

Freemasonry and the Development of Greek-Letter Fraternities

Masonic symbolism and philosophy had a strong influence in the early development of many of the so-called "Greek-letter" organizations so commonly seen and accepted on college campuses throughout the United States. In some cases, the influence is little more than an association of ritual and secrecy, but in many cases the relationships between Freemasonry and college fraternal organizations are strong and even enduring.

During the half century before the Revolutionary War, college fraternities had a meager yet building existence. Prior to 1776, Yale College, the College of New Jersey (Princeton University), and the College of William and Mary all had student fraternal organizations (Voorhees, 1945). The establishment and development of these fraternities closely mimicked the maturation of the American branch of Freemasonry. These fraternities supported fidelity, scholarship, and the development of speaking skills through debate and literary circles.

PHI BETA KAPPA: It was in the year of 1776 that the age of college fraternities took a secretive turn (Torbenson, 1992). That year marked the founding of the first Greek-letter society, the college fraternity Phi Beta Kappa at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia. Although not sanctioned by or directly connected to Freemasonry, Phi Beta Kappa patterned its initiations, oaths, and modes of proliferation after those of Freemasonry (Voorhees). Two of the founding members and a total of ten early members of Phi Beta Kappa were Freemasons (Torbenson).



Similarities between Phi Beta Kappa and Freemasonry are easily seen. First, both organizations held their meetings within a shroud of secrecy. Freemasonry and Phi Beta Kappa both required new initiates to take voluntary oaths of fidelity. The oaths of Phi Beta Kappa mentioned the "Holy Evangelists of Almighty God" and a "Supreme Being," both of which are commonly referenced in Masonic lodge ritual (Voorhees, 1945, p. 1). The three Greek letters stood for Philosophia Biou Kybernetes, "Love of Wisdom, the Guide of Life," a parallel to Freemasonry's reverence for "Light," or knowledge.

In the Phi Beta Kappa ritual, the founders named "friendship, morality, and literature as essential characteristics" (Voorhees, p.12). These are closely related to the principal tenants of Freemasonry: Friendship, Morality, and Brotherly Love. Phi Beta Kappa actually replicated the manner in which

they established new chapters directly from the model used by Freemasonry. Soon additional chapters were formed at Harvard, Yale and Dartmouth.

In 1825, forty-nine years after the organization of Phi Beta Kappa, the Kappa Alpha Society (not to be confused with Kappa Alpha Order) was organized at Union College, Schenectady, New York. Among its founders were several Phi Beta Kappa members. Today, the Kappa Alpha Society holds the honor of being the first Greek-letter general college fraternity with continuous existence.

Like Phi Beta Kappa and the Kappa Alpha Society, college fraternities continued to be organized in the academic institutions of the United States. Most of these fraternities had oaths of secrecy and modes of recognition (Torbenson, 1992). This practice was often questioned, even within the ranks of Phi Beta Kappa; however, it would not be until 19 September 1827 that the secrecy of fraternities would begin to be widely placed under scrutiny (Torbenson; Voorhees, 1945).

RITUAL EXPOSURE: 1826 was the year of the disappearance of Captain William Morgan in upstate New York, allegedly abducted and murdered for publishing and exposing Masonic ritual. The story of Morgan's disappearance and the subsequent anti-Masonic period, lasting until about 1840, should be well known to all Freemasons, because this period marked the beginning of an explosion in published ritual exposures.

The crisis faced by Freemasons spilled over to Phi Beta Kappa in 1831 with John Marsh & Company's publication of *A Ritual of Freemasonry, Illustrated by Numerous Engravings; with Notes and Remarks*, to which is added a *Key to the Phi Beta Kappa*, by Avery Allyn, an anti-Masonic lecturer of the time. This well known ritual exposure would be reprinted time and time again.

The work focused predominantly upon the rituals of Freemasonry. It offered only eight pages on the topic of Phi Beta Kappa, and as little as one or two pages in later editions. Although the subversive author of the compromising book admitted there was not an open or concrete connection between Freemasonry and Phi Beta Kappa, the backlash resulted in the latter order abandoning its secrecy and becoming little more than an academic honor society (Allyn, 1831; Voorhees).

