political Education to a building called "Town Hall," which was defined as a community center for the city of New York, a venue for "public meetings of all kinds related to the general welfare [where citizens may gather] to discuss their common interests." Like the league, Town Hall was dedicated to a "constructive educational purpose."¹³ However, the expanded definition of the league's fellowship to the city itself broadened its base, brought additional subscribers, and made its long-held aspiration feasible.¹⁴

In addition to the meeting hall itself, the building housed the offices of the League for Political Education, the Economic Club, and the Civic Forum.¹⁵ In 1925, after completion of the building's interior, the new Town Hall Club became the fourth tenant, occupying space on the top two floors. The Town Hall Club was founded on the premise that "sociability promotes acquaintance and mutual understanding" and prided itself on its egalitarian principles.¹⁶ Dedicated to promoting "a finer public spirit and a better social order" through the interrelationship of social and educational programs, the club was progressive in admitting both men and women to full membership.¹⁷

Construction History¹⁸

By the time McKim, Mead and White received the commission for Town Hall, founding members Stanford White (1853-1906) and Charles F. McKim (1847-1909) were dead, and William R. Mead (1846-1928) had withdrawn from active practice. In their stead, a younger group of designers, led by four new partners, William M. Kendall, William S. Richardson, Burt L. Fenner, and Teunis J. van der Bent, was producing the firm's designs. Teunis J. van der Bent (1863-1936) emigrated to the United States from the Netherlands, where he had studied at the University of Delft. In 1887, at the age of twenty-four, he secured work as a draftsman at McKim, Mead and White, where he worked on such projects as the Hotel Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Terminal Station, several buildings at Columbia University, additions to the Metropolitan Museum, and Cornell University Medical School. In 1909, van der Bent became a partner in the firm, and in 1928 he succeeded Mead as head of its office of business management. Records indicate that van der Bent was responsible for the design of Town Hall, a restrained, yet dignified example of the Georgian Revival style that evoked associations with the building's civic purpose and the architecture of early America.

¹¹ Mrs. Roosevelt was unable to attend the ceremony due to illness.

¹² Robert Erskine Ely, *A Beginning* (New York: Town Hall, 1944), 33.

¹³ "The Town Hall," Program of the Opening Ceremonies [1921], 2.

¹⁴ Ely, *Beginning*, 30.

¹⁵ All of its occupants, including the League for Political Education, were expected to pay rent until the hall was debt free.

¹⁶ Ely, *Beginning*, 36.

¹⁷ "New Civic Club Planned; Being Organized by the League for Political Education," *New York Times*, February 24, 1918.

¹⁸ Information on the construction of Town Hall was drawn in part from Ruth Seldon-Sturgill, "Town Hall Designation Reports," New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, LP -1011 and LP-1012, 1978.

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Due to funding limits, McKim, Mead and White was commissioned to design only the exterior of the building, its lobbies and auditorium. The estimated cost of completing the remaining interior spaces, including a library, lounge, and restaurant, was \$500,000. After Anna Blaksley Bliss's 1922 donation, New York architect Louis E. Jallade (1866-1957) was hired to complete the interior. Jallade was trained at the Metropolitan Museum of Art School before graduating from the École des Beaux-Arts in 1902. In 1923, Jallade was a partner in the firm Lindsay and Warren; however, he later formed a partnership with his son at 597 Fifth Avenue. Jallade served as president of the New York Society of Architects and was a member of the Architectural League and the Brooklyn Committee for Better Housing.¹⁹

Tradition holds that the internationally famed acoustical engineer Wallace C. Sabine of Harvard was consulted in the design of Town Hall's auditorium. However, at the time the plans were being developed, Sabine was involved in projects in Europe and he died in 1919, before the construction of Town Hall commenced. After years of experiments with various materials and shapes, Sabine had developed a precise formula for building an acoustically perfect hall. In 1900, McKim, Mead and White had been the first architectural firm to follow Sabine's acoustical instructions in the design of Boston's Symphony Hall, which is noted for its fine acoustics. Having worked with Sabine on a number of other projects, it is likely that McKim, Mead and White employed Sabine's successful scientific analysis of acoustical properties in its design for the Town Hall auditorium.

In 1930, Town Hall published a limited edition monograph that appears to have been part of a campaign to enlarge the building. The book included a rendering showing the McKim, Mead and White design enlarged by three additional bays on the west side (incorporating the rowhouse known as the "annex," purchased in the 1930s) and four additional stories.²⁰ The text restated and reenergized the building's original dedication to purpose as a public meeting place and listed all of the diverse cultural, civic and religious groups that had used the facility. It stated that one thousand lectures had been given and that Town Hall's program had influenced millions of people. The booklet's only reference to a potential expansion was the observation that "still more millions await only an extension of the facilities now available."²¹ The proposed enlargement was never completed; however, Town Hall did expand part of its operations into the annex.²² In fact, Town Hall has experienced only minor physical changes since it was completed in 1923, and both the exterior and the interior lobby and auditorium remain almost exactly as built.

The Town Hall

The Town Hall has been described as "an idea with a roof over it."²³ As such, the building was designed and built in the service of an ideal: to foster civic education. This purpose has been clearly expressed in all of the literature related to its history, from the genesis of the League for Political Education through the history of *ATMA*. In fact, the two are linked by an outstanding correlation of thematic and programmatic concerns over more than a century.

¹⁹ Among Jallade's works are the Thompson Meter Company in Brooklyn, the Welfare Island Dispensary, the New York City Department of Hospitals, and the International House on Riverside Drive.

²⁰ Plans for a sixth story were mentioned in "The Town Hall, New York City," *Architecture and Building* 53 (February 1921): 13.

²¹ *The Town Hall, New York* (New York: League for Political Education, 1930), 12.

²² The annex is extant but no longer owned by Town Hall. Although Town Hall still uses one floor for storage, the annex is a separate building and is not included in this nomination. A history of Town Hall published in 1938 discussed a then-ongoing campaign to add what the author called the "five long-projected stories to the building." The authors discussed Town Hall's overcrowded classes and outgrown plant, while also suggesting plans for an expanded program of adult education proposed for the enlarged building. However, like the 1930 proposal, the 1937 addition was never completed. "Town Hall Plans Five More Stories," *New York Times*, April 16, 1937; Louis E. Jallade, *Rendering of Town Hall Expansion, 1939*.

²³ Harry A. Overstreet and Bonaro W. Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), 71.

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The association of the league's new building with the New England town hall that became so important in the conceptualization of the radio show began before the building was even constructed. Writing about the cornerstone ceremony in 1920, Hildegard Hawthorne observed that "America was born in her town halls. Our forefathers met [there] to talk freely of all matters related to the civic life."²⁴ Other reporters alluded to the same theme, some embellishing their stories with folksy language, such as the writer who declared that "New York's small town longings rise in the concrete. You are to have a Town Hall on West 43rd Street. If you want to know what your neighbors think...you may go clearly to town meetin' regular as preachin' and have your say too."²⁵ Architectural critics were quick to reinforce the connection. One article opened with a romantic description of the New England "Common House," a "rough structure of logs" as the "first purely American architectural tradition, one that still exists in its purity in our small villages" before moving on to discuss McKim, Mead and White's design for Town Hall, while another began with contemporary references to the need for a town hall in the heart of the city, described the league's high civic ambition, and concluded that the architect's design "well expresses the purpose of the building."²⁶ These associations clearly originated with the league itself, not only in the name chosen for the new building but in its educational purpose. As Henry W. Taft, then president of the board, asserted, "no instrumentality for the education of men and women in the history of the world has been so effective as the old institution of the New England Town Meeting. We are, in a measure, trying to restore, in a great community, the fundamental ideas of the Town Meeting."²⁷ The idea for the venue caught on quickly, and the *Christian Science Monitor* reported that in the first year "more than 200,000 have used the Town Hall...as an open forum in the heart of New York."²⁸

Town Hall's dedication to the creation of an open forum clearly reflects the original goals of the league's founders. Its very first lecture, in 1884, addressed the duties of citizenship. Those that followed delved optimistically into the philosophy and details of government, addressing such topics as "The Citizen and the Public Purse," "On Elections," "The Peculiar Fascinations of the Study of Our Government," "The Relation of the Citizen to the Criminal," "The Dream and Reality of Social Equality, and "The Distribution of Wealth." Indeed, Robert Erskine, who became the league's first director, was initially hired in 1901 to give a series of lectures on political economy. Other league lectures addressed some of the major social issues of the day, including "The Economic Independence of Women," "The American Trade Union and Its Critics," "Race Problems," "What America Owes to the Foreigner," "How to Clear the Slums," and "Human Nature Behind Prison Bars." In 1914, members heard both sides of the league's founding issue, with lectures entitled "Why I Believe in Women's Suffrage" and "Why I am Opposed to Women's Suffrage."

With the construction of Town Hall, the league's emphasis on education with an open forum continued. political education, social problems, and current events continued. Topics during the 1920s covered political, social, and current events with lectures such as "Russia Today and Tomorrow," "The Problem of Main Street," "The New Political Power of Women," "Justice and Efficiency for Capital and Labor," "The Outlook for World Peace," "What is the American Way," "What Does Democracy Mean," "Is Our Freedom in Danger," "Personal Liberty and the Modern State," and "The Challenge of Self-Government."

Town Hall assumed a prominent place in the life of the city at its inception, attracting leading scholars, artists, and politicians. Program speakers included women activists such as suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt and reformer Jane Addams, as well as intellectuals and literary figures like Henry James, Thomas Mann, Carl

²⁴ *New York Evening Post*, February 21, 1920; quoted in Overstreet and Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, 74.

²⁵ *New York Evening Post*, January 28, 1920; quoted in Overstreet and Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, 76.

²⁶ "The Civic Forum for New York City," *American Architect* 117 (January 1920); "The Town Hall, New York City," n.p.

²⁷ Quoted in Overstreet and Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, 77.

²⁸ *Christian Science Monitor*, February 17, 1922, quoted in Overstreet and Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, 79.

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Sandburg, and Edna Ferber. General John J. Pershing and Rear Admiral Bird addressed military topics, while African American leader Booker T. Washington spoke to racial issues, and Samuel Gompers addressed labor concerns. Counted among the prominent political speakers were Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, Woodrow Wilson, and Winston Churchill.

