The Story of How the U.S. Chamber Got Its Start, Gave Voice to the Business Community, and Propelled America Forward
The Early Years
If we shall wisely and soberly take advantage of the opportunity thus offered … to form a National Chamber of Commerce it is possible that history will be made and a force created that shall endure throughout the years as a beneficent influence upon our national life.

Harry A. Wheeler, first president, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, April 22, 1912
I. America in 1912—Dynamic and Thriving

On January 1, 1912, the American flag boasted 46 stars. There was no income tax, no radios, no TVs, and very few cars. Women could not vote, and senators were appointed by state governors. Federal spending was $690 million, unemployment was 4.6%, and a first-class postage stamp cost 2 cents.

The U.S. population stood at 90 million. Half of those aged 14–16 had jobs. Ninety-nine out of 100 people had never seen an airplane, then spelled “aeroplane.”

Canned goods began hitting the shelves. Paved roads were few and far between. With practically no emissions, the term *environmentalism* had yet to be coined.

A young, dynamic America was on the move and growing fast, carving out a place for itself as a major global economic power. The industrial revolution, a youthful population, a flood of immigrants, vast national resources, and a strong spirit of entrepreneurism were propelling the nation forward at a dizzying pace.

Newspapers of the day chronicled America’s fantastic growth in bold headlines: “Nevada’s new rail line opens rich traffic and farms”; a six-mile track elevation between Linden and Rahway Junction in New Jersey was to be “one of the greatest engineering achievements” in the state’s history; “Oklahoma’s Grand River soon to be harnessed for power production”; and “in Seattle there is well underway a 42-story building, the largest in the United States outside New York City.”
The port of New York had shot ahead of London in trade volume. Trade figures for the first time showed that the United States had attained preeminence in the export field. U.S. exports, only 5% of the country’s manufacturing volume, had passed Britain’s. Work on the Panama Canal was under way but wouldn’t be completed for two more years.

The nation was growing in every conceivable way. New Mexico and Arizona joined the union as the 47th and 48th states in January and February 1912, respectively. America’s potential seemed boundless.

Driving the country’s mighty economic engine was business. But despite the business community’s outsized impact on the nation’s burgeoning prosperity, it lacked a unified voice in Washington, where an increasingly powerful federal government was beginning to wield enormous influence over major aspects of business operations.

That void would soon be filled.

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By the beginning of the 20th century, the need for a closer relationship between government and business was obvious.

It wasn’t that chambers of commerce, trade associations, and other business groups didn’t exist. The Charleston Chamber of Commerce—believed to be the first chamber in the United States—dated back to 1773. That same year, a newly formed Chamber of Commerce in Boston led a vigorous public protest against the tax that had been imposed by the British on tea. That protest was known as the Boston Tea Party.

By 1912, the U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor reported that there were a total of 1,968 business groups in the nation, with a combined membership of more than 348,000 and a combined income of $6,557,000.

Yet analysts of the period believed that the great commercial population of the United States was ridiculously underorganized. Even those organized units that did exist—or the vast majority of them—were inadequately constructed, financed, and operated. These varied business groups had no sense of interdependence, and no single interest served to bind them together. They were a team of horses galloping in different directions.

Between 1860 and 1912, attempts were made to organize businessmen nationally. A National Board of Trade was established in the 1860s, but eventually it failed because 90% of its membership was drawn from Atlantic Coast states. A national group, the American Association of Commercial Executives, founded in 1905, was flourishing. And two large regional groups, the Southern
Commercial Secretaries Association, organized in 1908, and the Central Association of Commercial Secretaries, created in 1909, were both active.

In 1911, the American, Central, and Southern groups met jointly in St. Louis and propounded their views to then-Secretary of the Department of Commerce and Labor Charles Nagel. It was suggested to him that a general business conference might be called in Washington to make another attempt at founding a national business federation.

On Secretary Nagel’s recommendation, President William Howard Taft included in a message to Congress in December 1911 a recommendation that a central organization be created “in touch with associations and chambers of commerce throughout the country and able to keep purely American interests in a closer touch with commercial affairs.” That, he said, “would be of great value.”

This view was underscored on the floor of the U.S. Senate a month later when Senator Knute Nelson of Minnesota said: “I received this morning a telegram from a chamber of commerce in my state, urging me to vote against the bill now before us. This afternoon I received a telegram from another business organization, asking me to vote for it. What does business really think?”