By the time the second edition of Allyn's exposure was printed, most Phi Beta Kappa Chapters had traded the standard of being a society cultivating friendship and the oath of fidelity for the sole

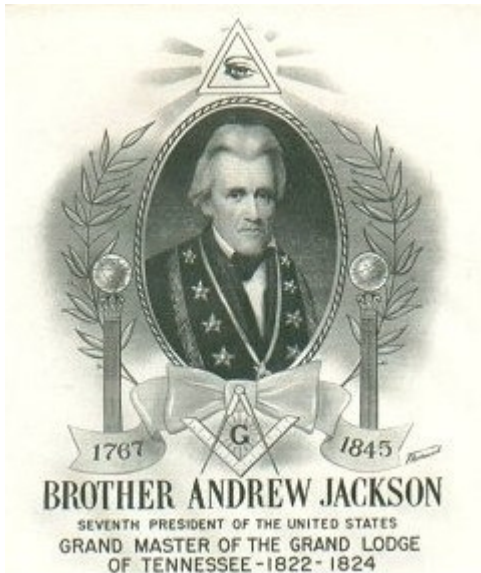


image of being a scholarly literary society (Torbenenson, 1992; Vorhees, 1945). It is ironic that in 1832, the same year Phi Beta Kappa was abandoning its own secrecy, the notoriously secretive Order of Skull and Bones was being established at Yale (Robbins, 2002). The founders of Skull and Bones are reported to have been outraged by the demystification of Phi Beta Kappa and wanted to create an order to carry on its mystical prestige.

The backlash from the Morgan Affair created the first third-party in American politics. The Anti-Masonic party continued with minimal momentum until the end of the 1830s. It garnered enough support following the Morgan Affair to organize a national convention in 1832. That year, the Anti-Masonic Party's presidential candidate, William Wirt, carried only the state of Vermont, and was defeated by Andrew Jackson, Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Tennessee (Holt, 2002).

THE FRATERNAL MOVEMENT: It would still be several decades before the chaos subsided enough to hasten in the heyday of American fraternalism. However, the number of Greek letter societies continued to grow throughout the mid- and late-1800's. The new fraternities formed during this time patterned themselves after Phi Beta Kappa's original model. Based upon this fact alone, it could be stated that all American college fraternities owe at least a little of their heritage to Freemasonry.

The unified fraternities that were organized during the last half of the nineteenth-century exhibit strong influences derived from Freemasonry; however, these fraternities held no official ties to it. During this era in American history, men going to college were often of an older age, and it was not unusual for these men to have either been inducted into the Masonic fraternity before enrolling in college or while under the tutelage of professors who were Masons (Torbenenson, 1992). Three of the fraternities with Masonic similarities that were established during this period are Phi Kappa Sigma, Delta Tau Delta, and Kappa Alpha Order.

PHI KAPPA SIGMA: Phi Kappa Sigma was founded at the University of Pennsylvania on 16 August 1850. The primary leader of the movement was Samuel Brown Wylie Mitchell who later became a noted physician, and who was a member of Franklin Lodge No. 134¹, Philadelphia.



A quick perusal of the Phi Kappa Sigma website will reveal a few images and principles that will be familiar to Master Masons (About Phi Kappa Sigma). The arms of the badge of the order, designed by Mitchell, resonate with Masonic and Knight Templar influence. The shield bears a cross patée, the pin of the order, at its center, while the crest consists of a skull and crossbones.



DELTA TAU DELTA: Delta Tau Delta was founded 5 March 1858 at Bethany College, Bethany, West Virginia. One of the primary leaders in the organization of the fraternity was William R. Cunningham, a Freemason and Church of Christ minister. Cunningham had been inducted into the Masonic fraternity before the formation of Delta Tau Delta, and he was influential in the development of the ritual and constitution, both containing Masonic language (The History Behind, n.d.).

The crest of the Delta Tau Delta badge consists of an all-seeing eye, and the shield includes the symbol of the blazing star. Albert Mackey, in his encyclopedia, states that the blazing star is one of the most important Masonic symbols and is symbolic of “a true Mason, who, by perfecting himself in the way of truth, that is to say, by advancing in knowledge, becomes like a blazing star, shining with brilliancy in the midst of darkness” (Mackey, p. 130).

