Masons and Greeks: A Brief Lodge Address

Paul J. Rich, George Mason University

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Masons might well take a closer look at their cousins, the Greeks. All fraternities and sororities in the United States owe their origins, at least indirectly, to Freemasonry. This is because the very first fraternity, Phi Beta Kappa, was heavily influenced by the Craft: “A Masonic lodge had existed in Williamsburg as early as in the 1750s, and in 1773 it received a charter from the grand lodge in England…John Heath himself [the fifteen-year old founder of Phi Beta Kappa] was not a Mason while a student at William and Mary, but Thomas Smith belonged to the Williamsburg lodge before joining Heath as one of the five Phi Beta Kappa founders. Smith served as the first clerk of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and became its president on May 3, 1777. Nine other members of the society joined the Masonic lodge during the next year”.¹

It is curious that Phi Beta Kappa was forced to jettison rather than embellish its cryptic ritualistic traditions in the early 1800s at the same time that other Greek fraternities were being established with many of the same features.² The society’s members found themselves being lumped with the Freemasons and the Illuminati as evil-worshippers and infidels.³ Some chapters reacted by
closing down, but at Harvard the brethren coolly responded: “Animated by a consciousness of right, the noble mind rises superior to opposition. Should it be our fate then to be traduced, let us as individuals boldly profess our attachment to our society: — let us declare to teeth of clamor, that it is not only harmless, but virtuous in its objects, & useful in its effects: — that the circumstances of its origin here [whatever the circumstances of its origin at William and Mary!] indicated, not a design to sow infidelity with sedition, but a benevolent wish to enlarge the heart & improve the mind; & that our initials are only expressive of a submission to true wisdom from a love to true virtue. Should we meet the rude shock of persecution let us stand firm & undaunted, steady in our resolutions, & more energetic in our exertions.”

Phi Beta Kappa never acquired a complex honors system like that of Freemasonry, although such a suggestion was made on at least one occasion. A partisan of giving additional honors wrote, “Why do you suppose that there are 32nd degree Masons? Because the Masonic system is adapted to human nature. Then why not 64th degree Phi Beta Kappas? Why not a scheme of honors for intellectual attainments — so many points for a scholarly book, so many for a course of reading, a task of memory, the points to be awarded by democratically organized graduate chapters?”

That proposal came to naught, and there are no 64th degree Phi Betas. However, honor societies encouraging scholastic excellence patterned on Phi Beta Kappa multiplied. Tau Beta Pi for engineering started in 1885, and Sigma Xi for scientists began in 1886. Depending on whether one counts professional societies which admit students on the basis of interest rather magna grades along with the more academic honor societies, there were at least 100 by the time the tenth edition of Baird’s Manual of Greek College Fraternities appeared in 1923.
Today there is too little connection between Masonry and the world of fraternities and sororities. Like the Masons, the Greeks find that the profane world with its problems has intruded into the temple, even into the Phi Beta Kappa temple. And like the television comedian who drew laughs in implausible situations by complaining about not getting respect, the Greeks have suffered at the hands of the profane. In the early 1950s the Bates Shoe Company began advertising a line of Phi Bates, but the attorneys for Phi Beta Kappa advised against bringing suit. Upsetting as well were the Fybate Lecture Notes, a commercial venture of cram outlines that enabled students to pass exams without taking classes. Equally annoying was a line of Phi Beta panties and brassieres that was introduced in 1963. A letter of complaint from Phi Beta Kappa was dismissed with the company’s reply that “I am sure you will agree, however, that there was no trade mark infringement involved because of the dissimilarities of the goods and services involved.” Max Factor makeup followed with an eye makeup promoted as Eye Beta Kappa and Bloomingdale’s opened boutiques in its stores under the name of Phi Beta Caper.

When Capuchino High School in San Bruno, California, started an honor society named Phi Beta Cap, Phi Beta Kappa protests fell on deaf ears. The school’s attorneys replied that “In reviewing the law on this matter we have concluded that the letters Phi Beta, being of common usage, are not the sole property of any organization or fraternity...The question then resolves as to whether the terms ‘Cap’ and ‘Kappa’ are the same or similar enough to be misleading. In our humble opinion, they are not.” So Capuchino High School students still join Phi Beta Cap. Is there honor among honor societies? At any rate, perhaps since we have similar problems with public image and media folklore, we ought to talk more with each other.
While the frat house on the local campus or the graduation ceremony awarding Phi Beta Kappa keys are far removed from Freemasons meeting in Virginia taverns in the eighteenth century, they nevertheless are descendants of those brothers, and we strongly suspect that on at least some occasions the conviviality if not the ritual might recall those distant forbearers.

NOTES


2. “Phi Beta Kappa. The members of this institution have recently removed the injunction of secrecy imposed by its obligations, and have left the world to form a just notion of its moral and social principles. This event has doubtless been hasted by the development of its mysteries published in the first edition of this Ritual. This act of the
Phibetian society shows the good sense of its members; and also that its purposes were not political. Had politics, as in Masonry, been its main object, it would have held on with tenacity to its principles, as to the threads of life, and, disregarding its departure from sound morals, or patriotism, would still have contended, with the infatuation of a Mormonite, for the enjoyment, in secret, of that which in the eye of the public would overwhelm its members in confusions.” “A Traveller in the United States”, A Ritual and Illustrations of Free-Masonry and the Orange and Odd Fellows' Societies, Accompanied by Numerous Engravings, and a Key to the Phi Beta Kappa, S.Thorne, Devon (Shebbear, near Hatherleigh, England), 1835, 251.

3. “Of all the zealots, none aroused hotter indignation among Federalists than did the president of Yale College, Timothy Dwight. In his baccalaureate address of September 9, 1797...Dwight thought the peril imminent. He could cite as an incontrovertible authority the just-published book by the University of Edinburgh’s Professor John Robison, Proofs of a Conspiracy against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, illuminati, and Reading Societies....Good Federalists among the Phi Beta Kappa members, listening to Dwight’s harangues or reading them in pamphlet form, could hardly avoid twinges of concern and even of guilt. Plainly a secret society could be a devilish thing, and they belonged to a secret society, which had originated in Virginia at the College of William and Mary — the state and the college of the Jacobinical Jefferson himself. And the society’s very name stood for ‘philosophy the guide of life,’ which was precisely the satanic error that Dwight warned against. Perhaps God-fearing, right-thinking members of the thing ought to terminate it before it developed its potential for mischief.” Current, 32-33.


6. The “higher doctorates” would seem an example of how what appears to be a terminal distinction such as the Ph.D. can be trumped. Americans are unfamiliar with these degrees, given in countries with a British heritage. They are awarded some years after the Ph.D., after submission of books or other accomplishments. In the United States, an LL.D. is generally an honorary degree — but at the University of Western Australia, where Rich gained his Ph.D., it is one of the higher doctorates, a sort of academic equivalent of the Masonic 33rd degree.

7. American honorary fraternities were slow to expand overseas. In 1907 Americans at Oxford petitioned for a Phi Beta Kappa chapter, but the Senate and Council of Phi Beta Kappa never authorized one. Current, 109.