NORTH AMERICAN COLLEGE FRATERNITIES

A SHORT HISTORY

Introduction

Universities got their start in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as the stagnant feudal world of the Dark Ages was beginning to stir. Towns were growing, trade was starting to flow across Europe, and there was a need for an educated professional class to cope with an increasingly complex society. The university preceded the college: it offered its students lectures and a degree, but little more. The college (which simply meant “a gathering of men”—there were colleges of Cardinals, and colleges of fishmongers) began as a simple boarding house, gradually evolving into a tutoring school until in time it took over most of the university's functions and became the institution we know today.

By then there were student societies of various kinds, but each was unique to its particular university, where an undergraduate's academic and social life (what there was of it) centered around his college. There were no networks of social organizations linking the students of the early universities together, nor have any developed since. In talking with most Europeans, the concept of a college fraternity is often a difficult one to convey; it is a phenomenon unique to North American life.

Early Days

The heritage of the Old World found its echo in the colleges of the American colonial period. The academic emphasis was on biblical studies, Latin, and Greek; hours were long; dress and behavior were strictly regulated and there was little, if any, provision for a student’s social needs, or interest in the development of his character and personality other than by compulsory daily chapel services.

Not much fun, perhaps, but students had a way of rising above such constraints.

The fraternity movement may be said to have started in 1750 at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. There, a group of students, calling themselves the Flat Hat Club, were accustomed to meet over a bowl of punch in an upper room of the Raleigh Tavern to socialize and discuss the issues of the day. This jolly group, which lasted until about 1770, sparked the formation of other groups, somewhat less jolly, which, with an eye to faculty approval, formed themselves into literary societies and oratorical clubs with such names as Neotrophian and Philopeuthion.

The First Fraternity

One suspects that, in addition to literary exercises, a certain amount of political maneuvering went on. One such group, named PDA, rejected a blameless scholar of Greek, John Heath, who, in retaliation gathered four friends and founded his own group, which he called Phi Beta Kappa. This group was founded on the evening of December 5, 1776 in the Apollo Room of the ever-popular Raleigh Tavern; it subsequently adopted a secret oath, slogan, motto and ritual, and a distinctive badge—all attributes of today's fraternities. The society was a secret one: it was a departure from the established literary groups and despite the fact that the three starts on its silver medallion symbolized fraternity, morality and literature the faculty was not about to sanction anything, be it a group or an idea, that strayed very far from accepted practice and traditional beliefs.

And the men of Phi Beta Kappa were of independent spirit, as were their countrymen who had declared their independence from the mother country just five months before. The students, too, wanted self-government; they wanted to say in their affairs, intellectual discussion without fear of censure, and unhindered comradeship. “They were,” as one writer put it, “pursuing freedom and a richer life by the means of brotherhood.”

Early Growth

The idea caught on and Phi Beta Kappa chapters were established at Yale in 1780 and Harvard the following year. The Revolutionary War caused the parent chapter to temporarily cease operations in 1781, but branches were slowly added. Agitation against secret societies in the 1830's led to the disclosure of the society's secrets, and since that
time Phi Beta Kappa has been an academic honor society. (In addition to Phi Beta Kappa there are today numerous Greek-letter honorary, professional and recognition societies in virtually every field of academic and professional endeavor.)

In 1812 four Phi Beta Kappa men at the University of North Carolina established the first Kappa Alpha, and a number of chapters were founded in the South during its early years. Internal dissent resulted in the dissolution of many of its “circles” (its circle at Centenary college of Louisiana accepted a charter from DKE in 1858) and all of its circles eventually fell away. Local Greek-letter groups sprang up here and there, but none survived.

Things really got started at Union college in Schenectady, New York. Union’s president, Eliphalet Nott, a man ahead of his time, had moved away from the traditional emphasis on Latin and Greek and had introduced more practical subjects such as mathematics, history and modern languages. He was also, untypically, receptive to the idea of student associations. To fill a void left by the demise of a military marching club, a group of students, including some Phi Beta Kappas, organized the Kappa Alpha Society on November 26, 1825. Not to be confused with the 1812 Kappa Alpha or the Kappa Alpha Order, founded in 1865, the Kappa Alpha Society is recognized as the oldest fraternity in continuous existence today.

**Expansion**

Two years later, in 1827, Sigma Phi and Delta Phi were founded at Union to compete with Kappa Alpha; these three became known as the “Union Triad,” and were the pattern for the college fraternity system. Three other fraternities were subsequently founded at Union: Psi Upsilon in 1833, Chi Psi in 1841 and Theta Delta Chi in 1847, giving Union the title of “Mother of Fraternities.”

Sigma Phi became the first of these fraternities to establish a branch organization when, in 1832, it started a chapter at Hamilton college-a move which inspired some other undergraduates to found Alpha Delta Phi later that year. The following year Alpha Delta Phi became the first fraternity to establish a chapter west of the Alleghenies, at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. Miami was also the site of the first fraternity founded in the “West”-Beta Theta Pi, in 1839. In 1834 the first non-secret fraternity, Delta Upsilon, was founded at Williams; for some reason, non-secret fraternities apart from D.U. never really caught on, in spite of a lot of anti-secret society sentiment on and off campus.