KAPPA ALPHA (KA) ORDER: Kappa Alpha Order was founded on 21 December 1865 at Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) at Lexington, Virginia, by James Ward Wood and three others. During their lives, all four were Master Masons. Wood was a member of Moorefield Lodge, Moorefield, West Virginia. The ritual for Kappa Alpha was created by Samuel Z. Ammen, ultimately earning him the title “the practical founder of Kappa Alpha Order” (www.kappaalphaorder.org).

Ammen, who had already been inducted into Freemasonry in Friendship Lodge, Fincastle, Virginia, later stated: “I drew heavily upon my experience as a Master Mason in crafting the new ritual.” That ritual utilizes the symbolism of the Masonic Knights Templar as much as the symbolism of Craft

Masonry. The ritual transformed the fraternity into an order of Christian knighthood, which sought to preserve the masculine virtues of chivalry, respect for others, honor and reverence for God and womanhood.

Other examples of Greek-letter fraternities with Masonic influences granted by either founding members or early members include Alpha Tau Omega, Sigma Nu, Phi Delta Theta, Sigma Chi, Phi Gamma Delta, Sigma Alpha Epsilon, Phi Kappa Alpha, Zeta Psi, Tau Kappa Epsilon, Psi Upsilon, and Delta Psi. The last of these, according to the 1899 Cyclopedia of Fraternities, “was dressed up by someone who had access to rituals of the bastard Masonic rites of Misraim and Memphis” (Stevens, p. 346).

THE ACACIA FRATERNITY: On many college campuses there existed clubs and organizations for students and professors who were Freemasons, but it was not until the turn of the twentieth century that those exclusively Masonic college fraternities were unified (Ellenberger, 1998; Katsaounis, 2004; Sink, n.d.). The first unified fraternity to have direct ties to Freemasonry was the Acacia Fraternity.



It is unlike its peer organizations in that it does not use Greek letters to represent its name. Instead it uses a Greek word, *Akakia* (Katsaounis, 2004). The fraternity was officially established on 14 May 1904 by fourteen Freemasons at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor (Ellenberger; Katsaounis). Initially its members were required to be Freemasons. However, the sublime degree of Master Mason is no longer a prerequisite.

The Acacia fraternity sought only those Master Masons with high standards of conduct. Thusly, Acacia was selective of an already elite group of men. Acacia wished to be an entity of high moral standards, offering a refuge and fraternity for those who wished not to participate in the debauchery of college fraternities of the time (Fairfield, 1965; Sink). It was the goal of the founders that the teachings of Acacia be dedicated to scholarship, and a continuation of the principles of Freemasonry.

The original colors of the Acacia Fraternity were dark blue and gold. The order's pin is in the form of a right triangle, and although it was never designated as a 3-4-5 triangle, a close examination of the pin will divulge the base of the pin contains three pearls, the height four, and the hypotenuse five. The 3-4-5 triangle has great significance in the symbolism of Freemasonry (Stafford, 2006). Within the pin are three right triangles encased in a larger one. These three smaller triangles represent the three Hebrew-letters shin, teth and he. The crest of the fraternity is a threebranched candelabra wreathed with sprigs of acacia. The shield of "old gold" has a black band "in fess, endorsed" bearing three gold right triangles (Acacia Fraternity).

Today, the Acacia Fraternity has no official relationship to Freemasonry. However, many chapters still maintain close ties with local Masonic lodges. In 1997, the Masonic Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania began to strengthen its connections with the Acacia Fraternity by allowing it the use of Masonic lodge rooms to conduct the three Acacian degrees (Katsaounis, 2004).

SQUARE AND COMPASS FRATERNITY: The Square and Compass Fraternity was organized at Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia in 1917 (Fairfield, 1965). This fraternity, like Acacia, unified the individual Masonic clubs found on college campuses across the country, many of which were called "Square and Compass clubs" (Foss, 1925).