Although presentation of musical entertainment was originally deemed secondary to the building's main purpose as a venue for the civil and democratic exchange of ideas, Town Hall was designed with a world class performance space. It is not certain if this was a conscious decision by the board or a suggestion of the architects; however, Robert Ely reported that the original seating plan was changed so that the seats could be arranged in a more democratic way, making them of equal value for everyone attending the performance.²⁹ The building's sophisticated acoustical engineering also suggests an original intent to use the auditorium as a performance space. A 1921 letter from McKim, Mead and White to Robert Ely confirms that the architects designed the hall "for public meetings, lectures and the like [and] to be rented for concerts, moving pictures exhibitions and similar entertainments."³⁰

Throughout its history, Town Hall has been a popular venue for musical performances of all types. The league began this initiative slowly, renting the auditorium for private recitals as a source of revenue. However, as the auditorium's reputation for acoustical excellence spread, the demand grew, and from 1930 to 1931 Town Hall sponsored its first Endowment Series. Among the hundreds of notable artists who performed there are Richard Strauss, 1921; Pablo Casals, 1923; Paul Robeson, 1927; Andres Segovia, 1929; Sergei Rachmaninov, 1932; Feodor Chaliapin, 1932; Lily Pons, 1938; Isaac Stern, 1939; Bela Bartok, 1940; Billie Holliday, 1942; Sarah Vaughn and Lester Young, 1947; Leontyne Price, 1954; Thelonious Monk, 1959; Igor Stravinsky, 1959; and Charles Mingus, 1962. Those who made their debuts here include Lotte Lehmann, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, Joan Sutherland, and Marian Anderson. A 1945 jazz concert featuring Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Don Byas, Al Haig, Curley Russell, and Max Roach was an early and important public performance of bebop. Today, Town Hall remains one of the most well-known and active concert halls in the city.

In 1958, Town Hall merged with New York University (NYU), which managed the hall and leased the auditorium for a variety of purposes. During the university's ownership, the upper floors of the building became the home of the NYU Club, which had been founded in 1951 by a group of alumni. In 1973, NYU formed the Town Hall Foundation to operate the hall. In 1978, the building was acquired from the university and a new board of directors and management team was formed.³¹

Development of Radio after World War I

The early twentieth century marked a series of major changes in American society. The various effects of immigration, industrialization, and urbanization, America's involvement in World War I, and technical advances that facilitated transportation and communication all stimulated the development of a broader, more diverse, and more accessible cultural experience for many Americans. Among the many ways that citizens experienced and participated in this rapidly changing culture, the development of radio broadcasting was especially significant. The new media was revolutionary in its ability to reach an immense, scattered, and diverse audience. Many touted radio for its potential to democratize cultural exchange, while others hoped that

²⁹ Ely, *Beginning*, 41.

³⁰ McKim, Mead and White to Robert Ely, May 20, 1921; quoted in Seldon-Sturgill, "Town Hall Designation Reports," LP-1012.

³¹ Several newspaper articles refer to these and other specifics about the sequence of ownership; they include "The Evolution of a Legacy at the NYU Club," *New York University Alumni Connect Newsletter* (July 2009), accessed August 25, 2010, <http://www.nyu.edu/alumni/connect/archive/0709/special.htm> (site discontinued); Nadine Brozan, "N.Y.U. Club Is Shut Down, Perhaps Permanently," *New York Times*, July 22, 1989. However, the information in this paragraph was provided by current Town Hall staff.

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it might serve to promote social consistency for an increasingly diverse population and aid in the assimilation of the growing immigrant population. Still others worried about the potential for a loss of cultural cohesion as unregulated access to the airways enabled broadcasters to target specific races, classes, religions, and political beliefs. The possibility that labor union leaders, jazz musicians, African Americans, and communists, among others, might gain unfettered use of the airwaves unleashed fears that “mainstream” cultural values might be lost or threatened. These various themes influenced the larger political, economic, and social struggle over who should control the content and accessibility of the new medium.

By 1921, nearly ten thousand licensed amateurs were competing for the limited available frequencies.³² But as radio’s promise began to generate interest among providers and users, there was still no agreement about how the new media would be regulated and financed. Strict government control of radio during wartime led some to fear continued government censorship. Simultaneously, the proliferation of uncontrolled broadcasts prompted others to fret that a lack of government regulation would threaten a heretofore stable American identity. As early as 1922, David Sarnoff, a Russian-Jewish immigrant who held a job with American Marconi before it was purchased by General Electric Corporation had proposed the establishment of a high quality nationwide broadcast company.³³ While Sarnoff imagined a national non-commercial network, it was not until after American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) demonstrated the feasibility and profitability of chain broadcasting that Radio Corporation of American (RCA) was motivated to create NBC, the first radio network. Sarnoff assumed management of the company, later becoming its president.

RCA promoted the new network as “seeking...to provide machinery, which will ensure a national distribution of national programs, and a wider distribution of programs of the highest quality.” Initially NBC saw itself as a public service provider that sold only enough time to support its non-commercial programming.³⁴ But despite its emphasis on quality, NBC was still a privately owned, profit-making company responsible to its stockholders.³⁵ At the end of its first year, NBC had forty-eight affiliates, and the following year the company divided itself into two networks: NBC Red, which presented more popular programming and generated more profit, and NBC Blue, which offered primarily cultural or educational programs. In 1927, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) was established with sixteen affiliates. By 1929, the three networks presented 359 hours of national programs a week.³⁶ A fourth network, the Mutual Broadcasting System, was established in 1934 as a cooperative venture among four stations that shared all the expenses of programming and broadcasting.³⁷

During the 1920s and 30s, NBC and CBS pioneered the system of sustaining and sponsored programs. Sustaining programs were supported or produced by the networks, either by providing airtime and production assistance to nonprofit organizations or by producing programs themselves as a public service. The latter were touted as “quality” programming, with educational or cultural content. But despite the public service premise, sustaining broadcasts were often presented with the hope that they would be picked up by sponsors. Sponsored broadcasts were commercial broadcasts produced by paying sponsors that purchased airtime. By 1934, half of

³² Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2007), 30.

³³ Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Perseus Book Group, 2004), 355.

³⁴ Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (New York: Oxford Press, 1993), 15-16.

³⁵ Michele Hilmes, ed., *NBC: America’s Network* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁷ By the 1940s, Mutual had more affiliates than either of the other networks but it claimed fewer listeners. It was known for several popular shows, for its sports broadcasts, and for its news division. After 1952 it was no longer run cooperatively; it survived until 1999.

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network time was sold for sponsored broadcasts.³⁸ As advertising became the accepted economic foundation of broadcasting in the early 1930s, advertising agencies went beyond simply financing broadcasts to determining the actual content of the programs, and networks lost creative control over broadcasting.³⁹ By 1931, almost all sponsored programs were actually developed and produced by advertising agencies, and by 1934 more than 50 percent of revenue was generated from ten advertising firms.⁴⁰ By the mid-1930s, even the FCC had little control over advertisers, and it was clear that the companies paying the bill were in control of the content.⁴¹

The Communications Act of 1934 largely reinforced the system developed by the Radio Act of 1927. Under the new act, the FRC was replaced with the FCC, which was charged with regulating radio, telegraph, cable and telephone. The weak requirement that the FCC study the issue of independent broadcasting represented the failure of those who mounted a significant challenge to commercial radio.⁴² When the promised hearings were held, Congress found that commercial broadcasters had ample time for educational and other nonprofit needs and were most eager to serve the public.⁴³ It was in this era that the networks began to promote their public service broadcasting more actively, largely with a significant increase in sustaining broadcasts. The networks also donated free airtime and production support for groups such as the United States Department of Agriculture, the National Parent-Teacher Association, the Academy of Medicine, and the Federation of Women's Clubs. They focused on mainstream groups, avoided radicals, and steered clear of controversial issues such as economic inequality or discrimination.⁴⁴

By the mid-1930s, educational stations had a significantly smaller presence on the airwaves. More than half of the two hundred educational stations licensed by the 1920s had ceased to exist. In contrast, commercial radio made major strides in this period. Perhaps most important, the marketplace model had been institutionalized as an "icon of American freedom and culture."⁴⁵ Though the heads of both major networks publically championed commercial radio as the protector of democracy, the success of radio as a commercial medium meant that serious public affairs and educational programs received increasingly short shrift. Speaking in 1936, NBC's Sarnoff asserted that "we cannot have a controlled radio and retain a democracy." A year later, CBS president William Paley declared that "he who attacks the fundamentals of the American [broadcasting] system attacks democracy itself."⁴⁶ In order to justify the democratic potential of the commercial system, the networks supported a few important education programs. *ATMA* was one of these.

Radio and Democracy

As early as the 1840s, the development of the telegraph was hailed as ushering in a new era of communication in America and offering a new opportunity to develop an enlightened citizenry. Proponents had great hopes that instant electronic communications could be used to inform and educate citizens of a far flung nation, thus helping to augment national unity at a time when the republic was still growing.⁴⁷ With the emergence of popular radio in the first decades of the twentieth century, similar idealistic goals for enhancing access to

³⁸ Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, vol. 2, 1933-1953 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 17.

³⁹ Hilmes, *NBC*, 16-21.

⁴⁰ Barnouw, *Golden Web*, 17.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴² Ralph Engelman, *Public Radio and Television in America: A Political History* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications), 34-35.

⁴³ Barnouw, *Golden Web*, 26.

⁴⁴ Hilmes, *NBC*, 20-21.

⁴⁵ Robert McChesney, in Engelman, *Public Radio and Television in America*, 40.

⁴⁶ Eugene E. Leach, "Tuning Out Education: The Cooperative Doctrine in Radio," *History of Public Broadcasting in the United States*, accessed February 9, 2010, <http://www.current.org/coop/coop1.shtml> (site discontinued). Both speeches were made to the National Conference on Educational Broadcasting.

⁴⁷ Engelman, *Public Radio and Television in America*, 12.

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information and promoting democracy were revived. Before World War I, the amateur network created by more than one thousand ham radio transmitters suggested that almost universal access to uncensored communication was possible, while after the war the surge in independent radio broadcasters brought a democratic cacophony of viewpoints before radio listeners. At the same time, the fallout from several decades of immigration reshaped the culture in the 1920s. Between 1927 and 1935, the percentage of American households with radios rose from 25 percent to 93 percent. As radio became more accessible to the general population, many recognized that the ability to reach citizens in their own homes could play a valuable role in creating and/or defining a national public; yet, goals varied, ranging from those who embraced an opportunity to foster cultural diversity to those who promoted more rigorous assimilation. For example, while some thought that the ability to listen to stations from different regions could affirm the nation's distinctions and promote mutual understanding, others believed that radio had a special mission to raise the tone of American culture.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, there was general agreement that broadcasting could strengthen the social connections with American culture for those who were isolated and enable the electorate to be better informed. One writer expressed awe over an automobile trip during which he kept in touch with the news via radio: "...radio networks are supplying [people in remote parts of the country] with all of the news that comes into Times Square. You can think of them as lonely people listening to radios in waste places, or you can think of them as a populace and an electorate."⁴⁹ Numerous writers in the same era extolled the new medium's potential to facilitate political discourse, and many expressed the common theme that "radio would...do nothing less than resurrect the values of the early Republic."⁵⁰

Radio's promise as an agent of democracy was rooted in the belief that the nation is best governed by an informed citizenry able to engage in a free exchange of ideas, to debate them openly, and to arrive at decisions about solving mutual problems that are supported by the majority. However, in the first decades of the twentieth century, many worried that the country's rapid expansion was creating a nation of individuals, rather than communities, one in which those in outlying areas or overcrowded cities had fewer opportunities to obtain information and interact as neighbors and were thus hampered from participating fully in the rights and duties of citizens. Among the most exciting prospects of early radio was its potential to bring information directly to Americans who were separated by geographic or social distances. Optimists believed that radio might provide a way for all Americans to gather instantly to consider critical problems. As one scholar put it, "the magnificent distances we boast of also estrange us. An idea holds us together - the idea that...[we] are all citizens of the same commonwealth. Radio will achieve the task of giving a reality to this idea... Radio is destined to transform the United States...into a huge auditorium."⁵¹ The idea of creating "neighborhoods" via radio informed many of the most ambitious public affairs programming of the 1930s.