On March 1, 1912, President Taft called for a conference in Washington of commercial and trade organizations and directed Secretary Nagel to make the arrangements. The date was set for April 22, and the Bureau of Manufacturers of the Department of Commerce and Labor was assigned the task of setting up the meeting and inviting the delegates to attend.

This time, the effort would succeed.
III. Business Finds Its Voice

The conference was held in “The Large Hall” on the 10th floor of the New Willard Hotel, the “jewel of Pennsylvania Avenue.” It was called to order promptly at 10:30 a.m. More than 700 delegates were present. They came from 44 states and represented 324 voluntary organizations of businessmen.

In less than 24 hours, the Chamber of Commerce of the United States was established. Business had found its voice.

President Taft, rotund and good natured, made opening remarks, pointing out that “the danger in an introductory address like this is that I should say too much.” He told delegates:

We want your assistance in carrying on the government in reference to those matters that affect the business and the business welfare of the country, and we do not wish to limit your discretion in that matter. We wish that your advice should be as free and unrestrained as possible, but we need your assistance and we ask for it.

The president turned the meeting over to Secretary Nagel and humorously advised him to be brief “in order that the inventive genius and the power of original thought in this representative body of the business element of the United States may not be restricted.”

The first order of business for delegates was to select a temporary chairman. Harry A. Wheeler, vice president of the Union Trust Company of Chicago, was unanimously elected to the post. He would continue to serve in some capacity with the organization for the next 35 years.
Wheeler had recently served as president of the Chicago Association of Commerce. *The Boston Transcript* described him as “a strikingly handsome man of 47—tall, erect, with a short brown mustache and a voice of the most pleasing quality . . . [who] is diplomatic to the last degree yet firm, and full of resources.”

A 57-member committee on Permanent Organization was immediately created to help bring together the diverse ideas, hopes, and thoughts of the 700 attendees. Topics were discussed and debated well into the early hours of the morning. First among them was a name for the organization. Should it be called the National American Chamber of Commerce, the Commercial Association, the American Board of Trade?

When the conference reconvened early the next morning, John A. Fahey, publisher of the *Boston Traveler* and a persuasive participant, had taken the lead in creating the “Outline Plan of Organization.” He made an amazing announcement: “We have finally come to you with an absolutely unanimous report of a scheme for organization.” Then, he began to read from the plan:

*Article I. The name of this Association will be the “CHAMBER OF COMMERCE OF THE UNITED STATES.”*

*Article II. The object of this association shall be to provide a national clearinghouse for the development and consideration of business opinion, and to provide consideration of business opinion, and to provide united action upon questions affecting the commercial interests of the United States. Only questions of national importance shall be considered.*
The U.S. Chamber was blessed with extraordinary leadership in its early years. Chicago banker Harry A. Wheeler could arguably be called the “father of the U.S. Chamber” and was its first president. John Joy Edson, also a banker, ensured the financial stability of the fledgling organization and exercised superb business judgment. Harvard graduate Elliot H. Goodwin was the Chamber’s first general secretary, or chief executive, and successfully guided the organization through a dynamic period of explosive growth.
The delegates voted overwhelmingly for the organization’s outline, and officers were immediately elected. Wheeler was unanimously chosen as the first president. Fahey was elected chairman of the Executive Committee. The decision was made to designate three vice presidents—one each from the eastern, western, and southern parts of the country—and a board of directors composed of 25 members.

A 66-year-old Civil War veteran, John Joy Edson, was elected treasurer and head of the Finance Committee; he served until 1931. Edson was serving as president of the Washington Loan and Trust Company, as well as treasurer of The George Washington University and the National Geographic Society.

The first board meeting was immediately scheduled for the evening of the second day of the conference. A second session was convened the next day, during which a special delivery letter containing the first membership application arrived from Frederick, Maryland. “U.S. Chamber Membership Certificate No. 1” was awarded to the Frederick Chamber of Commerce and is still proudly displayed on the wall of that chamber’s office.

President Wheeler unveiled a $100,000 budget that received swift approval, although no receipts were recorded until two weeks later. The Boston Chamber of Commerce is listed as the first to pay its dues of $250 on May 4, 1912. Although the budget was later reduced to a more realistic figure of $50,000, the fundraising campaign continued for two years before reaching its goal.

