

Historian's Remarks

[After President's sentence, "A brief historical statement with an explanation of the key, mottoes, and signs of the Society will now be given by the Historian of the Chapter."]

On December 5, 1776, a group of young men, students of the College of William and Mary in Virginia, meeting in the Apollo Room of the Raleigh Tavern, Williamsburg, formed the Phi Beta Kappa Society, which they dedicated to high purpose with eighteenth-century magniloquence. In the Phi Beta Kappa Handbook, one can find a brief account of the early days of the Society in Virginia, and of the fortunate establishment at Yale in 1780 and at Harvard in 1781 of New England branches which ensured the perpetuation and propagation of the Society when the parent chapter became inactive. During the following half century, four more chapters were founded: at Dartmouth in 1787, Union in 1817, Bowdoin in 1825 and Brown in 1830. Then after a pause of fifteen years a slightly more rapid expansion began in 1845. At the end of the next half century of growth twenty-five chapters had been founded. The need of a closer unity and greater uniformity of practices led, in 1883, to the organization of the national body, the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa. At present there are well over 200 chapters.

In 1875, the Society extended the privileges of membership to women. The first chapter established at a women's college was at Vassar in 1899. The Wells Chapter, Xi of New York, was established in 1932. Sixteen members of the faculty comprised the first chapter. Robert P. Tristram Coffin, the noted poet, was the first president. Distinguished alumnae members, that is, members who were students before the Chapter was formed, include Helen Porter Lowe, Evelyn Carroll Rusk, Kate Clugston and Ione Davis Jones.

The original organization at William and Mary was a secret society, and the oath transmitted to the first six Northern branches contained a promise to "preserve inviolate the secrets of the same." As a result of the anti-Masonic agitation of the 1830s, most of the branches followed the lead of the Alpha of Massachusetts and repealed the injunction

of secrecy. They retained, however, the medal of key with its symbolic engraving, and the interpretation of these symbols and other "signs" of the Society has continued to constitute a part of the Form of Initiation.

The present standard key, except for its smaller size and for the lower stem added by the branch at Yale, is substantially the same as the original medal of the Alpha of Virginia. On the obverse the medal bore the Greek letters ΦBK, the initials of the words "Philosophia Biou Kubernetes" -- "Love of wisdom, the helmsman of life." In the upper left corner three stars symbolized the aims of the Society: Friendship, Morality and Literature. A pointing hand in a lower corner symbolized aspiration. On the reverse the letters SP represented the second motto of the Society, "Societas Philosophiae." Below them was engraved the historic date December 5, 1776, and above them the name of the member was inscribed.

The signs of the Society which tradition has preserved are two. When members met, they greeted each other by drawing the backs of the index and middle fingers of the right hand across the lips from left to right; thus, apparently, affirming that their lips were sealed. They followed this sign with a handshake, one of the traditional forms of which will be revealed to you at the end of this ceremony of initiation.