The Public Forum

Democracy also relies on an educated public, an appreciation for a wide range of values, and an awareness of an ever-changing world. In the 1930s and 40s in particular, increasingly disturbing news about the rise of totalitarianism in Europe and the long buildup to World War II led many to believe that the American people needed a refresher course in democratic values so that they would be able to help their government through the difficult decisions that lay ahead. One response to this was a renewed interest in public forums as a means of adult education. Advocates of the forum movement (which had its antecedent in the late nineteenth-century Chautauqua model) promoted a formalized system of public education intended to train adults for better

⁴⁸ Starr, *Creation of the Media*, 388.

⁴⁹ Bernard DeVoto, "Main Street Twenty Years After," *Harper's* (November 1940): 585-87, in William C. Ackerman, "The Dimensions of American Broadcasting," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 9 (Spring 1945): 1-18.

⁵⁰ Susan J. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 321.

⁵¹ Waldemar Kaempffert, "Who Will Pay for Broadcasting," *Popular Radio* (December 1922): 236-45.

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citizenship. The League for Political Education itself had been established based on the forum model. The public forum contained a set format that involved a specific topic, a moderator, a formal lecture by an expert, questions from the floor, a general discussion, and a recap.⁵² During the early 1930s, John Ward Studebaker, a school administrator from Ohio, brought national prominence to the forum movement. In 1932, Studebaker secured a grant from the Carnegie Corporation to develop a series of forums as an experiment in public education. Later, as U.S. commissioner of education (1934-1948), Studebaker established the Federal Forum Project (1936-1941) based on the same model. The Federal Forum Project sponsored thousands of forums all over the country, and by 1938 forums were drawing more than three million participants a year. Studebaker believed that the forums protected civil liberties by giving citizens the chance to exercise them.⁵³ His goal was to nurture democracy.⁵⁴ In *Plain Talk*, written in 1936, Studebaker argued that people had lost faith in their ability to deal with major social problems because they no longer understood them and that such “civic illiteracy endangers modern democracies.”⁵⁵ Another scholar suggested that public forums helped to increase the political literacy of the voter, providing an aptitude for interpreting the things that he or she must judge in everyday life.⁵⁶

For proponents of forums, who believed that education could give citizens the tools they needed to work democratically toward the public welfare, radio presented an opportunity to extend these benefits to a significantly larger audience. One enthusiast attested that “there were numerous indications that the public would accept public forum meetings and discussions by means of radio broadcasts.”⁵⁷ In fact, Studebaker, who also chaired the United States Radio Education Committee, reported that in 1937 his forum centers presented nearly one thousand radio discussions.⁵⁸ The Albuquerque Public Affairs Forum, for example, which held twelve public forums in 1938, also sponsored a live broadcast of *ATMA* followed by an open discussion from the Albuquerque High School.⁵⁹ Thus, for those who despaired of an informed public, radio allowed information to be transmitted right into the American living room, thereby leveling hierarchies that were created by distance, isolation, poverty, disability, access to education, and other social and environmental factors.⁶⁰ Advocates believed that radio could offer those in remote places the same kind of information that they would seek if they had access to large universities.⁶¹ This was seen as a tremendous resource in such a rapidly growing population and changing society. One author who believed that radio could bring valuable information into each and every home praised *ATMA* as “a significant expression of the forum idea.”⁶²

Finally, participation in a democracy also presupposes a sharing of ideas, the ability to listen to different ideas, to gather in groups to debate, discuss, and reach consensus. Here, proponents of radio believed that the new medium had the potential to present listeners with a wide range of views and to promote the free exchange of ideas, both on the air and among listeners, who, it was believed, would listen in groups, repeating and rearguing

⁵² Carroll D. Champlin, “The Public Forum as an Educational Agency,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 21 (November 1938): 74.

⁵³ John W. Studebaker, “Dr. Studebaker Pictures the Future for Public Forums as Part of the New Trend to Real Democracy in Life,” *New York Times*, April 11, 1937.

⁵⁴ John Gastil and William M. Keith, “A Nation That (Sometimes) Likes To Talk: A Brief History of Public Deliberation in the United States,” in *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook*, eds. John Gastil and Peter Levine (n.p.: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), 11-12.

⁵⁵ John W. Studebaker, *Plain Talk* (Washington: National Home Library Foundation, 1936), 128.

⁵⁶ J. T. Salter, “The Pattern of Politics: 1. The Politician,” *Journal of Politics* 1, no. 2 (May 1939): 130-36.

⁵⁷ Champlin, “The Public Forum,” 74.

⁵⁸ Studebaker, “Dr. Studebaker Pictures.”

⁵⁹ “Albuquerque Federal Forum Project Scrapbook,” The University of New Mexico, University Libraries, Center for Southwest Research, accessed February 15, 2010, <http://rmoa.unm.edu/printerfriendly.ph> [radio station KOB].

⁶⁰ Engelman, *Public Radio and Television in America*, 18.

⁶¹ John Erskine, “The Future of Radio as a Cultural Medium,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Special issue, *Radio: The Fifth Estate* 177 (January 1935): 216-17.

⁶² Salter, “Pattern of Politics,” 135.

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the debates they heard. Advocates for radio romanticized the medium by casting it as a “town hall” for the modern age, an ethereal meeting place where citizens could gather to exchange ideas and make decisions for the common good. The latter reflects a renewed interest in the idea of the New England town meeting as the embodiment of deliberative democratic decision making. This view of the town hall dated back through to the nineteenth century and reflected a reverence for New England’s colonial era government structure, in which town members gathered in person, rather than through elected representatives, to discuss, debate, and decide local matters, as one of the purest expressions of the democratic ideal. Similar to the public forum, the town hall was also lauded as a school for democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville had observed that “Town Meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people’s reach, they teach men how to use and enjoy it.”⁶³ Although the town hall idea had lost some credence during the Progressive Era, with its emphasis on professional management of government, the desire to empower citizens to counter threats presented by the specter of totalitarianism promoted a renewal of interest in the decentralized democracy represented by the town hall during the 1930s.⁶⁴ Among public discussion’s advocates, John Studebaker insisted that “democracy must have a channel whereby public questions may be discussed as frankly and as freely as they were in the old New England town hall meeting.”⁶⁵

The new town hall advocates focused on encouraging the exchange of viewpoints as a way to understand them and sort out their relative merits. In “Radio Builds Democracy,” George Denny decried the public’s tendency to read and listen only to those who shared their own views.⁶⁶ He later remarked that “it is only in orderly discussion that lies are unmasked” and asserted that when mass meetings replace town meetings danger arises.⁶⁷ “Discussion as democracy” was a popular idea in the early twentieth century, and in a book of the same name, one scholar defined democracy as “governance through talk.”⁶⁸ Although face-to-face communication was highly praised and encouraged, many worried that the country had grown too large for effective discussion among citizens. Here radio advocates believed that the new medium could significantly expand the average citizen’s exposure to a wide range of views. Shows such as *ATMA* emphasized the breadth of topics and participants (many of whom were decision makers in government) and prioritized exchanges between guests that elucidated differences over similarities. Furthermore, audience participation held the potential for an even more generous exchange of views, as did the opportunity for the home audience to respond by mail. Radio offered everyone the opportunity to listen to, think about, and perhaps participate in lively discussions of current affairs with important leaders in government and industry, helping to approximate the perceived virtues of the New England town hall meetings.

Public Service Broadcasting

Public service broadcasting embraces many of the principles promoted by broadcasters, idealists and reformers since the earliest days of radio. The idea that radio should serve everyone equally, promote cultural diversity, represent all viewpoints, allow for an exchange of ideas, help to ensure an informed electorate, and provide cultural and educational enrichment pervades discussion of the media from its earliest history. Since it was formed in 1927, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), a non-commercial public monopoly service chartered by the British government and funded by a fee (or tax) charged to all users, has provided an almost

⁶³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835), quoted in Frank M. Bryan, *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 27.

⁶⁴ Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 25-40.

⁶⁵ William H. Bristow, “Extending the Adult-Education Horizon,” Review of *Plain Talk* by John W. Studebaker,” *The School Review* 45 (April 1937): 309.

⁶⁶ George V. Denny Jr., “Radio Builds Democracy,” *Journal of Educational Sociology* 14 (February 1941): 370.

⁶⁷ S. J. Woolf, “The Umpire of the Town Meeting,” *New York Times*, June 6, 1943.

⁶⁸ Robert Danisch, Review of *Democracy as Discussion: Civic Education and the American Forum Movement* by William Keith. *Rhetorical Review* 6 (June 2008): 9.

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universally admired model for public benefit broadcasting. Nevertheless, many Americans found the BBC model, which implies that a public trustee would be immune from political and commercial interests, an insufficient guarantee that radio would be free from government censorship. In 1941 Arthur Garfield Hays, general counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union, observed that “our traditions make us hesitate to give the government the power of monopolizing the radio. It is not the American way.”⁶⁹ In the following decades, the example of German takeover of radio in the 1930s was frequently cited as a cautionary tale. But without government support or protection in its formative decades, American radio broadcasting was marked by tension between public service and economic interests and increasing dominance by commercial broadcasters. Although the FCC always required broadcasters to present a reasonable amount of sustaining programming, it was not until the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 that the U.S. government mandated funding for public radio.

Nevertheless, dedication to purpose, high idealism, a concern for image and reputation, a general desire to curry favor with the government, and even commercial gain motivated both independent and network broadcasters to present programs that met some or all of the goals championed by advocates of public service radio. Before the advent of commercial broadcasting, corporate stations such as those owned by RCA were presenting public service programs, and even as sponsored programming solidified its place as the basis for radio broadcasting in the United States, networks continued to produce sustaining programs that promised education or enlightenment. While public service radio has always encompassed a wide range of programming, from classical music to the latest news, programs with an educational or civic component or those that sought to enhance participation in public affairs or advance democracy through the creative use of the new medium were a natural fit with the broadly conceived goal of radio as a new public forum.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Fireside Chats,” which began in 1933, have been hailed as a landmark in public service broadcasting because they demonstrated radio’s potential for achieving exactly the goals that idealists had imagined for the new media. Broadcast directly from the White House, the chats linked a diffuse public, provided information to everyone at the same time, and fostered an exchange of ideas about mutual problems. A large part of their success has been attributed to the president’s skillful presentation, which gave listeners the feeling that he was talking directly to them and inviting their response. Roosevelt used straightforward language and addressed the public as friends and neighbors. Calling the addresses “chats,” suggested both an intimacy and a two-way conversation. And the public responded appreciatively. Staggering amounts of mail followed the broadcasts, with writers, many of whom were from the middle and lower middle classes, responding as they might to the president himself. One person replied warmly, saying “you are the first President to come into our homes, to make us feel that you are working for us; to let us know what you are doing.” Another writer admitted that “until last night, to me, the President of the United States was merely a legend.” The radio chat seemed to change all that. Now “you are real. I know your voice; what you are trying to do.”⁷⁰ Studies showed that people tended to listen to the broadcasts in groups, continuing to explore the issues discussed after the broadcast.⁷¹ Roosevelt’s fireside chats verified the promise of radio and exemplified a style suitable for mass communication via electronic media.

