

Introduction

Fraternities' Past and Historians' Present

On May 17, 1875, a student at Asbury College in Greencastle, Indiana, waited alone in a darkened hallway for her initiation ceremony to begin. On the other side of the doorway, the sisters of Kappa Alpha Theta Fraternity prepared for the ritual that would transform the young woman from a “barbarian,” or nonfraternity student, into a “Greek sister.”¹ Although the waiting student had, weeks before, accepted the “bid” for membership offered to her by the fraternity members, she would have known little of what would transpire inside the initiation room because Kappa Alpha Theta was, and still remains, a secret society.

The young initiate could not have known that once inside the room, she would be asked to pledge her loyalty, “in the name of a nobler womanhood,” to Kappa Alpha Theta. She would next be given a Greek name to symbolize her new identity as a sister, and, in a highly ritualized ceremony, would be instructed that henceforth, her words, actions, and behavior would be regarded as reflections not only of her own character, but of the entire fraternity and all of its members.²

This ritual of initiation would be enacted over 2,700 times in the last three decades of the nineteenth century and over 8,100 times by 1920, as growing numbers of female collegians pledged themselves to Kappa Alpha Theta.³ Nearly 80,000 other women would undergo similar initiation processes during this period in their quests to join Kappa Kappa Gamma, Pi Beta Phi, Alpha Phi, Sigma Kappa, and other women’s fraternities.⁴ Like these other Greek-letter societies for women, Kappa Alpha Theta demanded of its members loyalty and a pledge always to uphold the standards of the society. In exchange, it offered solidarity, support, the overt mark of belongingness in the form of a pin, and, most importantly, membership in and the backing of an organization that sought to take in

only those whom its members considered the highest representatives of ideal and noble womanhood.⁵

Founded in 1870 as one of the first Greek-letter fraternities for women, Kappa Alpha Theta postdated several all-male organizations by nearly a century. The first fraternity in the United States, Phi Beta Kappa began in 1776 at William and Mary College in Virginia, when five students came together to form a social club based on the principles of friendship, morality, and learning.⁶ Boasting a secret password, an insignia, a handshake, and an initiation ritual, Phi Beta Kappa contained at its inception all of the characteristics that would later come to define collegiate fraternities. In the early 1800s, the Phi Beta Kappa members decided to establish branches of their organization at Yale, Harvard, and Dartmouth Colleges. While this expansion coincided with Phi Beta Kappa's transformation from a secret and social society into an open and honorary one, it also marked the first wave of development of Greek-letter fraternities on American college campuses, constituting the first time a private society had established a branch on more than one college campus.⁷ In 1813, a group of male students at Union College in New York petitioned for the right to join Phi Beta Kappa. When the fraternity denied the request, the Union men created a new society, Kappa Alpha. Within eight years, students at nearby schools established four other Greek-letter organizations, each based on principles similar to Phi Beta Kappa's friendship, morality, and learning.

According to historian John Robson, fraternities found their basis in the Greek tradition of wisdom and human struggle for intellectual, physical, and spiritual betterment.⁸ Phi Beta Kappa took as its motto the Greek translation of the statement, "Love of wisdom the guide of life," and subsequent fraternities followed suit by adopting Greek statements of inspiration and uplift as their organizations' mottoes.⁹ Fearing repression from faculty members—who, despite the high-minded principles espoused by the fraternity men, still distrusted the actions and motives of their students—the early Greek members bound themselves to secrecy.¹⁰ Thus founded along secret lines, the fraternities elected to keep their activities secretive as well, arguing that the true meaning of fraternal bonds would increase in weight and importance if kept for members only. As these organizations expanded to other college campuses and students of different schools founded their own clubs and societies, Greek-letter fraternities became major forces in the social and extracurricular lives of stu-

dents.¹¹ By 1870, forty-eight fraternities for collegiate males existed, the bulk of them having branches, or “chapters,” on multiple college campuses across the United States.¹²