The Square and Compass Fraternity was organized as a reaction to Acacia's "prohibition against having as members any Masons who were already members of social Greek-letter fraternities" (Foss, 1925). But Square and Compass was not as selective as Acacia, accepting virtually all Masons who petitioned for membership. Petitioning Masons could only be rejected for membership due to Masonic misconduct, and by majority vote (Foss).

The Square and Compass Fraternity merged with Sigma Mu Sigma in 1952 (Alpha Chapter History, n.d.). The objective of the unification of these two fraternities was "to thoroughly indoctrinate the college men of America with the traditions of our American Masonic Heritage through ritualistic and fraternity conducted educational programs devoted to the Rites of Initiation and our American Way of Life" (Fairfield, p. 16).

SIGMA MU SIGMA: Sigma Mu Sigma was established 25 March 1921 at Tri-State College, Angola, Indiana. During this time, the college had a strict rule banning student secret societies on campus. However, there were several organizations working clandestinely on the campus. These organizations were well known for hazing and excess. In order to combat the rules of the college and the unsavory established fraternities, three Masonic Knights Templar worked together to organize a fraternity for Master Masons (Fairfield, 1965).



The founders invited other students of good report and demeanor who were Freemasons to begin a student organization. The young founders were savvy enough to invite the president of the College and various professors who were Freemasons to become honorary members, a plan originally used by Phi Beta Kappa (Voorhees, 1945). The president wished to retain these highperforming students at the College, so he revoked the restriction on fraternities and recognized the new body.

Today, Sigma Mu Sigma no longer requires its members to be Master Masons. The prerequisite was dropped in 1929 due to the reduced age of men attending college (Alpha Chapter History, n.d.; Fairfield). The Sigma Mu Sigma shield² incorporated the symbols of two clasped hands, an open book, and a lamp of knowledge. The crest above the shield consists of an all-seeing eye.

ORDER OF THE GOLDEN KEY: In the article "Collegiate Freemasons", Almond Fairfield identifies a

fourth collegiate order exclusive to Master Masons (1965). The Order of the Golden Key was first conferred at the University of Oklahoma on 21 March 1925 by Fairfield (Fairfield). It should not be confused with the Golden Key International Honor Society founded in 1977, or the honorary award of Phi Theta Kappa. Fairchild wrote, "The ritual of the order was written by a college Mason for college Masons with the purpose of giving them a comprehensive understanding of the Rites of Initiation and of Masonic Philosophy" (p. 17).

AN UNTAPPED SOURCE: The association and connection between Freemasonry and college fraternities is only one example of the great impact the Freemasonry has had upon American society. Although the Masonic fraternity has in many ways lost a great deal of its former influence, there exists an immense need for men to be indoctrinated with the spirit of Freemasonry.

There is no other organization today, either on college campuses or in the world at large, that offers the moral and spiritual lessons of Freemasonry. It has been mimicked and copied many times but never surpassed. Freemasonry has a great deal to offer young men, and old men alike, who have experienced the initiation rites of lesser orders.

William Ellenberger (1998), in his article "The Acacia Fraternity", makes the assertion that the Acacia Fraternity and those like it offer the Masonic fraternity an untapped source of members. In order for Freemasonry to attract men of high quality it must be an organization that lives by the principles it teaches. Freemasons must walk circumspect to the world and truly be bringers of light. We must discover unto the world the happy effect of this ancient and honorable institution.

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¹According to a communication with the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, Brother Mitchell was admitted as a Master Mason into Franklin Lodge No. 134 on March 30, 1872 at the age of 43. There is no record as to where he was a member before affiliating with this lodge. Brother Mitchell died August 16, 1879.

²According to David Sobel, “the coat-of-arms of the Sigma Mu Sigma is azure, charged with the Hands of Sincerity, the Book of Morality, and the Lamp of Knowledge, all of or. The crest is the All-seeing Eye of God; the supporters, sprigs of acacia. It is underscored by the motto ‘Sincerity Life’s Guide’ translated in Greek.” David Sobel is associated with headquarters of Sigma Mu Sigma.



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Indocti discant, ament meminisse periti.

“Let the unlearned learn, let the experts love to remember.”

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