In 1931, the *University of Chicago Roundtable* made its debut as a cooperative venture with a local radio station. Two years later, the show was picked up by NBC, where it was initially funded by grants and aired on the Red network. The highly regarded roundtable, one of the first nationwide radio discussion programs, was among the most successful and well known of NBC’s public affairs offerings. Each Sunday, three or four University of Chicago professors would gather for a discussion of one of the controversial issues of the day.

⁶⁹ Arthur Garfield Hays, “Civic Discussion Over the Air,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Special issue, *New Horizons in Radio* 23 (January 1941): 39.

⁷⁰ Both letters cited in Starr, *Creation of the Media*, 374.

⁷¹ Discussion of fireside chats in Starr, *Creation of the Media*, 374-75 and Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, 7-8.

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The roundtable was informal and unrehearsed, yet educational, with the university supplying bibliographies and discussion aids so that listeners could investigate the topics in more depth. The show was carried on as many as ninety stations and remained on the air until 1955.

Between 1934 and 1956, *American Forum of the Air*, originally the *Mutual Forum Hour*, aired on the Mutual Broadcasting System. Hosted by Theodore Granik, this popular program has been hailed as the first public affairs panel discussion and featured many notable guests, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt, New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, and Senators Harry Truman and Robert Taft. Topics discussed ranged from politics to matters of cultural concern. The format included opening remarks, a panel discussion, and questions from the audience. *The World Is Yours* was a half-hour broadcast produced by NBC with the Smithsonian Institution. Broadcast on NBC Red between 1936 and 1942, the show drew on the broad range of the museum's collections. A host known as the "Oldtimer" guided the audience through each half-hour episode.

American School of the Air, CBS's premier half-hour educational program, was introduced in 1930 and had an eighteen-year run. In the late 1930s, it was heard in more than one hundred thousand classrooms nationwide. *American School*, modeled after Ohio State University's 1929 *School of the Air*, presented educational programming in a different discipline each day.⁷² For example, Monday was devoted to industry and agriculture, while Tuesday was reserved for American music. Among many notable programs, musicologist Alan Lomax contributed a twenty-six week historical overview of American folk music in 1939.

Among CBS's other offerings in this genre was *American Labor and the Nation*, a series of speeches sponsored by the American Federation of Labor in 1932. *The Columbia Workshop* (1936-1943, 1946-1947), another of CBS's sustaining programs, was developed by Irving Reis. Reis was interested in experimental modes of narrative, and the show premiered many technological innovations while presenting dramatizations of plays, stories, etc. *The People's Platform*, a CBS program, aired 1938-1952. Dr. Lyman Bryson, a former assistant to George Denny at Town Hall, professor of education at Teachers College, and chair of the Adult Education Board at CBS, developed and hosted the show. Bryson's invited four or five people with different views to dinner, following which they would discuss controversial subjects. There were no prepared speeches and discussion was kept informal and spontaneous. Bryson encouraged candor by concealing the microphone, and one of the four guests was always an average citizen. Although there was no live audience, the program featured a spirited exchange of ideas.

Overall, this programming did not prove profitable for the networks. NBC Red, with its popular fare, was vastly preferred by advertisers, while NBC Blue, with its higher cultural content, became a refuge for the less popular but more respected educational and public affairs programs. The Blue network was valuable to NBC as a demonstration of the network's commitment to high ideals, yet it remained an economic liability, and when NBC was forced to divest in 1943, it dumped the Blue network altogether.⁷³ Overall, public affairs broadcasting was said to be less popular than other shows; however, several shows, such as *University of Chicago Round Table*, *ATMA*, and the *People's Platform*, succeeded in drawing respectable audiences.⁷⁴ Even though several of these shows had long runs, network commitment to sustaining broadcasts decreased in the 1940s.

⁷² The *Ohio School of the Air* (1929-1937) was an early effort to use radio in public education. Founded by Benjamin Darrow, the school offered a number of subjects to primary and secondary school students and was heard in as many as twenty-two states.

⁷³ Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, vol. 1, -- to 1933 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 272. NBC Blue became the foundation of the American Broadcasting Company (ABC).

⁷⁴ Public affairs programs usually generated between three and four thousand letters a week, sometimes as high as ten thousand. Letters about entertainment broadcasts generally brought in thirty to forty thousand letters a week.

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America's Town Meeting of the Air

ATMA was the initiative of George V. Denny Jr. (1899-1959), who joined the staff of the League for Political Education in 1931 as assistant to Robert Erskine Ely. Denny served as moderator for *ATMA* for nearly its entire run (until 1952) and replaced Ely as director (later president) of the league (later Town Hall, Inc.) after the latter's retirement in 1937. During his tenure as president, Denny embraced and advanced the ideals of the League for Political Education, asking "what...is more important and more urgent for the safety of American democracy than an honest system of political education?"⁷⁵ Denny, a native of North Carolina, brought valuable skills from his varied background as a student of commerce, actor, stage manager, and educator. In the latter capacity he served as director of the extension program at Columbia University and thus embraced some of the same optimistic views of public education as the public forum advocates.⁷⁶ He respected and carried on the legacy of Josiah Holbrook's early nineteenth century Lyceum Movement, the Chautauqua program, and other pioneering efforts in adult education, including the League for Political Education itself.⁷⁷ Throughout his career, he continued to believe that "a substantial percentage of the American people are not...close-minded" and welcomed efforts to expand their mental horizons.⁷⁸ Denny came to the league with a mixture of optimism, idealism, and artistic ability that strongly informed the choices that he made about its direction and that directly inspired the development of *ATMA*.

The oft-repeated and perhaps apocryphal genesis of *ATMA* was Denny's indirect encounter with a narrow-minded neighbor who had refused to listen to one of Roosevelt's fireside chats simply because he disapproved of Roosevelt. It was said to be this experience in 1934 that crystallized Denny's fears that Americans, hampered by ignorance, lack of education, practice or opportunity, or perhaps just isolated by remote locations or busy lives, were falling victims to the tyranny of the closed mind. Denny worried that without hearing and debating all sides of an issue, Americans would be more susceptible to the thoughtless "mass thinking" that Hitler was both encouraging and capitalizing on in Germany during the 1930s. Believing that the American public needed to be conscious of its power and responsibilities, Denny declared that "its members must be taught to listen to both sides of an argument and to reason together honestly and objectively."⁷⁹ Whether real or not, Denny's one-dimensional neighbor served as a metaphor for a nation of citizens who lacked empathy for others.

In the aftermath of this epiphany, Denny conceived the idea for an uncensored radio program "reviving our native tradition of a free and unfettered exchange of opposing views."⁸⁰ Denny's own history of *ATMA* began with a fundamental statement of his belief that "free discussion of public issues has always been a basic function of democracy" and an allusion to the construction of a place for town meetings as the first act of the New England colonists.⁸¹ Denny clearly embraced both the historicist and practical implications of calling his proposed broadcast a "town meeting of the air." During the 1930s, the town hall had once again become a powerful symbolic metaphor for American democracy. Denny also grasped the potential for modern technology to turn "every home into a potential town hall."⁸² Finally, like Roosevelt, Denny embodied the sense of showmanship and style needed to make it a success.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Orrin E. Dunlap Jr., "Open Forum Is Applauded, Freedom of Speech and Assembly for Discussion are Commended by Listeners in Tune with Town Hall of the Air," *New York Times*, June 30, 1935.

⁷⁶ David Goodman, "Programming in the Public Interest: America's Town Meeting of the Air," in Hilmes, *NBC*, 45.

⁷⁷ Denny, "Radio Builds Democracy," 370-71.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 375-76.

⁷⁹ Denny, quoted in Woolf, "The Umpire."

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Denny, "Radio Builds Democracy," 70.

⁸² Woolf, "The Umpire."

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Denny pitched his idea to John Royal, NBC's vice president for programming, and received approval for an initial series of six programs in the spring of 1934. Denny's timing was fortuitous. With the recent surge of interest in the successful Federal Forum Project, Royal observed that NBC had been besieged with forum proposals.⁸³ Denny's proposal also coincided with debate over the Communications Act of 1934, a period in which the network was eager to demonstrate its commitment to public affairs broadcasting. NBC agreed to finance the program, and the first six shows were broadcast between May and June of 1935.

The first broadcast, which took place on 30 May 1935, proved to be a landmark in broadcast history. Denny wasted no time in initiating discussion of a controversial yet timely topic: "Which Way America: Fascism, Communism, Socialism or Democracy?" Speakers, who represented each of the stated four ideologies, were Lawrence Dennis, A. J. Muste, Norman Thomas, and Raymond Moley.⁸⁴ Lawrence Dennis was an American diplomat, consultant, and author who argued that capitalism was doomed and advocated fascism during the Great Depression. Norman Thomas was a pacifist and American Socialist Party leader who ran for president six times. Raymond Moley was a lawyer, political scientist, member of FDR's "brain trust," and staunch defender of capitalism. Each delivered a prepared ten-minute talk and took questions from the audience of 1,500. Despite the fact that it aired on only eighteen stations with little advance publicity, the show received three thousand letters, only four of which were negative. Among the positive comments, one writer exclaimed that "last night you made radio history. My heartiest congratulations on the best radio program I have ever heard." Several praised the "splendid" programming, while another rejoiced to have "an example of this freedom of speech which has never been so much talked about and so little practiced as today." Yet another listener asserted that "if our country is to be rescued from the reactionaries on the one hand, and the radicals on the other, none can be of more service than your program....If the people knew of it you would have tens of thousands of listeners."⁸⁵ Denny later boasted that "nothing like it had occurred before in radio," differentiating *ATMA* from other radio discussion programs and forums by the audience's participation and their ability to question the speakers directly.⁸⁶

After the six trial programs, *ATMA* became a regular part of NBC's evening schedule, airing on NBC Blue for eight years as a sustaining broadcast. The show was broadcast weekly and Denny produced between twenty-four and twenty-nine episodes per season. Responses averaged 1,103 letters a week in the first year, and by the late 1930s the show was receiving more than two thousand letters a week.⁸⁷ After inheriting *ATMA* along with the rest of the Blue network, ABC solicited commercial support for the broadcast, and the 1944-45 season was sponsored by *Reader's Digest*. Between 1947 and its demise in 1956, the show was aired as a "cooperative," which meant that local sponsors shared its costs.⁸⁸ The show was televised for two brief periods, between October 1948 and June 1949 and for several months in the first half of 1952. Although Denny moderated the first TV run, the 1952 shows were moderated by John Daly. In the same year, Denny was replaced on the radio broadcasts as well. The show continued on radio for another four years, and the final broadcast occurred on 24 June 1956.

George Denny was the central figure in planning and executing *ATMA* from its inception until its last few years and his involvement was crucial to the show's success. He worked with Town Hall's Radio Forum Division in

⁸³ Goodman, "Programming in the Public Interest," 45.