Despite the proliferation of such societies for men, few clubs for women existed on college campuses in the mid-nineteenth century, a reflection in part of the fact that few women attended college at this time. In 1870, when Kappa Alpha Theta was founded, only 11,000 women were enrolled in institutions of higher education across the United States, a number that paled in comparison to the more than 52,000 men who filled the classrooms of the nation’s colleges and universities. Fewer than one-third of American schools allowed women to enroll, and those that did treated their female students very much as second-class citizens. Often ignored in the classroom and ridiculed outside of it, the “pioneering” women who went to college in the early years of coeducation faced fierce opposition from students, faculty, and townspeople, many of whom argued that higher education would “unsex” women and thus upset the “natural” order of society.¹³

Bent on making a place for themselves both academically and socially on campuses hostile to their presence and believing that collective rather than individual action would help them achieve that goal, several of the early female collegians came together in small groups, as had their male predecessors at William and Mary and other colleges years before, and formed organizations of support and friendship to help them navigate collectively the perils of coeducational college life. They conceived of their groups as support networks to help “worthy female students” combat male opposition to their presence on campus. The founders of Kappa Alpha Theta and their fellow female Greek-letter organizations based their societies on ritualized vows of loyalty and used the familial language of “sisterhood” to reflect the potency of their commitments to one another.¹⁴ Using the male Greek societies and social clubs as models, the fraternity women of the 1870s and 1880s crafted elaborate rites and rituals, in which they affirmed and reaffirmed their pledges to support and aid one another.¹⁵ Copying the secrecy of the male clubs, the fraternity women preserved their constitutions, by-laws, rituals, and activities for insiders only, but demonstrated publicly membership in their organizations by sporting large badges affixed to their clothing.¹⁶

From the start, the sisters of Kappa Alpha Theta considered themselves, in their own words, “bound” together by a “mighty vow,” each

one of them serving as one “link” in a “mystic chain of sisterhood.”¹⁷ In this belief, they were joined by the members of the other women’s fraternities, who also saw themselves as integrally connected to the other members of their organizations. With the strength and worth of the entire chain dependent upon the quality of each individual link, the fraternity women regarded themselves as implicated in, and responsible for, each others’ performances and behavior, whether in the classroom, the drawing room, the stage or playing field, or in the paid and unpaid workforce. How did these bonds of sisterhood manifest themselves in the lives of the women who shared them? What meanings did the early fraternity sisters assign to their vows, and how did later members use these concepts in their own interpretations of the content, depth, and meaning of their fraternal bonds? In what ways did the vows of sisterhood shared by the women of Kappa Alpha Theta and other women’s fraternities shape their collegiate and postcollegiate experiences and, as a result, their identities—as individuals, as members of the middle and upper-middle classes, and as Thetas, Kappas, or Alpha Phis? How, in turn, did the sisters, as “culture-bound” individuals and as members of particular geographic, religious, racial, class, and generational groups, shape and influence the mission and aims of their particular fraternities? This study will address these questions by examining female fraternity life between 1870 and 1920, especially the criteria for and methods of selecting new members; their educational programs for training sisters; fraternities’ policies and procedures; and the requirements asked of, as well as rewards granted to, Greek-letter society members.

In addition, this study will also focus on the sometimes-stormy relationship between the early fraternity sisters, the pioneers of women’s education, and their second-generation successors.¹⁸ Unlike other female networks such as literary clubs, political committees, and reform-centered groups, women’s fraternities recruited their members in their adolescence and maintained ties with them throughout their lives. These organizations thus encompassed at any given time a complex mix of members who represented diverse worldviews and who therefore held differing notions regarding women’s higher education, what constituted “woman’s sphere,” and which kinds of women were worthy enough for fraternity membership.