News of the conference received scant press attention during the first two days, but both The Washington Post and The Evening Star in their April 24 editions gave front-page headlines to Wheeler’s election. Each newspaper seemed more than surprised that a large national organization had been created in such little time.
The headline said, “Business Put Through in Forty-Eight Hours. Government Will Receive Powerful Aid in Solving Harassing Commercial Problems.” Wheeler, the report said, “was a potent factor in the organization of the association.”

The Star story took precedence over the many columns of news stories still being devoted to the sinking on April 12 of the British liner Titanic. The Star headline said: “National in Scope—Chamber of Commerce of the United States a Fixed Fact.” The Star reporter commented that Washington is “astounded at formation of a national organization in 48 hours.”

The Washington press described the gathering as “the most representative of the kind ever held in this country, its members coming from every state in the Union and from Alaska, Hawaii, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and the American Chambers of Commerce of Paris, Brussels, and Constantinople.”

So a historic gathering of the nation’s businessmen had been convened. Through steadfast commitment and exceptional leadership, the conference succeeded where others had failed. With breathtaking rapidity, a plan had been established and unanimously endorsed. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce was born. Now what?
IV. GETTING ORGANIZED

With an approved plan for organization, 25 directors, a president, and a treasury of $400–$600, the birth of the U.S. Chamber boasted a brave beginning and a typically American one. It was the old American story of a few bold hearts with a magnificent idea and shoestring capital.

The next step was to locate an office and to employ a staff. The Executive Committee set up a temporary office in Washington’s Evans Building on New York Avenue. On the recommendation of Edson and Fahey, Room 335 in the Southern Building in Washington was rented. A stenographer was employed to serve as office manager until a paid secretary of the organization could be hired. The Washington press reported that the search for a trained and competent staff was under way.

The men who directed the affairs of the new Chamber of Commerce of the United States of America were deliberate in weighing the appointment of their general secretary, or chief executive.
By August 1, 1912, they had found him. He was Dr. Elliot H. Goodwin.

An 1874 graduate of Harvard, Goodwin held a Ph.D. from the University of Leipzig, Germany, awarded in 1900. Goodwin was plucked from his position as secretary of the National Civil Service Reform League in New York City. In 1920, his Chamber title was changed to resident vice president. He served the organization until 1926, then joined the Massachusetts Civil Service Commission.

Goodwin began his duties on August 1 with an annual salary of $8,000 ($183,000 in today’s dollars). A bright, intelligent, young Commerce Department clerk named David A. Skinner was tapped as assistant general secretary with a $3,000 salary.
G. Grosvenor Dawe, managing director of the Southern Commercial Congress, quickly consented to a $5,000 post as chief of the Editorial Division. Dawe had written the board that he had several ideas and projects for the division—and he would waste no time getting them started.

In the first week of September, General Secretary Goodwin and his staff—Skinner, Dawe, a stenographer, and a clerk—moved into the top floor of the one-year-old Riggs Building, on the corner of 15th and G Streets, N.W.

Goodwin set the tone of the new organization by establishing working hours Monday–Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (with 45 minutes for lunch) and Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., with the understanding that employees would not leave on time if they had urgent work to complete.

When Wheeler stepped down in 1914 following his first term as president, he couldn’t resist telling a story about the dedication of the staff at headquarters. One afternoon, he recounted, two gentlemen from Chicago happened to be in Washington and one said to the other that it probably would be impossible to visit Chamber headquarters because it was a Saturday and also a very warm day. They tried the door, and it was unlocked. “At four o’clock on that Saturday afternoon,” Wheeler said they told him that “the whole force was there and had never given a thought to leaving because they had a task to be performed. Those men returned to Chicago and said, ’You are a thousand miles away from your staff at headquarters, but they do not need any supervision; they were on the job on a most impossible day. We owe a debt of gratitude to them for this service.’”

If things were moving rapidly up till that point, they were about to go into overdrive.
V. Bursting Out of the Gate

In just five short months since its organizing conference had concluded, the young Chamber had hired a top-notch staff, secured excellent offices, begun to get its finances in order, and dealt with a flood of membership applications.

Now, it was time to get down to business. On September 2, 1912, the organization launched Nation’s Business, the brainchild of Dawe, who was its editor. The purpose of the publication was to tell the story of the Chamber, as well as business in general. Printed in a newspaper format, 1,000 copies were distributed, mostly to editors of leading newspapers and magazines.