⁸⁴ Though NBC promised that there would be no censorship, the network did indeed object to one of the proposed speakers, communist leader Earl Browder, and he was replaced with Muste, chair of the Workers Party of the United States. Goodman, "Programming in the Public Interest," 49.

⁸⁵ Overstreet and Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, 8-12.

⁸⁶ Denny, "Radio Builds Democracy," 373.

⁸⁷ Goodman, "Programming in the Public Interest," 49. Goodman notes that during the late 1930s and early 1940s the most popular broadcasts received more than four thousand letters per week.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

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selecting the speakers, who were always chosen from the top echelons of their fields, and the division director handled the logistics of the programs.⁸⁹ During the show, Denny introduced the speakers, moderated the debate, and read the questions from the audience.⁹⁰ The format remained consistent, with four presenters speaking briefly from prepared scripts before taking questions from the audience. Speakers met the morning of the broadcast and had the option of spending the afternoon revising their remarks. They were instructed to stress their differences in their opening remarks, so that they could summarize the points on which they agreed at the end. Audience questions, which were limited to twenty-five words, had to be written and approved by a committee to eliminate “personal” remarks.⁹¹ The audience was crucial to the success of the program, and Denny allowed them a great deal of freedom. Described [by Denny] as “spectators-hecklers,” audience members could be heard cheering, hissing, and/or booing. The unpredictable nature of their reaction added drama, a sense of risk, and a certain intimacy, drawing the radio listeners into the moment. By 1936 it was possible for radio listeners to call in from throughout the country, which further enhanced the connection between the forum and its listening audience.⁹² The format for the live question period developed for *ATMA* has been called a “significant innovation in American broadcasting,” and it clearly reflected Denny’s larger intent to “dramatize the power of discussion.”⁹³

Part of *ATMA*’s success can be attributed to Denny’s skills as a host and moderator. Presumably, his acting experience had given him a sense of performance that facilitated his handling of the live event in New York. He also understood how to make the broadcast an engaging experience for the home listener. He was skillful in mediating between guests who were accustomed to deference and unruly audience members and straddling the line between education and entertainment. He maintained that “conventional classroom methods cannot be used on the air. When the words ‘talk’ or ‘education’ occur in the radio-program listings in the paper, they are assiduously avoided by most listeners.”⁹⁴ He relied heavily on reinforcing the ideological associations with the New England town hall by using corny effects that were intended to create an historicist atmosphere for the home audience, such as ringing a loud bell to open the show and calling out “good evening neighbors, town meetin’ tonight.” These associations were further reinforced for members of the live audience, who were seated by ushers wearing colonial costumes.⁹⁵ And although Denny himself didn’t dress like a Puritan, a cartoon figure of a man resembling one was used for the show’s promotional brochure.

Mail was steady in volume and generally supportive. Listeners expressed a keen interest in learning as well as understanding and appreciating Denny’s goals for the program. For example, one writer appreciated “discussion of vital questions at an adult level.” Another called the show “the best thing that has happened to my mind in a longer time than I can remember,” and a third professed that “[t]here has never been a time when it was more important for intelligent people to use every means at hand to strengthen democracy.”⁹⁶ Denny also reported receiving mail from all kinds of listening groups, including those formed in schools, colleges, churches, and social clubs. He described one group that listened in the back of a drugstore and others that gathered in the homes of friends and neighbors.⁹⁷ In 1936, researchers found that 50 percent of listeners usually continued discussion after the show, and 34 percent reported changing their opinion at least once after listening

⁸⁹ Information about the Radio Forum Division from Max Wylie, ed., *Best Broadcasts of 1938-39* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1939), 189.

⁹⁰ In his duties as director of the league (and then Town Hall, Inc.), Denny also continued to help select lecturers for the league’s morning lectures and assist in the management of the concert department.

⁹¹ Goodman, “Programming in the Public Interest,” 48.

⁹² John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 31.

⁹³ Goodman, “Programming in the Public Interest,” 48.

⁹⁴ Denny, “Radio Builds Democracy,” 376.

⁹⁵ R. M. Ely, in Goodman, “Programming in the Public Interest,” 47.

⁹⁶ The first two quoted in Overstreet and Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, 212-13. The third quoted in Goodman, “Programming in the Public Interest,” 49.

⁹⁷ Denny, “Radio Builds Democracy,” 373-74.

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to a broadcast.⁹⁸ In 1938, in response to numerous requests for assistance, Denny initiated the Town Hall Advisory Service, organized by Chester D. Snell, which prepared materials for discussion groups. Among these materials were advance information about broadcasts, a bibliography, a discussion leader's handbook, and a guide for discussion group members. By 1941, more than one thousand discussion groups had registered with Town Hall, and the American Association for Adult Education estimated that more than three thousand groups met regularly to listen to and discuss the program.⁹⁹ Denny's handbook adhered closely to his intent that the show should provide information and spark discussion rather than solve problems, and he reminded leaders that "judgment should be reserved on many proposals."¹⁰⁰ As Robert E. Ely phrased it, *ATMA* was not an attempt to solve problems but to promote a better informed, broader consideration of them.¹⁰¹

Although most broadcasts originated from Town Hall, Denny toured with *ATMA* several times. In 1938 he presented the show from a series of educational institutions: Harvard, Chautauqua Institution, Northwestern University, the University of Denver, and the University of California at Berkeley. And in 1949, the show took a world tour, broadcasting from London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Rome, Ankara, Tel Aviv, Cairo, Karachi, New Delhi, Manila, Tokyo, Honolulu, and Washington. The latter series focused on race relations in America and included representatives of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and The National Council of Negro Women. The show's reach expanded internationally in 1950, when *ATMA* was broadcast over Voice of America, an international broadcasting service funded by the United States government with the intention of bringing democracy to totalitarian countries.

Denny, *ATMA*, and NBC all won numerous accolades for the show. Among them were two awards for best radio performance from the Women's National Radio Committee (before 1938) and an award for best educational program of the year from the Ohio Conference on Radio and Education (for the Willkie-Jackson discussion, 6 January 1938). The same broadcast was also honored as best public discussion in Max Wylie's *Best Broadcasts of 1938-38*. Wylie judged the broadcast, "How Can Government and Business Work Together," with Robert Jackson and Wendell L. Willkie, as "one of the most effective public discussions ever broadcast in this country."¹⁰² The Women's Press Club of New York and the National Federation of Press Women awarded a certificate of merit for the "best unbiased discussion on economic, political and international problems" (before 1938), and the American Legion Auxiliary awarded a silver plaque for "the program most acceptable and worthwhile to the general family audience" (before 1938). The show won the prestigious Peabody Award for outstanding educational program twice, in 1943 and 1945, and took a first place in Network Public Issues Broadcasts from the Institute for Education by Radio at Ohio State University, 10th American Exhibition of Education Radio Programs, in 1946. The show was also cited twice by the National Council of Teachers of English, in 1946 and 1947, for its excellence.

In addition, throughout the 1930s and 40s, *ATMA* received repeated notice in various scholarly journals. Its published broadcast transcripts were noted more than fifteen times in the *American Economic Review's* new books feature, which highlighted those relating to economic policy, business, and labor issues. *ATMA* broadcasts were also cited in bibliographies for articles published in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, the *Michigan Law Review*, the *Yale Law Review*, the *Virginia Law Review*, the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *American Anthropologist*, the *American Political Science Review*, and the *Journals of Politics*. During the same period, the show and/or its published transcripts were also recommended in numerous journals for educators, including the *Phi Delta Kappan*, *College English*, the *English Journal*, the

⁹⁸ Research was by psychologist Hadley Cantril of Princeton, in 1936. Reported in Goodman, "Programming in the Public Interest," 49.

⁹⁹ Denny, "Radio Builds Democracy," 374.

¹⁰⁰ Goodman, "Programming in the Public Interest," 52.

¹⁰¹ Ely, *Beginning*, 46.

¹⁰² Wylie, *Best Broadcasts of 1938-39*, 190.

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Clearing House, Library Quarterly, the Peabody Journal of Education, the Journal of Negro Education, History of Education Quarterly, Review of Educational Research, the School Review, the Elementary School Journal, and others.

Programs¹⁰³

Although *ATMA* presented a great many diverse programs over its twenty-two year history, the overall content of the show's broadcasts can be generally divided into three periods. The show's earliest years (1934-1939), which coincided with the Great Depression, were marked by the greatest diversity and the greatest willingness to explore new ideas. During these years, the show came closest to achieving its goal of promoting free, fearless, and open discussion, giving time to advocates of alternative political, social, economic systems, and allowing discussion of fundamental social and political questions. Among those who spoke were Earl Browder and Clarence Hathaway, representatives of the American Communist Party, and Olivia Rossetti Agresti, who defended fascism. Shows from this era that address important political and social issues include: "Personal Liberty and the Modern State" (1935); "The Supreme Court and the Constitution" (1936); "What Does Democracy Mean?" (1938); "Can Democracies Avoid Dictatorship?" (1937); "Which Way Capitalism- Competition or Cooperatives?"; "Can We Solve the Crime Problem?"; "The State and Civil Liberties"; "Does Our Tax System Need to Be Revised?" (1937); and "Do We Have a Free Press?" (1939).

The latter ("Do We Have a Free Press?") was a landmark program in which Harold Ickes, secretary of the interior, faced Frank E. Gannett, a well-known newspaper publisher. While Gannett described members of the press in heroic language and championed them as courageous, Ickes accused Gannett of specific conflicts of interest.¹⁰⁴ In citing examples that the press was beholden to advertisers, Ickes referred to the results of a 1933 study by Dr. Raymond Pearl of Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Pearl, who was also on the program, is believed to have been one of the first scientists to link smoking to a shorter life span. The results of his study had been made widely available to every paper in America through the wire services. Ickes claimed that nearly all of the major urban papers had suppressed it, a decision that he attributed to pressure from tobacco advertisers.¹⁰⁵ The following year, Ickes followed up the debate with a book on the subject (*America's House of Lords, An Inquiry into Freedom of the Press*), asserting that publishers were men of wealth and power working against the interests of the common man.¹⁰⁶ The *ATMA* broadcast itself, with an audience of millions, may have been among the first public mentions of the potentially deadly effects of tobacco.¹⁰⁷ This program has been cited as one of *ATMA*'s stellar offerings and was rebroadcast in 1953 as part of *ATMA*'s twentieth-anniversary celebration.

Guests from this era, one of great uncertainty for the United States, also examined the serious economic and social problems the country faced and debated proposed new government policies and the philosophies behind them. In 1935, *ATMA* asked: "Has the New Deal Promoted or Retarded Business Recovery?" The question was discussed by Merwin K. Hart of the New York State Economic Council and future Supreme Court Justice

¹⁰³ The section on programs was drawn in part from the analysis by David Goodman, "Programming in the Public Interest," 49-60.

¹⁰⁴ "The Press: Suppression of News," *Time*, January 23, 1939, accessed November 16, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,760627,00.html>.

