

## Taking the Mystery out of Fraternity History

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Each fraternity/sorority, from the youngest to those founded before the Civil War, has a history. The depth and breadth of that history is sometimes lost on its members. Memorizing the founders' names, without a sense of time and place, is a meaningless exercise. So, too, is knowing where and when an organization was founded, without knowing the why of it. To paraphrase Michael Crichton's quote in *Timeline*, "If you don't know history, then you don't know anything. You are a leaf that doesn't know it is part of a tree."

While history may be interesting, it is not always appealing to today's members. Expecting members to learn the history of their organization can be perceived to take too much time and create stress for already over-programmed members. Being "forced" to learn certain facts takes the fun out of discovery. However, when I was director of fraternity education for a women's fraternity, I was adamant that if our members left college without knowing the history of our organization, they would likely never learn it. While that might still be true, to a certain extent, the opportunity for lifelong fraternity education is greater today than it has ever been.

It has never been easier to learn fraternity history. The internet has made many out-of-print items readily available. Publications that were nearly impossible to find 25 years ago – early editions of *Baird's Manual of American College Fraternities*, Ida Shaw Martin's *Sorority Handbook*, and other classic publications are now just a click away. Additionally, many organizations have digitized magazines and histories and put them on their website. Some college publications are digitized and online as well.

Consider this personal example. I recently searched for information about John H. Lewis, M.D., Ph.D. after seeing a press release about a ceremony honoring him at the University of Chicago. There was no entry for him on Wikipedia. However, I knew he entered the University of Illinois at age 16 and earned two degrees before beginning a doctoral program at the University of Chicago. A member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., he was the University of Chicago's first African American professor. I was able to search digital copies of the fraternity's magazine, *The Sphinx*, and learned that he had been a speaker at the 18th convention in Detroit in 1925. His speech was published in the magazine. I also found out that he had spoken in Atlanta in 1926. It would have been nearly impossible for me to find that information even 10 or 20 years ago without the internet.

In another post I wrote for Sigma Pi's Founder's Day, I discovered the fraternity's founders had heard a talk on college fraternities by one of the female professors at Vincennes University. I wondered why she would choose to talk to the men on that topic. I guessed that she was a fraternity woman. I was able to discover she was! She was a member of Kappa Alpha Theta at Indiana University. Her talk spurred the young men to found what later became Sigma Pi. Kappa Alpha Theta did not know the story. I suspect Sigma Pi did not know that she was a Theta. I am not sure they even knew her married name. In the past, that information was too difficult to locate. Within 15 minutes on the internet, I found when she left Vincennes, her yearly salary for the teaching job she took in Spokane, the date of her wedding, what her husband did for a living, and when she died. Without the internet, uncovering this information would have taken

a long time in research libraries and with much follow-up correspondence if it was even possible.

Digital copies of newspapers, yearbooks, and magazines can be treasure troves of information about fraternities and sororities. The Hathi Trust has digitized many books from the New York Public Library's William Raimond Baird Collection of Fraternity Literature. Reading old fraternity and sorority magazines provides a fascinating glimpse of what it was like to be in college in a different time and place. Locate an old online copy of a fraternity/sorority magazine and get lost in it for a few minutes. I guarantee you will learn something new.

I offer two caveats to anyone researching the history of fraternities and sororities. The first is that "traditions" should not be confused with history. Traditions are often fleeting, although chapter members seldom realize that. Nor do they realize that traditions are hardly ever traditions. Traditions tend to be ideas which get confused and convoluted with every occurrence; traditions are like that old fashioned game of telephone where two teams start with a quote or phrase and it gets passed down the line, told as a whisper, from ear to ear. By the time the last one in line says the word or phrase, it is usually something completely different than what it was when the game started.

The second caveat is that members, especially collegians, need to realize that the things a chapter did decades ago may not have a place in today's world. Activities must be looked at from the lens of 2015. In researching a chapter's history, it also may become apparent that a chapter's history may not have always been bright. A charter may have been revoked. Members may have taken their obligations lightly. The chapter may have suffered the consequences of stupid decisions. Those things are a part of a chapter's history, and they can become teachable moments.

Most importantly, the current members of a chapter need to know that they are the chapter's living history. Documenting the present is vital for the sake of future members. It, too, is also easier than ever to do. In the 1900s, it meant taking pictures, having them printed, and putting them in a scrapbook. Today, digital files can be uploaded to a website and/or cloud storage. A chapter's history can be documented on social media although the members need to adhere to any organizational guidelines. It goes without saying that all items on social media should reflect credit on the organization.

Learning more about the history of one's fraternity/sorority can offer special insights. Discovering the history of the other organizations is not being unfaithful to one's own organization. For instance, what was it like to be a woman in college in the 1880s, when women were not always welcomed in higher education? How did women's fraternities and sororities offer support to their members? Or how many fraternity men lost their lives as aviators in World War I, when the field of aviation was quite young and college men were sought to take on these challenges? Or why were the predominantly Jewish fraternities and sororities founded on the east coast? Or when did philanthropy begin playing a part in fraternal life? Or what role did the NPHC organizations play in the Civil Rights Movement? Or who were the men and women who shaped the world of fraternities and sororities? The answers to these questions and more are out there and ready to be shared with those who realize their importance.