The first generation of Thetas, Kappas, and Alpha Phis developed their fraternities in direct response to largely male challenges to coeducation and regarded themselves as representatives of womanhood, their ability

to succeed on campus a reflection upon their sex as much as upon themselves. Later sisters, their place on campus more assured and competition for “desirable” members stiffer due to the development of rival fraternities, concentrated their efforts on setting themselves apart from and above their female peers, their actions aimed at making their own particular organizations the most prestigious group of collegiate women, their identities shaped more by their specific fraternity membership than by their femaleness.¹⁹ The national scope of organizations like Kappa Alpha Theta and their broad-reaching membership, encompassing different generations as well as social, cultural, and geographic groups, complicated attempts to craft clearly defined aims and values for the fraternities upon which all members could agree. In Kappa Alpha Theta’s case, especially as it expanded into a national entity, the fraternity’s social as well as geographic base in the small towns of the heartland led to real friction between the Midwesterners and their sisters who came from the more cosmopolitan East or the more sparsely populated West. Differences in approach to issues of class, ethnicity, and religion posed challenges to the fraternity, as members from diverse areas of the country and backgrounds reacted to changes in the campus and societal populations of the early twentieth century with different mindsets and differing concerns.

This inquiry into the past of women’s fraternity life in general and Kappa Alpha Theta Fraternity in particular thus offers an examination of an intergenerational, interregional, and intercultural social world. It serves both as an overview of the early history of the women’s collegiate Greek system and as a case study of Kappa Alpha Theta. Beginning with the founding of women’s fraternities in 1870, the book concludes in 1920, with the departure from campus of the second generation of female collegians. The year 1920 serves as a logical conclusion to this study because it marks the closure of the developmental era of women’s fraternities and represents the point at which the women’s Greek system essentially reached maturity.²⁰ Whereas the organizations spent the first fifty years struggling to define and redefine their purposes and missions in response to the differing and changing needs of their members, by 1920 they had jelled into the bodies that they would remain, with only small variation, for decades to come. By this point, too, they had established their positions among the campus and societal elite. This book thus examines the formation and solidification on campus and in American society of women’s fraternities. It offers a close look at the mechanisms of development of one of the oldest, largest, and most powerful female

networks in America during a fifty-year time period when few other such collectives existed.²¹

In 1870, when the sisters of Kappa Alpha Theta founded their fraternity, they represented four of only a handful of collegiate females to belong to a private society. By 1920, nearly 77,800 other women had joined them in the collegiate Greek system. More than twenty other national fraternities for college women populated the nation's college campuses, and the majority of these organizations boasted between twenty and sixty chapters.²² Between 1870 and 1920, roughly 30 percent of the female student population belonged to a Greek-letter society. On more than a few campuses, the proportion of affiliated women topped 50 percent, and the prominent role the women's fraternity and sorority members played on campus exceeded in feel what their actual number might suggest.²³

Despite the popularity of these organizations among the early generations of female collegians, however, historians of women's education have largely ignored Greek-letter societies in their examinations of American college life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of the most widely acclaimed and, in other respects, most thorough studies of the early years of women's higher education, few have granted women's fraternities or sororities more than passing notice. Even more striking, those scholars who have addressed them have seemed to focus mainly on issues of exclusion—who was *not* taken as a member—rather than exploring who *was* included and what these women may have sought and gotten from their Greek-letter affiliations.

Barbara Solomon's pioneering history of women's higher education, for example, touched only briefly on female fraternities, noting that they brought "mixed results" to campus. While conceding that these organizations served as "institutional support group[s] for young women," Solomon spent little time exploring this function and quickly moved away from the experiences of those inside the Greek system to focus on those excluded from its circle.²⁴ In a similar manner, historian Lynn Gordon, in an otherwise illuminating and detailed account of women's collegiate experiences between 1870 and 1920, offered little discussion of the women's Greek system, noting mainly that on certain campuses, the appearance of women's fraternities in the 1890s "exacerbated social class distinctions by shutting out those whose social status or ethnicity did not qualify them for membership."²⁵ Likewise, in *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, a

rich depiction of student life across the centuries, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz adopted a rather vague yet biting tone when addressing the history of women's fraternities and sororities. Referring to Greek-letter organizations as "discriminatory [and] intent on retaining archaic social distinctions that warp the personal and intellectual growth of [their] members," Horowitz neither offered a discussion of the missions of the women's societies, nor did she examine in any real sense who belonged to them, other than to assume, not entirely accurately, that "affluence" and "elitism" served as the historical bases of their founding. Asserting that affiliated women "gained a moment of glory when their beauty or popularity singled them out for social honors," Horowitz essentially dismissed the women's Greek system, choosing to minimize the important role that these organizations played in the history of women's education and in the development of women's networks.²⁶

