

## **The History of Women's Fraternal Organizations**

Harvard College, the first college founded in North America, was chartered in 1636; its primary mission was to educate male clergymen. It took more than 200 years for American women to make a foray into the world of higher education.

In 1870, less than one percent of all females aged 18 through 21 years were enrolled in higher education. Those who attended coeducational institutions sought support systems and friends with whom they could share their educational pursuits. Although most colleges had literary and debating societies that females could join, some women were seeking closer ties. The men's fraternity system had been established and chapters were located at many colleges. Therefore, there was a model upon which to create women's fraternities.

The women's fraternity movement began in the Midwest soon after the end of the Civil War. I.C. Sorosis, today known by its original Greek motto, Pi Beta Phi, was founded on April 28, 1867 at Monmouth College in Illinois. A second chapter was established at Iowa Wesleyan University in Mount Pleasant, Iowa in late 1868. Shortly thereafter, P.E.O., now a community philanthropic, educational organization, was founded as a collegiate society at Iowa Wesleyan University. In 1870, Kappa Alpha Theta came to life at Indiana Asbury University (now DePauw University) in Greencastle, Indiana. Later that year, Kappa Kappa Gamma began at Monmouth College.

Alpha Delta Pi and Phi Mu, both founded at Wesleyan Female College in Macon, Georgia, consider themselves the oldest secret sisterhoods. They began as rival literary societies in the 1850s and they did not take on Greek letter names or expand beyond the Wesleyan Female College campus until the early 1900s.

From 1867 through 1873, the women's fraternity system was, for the most part, centered in midwestern church-affiliated colleges. The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 encouraged the establishment of state institutions. Before the Civil War, the University of Iowa was the only state institution to admit women. After the war, women began to be admitted to state institutions. However, they were not always welcome on campus and the men sometimes showed disdain at their presence. Women's fraternities provided their members a safe haven, moral support and academic encouragement.

Until 1881, only four groups - Delta Gamma, Kappa Alpha Theta, Kappa Kappa Gamma, and Pi Beta Phi - formed chapters beyond the founding campus. In 1902, Alpha Phi, Delta Delta Delta, and Gamma Phi Beta joined these four fraternities and together they founded what is today known as the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC). There are now 26 member organizations in NPC.

The founders of Pi Beta Phi were serious minded women. The preamble of the I. C. Sorosis constitution reflected the founders' intention of finding fellowship among college women: "Whereas it was deemed necessary, in order to cultivate sincere friendship, establish the real object of life, and promote the happiness of humanity, we, the undersigned ladies of Monmouth College do ordain and establish the following constitution."

The founders of Pi Beta Phi took a keen interest in altruistic work. During the first winter of the fraternity's existence, members purchased coal and paid the rent for a poor man's family. The minutes from other early Pi Phi chapters note that members donated funds toward city relief and home relief committees, distributed money to the poor, and took part in sewing bees to provide clothing for underprivileged people.

One of the early Pi Beta Phi chapters took a keen interest in promoting literacy, a cause that would later become one of the fraternity's primary service philanthropies. At the August 7, 1885 meeting of the Chi Chapter of I.C. Sorosis at Nebraska Methodist College in York, Nebraska, the chapter discussed creating a circulating library. The members raised \$100 through an opera performance, cake sales and ice cream socials. Four months later, the library made its debut in a certain Dr. Hatfield's office. The library was open on Saturday afternoons and, for a yearly membership of \$1, books could be borrowed.

In the year before the Washington, D.C. Alumnae Club made its groundbreaking proposal to found a settlement school in Southern Appalachia, the minutes of the D.C. Alpha Chapter at George Washington University report that the chapter discussed charitable work at several meetings and "it was agreed to help a specific family of three orphan children." This included setting aside time to sew clothes for one of the little girls.

Emma Harper Turner was a woman ahead of her time. She started her fraternity life as a member of Kappa Kappa Gamma at Franklin College in Indiana. When the chapter's charter was revoked through a series of misunderstandings, she was granted an honorable dismissal from Kappa Kappa Gamma. She then established a chapter of Pi Beta Phi. As a recent college graduate, she served as Pi Beta Phi's Grand President while working full time for the federal government. After her tenure as Grand President, she established Pi Phi's Alumnae Association. At the 1910 Swarthmore, Pennsylvania convention, Turner, as a representative of the Washington, D.C. Alumnae Club, proposed the establishment of a settlement school for the mountain poor, in honor of the founders, to be dedicated on the fiftieth anniversary of the fraternity's founding. She researched the issue, invited a guest speaker to discuss the problem,

and lobbied for the project. Pi Beta Phi made Panhellenic history when it became the first women's fraternity to create its own philanthropic project.

Locating a site for the school became a top priority. Gatlinburg, Tennessee was chosen and news about the school was spread to the fraternity's chapters and alumnae clubs. They embraced the cause and took up fundraising in earnest. By March 1912, after the first request for funds, donations totaled \$2,775.63. Alumnae clubs sent money and household goods.

After the establishment of Pi Beta Phi's Settlement School, each chapter and alumnae club took up the continued challenge of supporting the school. Pi Beta Phi's efforts in Gatlinburg spurred fraternity women members to take on fraternity-wide altruistic efforts of their own. The establishment of the Settlement School gave Pi Beta Phi the honor of being a pioneer in philanthropic efforts among women's fraternal organizations.