¹⁰⁵ "Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil: The Story of In Fact - Part Two," adapted from George Seldes, *Never Tire of Broadcasting* (n.p.: Lyle Stuart, 1968), accessed November 17, 2010, <http://www.brasscheck.com/seldes/infact2.html> (site discontinued). Note: Seldes apparently undertook a library search and found that no large urban newspaper other than the *Washington Post* had published the story. Pearl disagreed. Seldes discussed the controversy in several articles of *In fact*.

¹⁰⁶ "The Press: Debate Continued," *Time*, January 23, 1939, accessed November 17, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,762759,00.html>.

¹⁰⁷ "Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil."

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Hugo L. Black. Another 1935 program addressed the question: “Will the Demands of Organized Labor Promote Recovery?” This two-part series featured Sidney Hillman, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, and James A. Emory, general counsel of the National Council of American Manufacturers. Hillman has been called one of the greatest labor leaders in American history, while his opponent was once quoted as saying that labor unions were “more tyrannical than George III.”¹⁰⁸ In 1935, Labor Secretary Frances Perkins debated journalist George E. Sokolsky over the merits of the newly passed Social Security Act (“Should We Plan for Social Security?”). Sokolsky, a strong supporter of the National Association of Manufacturers, argued that the New Deal promoted a collectivist agenda. During the *ATMA* debate, he told Perkins that liberty was not to be “sacrificed for bread alone.” Sokolsky felt that the federal government had overstepped its jurisdictional bounds and had used the federally subsidized insurance as a bounty to coerce state governments into going along with it. He called the 10 percent tax retained by the federal government a “service charge for coercion.”¹⁰⁹

In a 1936 program, “Will Unionization Promote Industrial Recovery,” Matthew Woll, vice president of the American Federation of Labor, appeared opposite Ralph Robey, assistant professor of banking at Columbia University and author of *Roosevelt vs. Recovery*. In 1937, *ATMA* addressed the controversial topic of health care reform (“What System of Medical Care Should We Have?”). In this show, Dr. Arthur C. Christie spoke for the AMA, arguing against “the evils of health insurance or state medicine,” while Dr. Gilbert Hague spoke in favor of socialized medicine. Three years later, *ATMA* returned to the topic (“Does America Need Compulsory Health Insurance?” 1940). This time Dr. Terry Townsend took the AMA’s position against compulsory health insurance, while Charles Edward Winslow, a professor of public health at Yale University, strongly endorsed it. Howard claimed that “compulsory health insurance is the mark of decadent medicine everywhere it exists.” Winslow declared (to applause) that “while we stand still and quarrel about details...men and women and children suffer and die for the lack of the resources of modern medical science.”¹¹⁰ And in 1938, former New Deal supporter Wendell Willkie and Robert H. Jackson, a prominent advocate for Roosevelt’s programs, had a spirited debate on the merits of the New Deal that was later selected as the “best public discussion” of 1938 (Max Wylie’s *Best Broadcasts of 1938-38*). At the end of the 1930s, *ATMA* also ventured tentatively into the question of racial equality. A 1939 program featuring Earnest A. Hooton, a physical anthropologist at Harvard and Ashley Montagu, a professor of anatomy, asked “Should We Ignore Racial Differences?” In the same year, Mary McLeod Bethune, vice president of the NAACP and an important influence on civil rights policy during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration, appeared on a program entitled “What Does American Democracy Mean to Me?” Bethune, the daughter of slaves, spoke eloquently of envisioning “mutual respect and understanding between [the] races.”¹¹¹

As the situation in Europe deteriorated and the nation edged closer to war and then entered the fighting itself (1940-1945), broadcasts were dominated by discussions of international relations. The prelude to war actually began in the late 1930s, with programs such as “Can America Remain Neutral?” (1937), “How Should Democracies Deal With the Dictatorships?” (1938), and “What are the Real Issues in the War?” (1939). Guests for these broadcasts included a variety of journalists, foreign correspondents, and military intelligence experts. By the 1940-41 season, twenty-seven of twenty-nine broadcasts were about some aspect of this topic. Many of

¹⁰⁸ “Assails the Unions, J. A. Emory, at Manufacturers’ Dinner, Charges them with Tyranny,” *New York Times*, January 29, 1909.

¹⁰⁹ Social Security Administration, “Should We Plan for Social Security?” American’s Town Meeting of the Air, Radio Broadcast: December 19, 1935, Social Security History, accessed November 17, 2010, <http://www.ssa.gov/history/1935radiodebate.html>.

¹¹⁰ John McDonough, “Echoes of 1930s in Health Care Debate: NPR,” August 28, 2009, accessed November 12, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112345150>.

¹¹¹ “Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955), ‘What Does American Democracy Mean to Me’,” *America’s Town Meeting of the Air*, November 23, 1939, American RadioWorks, “Say it Plain,” accessed November 12, 2010, <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/sayitplain/mmbethune.html>.

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these broadcasts examined the ways in which a democratic nation should respond to a war of aggression outside its shores. Specific topics included: “What Are We Preparing to Defend?” (1940); “Is This Our War?”; “How Should We Meet Totalitarian Aggression in the Americas?”(1940); “Is A Hitler Defeat Essential to the United States?”(1941); “Must America and Japan Clash?”; “Should the President’s National Defense Program Be Adopted?” (1940); and “Must We Fight Japan?” In 1941 *ATMA* spotlighted the heated debate about American intervention twice. In April, in a program entitled “Should Our Ships Convey Arms to Britain?,” Ernest W. Gibson, national chair of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, spoke in favor of the convoys, while Sen. C. Wayland Brooks, a decorated World War I veteran, argued passionately against them. Only a month later, in May 1941, the similarly titled “Should Our Ships Convoy Materials to England?” featured Reinhold Niebuhr, chair of the Union for Democratic Action, who supported the aid, and John Flynn, a founder of the America First Committee, who opposed it. In June 2010 a recording of the latter broadcast was chosen for inclusion in the National Recording Registry at the Library of Congress.

The debates and the audience reactions during this period were marked by a gradual increase in tension, and Denny himself began to fear that “the audience would get completely out of control.”¹¹² The most divisive conflicts arose between isolationists and interventionists, a disparity that no doubt reflected the divided sentiments of the country. People on both sides of the issue were less willing to listen to views that contradicted their own and, perhaps even worse, were quick to challenge the patriotism of members of the opposition. It may have been the emergence of a serious threat to democracy that made it difficult to maintain objective views, which in turn compromised *ATMA*’s ideals for free thinking and open debate. In addition, as some listeners gave in to fear and suspicion, their correspondence shamelessly erupted into stereotyping and racism, such as the letter from “twelve listeners” from Brooklyn, who wrote that “those noisy Jews, who packed the Town Hall Meeting of the Air tonight, spoiled the program for the listening audience....[T]he Jews, by their actions, convince the radio listeners that...Hitler is 100% right.”¹¹³ Letters such as these contrasted sharply and shockingly with the open embrace of diversity that greeted the show’s earliest broadcasts.

The horrors of war, which were perhaps worse than even imagined beforehand, presented a challenge to the champions of open debate, who now questioned whether freedom, even of discussion, was too dangerous. Even Denny seemed to rethink his priorities, realizing that one was just as free to be evil as to be good.¹¹⁴ He and other idealists wondered whether, with such evil at loose in the world, unity was more important than “tolerance, reason and justice.”¹¹⁵ Some commentators even questioned whether open forums with live questions should continue during the war.¹¹⁶ After one broadcast in 1941, Chester S. Williams, director of the Federal Forum Project, wrote to Denny that “the live audience encouraged participants to speak ‘according to crowd psychology’ and that forums of this kind served the cause of totalitarianism rather than democracy. Williams blamed open forums for creating ‘that disgusted state of mind which is ready to embrace a dictator rather than carry on with a confusion of tongues’ and concluded that ‘this kind of thing can wreck American democracy’.”¹¹⁷

In the immediate aftermath of the war, *ATMA* presented several programs that focused on issues of international importance. Among them was the debate that preceded the Nuremberg war crimes trials, which presented society with the question of how to deal with crimes that were so horrible as to be outside the legal system. During *ATMA*’s show of February 10, 1944, “How Should the Axis War Criminals be Tried?,” panelists Emil Ludwig, Samuel Grafton, and Louis Nizer brought the issue before Americans nearly two years before the trials

¹¹² Quoted in Goodman, “Programming in the Public Interest,” 51.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹¹⁴ Denny raised this issue in a 1943 speech, quoted in Goodman, “Programming in the Public Interest,” 54-55.

¹¹⁵ Goodman, “Programming in the Public Interest,” 54.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

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begin (in November 1945). And in 1945, a panel consisting of Undersecretary Joseph C. Grew, Sen. Tom Connelly of Texas, Harold E. Stassen, chair of the Council for Democracy; Raymond Swing; William Shirer; and H. V. Kaltenborn discussed the founding of the United Nations. Some of the participants expressed hope that the new organization would serve as a major catalyst to world order and peace.

Although Denny struggled to retain his belief in openness and tolerance, he emerged from the war as a fierce opponent of communism and, ultimately, a less tolerant thinker. Whereas he had once held an unwavering faith in a “public sphere of discussion,” by the mid- 1940s he began to despair that “openness and tolerance...were no longer enough in a world of evil...that discussion must be anchored in some innate moral sense.”¹¹⁸ Between 1946 and Denny’s replacement as host in 1952, the show’s focus turned to the Cold War and the increasingly heated debate about the Communist threat. The notorious anti-communist Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy appeared on the program three times. In a 1947 show (“Should the Communist Party Be Outlawed in the United States?”), the then little-known McCarthy made one of his first public statements about communism, explaining why he thought the party should be banned; in 1948, McCarthy stated that the U.S. was losing the war against communism, linking this to a possible Russian takeover; and in 1950, at his most outspoken, he said that American policy was being made by “stooges and dupes of the Kremlin.” In another show in this era, “Who Are the Troublemakers in Our Democracy?” (1952), panelists Arnold Foster of the Anti-Defamation League; Merle Miller, a writer and war correspondent; and Victor Riesel, a columnist for the *New York Mirror*, debated whether the true troublemakers were members of the Communist Party, the zealots who demonized them, perhaps based on racial or religious bigotry, or those who favored the suspension of American civil rights in order to stop the Communists.¹¹⁹ As David Goodman has pointed out, the need to debate the meaning of democracy, within the context of the Cold War, was viewed as less important than the need to spread democracy around the world. In response to the threat of communism, democracy was now generally understood to be an existing achievement, rather than a work in progress. Denny’s thinking in this era paralleled the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy.¹²⁰

To its credit, however, *ATMA* continued to address controversial issues, even when fear and/or intolerance tainted the discussion. In an article called “TV and the Popularization of Fear,” J. Fred MacDonald compared *ATMA* favorably with other media shows of the era and noted some of *ATMA*’s important Cold War programs such as “How is Peace with Russia Possible?” (1948); “Can Modern Capitalism Meet the Needs of Modern Man?” (1949); and “How Do We Fare in the Cold War?” (1952).¹²¹

Also among *ATMA*’s postwar highlights were a number of shows that courageously and honestly addressed racial issues. These include: “Are We a Unified People?”; “Let’s Face the Race Question” (1944); “Are We Solving America’s Race Problem?” (1945); “Should the Government Guarantee Job Equality for All Races?” (1947); “What Can We do to Improve Race and Religious Relationships in America?” (1947); “Should the President’s Civil Rights Program Be Adopted?” (1948); and “What Should We Do About Race Segregation?” (1948).

