

# The History of Sigma Phi Epsilon

## The First 50 Years

### The Place of Our Origin

Richmond College in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century was attended by less than 300 students. Almost half this number belonged to five fraternities previously chartered on the campus. The little Baptist college, founded in 1830, became home to Sigma Phi Epsilon.



Sigma Phi Epsilon was founded because 12 young collegians hungered for a campus fellowship based on Judeo/Christian ideals that neither the college community nor the fraternity system at that time could offer. The desire for brotherhood was in the young men's souls. Sigma Phi Epsilon was needed.

### Sigma Phi Epsilon Founded

Carter Ashton Jenkins, the 18-year-old son of a minister, had been a student at Rutgers University, New Jersey, where he joined Chi Phi Fraternity. When he transferred to Richmond College in the Fall of 1900, he sought companions to take the place of the Chi Phi brothers he had left behind. He found five men who had already been drawn into a bond of friendship and urged them to join him in applying for a charter of Chi Phi at Richmond College. The request for a charter was forwarded to Chi Phi only to meet with refusal. Chi Phi felt that Richmond College was too small for the establishment of a Chi Phi chapter.

Wanting to maintain their fellowship, Carter Ashton Jenkins, Benjamin Gaw, William Carter, William Wallace, Thomas Wright, and William Phillips decided to form their own local fraternity.

### The First Meeting

The six original members found six others also searching for a campus fellowship neither the college campus nor the existing fraternity system could offer. The six new members were Lucian Cox, Richard Owens, Edgar Allen, Robert McFarland, Franklin Kerfoot, and Thomas McCaul.

The 12 met in October, 1901, in Gaw and Wallace's room on the third floor of Ryland Hall. They discussed the organization of a fraternity they would call "Sigma Phi." The exact date of this meeting is not known. However, the meeting was probably held before the middle of the month, because the 12 Founders are named as members on November 1, 1901, in the first printed roster of the Fraternity. Jenkins is listed as the first member.

### Fraternity Recognized

A committee of Jenkins, Gaw, and Phillips was appointed to discuss plans for recognition with the faculty at the college. These men met with a faculty committee,

where they were requested to present their case. The faculty committee requested that the new group explain:

- The need for a new fraternity since chapters of five national fraternities were on the campus and the enrollment at Richmond College was less than 300.
- The wisdom of this attempt to organize a new fraternity, with 12 members, seven of whom were seniors.
- The right to name the new fraternity Sigma Phi, the name of an already established national fraternity.

Jenkins, Gaw, and Phillips answered:

***"This fraternity will be different, it will be based on the love of God and the principle of peace through brotherhood. The number of members will be increased from the undergraduate classes. We will change the name to Sigma Phi Epsilon."***

Though the discussion lasted some time, permission was granted for the organization of the new fraternity to proceed.

Immediately at the close of the meeting with the faculty committee, the fraternity committee rushed to Jenkins' room to borrow Hugh Carter's Greek-English Lexicon. They convinced themselves that Epsilon had a desirable meaning, and then telegraphed jeweler Eaton in Goldsboro, North Carolina, to add an E at the point of each of the 12 badges. Eight other students were invited to join SigEp. The purchase order was then increased to 20 badges at \$8 each, with the initials of each man engraved on the back of his badge.

These 20 heart-shaped badges were of yellow gold, with alternating rubies and garnets around the edge of the heart, with the Greek characters  $\Sigma\phi$  and the skull and crossbones in gold and black enamel in the center and a black  $\text{E}$  in gold at the point. (William Hugh Carter's and Thomas V. "Uncle Tom" McCaul's original badges are on display at Zollinger House.)

Founder Lucian Cox reflected on the "brotherhood that had inspired him and his brothers" when he wrote in the Sigma Phi Epsilon Journal, Vol. 1 No. 1, March, 1904:

"As a member of an ideal fraternity, the resources of every member of that body are my resources, the product of their lives is my daily life. The fraternity is a common storehouse for experience, moral rectitude, and spirituality; the larger and purer the contribution of the individual, the greater the resources of each member."