The publication’s principles were clearly spelled out in Dawe’s front-page editorial:

Nation’s Business will set forth periodically affirmative information and thought regarding our progress as a nation. Its columns will not be controversial. It will not touch on partisan politics. It will assume that each public servant is well-intentioned and that he is entitled to that assumption until proved unworthy. Nation’s Business will not muck-rake, denounce, or defame.

Headlines from the first issue included such diverse topics as “England Shows Manufacturers Africa’s Needs”; “Erie Canal Terminals Give Improved Service to the Empire State”; and “Kentucky Coal Fields Made Accessible by New Railways.” The newspaper’s centerpiece had an article explaining the purpose and organization of the Chamber. The last page presented pictures of officers and directors.

In March 1913, 6,000 copies of the ninth issue were distributed. The publication was receiving national recognition. The next month the newspaper format was abandoned in favor of a tabloid printed on a better-finish paper stock.

Publication of Nation’s Business was an early signature achievement of the fledging U.S. Chamber. From an initial run of 1,000 in 1912, Nation’s Business grew into a national, subscription-based magazine with a circulation in excess of 850,000. The publication was discontinued in 1999 with the advent of Internet communications.
When Merle Thorpe was named editor of *Nation’s Business* in 1916, he made the magazine available to readers outside the Chamber’s membership. In 1917, the first advertisements appeared. Within three years, circulation included 60,000 paid subscriptions and 22,000 Chamber member subscriptions. Circulation had risen to 300,320 by 1937 on the Chamber’s 25th anniversary year. Fifty years later in 1987, circulation exceeded 850,000.

Two additional publications were introduced in December 1912, just three months after the first appearance of *Nation’s Business*. In response to members’ requests for additional information, both new publications were simply called “bulletins.”

*The Legislative Bulletin* concentrated on congressional matters and was issued weekly while Congress was in session. Its stated purpose was to trace “the course of legislation affecting the financial, commercial, civic, and industrial interests of the country at large,” including “all changes in status.” The first issue covered 27 categories and included 47 bills introduced in Congress, listing the bill number, the sponsor, and an explanation, but no opinions or purposes were offered.

*The General Bulletin* covered a wide range of business subjects of general interest to Chamber members. These were the forerunners of the professional information publications, later produced by the Legislative Action Department, the News Department, and other departments.
VI. ‘Stand in an Advisory Capacity’

By 1913, the Chamber was a blizzard of activity. Its staff, budget, and membership were growing rapidly. But what were the principles guiding these activities?

Chamber President Harry Wheeler put it on the line. He declared that the organization would do the following:

[The Chamber will] stand in an advisory capacity. … We will ask Chamber members for their opinions on the great constructive measures that originate in Congress, and we will impartially and fairly gather that information by referenda, and will place that information before the gentlemen in this city, in our House of Representatives and in our Senate, and before the Executive of whatever party, asking them simply to consider the judgment of the business minds of this country, with respect to the question at issue, and this Chamber will not, I trust, ever in its history become a lobbying organization. …

So Wheeler and the board of directors issued guidelines and strictures to keep the Chamber on a narrow, neutral path. Only cold, explanatory facts were printed in the reports contained in Chamber publications or in the verbal pronouncements by its officers.

Wheeler’s desire not to lobby—as lobbying was thought of and defined at the time—quickly faded as more and more executive branch officials and members of Congress asked for the Chamber’s recommendations. It soon became clear that advocacy would be one of the most important reasons for the Chamber’s existence as the national business federation.
Initially, the Chamber would lead by referenda of its members and would be committed by a two-thirds vote. Every member organization, however small in number, had 1 vote. No organization, however large, had more than 10 votes.

The first referendum took place in January 1913 on the question of a “Plan for a National Budget.” It was overwhelmingly ratified by the membership. It would take eight years until The Budget and Accounting Act of 1921 was eventually enacted into law, but the Chamber was given great credit for its passage.

Two other major referenda that brought affirmative votes from Chamber members in 1913 concerned establishing a permanent tariff commission and creating a legislative and bill drafting service.

Twenty-nine referenda were voted on in the first seven years. Teddy Roosevelt called the Chamber’s referenda “both educative and useful” and expressed “my hearty belief in what the Chamber of Commerce of the United States is doing.”