These programs returned to some of the same spirit of open and honest debate that inspired the show in the 1930s. One scholar, Barbara Savage, has argued that radio and non-governmental officials led the way in addressing racial problems in the United States. Two *ATMA* programs in particular stand out for their unusually candid discussions. In 1944, “Let’s Face the Race Question” featured renowned African American poet

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 54-55.

¹¹⁹ “Who Are the Troublemakers in Our Democracy,” *America’s Town Meeting of the Air*, May 27, 1952, recorded broadcast, accessed November 16, 2010, <https://texasgypsy.wordpress.com/2010/02/07/americas-town-meeting-of-the-air-1935-1952/>.

¹²⁰ Goodman, “Programming in the Public Interest,” 58.

¹²¹ J. Fred MacDonald, “TV and the Popularization of Fear,” accessed November 23, 2010, <http://jfredmacdonald.com/trm/11tvfear.htm>.

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Langston Hughes; Carey McWilliams, a white progressive; John Temple Graves, a white southerner; and James Shepard, a conservative black president of the North Carolina College for Negroes. During this show, Hughes blamed segregation for undermining the “morale of Negro soldiers.” He also spoke bluntly about its causes, asserting in part that it concealed a profound fear of intermarriage, and called for a comprehensive federal civil rights program. His comments were considerably more daring than radio audiences were used to hearing, a fact that Graves reinforced by praying (during the broadcast itself) that “nothing tonight will increase the sum total of race hate in America.” Nevertheless, the show was enormously popular, received a high volume of positive letters, and was praised by both blacks and whites for its fair and open discussion of a sensitive issue.¹²²

The following year, in “Are We Solving America’s Race Problem?” (1945), well-known African American novelist Richard Wright and Elmer Carter, a black former editor of the National Urban League’s *Opportunity*, took opposing views as to whether the race problem was being solved. They were joined by Irving Ives, a New York State assemblyman and Jerry Voorhis, a liberal black congressman from California. Wright delivered an attack on racism that was far more direct and aggressive even than that of Hughes. Savage noted that Wright’s command of language overpowered the other speakers, as well as the moderator, allowing him to dominate the show. He called upon blacks to protest segregation actively, referring to it as a moral duty, and again raised the taboo subject of intermarriage. This show shocked listeners, who were highly critical of Wright’s comments and especially of his remarks about intermarriage, the discussion of which they described as revolting, disgraceful, deplorable, and appalling. This show has been called one of *ATMA*’s most “controversial and tumultuous broadcasts,” and it generated an enormous volume of mail, most of it revealing the anxiety of a white population fearful that their long-held conceptions about the relative places of blacks and whites in society might be tested.¹²³ It also demonstrated the rising importance of racial issues in the American consciousness. But although many whites took offense at Wright’s remarks, members of the African American community were pleased. The African American members of the 477th Bombardment Group (the Tuskegee Airmen) contacted Wright directly, writing “from all of us, thanks a million....We do not *ask* for democracy, we demand it.”¹²⁴ Savage observed that African Americans took advantage of opportunities to appear on political discussion shows such as *ATMA* to introduce arguments that other political commentators were not yet courageous enough to make. However, she concluded, despite the speakers’ blunt appeals and the eloquence of their arguments for an end to segregation, this goal was not even “rhetorically acceptable” to most whites in 1945.¹²⁵ Nevertheless, frank discussions of racial problems on radio “illustrated radio’s enormous potential as a medium for cultural and political education,” helped to “expand the concept of Americanness,” and prepared the way for the Civil Rights movement.¹²⁶

Some scholars attribute the demise of *ATMA* to the development of the Cold War, when divergent opinions were considered unpatriotic. J. Fred MacDonald described *ATMA* as “the product of an earlier era in broadcasting when divergent thought was tolerated as necessary to public debate.” MacDonald credited *ATMA* with continuing its tradition of presenting all sides of controversial issues during its two brief runs on television (1948-49; 1952), while other TV shows aimed for a narrow ideological consensus that reflected the “simplified emotionalism of the anti-Communist era.” MacDonald concluded that *ATMA*’s divergence from the norm engendered its rapid and final disappearance from the television.¹²⁷ Likewise, Stephen J. Whitfield also

¹²² Barbara Savage, “Radio and the Political Discourse of Racial Equality,” in *The Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, eds. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 231-32.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹²⁴ Barbara Dianne Savage, quoted in Arthur Zilversmit, Review of *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), *History of Education Quarterly* 40 (Winter 2000): 511-13.

¹²⁵ Savage, “Radio and the Political Discourse,” 241.

¹²⁶ Savage, quoted in Zilversmit, Review of *Broadcasting Freedom*, 511-13.

¹²⁷ J. Fred MacDonald, “Television and the Red Menace: the Video Road to Nam,” accessed 24 August 2010, <http://jfredmacdonald.com/trm/11tvfear.htm>.

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contrasted Depression era radio (such as *ATMA*), which offered a “less constricted political perspective” with Cold War era television, where official views were “rarely and insufficiently challenged.” Whitfield credited *ATMA* with bringing its distinctive format to TV, but he noted that the program was dropped in 1952 because “the availability of a forum for left-wing opinion might generate unnecessary friction, might even appear vaguely unpatriotic when unity against Communism was sought.”¹²⁸ Thus, although George Denny’s high principles were tested and perhaps even tainted by World War II, the show remained a standard bearer for free speech and ideological independence throughout Denny’s association with it.

Comparative Analysis and Critical Assessment

Contemporary critics and subsequent scholars have been consistent in identifying the most influential educational and public service shows from period c1930-c1950. Nearly all of the books and articles consulted for this nomination have cited the *American School of the Air* (1930), the *University of Chicago Round Table* (1931), *The American Forum of the Air* (1934), *America’s Town Meeting of the Air* (1935), and/or *The People’s Platform* (1938) on their lists of exemplary programs. Among these, the half-hour *American School of the Air* is most often commended for its early date and contribution to public education. The *University of Chicago Round Table*, *ATMA*, *The American Forum of the Air* and *The People’s Platform* are all cited for their efforts to bring substantive issues of national importance before the American people, the high caliber of their guests, and their innovative formats. Neither *The People’s Platform* nor *University of Chicago Round Table* had live audiences; however, the Chicago program was among the first national radio discussion programs and a pioneer in preparing handouts for further study. Meanwhile, the “dinner table” format made *The People’s Platform* lively and entertaining. In addition, the latter show always included an “average citizen,” which made it less predictable and established a more personal connection with the audience. *The American Forum of the Air*, which did take questions from an audience, is said to have been the first public panel discussion; however, neither the *American Forum* nor the *Chicago Round Table* was broadcast during prime time. In this regard, *ATMA*, an evening show broadcast Thursday at 9:30 p.m., enjoyed a higher profile and had the potential for a much larger audience.

Among all of these shows, *ATMA* excelled in its use of a live audience. Because audience members became “on-air participants in the debate,” *ATMA* succeeded in “bringing the voices of everyday people onto the national airwaves arguing important topics of the day.”¹²⁹ In Max Wylie’s assessment of *ATMA*’s 6 January 1938 show as among the best broadcasts of 1938-39, he noted that “because they know they are to have the privilege of questioning the guest speakers [audience members] have a feeling of direct personal participation in the program.”¹³⁰ As one reporter noted, “questions for the audience are generally regarded as the high point of the discussion hour, and not only the punch but the program’s meaning would be lost if the audience were curbed.”¹³¹

From the show’s inception, critics acknowledged that Denny had tapped into a deeply felt need among Americans. After the show’s first broadcast in 1935, the *New York Times* observed that “what the listener apparently likes about Town Hall is that freedom of speech is the guiding principle...Town Hall [is] a ‘safety valve’ for interesting debate and discussion.”¹³² Academics also quickly realized the show’s educational potential. By 1939 radio, as a medium of communication, had received support from the New York State Board

¹²⁸ Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 155.

¹²⁹ Michele Hilmes, “Evaluation of Significance of *America’s Town Meeting of the Air*” for National Historic Landmark Designation of Town Hall,” February 2009.

¹³⁰ Wylie, *Best Broadcasts of 1938-39*, 190.

¹³¹ Herbert Lyons Jr., “Free Speech in Action,” *New York Times*, May 25, 1941.

¹³² Dunlap, “Open Forum is Applauded.”

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of Regents, and educators recommended *ATMA* as “a stimulating demonstration of the democratic process.”¹³³ Teachers also praised *ATMA* and its contemporaries for their exploration of important issues, noting that “[the] objective of English teachers is that of developing a purposeful interest in current social problems....Radio experiences, too, can result in giving us social understandings. We can encourage students to listen to such programs as the University of Chicago Round Table, The People’s Platform, America’s Town Meeting of the Air [and] we can organize our own classes into ‘town meetings’ around significant social problems.”¹³⁴ The show remained highly regarded by educators, as “thousands of teachers have, in the past six years, made use of ‘America’s Town Meeting of the Air’ in their classes....‘America’s Town Meeting of the Air’ represents such a significant contribution to the strengthening and improvement of American democracy that no school can afford to fail to introduce its students to the program.”¹³⁵

The show continued to be highly regarded by critics, including one who called it a “national institution.”¹³⁶ Another noted that “millions of Americans find *ATMA* stimulating, interesting, and informative.”¹³⁷ And a third saluted the show’s intentions, stating that “Denny is certain that a democratic government will want the people to get all the information they need on subjects that are not military history...and sees the nation’s thirst for unbiased and well-rounded information, plus an instinctive sense of fairness, as a deep rooted American trait.”¹³⁸ The show’s testament to free speech remained strong even during the 1940s, as the sum of its ideals were tested. One period critic noted that “Town Meeting owes its success to the fact that Americans enjoy free speech...George Denny [has] applied modern science to an institution older than the nation and turned every home into a potential town hall.”¹³⁹ More than a decade later, after Denny’s death, Town Hall was hailed as his greatest achievement. His obituary recalled that “in its heyday, *America’s Town Meeting of the Air* was estimated to have more than ten million listeners through more than 170 radio stations” and noted that the programs “pioneered in audience participation.”¹⁴⁰ A more contemporary critic called *ATMA* “the most famous civic education program of the 1930s” and argued that its attempt to recreate the tradition of self-government became “symbolic of the ways in which democracy might fight back against totalitarianism.”¹⁴¹

In the introduction to his article “Programming in the Public Interest,” radio historian David Goodman provided a succinct assessment of the significance of *ATMA*:

ATMA was the jewel in the crown of NBC’s public service programming, an oft-cited piece of evidence that the network was responsible and civic minded and already carrying out the public service work of a national broadcaster....[Radio] stimulated new hopes for American democracy, the prospect of historically novel levels of democratic awareness and activism in citizens. The history of *ATMA* reminds us of the civic ambition of the golden age of network radio.¹⁴²

Goodman concluded the article by praising *ATMA* as:

¹³³ Walter Ginsberg, “Radio Programs for High-School English,” *The English Journal* 28 (December 1939): 837.