Of the most prominent historians of women's higher education, only one has taken the role of the women's Greek system seriously: Paula Giddings, who traced the development of historically black Delta Sigma Theta Sorority's development from its founding in 1913 through the mid-1980s. A study that located the basis for Delta Sigma Theta's formation specifically in racially grounded debates over African American women's roles on college campuses and within the black American community, Giddings's *In Search of Sisterhood: Delta Sigma Theta and the Challenge of the Black Sorority Movement* explored the ways that a female Greek society helped its members build community both among themselves and with those around them. While her concern rested mainly with the mechanisms of the African American sorority movement—a very different entity than the historically white Greek system—Giddings's book provides an example of how a historian might tackle the complex and sometimes contradictory aspects of a secret, selective organization.²⁷ Despite her model, no historian of women's education has yet undertaken a similar study of a historically white Greek society, and thus the history of this movement remains very much unknown.²⁸

One underlying cause of this silence may be that many of the scholars who pioneered the history of women's higher education potentially had certain social and political objectives for their studies; they may have feared dilution by paying attention to what some consider "frivolous" organizations. Like scholars who focus on other previously marginalized groups, women's historians at times have seemed to shy away from exploring "conventional" or "conservative" topics, preferring instead to

focus their attention on those in the past who pushed against gender barriers, such as organized female workers or medical students, or those who adopted explicitly activist or what came to be known as feminist stances, such as the suffragists and the proponents of women's health and safety. To many, fraternities and sororities simply smack of elitism. Therefore, it seems likely that certain scholars have declined to explore this history because they could not identify with, and therefore did not really consider, the experiences of those who joined elite (and, to many, elitist) white, middle- and upper-middle-class organizations.²⁹

But this is not reason enough for us to rest with glossed accounts of the history of the women's collegiate Greek system. Between the 1870s, when women's fraternities first formed, through the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, nearly 80,000 women pledged themselves to a Greek-letter organization. Given the high number of women who chose fraternity membership, it is crucial for historians to ask themselves what meanings these organizations held for those who belonged to them. It is important for scholars to look for more multidimensional ways of examining the female Greek system, rather than focusing simply on the question of exclusion.

The present study is an attempt to address this need. It represents a quest to understand why, in the first fifty years of coeducation, more than a third of American female college students pledged themselves to a Greek-letter organization and what role these organizations played in shaping the collegiate and postcollegiate experiences of so many thousands of women. It seeks to nestle women's fraternity life within the cultural worlds of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century coeducational college life and within white, middle- and upper-middle-class society, to read the concerns and actions of their members within the contexts of their environs.³⁰ Looking deeply rather than broadly, it seeks to understand fraternity culture, in particular that of Kappa Alpha Theta Fraternity, not just from the perspective of an outside critic, but also as an insider might, by making sense of the internal mechanisms, concerns, and values that drove its membership.

A major impediment to scholarly understanding of women's fraternities lies, of course, in the secrecy with which these organizations did and do shroud themselves. Secret societies have remained secretive for so long in large measure because they have limited outsiders from knowing much of their business. Most fraternities and sororities have kept close guard on their records and have preserved their documents for the eyes of mem-

bers only. Knowing this, when I began this study in the spring of 1995, I was fully aware that it would be very difficult to research the history of organizations defined in many ways by their secrecy.³¹ I thus approached this project with caution as well as with an underlying fear that I, as a non-Greek, might be unable to gain access to enough material to support a project of this size.