In August 1913, Wheeler appeared before a Senate committee in support of a bill establishing a Federal Reserve System. The Federal Reserve System was created the following December.

In 1914, Wheeler stepped down as president in favor of John Fahey, who served a two-year term.

In April, the Chamber, by referendum, recommended the creation of the Federal Trade Commission.
By mid-summer 1914, war raged in Europe following the June 28 assassination of Austrian Archduke Ferdinand. In response, the Chamber’s board established a special committee to make recommendations for the national defense and proposed the establishment of an International Court or Council of Reconciliation.

In May 1915, a German submarine sank the British passenger ship *Lusitania*, which carried war materials along with 1,800 passengers, of whom only 600 survived. Americans were shocked and enraged.

Throughout the year, the war that was ravaging Europe brought recommendations and responses from the Chamber. When the Treasury secretary called for a Pan-American Financial Conference to consider common problems created by war, the Chamber helped make arrangements.

Chamber members banded together to oppose a government-operated merchant marine, and in December, recommended that a conference of neutral countries be held to formulate rules for protecting life and property on the high seas.

The Chamber continued to work closely with Congress and the Wilson administration, urging an increase of the nation’s naval and land forces. The key to accomplishing this goal, advised the Chamber, was to properly coordinate the enormous financial and industrial strength of the nation. *Nation’s Business* noted that “the tools of business” might be deadlier weapons against the enemy than the wooden rifles used by soldiers.

In November, Woodrow Wilson was elected to a second term with the slogan, “He kept us out of war.” That wouldn’t hold true for long.
VII. THE U.S. CHAMBER AND THE WAR TO END ALL WARS

Provoked by Germany’s resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare and the sinking of seven American merchant ships—and incensed by Germany’s secret invitation for Mexico to enter the war on Germany’s side—President Wilson had had enough. On April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Imperial Germany and her allies. For the first time in the history of the nation, the federal government would take control of the railroads, shipping, food and fuel production, resource allocations, and industrial production.

In May, the Chamber’s board of directors met in St. Louis. The board was overwhelmed with requests from members for information, coordination, and assistance. The Executive Committee was asked “to continue in session as long as necessary to formulate a program.” The committee renamed itself the War Service Executive Committee of the U.S. Chamber and held 24 meetings between May 9 and June 14. Soon, a series of War Bulletins were issued to all Chamber members outlining ways the business community could contribute effectively to the war effort.

The Chamber worked closely with the federal Council on National Defense in establishing a joint Committee on Cooperation. A six-part plan was proposed, detailing how the Chamber could improve the war effort on the domestic front. A trade conference on buying problems and government demands was also suggested, which led to an unprecedented four-day War Convention of American Business in Atlantic City. More than 1,800 businessmen from across the nation attended.

The Chamber approved a set of resolutions at the conference: an acceptance of price controls; a request to Congress to pass any laws necessary to give the president power to concentrate the
industrial strength of the country toward winning the war; endorsement of the then-budding, but ill-fated and short-lived democracy that barely existed in Russia; support for the Liberty Loan drive; support for daylight saving time and universal military training; condemnation of profiteering; and, finally, a call to all industrial organizations to appoint a War Service Committee, independent of any government committee, to be made up of representative members in each particular industry.

The Chamber offered extraordinary assistance in mobilizing the resources of the nation for victory in war. When Congress approved the Selective Service Act requiring all American males ages 21–30 to register for military service by June 5, the Chamber promoted registration during the month preceding Registration Day. Showing strong support for Liberty Bond sales, the organization bought $25,000 worth of bonds in the first drive and more in the second drive.

In April 1918, at the Chamber’s 6th annual meeting, delegates discussed war issues, including the production of more ships and central control of government procurement. The War Service committees were helping keep a steady stream of supplies moving to the armed forces. The board surprised many by reelecting Harry Wheeler as president for a one-year term.

On November 11, 1918, Armistice Day was declared, bringing an end to the fighting in World War I. On June 28, 1919, the Treaty of Versailles was formally signed. In total, more than 16 million soldiers and 7 million civilians had died, including 117,465 U.S. dead and 205,690 U.S. wounded.
The U.S. Chamber had more than proven its worth during the war years. Thousands of businesspeople participated in the war effort, without regard to personal convenience and private or personal interests. Chamber President Wheeler said:

This form of patriotic service merits more than passing mention because it was offered with no thought of public recognition or possibility of applause, it carried no government commission, donned no uniform, nor hoped for inclusion in that long and honored list of government appointees at a dollar a year whose assumption of Federal authority lent a certain glamour to their service.