¹³⁴ Seerley Reid, “Radio—From Blurbs to Baby Snooks,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 21 (May 1939): 440-41.

¹³⁵ Ralph Adams Brown, “The ‘Town Crier’ in the English Class,” *The English Journal* 30, no. 9 (November 1941): 769.

¹³⁶ William E. Utterback, “Political Significance of Group Discussion,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 250 (March 1947): 36.

¹³⁷ Hays, “Civic Discussion Over the Air,” 41.

¹³⁸ Lyons, “Free Speech in Action.”

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ “George V. Denny, Radio Host, Dead,” *New York Times*, November 12, 1959.

¹⁴¹ Craig, *Fireside Politics*, 25.

¹⁴² Goodman, “Programming in the Public Interest,” 44.

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one of NBC's more significant public service programs. It was for NBC in its heyday a great success story - a program that both presented and provoked national debate. It provided a practical demonstration of a new kind of radio public sphere, one that was both constrained and enabled by the network's commercial basis.¹⁴³

Michele Hilmes, expert and the author of several books on the history of radio and television, has written an assessment of *ATMA*'s significance. Hilmes observed that *ATMA*'s programming was "more inclusive and adventurous" than that of similar programs and that it made an effort "to portray and debate all aspects of American life through the contentious years of the Depression, New Deal, and the interventionist debates preceding World War II." She also noted that *ATMA* directly inspired other public affairs programs, such as *The People's Platform* and *Freedom Forum*, a BBC production that significantly influenced public affairs programming in Britain.¹⁴⁴

According to Hilmes, "the Town Hall venue itself was key to the show's appeal and success." In this *ATMA* is truly exceptional. No other radio show became so closely identified with its broadcast location. For *ATMA*, the association between venue and program went far deeper than simply the site of the broadcast. *ATMA* was the culmination of a thirty-year commitment to public education that began when six women founded the League for Political Education in 1894 and continued with the construction and use of Town Hall in the 1920s and early 1930s. *ATMA* carried the goals of the league into the modern age of electronic communication, extending the opportunity for Americans to become better citizens from Manhattan to the entire country. Remarkably, Town Hall's original program was not overshadowed by the radio broadcast; rather, the organization continued to host public lectures, educational forums, and classes concurrently with the development and success of *ATMA*.

Town Hall is significant not just as the location for a significant event, but as a physical embodiment of the event itself. Although the building was constructed before *ATMA* was conceived, the ideals embodied in its original design and program are inextricably linked to those of the radio show. The intent of Town Hall's builders to erect a "town hall" in the heart of a metropolis prefigured George Denny's intent to establish a virtual town hall for an immense country. The producers of *ATMA* went out of their way to reinforce the show's association with the building's symbolism, heralding each broadcast with an announcement that it came from "historic Town Hall in New York City."¹⁴⁵ The space from which the program originated, an intimate auditorium designed to provide each attendee a seat of equal value, excellent sight lines, and superb acoustics, also enhanced the goals of *ATMA*'s creators to bring everyone into the discussion. After nearly a century of use, the space in which the Town Hall lectures were given and *ATMA*'s meetings were held retains virtually complete integrity, thus preserving an outstanding association with the important events that took place there.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 58.

¹⁴⁴ Hilmes, "Evaluation of Significance."

¹⁴⁵ Goodman, "Programming in the Public Interest," 47.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
 Previously Listed in the National Register.
 Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
 Designated a National Historic Landmark.
 Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
 Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 Other State Agency
 Federal Agency
 Local Government
 University
 Other (Specify Repository):

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: less than one acre

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	18	585727	4512176

Verbal Boundary Description: The nominated parcel is defined as Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 996, Lot 32 and is outlined on the enclosed map.

Boundary Justification: The boundary was drawn to include the original parcel associated with this building.

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11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: Kathleen LaFrank, Historic Preservation Program Analyst
New York State Historic Preservation Office

Address: Peebles Island State Park
Box 189
Waterford, NY 12188

Telephone: (518) 237-8643 x3261

Date: November 2010

Edited by: Susan Cianci Salvatore, Historian
National Park Service
National Historic Landmarks Program
1201 I St., NW, 8th Fl.
Washington, DC 20005

Telephone: (202) 354-2256

DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK
March 2, 2012

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Photos

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Photo 1. The Town Hall façade. Photograph by Kathleen LaFrank, 2009.

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Photo 2. The Town Hall historic view, 1921. Photographer unknown.

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Photo 3. View to main stage from upper level. Photograph by Kathleen LaFrank, 2009.

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Photo 4. 1945 Town Hall postcard

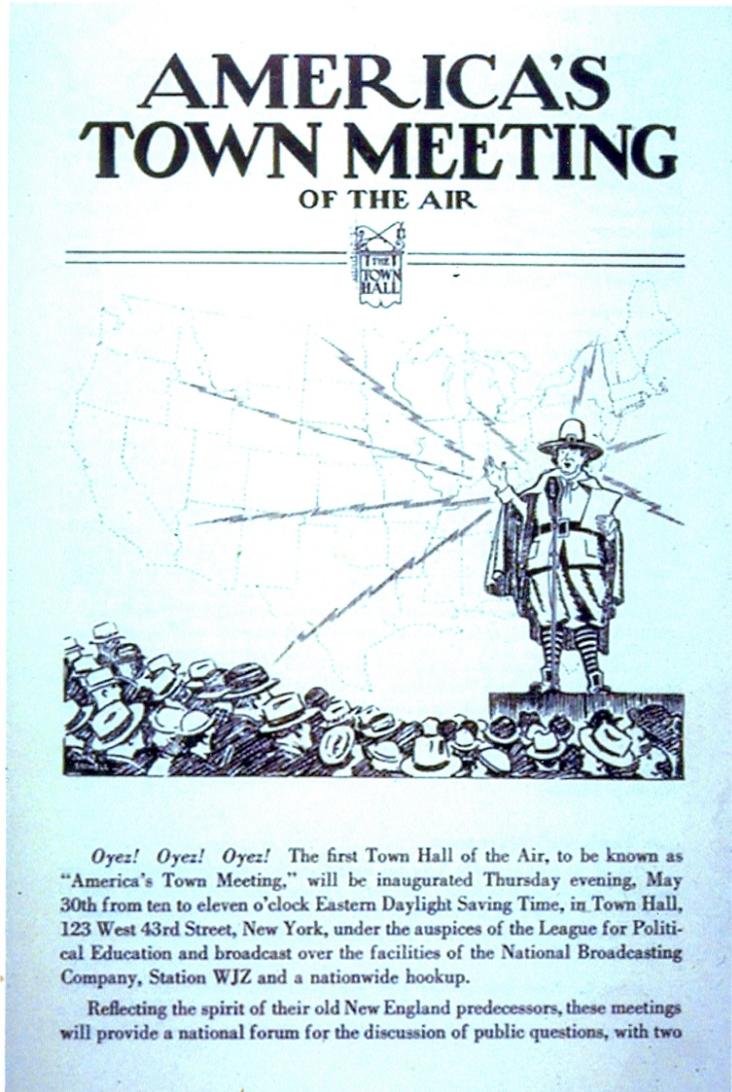


Photo 5. Cover of 1935 promotional brochure

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Figures

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Figure 1. 1977 Sanborn Map Company showing location of The Town Hall.

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Figures

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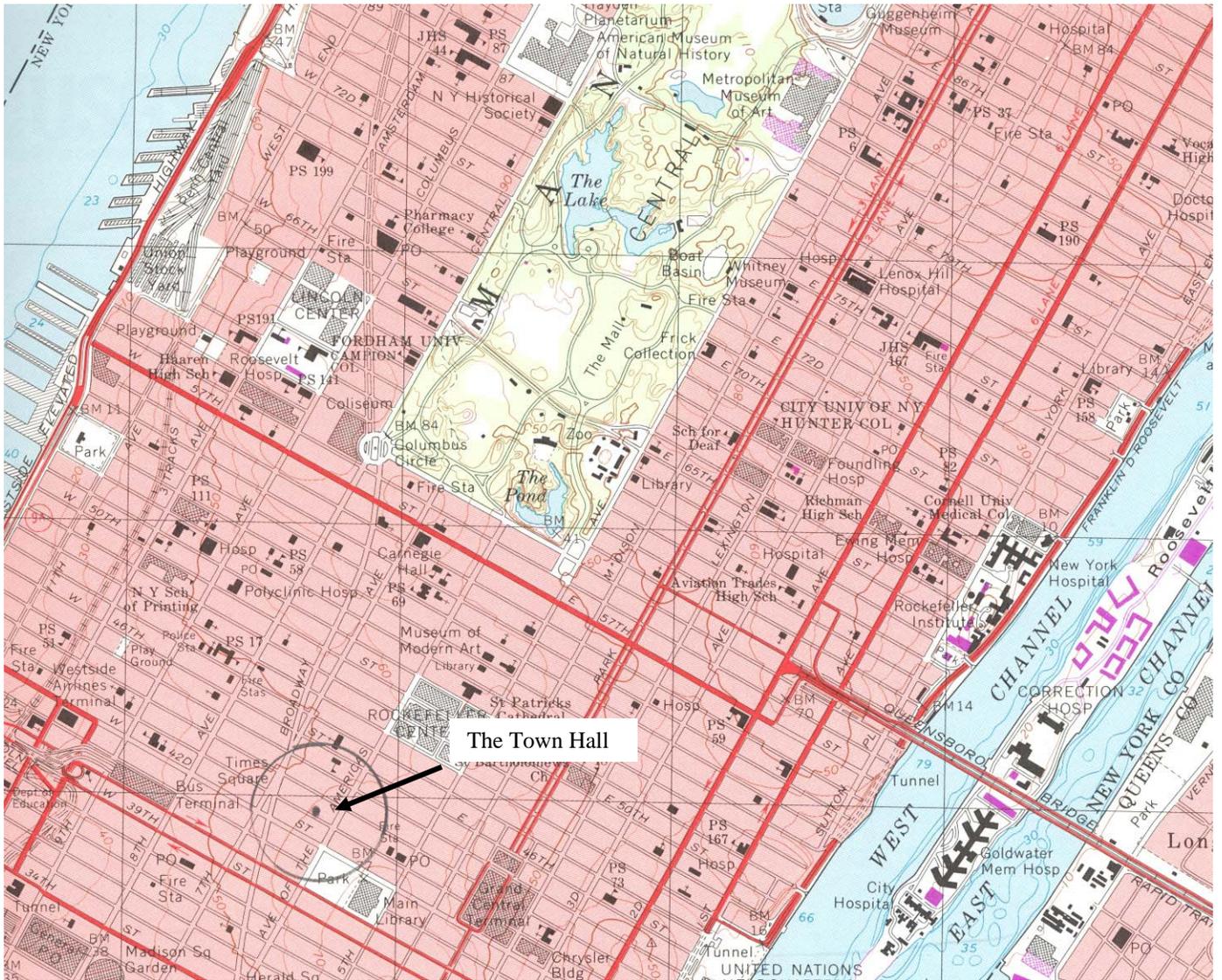


Figure 2. USGS Central Park, New York Quad.