My first visit to Kappa Alpha Theta's headquarters in Indianapolis only compounded my concern. Fraternity archivist Mary Edith Arnold, while excited about my project, appeared tentative about sharing private fraternity documents. Understandably, she remained somewhat suspicious of what an outsider's motives might be in wanting to study her fraternity: Why did I want to know about Kappa Alpha Theta? And what was I going to do when and if I found "bad things" about the fraternity? Was I going to focus only on what I might consider negative events of the past, such as accounts of anti-Semitism or elitism within the fraternity, or was I going to approach my study in a balanced way, evaluating both the "bad" and the "good" as I saw fit?

As she and I came to know each other over hours of discussing women's education and the fraternity's role in its development, Mary Edith Arnold soon came to recognize that I was not interested in ferreting out only the "negative" aspects of the fraternity's history. I was and remain dedicated to performing as fair and accurate a study of early fraternity life as possible. In order to do so, I needed access to all of Kappa Alpha Theta's historical documents, including those that were written for private consumption and those whose authors assumed would never be seen by a nonmember. I needed to know both what the fraternity wanted known about its past as well as what it might, in the context of the late 1990s and early 2000s, consider its "skeletons in the closet." Convinced of my need for access and trusting that I would aim for accuracy and balance and would shy away from sensationalism, Arnold convinced the other members of the Kappa Alpha Theta leadership to open the archives to me. Complete entrée soon followed, as did official support and encouragement from the fraternity's officers, especially as they came to see the benefits that might result from broader understanding of their organization's past among the nonfraternity public. While at times certain leaders have questioned me about particular findings, at no point has anyone within Kappa Alpha Theta or any other of the women's fraternities attempted to shape or in any way alter the history I have written.

My findings are thus based on close analysis of nearly all of the documents pertaining to Kappa Alpha Theta's early history housed in the fraternity archives and in other collections. I have examined all the existing minutes of the Alpha (Asbury College, later DePauw University), Beta (Indiana University), Epsilon (College of Wooster), Delta (University of Illinois), Sigma (University of Toronto), Tau (Northwestern University), and Alpha Beta (Swarthmore College) collegiate chapters as well as occasional entries recorded in other collegiate and alumnae chapters' minutes; all official reports sent by the individual chapters to the Grand Council of the fraternity as well as those sent by the Grand Council to the chapters and to alumnae; Kappa Alpha Theta's bimonthly newsletters; all issues of the fraternity quarterly, the *Kappa Alpha Theta*; private and fraternity correspondence; and assorted reminiscences, private journals, and oral histories written by Thetas during or concerning the period in question.³² In addition, I have looked closely at documents related to the founding and development of the National Panhellenic Congress (NPC), the umbrella organization for the women's fraternities to which Theta did and does belong, as well as at a broad range of materials pertaining to Kappa Kappa Gamma, Alpha Phi, Sigma Kappa, Pi Beta Phi, Kappa Delta, and assorted other Greek-letter societies, to gain an understanding of the typicality of the Theta sisters' experiences. Finally, I have drawn from numerous campuses' yearbooks, catalogs, scrapbooks, and other archival collections to gain as complete a picture as possible of female fraternity life and to situate my findings within the larger context of women's higher education.

Throughout this study, I have sought to respect the boundaries of secrecy in Kappa Alpha Theta and its fellow Greek-letter organizations. Thus, I do not dwell in any length on the central tenets of initiations, passwords, or Greek mottoes. In my analysis of what sisterhood meant to the early generations of fraternity women, what is important is the meanings that members attached to their rites and rituals and not the specific contents of these particular practices.

I am well aware that the topic of Greek-letter societies is a highly charged one, and some readers may be inclined to read this study through the lens of their own position vis-à-vis fraternities. Certainly, since the nineteenth century, women's fraternities have been the focus of much popular (if not scholarly) attention, both positive and negative. In ways that I will explore, these organizations played both supportive and constraining roles for their members. While helping women succeed in class-

room environments previously closed to them and easing their paths in social settings and in securing paid and unpaid vocations, women's fraternities also presented very specific and somewhat narrow models of womanhood to which members had to subscribe to remain in good standing. It is my hope that this book will help facilitate scholarly understanding of the women's Greek system and that more open and substantive discussion will ensue about the relative merits of fraternity membership—both for women in the past and for women in the present.