Finally, the emergency was over. The Chamber at once called its membership together in a Reconstruction Conference, which recommended the speedy removal of wartime business restrictions, the return of railroad and communication systems to private industry, and the equitable adjustment of canceled war contracts.
VIII. A Return to Normalcy—The U.S. Chamber in Postwar America

The Chamber viewed its postwar relationship with the federal government in stark terms:

American business will either profit by its war experience and hold fast to its present friendly relations with the executive and legislative branches of our government or by neglecting its present opportunity will help to usher in a new period of misunderstanding and suspicion between government and business, more disastrous in its effect than that which existed before the war.

Two things would serve to promote the desired relationship, according to the Chamber: (1) evidence that the plans and purposes of the Chamber were not wholly selfish or without regard for the public interest, and (2) evidence that the organization would be a real force for the foreseeable future.

Working together in war, business and government each found a measure of sympathetic consideration for the other’s problems. However, government was still responsible for applying reasonable restraints on business, and business was still responsible for generating jobs, growth, and profits to the fullest extent possible. There would be numerous instances in coming years where the two would cooperate … and clash.

Among the Chamber’s top postwar priorities was unwinding the unprecedented level of government regulations resulting from the war. In clear language, government intrusion into private enterprise was severely condemned. It was essential, the Chamber declared, that “our government should scrupulously refrain from entering any of the fields of transportation, communication, industry, and commerce, or any phase of business, when it can be successfully undertaken and conducted by private
enterprise. Any tendency of government to enter such fields should be carefully weighed in the light of its possible effect upon the very genius of our institutions.”

Plagued by labor unrest, the country sought assistance in how to cope with postwar strikes. One of the Chamber’s clearest definitions of its stand on labor-management relations was made in that first postwar year:

The right of workers to organize is as clearly recognized as that of any other class or part of the community. … Wages should be adjusted with due regard to the purchasing power of the wage and the right of every man to an opportunity to earn a living at fair wages, to reasonable hours of work and working conditions, to a decent home and to the enjoyment of proper social conditions. …

The Chamber was vigorously pressing its position that “the relation of government to industry and commerce is primarily that of preserving equality of opportunity for all.” It advocated adherence to the Court of International Justice. It spoke out against the intrusion of the federal government into fields of local or state responsibility.

Organizationally, the Chamber was marshalling its powerful resources. From the small staff in 1912—“just four, no more”—the number of employees had ballooned to 300 by the end of 1921. At the 7th annual meeting in 1919, Chamber President Wheeler suggested a series of changes that would allow the organization to “become the spokesman of American business in all its reality.” He requested an “expansion of the internal organization” and the creation of new departments in the following areas: industrial production, foreign commerce, domestic distribution, transportation and communications, finance, insurance, and civic development.
The size of the Chamber’s board was increased from 25 to 32 to enable better representation both geographically and by business sector. A Senior Council composed of former Chamber presidents was established to advise the current leadership.

In 1921, the Chamber’s board of directors approved a plan developed by the National Association of Commercial Secretaries for the establishment of a summer school for training and upgrading the skills of executives of chambers of commerce. The Chamber agreed to underwrite the school’s expenses for 1921 by appropriating $21,000. Northwestern University was the site for the first classes held July 18–30, 1921. This program soon included trade and professional association executives and staff. It gradually grew into the U.S. Chamber’s Institute for Organization Management program, which is today one of the oldest adult education programs in the nation’s history.

As the 1920s unfolded, the Chamber of Commerce of the United States was making its mark, showing increasing involvement in the complex issues affecting business and the economy and speaking out with aggressive confidence on important matters.

It was about to make its boldest statement yet.
IX. U.S. Chamber Headquarters—The Rallying Place for Business

Of Harry Wheeler’s many legacies, few surpass his dream of establishing a national headquarters for the Chamber reflecting the power, grandeur, and ideals of the American business community.

At the 1919 Chamber board meeting, Wheeler had sprung his surprise proposal for a national headquarters as he stepped down from his second term as president. He would remain the only chief elected officer ever to serve two nonconsecutive terms. Wheeler had been working in secret with Edson to select a site for the building and putting feelers out to key board members.