**Old Traditions**

This sentiment notwithstanding, fraternities grew and flourished, replacing the oratorical and literary societies, and adopting many of their cultural activities. Literary exercises came to be an integral part of each chapter meeting, and the presentation of orations, essays and poems became part of fraternity life, as it was in the life of the college itself. Such doings were not undertaken lightly, and election to literary office was a serious thing-so much so that, in 1855, six Dekes broke away from Kappa, Miami over the question of who was to be elected class poet, and founded Sigma Chi.

**New Appeal**

But it was not only the traditional appeal of classic expression which drew together the members of the early fraternities-after all, they could get that in the literary societies. It was something more-a sense of common interest, of brotherhood; a desire to be a part of something larger than the local scene, to find new friends and affiliations at other colleges, to enjoy activities and social events beyond the curriculum in a day when, on most campuses, there wasn’t very much to do outside of class. Then too, it was the expression of a national trait: in his *Democracy in America* (1839) the French traveler and historian Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “Americans... constantly form associations. They are the most fraternal people in the world.”

**1840-1860**

Reflecting these desires, the fraternity movement gained momentum in the 1840’s. DKE, tenth oldest of today’s fraternities, was founded at Yale in 1844, Alpha Sigma Phi a year later, Delta Psi, Zeta Psi, and Theta Delta chi in 1847, Phi Delta Theta and Phi Gamma Delta in 1848, and Phi Kappa Sigma in 1850. By 1860 the fraternity system was well established, with 22 of today’s 58 fraternities already in existence.
AN ORIGINAL ΔΚΕ PIN,
The Property of
W. B. JACOBS, Esq.,
A Founder of the Fraternity.

The Founders of Delta Kappa Epsilon
June 22, 1844

William Woodruff Atwater
Edward Griffin Bartlett
Frederic Peter Bellinger, Jr.
Henry Case
George Foote Chester
John Butler Coyngham
Thomas Isaac Franklin
William Walter Horton
William Boyd Jacobs
Edward Van Schoonhoven Kingsley
Chester Newell Righter
Elisha Bacon Shapleigh
Thomas Du Bois Sherwood
Orson William Snow
Albert Everett Stetson
ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF DELTA KAPPA EPSILON
(1844 - 1944)

Our Fraternity had its beginnings at Yale in early 1844 as a protest against the injustice of the society system then existing at that university. Psi Upsilon and Alpha Delta Phi, both of which had been at Yale for several years, selected their members near the end of the sophomore year largely on the basis of scholarly attainments and honors won, or likely to be won, in the two open literary societies. When the elections from the class of 1846 were announced, this arrangement was so flagrantly violated and merit was slighted so obviously, that there was immediate resentment. Several of the sophomores rejected the elections offered them, and with other and wholly congenial members of the class met to discuss the project of a new junior society. These young men, 15 in number, became the founders of Phi of DKE. The meeting for organization was held June 22, 1844, in No. 12 Old South Hall, which was razed a generation ago. Thus the founders made justice the cornerstone of our temple, and from that day to this the ideal Deke has been a square shooter, playing the game of life fairly and cleanly in undergraduate years and later.

In connection with those beginnings, several significant things should be noted. First, in their emphasis on good-fellowship and community of tastes and interests, the founders of DKE made it a “fraternity” as distinct from the “societies” which were its predecessors and rivals, one of which soon passed out of existence at Yale and remained dormant for many years. Dr. Bartlett, one of the 15 founders, who later wrote at length about the beginnings of DKE, tells us that in taking members from the following classes “the candidate most favored was he who combined in the most equal proportion the gentleman, the scholar and the jolly good fellow.” So it was that the open Greek motto, adopted with the secret motto, the pin and the grips, at the very first meeting—“From the heart friends forever,” in translation—was woven into the fabric of our Fraternity.

Again, DKE is the only great national fraternity of New England origin. The only debatable exception is Delta Upsilon, which had its beginnings in a union of several undergraduate organizations, one of them at a New England college, which were formed in opposition to the secrecy of the Greek-letter fraternity system. And New England has been a Deke stronghold for all these 90 years. There a fourth of our chapters, the youngest of them close to half a century old, have enjoyed uninterrupted prosperity and prestige. The only one of the 12 chapters of DKE in New England to become extinct is Alpha at Harvard from which the chapter, after 40 years, was withdrawn in 1891 on account of the complications and overlapping of the undergraduate club system at that self-sufficient university. Today seven leading colleges and universities of New England have Deke presidents, out of 19 in the country at large.

Again, DKE was the first fraternity to push into the South and thereby become a truly national undergraduate brotherhood. Yale drew heavily in those years from the sons of the wealthy planters and the cultured aristocracy of the South, and several of the founders of Phi were from that section. When the storm of war broke, some of them enlisted in a body, and all of them became inactive. The war killed some of the chapters beyond revival. Indeed, it killed beyond revival some of the colleges themselves. But when there was a secession of states, there was no secession in DKE, and the splendid loyalty with which both the chapters and the members as individuals met the test of those cruel years is one of the things of which we are proudest.