A resolution was introduced on May 6, 1919, to establish a headquarters that would “suggest the permanency to which this organization has attained and should be such as to represent creditably a great national interest.” Presiding over the debate, Wheeler cautioned the delegates:

You do not want to vote so quickly. You have to pay for the new building, and when you vote for this it is going to cost you money. So this is fair warning that if you put this up to the Board of Directors, they will promptly put it back on your pocket. It is not simply handing the Board of Directors a job. It is being willing to stand behind it, and when called upon to exercise your influence and to devote your time to gathering together the funds that will be necessary to do the work right.

The delegates did not flinch in the face of the estimated $3.2 million price tag. The resolution passed. A major fundraising campaign ensued. The response was overwhelming, as more than 10,000 American businessmen in more than 1,050 cities contributed enough to cover nearly all the costs.
In keeping with the can-do nature of the Chamber, things moved swiftly. In August, Chamber headquarters moved from its cramped quarters at the Riggs Building to the new Mills Building on 17th Street N.W., just west of the White House. The Executive Committee made the decision to lease floors two through eight until a new headquarters structure would be built and could be occupied.

Wheeler and Edson had already chosen an outstanding location for the new building, facing the White House on the northwest corner of Lafayette Square. Two 19th-century mansions occupied the site: the Corcoran House and the Slidell House, which throughout Washington's history had been the home to military heroes, high government officials, historians, bankers, lawyers, and diplomats. The most famous occupant of the Corcoran House was former U.S. Senator and Secretary of State Daniel Webster, whose desk remains in the Chamber's possession.

The mansions were purchased for $775,000 and razed to make way for the Chamber building.

Architect Cass Gilbert was engaged to design the new headquarters. In 1913, Gilbert had served as the architect of New York City's first skyscraper—the 60-story Woolworth Building. He also designed the Customs Building in New York City and three state capitols. Gilbert designed the Treasury Annex Building located across Lafayette Square, which shares many architectural details with the Chamber building. He would later design the magnificent U.S. Supreme Court building.

On May 22, 1922, the cornerstone of the new Chamber building was laid and nearly $2.5 million had already been raised. The organization directed that the building be constructed on the “American” plan, an open shop that does not discriminate between union and nonunion labor.

In just over two years, the building was completed. Staff occupied it on October 1, 1924.
Left to right: Secretary of Commerce and future President Herbert Hoover attended the laying of the cornerstone of the Chamber’s national headquarters building on May 22, 1922. The building was designed by famed architect Cass Gilbert, who later designed the U.S. Supreme Court building.
Construction of the Chamber took two years and cost $3.2 million, raised almost entirely from chambers, business organizations, and businessmen. The organization was built on the site of the Corcoran House, where Daniel Webster once resided, and the Slidell House. Construction began in 1922 and was completed on October 1, 1924. The building stands as a monument to American industry and its contribution to winning World War I.
On the evening of May 20, 1925, the new Chamber headquarters was formally dedicated. Chief Justice Taft, who as president was so instrumental in the creation of the Chamber, was present for the ceremony. He said: “With small beginnings … you have built a center of influence that has made, and will continue to make, for the great good of this country.”

Chamber President Richard F. Grant of New York City said that the new edifice stood as a symbol to the determination of the American businessman for service. He explained that it was a service built on the great ideal “that the American businessman owes to his country something of himself.”

The memory of the great Daniel Webster also was present. Around the open courtyard, as a frieze on the walls of the new building, were the engraved words of the Yankee statesman:

> Let us develop the resources of our land, call forth its powers, build up its institutions, promote all its great interests, and see whether we also, in our day and generation, may not perform something worthy to be remembered.

—Daniel Webster

For Wheeler, the headquarters building would forever stand as a monument to American industry and the role it played in winning World War I. As the “father of the U.S. Chamber,” few could explain the organization’s essential purpose better than Wheeler:

> The Chamber of Commerce of the United States of America is of value to the individual businessman because it gives organized and nationwide expression to the idea that business is service, and nothing is good for business that isn’t good for the ultimate consumer.

In the span of a few short years, the Chamber had found its voice, its purpose, and its home.
Looking Forward

As America’s prosperity at home and influence abroad accelerated and expanded during the 20th century, the Chamber’s prestige and power grew in equal measure. Having the ear of presidents and the voice of America’s ever-expanding business community, the organization made a difference during periods of promise, prosperity, and tribulation.

Leaders turned to the Chamber to help navigate the dark days of the Great Depression and restore hope in America amid widespread economic despair. Along the hard road to recovery, the Chamber worked to establish the foundation for a strengthened economy.

As the horror of World War II engulfed the world, U.S. leaders mobilized the business community and marshalled the great industrial might of America in the fight against fascism and tyranny, just as it had done so remarkably well in World War I.

In the 1960s, the Chamber engaged the business community in a war of a different kind—against crime and poverty, which were undermining the American Dream and tearing society apart.

When the oil crisis of 1973 led to price controls and rationing, the Chamber pushed for expanded domestic production, including oil and gas exploration, coal mining, and the Trans Alaska Pipeline.

America’s economic strength would be tested again and again. In 1981, the Chamber launched the Let’s Rebuild America campaign to help brighten the dark national mood and build support for President Reagan’s Economic Recovery and Tax Act.
In the 1990s, as globalization took hold, the Chamber was at the forefront of expanding opportunities for the export of American goods and services—and all the jobs that exporting would create.

In the 2000s, the organization experienced a period of substantial growth. It was better financed, more global, and more politically active. In the aftermath of the Great Recession and financial crisis of 2008, the Chamber worked to train the nation’s focus on the paramount challenge of economic growth and jobs.

Throughout the course of its history, the Chamber has exemplified one of the defining characteristics of the businesses it represents—the ability to grow, adapt, and change with the times. When new resources were needed, it made the case and raised the funds. When programs had outlived their usefulness, they were quickly discarded.
The list of Chamber innovations is extensive. In 1947, the Chamber began to export its influence, establishing a network of American Chambers of Commerce abroad. These AmChams—a unique asset among associations—advance the interests of American businesses overseas.

In 1967, the Chamber founded the National Chamber Foundation, which has driven the public debate on issues key to the business community. In 1977, inspired by a suggestion from future Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, it created the National Chamber Litigation Center. NCLC would grow to become a powerful public interest law organization protecting the rights of business in the nation’s highest courts.

In 1983, the Chamber established the Center for International Private Enterprise. This organization promotes democratic and market-oriented reforms in developing countries.

More recently, the organization established focused initiatives on some of the nation’s most cutting-edge issues, including legal reform, intellectual property protection, capital markets, and energy.

Along the way, the Chamber has become a powerful force for jobs, economic growth, and opportunity and a valued American institution. As one-time Chamber President Earl Shreve remarked in 1947, “The National Chamber is as distinctly and uniquely American as the redwood trees and the bison; as the Allegheny and the Rocky Mountains!”

While the Chamber has grown and evolved over the decades, one thing has not changed and never will—its ironclad commitment to the principles of free enterprise, the greatest economic system ever devised … a system built on individual initiative and personal responsibility that creates more opportunities, more hope, and more wealth than any other.
The traditions, achievements, and ambitions of the Chamber have been and are inseparably entwined with that philosophy of individual and economic freedom, which is the foundation of the great success of America among the nations of the world.

In that sense, the past is prologue. As the Chamber celebrates its 100th anniversary, it has embarked on a major campaign to defend, protect, and advance free enterprise, which has come under attack during these difficult economic times. Going forward, the organization has no higher calling than to preserve and strengthen this system that makes the American Dream possible for everyone.

Powered by outstanding volunteer leadership, an active and engaged membership, a professional staff second to none, ample resources, and a well-earned reputation for fairness and effectiveness, the Chamber is poised to not only meet the future from a position of power and influence but with a humble recognition of the importance of its fundamental mission.

The leaders of today’s Chamber are custodians of an important American institution. They are keenly aware of the hard work, sweat, and genius of those who created the organization and built it from the ground up. Their commitment to the future success of business, our economy, and our system of free enterprise is as solid as the Corinthian columns of the Chamber’s august headquarters.

In 1913, President Taft made a prophetic statement to the Chamber: “I am confident that with your marvelous growth, the sound principles upon which you have established your association, and the great opportunities that present themselves, the future of this organization will show it to be one of the real non-official factors in the progress of our country.”

He couldn’t have been more right. As the Chamber enters its second century, it will help propel America to ever greater heights.