Five men were invited to join before Christmas and became members in January, 1902. Three more of the first group of 21 joined February 1, 1902.

## **Meeting in the Tower Room**

In November or December, 1901, an unheated, unfurnished single room in the tower of Ryland Hall was assigned to the new fraternity by the college. Before January 1, 1902, SigEps had lined all open wall space with wide board benches. The wall was

papered—purple and red. A rostrum, shaped like a horseshoe, was built in a corner. A small oil stove would not heat the room, so secret meetings continued to be held in SigEp dormitory rooms until March, 1902.

## **Virginia Alpha's Second Year**

Of the remaining eight who did return to Richmond College the next session, only two were founders—Gaw and Wright. College records show that of the eight who did return, four were sophomores, three juniors, and one senior.

After recruiting many students, only one new man joined in the fall, and one more in the spring. The small college enrollment in the session of 1902-1903 and increasing competition for new members from the chapters of five national fraternities on the campus made the members of Sigma Phi Epsilon realize the crucial position of their local fraternity.

After discussing the situation at several meetings, a momentous decision was reached. Sigma Phi Epsilon must either convert the local fraternity into a national one or watch the local fraternity die. The secretary was instructed to request Founder Lucian B. Cox, an attorney in Norfolk, Virginia, to write an application for a state charter for Sigma Phi Epsilon Fraternity and return it to him at the earliest possible moment.

This charter was signed by all eight SigEps enrolled at Richmond College on October 18, filed in the Circuit Court of Richmond City on October 20, and recorded by the Secretary of the Commonwealth of Virginia on October 22, 1902. (The original charter is on display at Sigma Phi Epsilon Headquarters.) Under that state charter, Virginia Alpha established chapters at five other colleges that session.

## **Sigma Phi Epsilon's Growth**

Sigma Phi Epsilon ended its fifth year of operation with 14 chapters in nine states. Nineteen chapters had been chartered, despite the little money the group had to work with. But the will of the members to develop and expand their Fraternity prevailed, and chapters spread west to Colorado, north to Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and New York, and south to North and South Carolina.

The next five years brought 17 new chapters and representation in a total of 18 states. In addition to those mentioned, Sigma Phi Epsilon chartered in Alabama, Arkansas, California, Delaware, Georgia, Kansas, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Vermont, and the District of Columbia. This momentum continued with the appointment of the first Grand Secretary of Sigma Phi Epsilon.

## Our First Grand Secretary



**"Uncle Billy"**

The fifth Grand Chapter Conclave, held in 1908, is particularly significant because it was at this Conclave that the laws were changed to provide for a central office and the employment of a full-time chief executive officer to bear the title of Grand Secretary. Founder William L. Phillips ("Uncle Billy") was employed as Grand Secretary and, according to the minutes, was to receive a salary of \$900 in the first year.

An article by Frank W. Shepardson, first published in the 1927 edition of Baird's Manual of American College Fraternities, refers to the "latest development in fraternity administration...the establishment of a central office (headquarters) with a full-time secretary in charge." It is apparent from this that the Grand Chapter of Sigma Phi Epsilon, in taking this step, was showing remarkable forethought as a pioneer in fraternity administration. SigEp was one of the first two fraternities to own a headquarters building.

In slightly less than 10 years, Sigma Phi Epsilon had grown from a single chapter to a fraternity with chapters in 21 states and the District of Columbia.



## War, Depression, and Recovery

World War I took its toll on college attendance and impacted fraternities, both in membership and expansion.

The *Journal* editor reported:

"Already men are leaving in large numbers, while a great many institutions... devote their athletic fields to drilling..."

Congress passed a draft bill with age limits from 21 to 30 years. The editor advised all chapters that, "While fulfilling every duty to our country, let us also strive to maintain every chapter."

The cover of the October, 1917, *Journal* featured two SigEps in army uniforms. Grand President Knauss wrote of his pride in the brothers' response to the call of duty. However, he warned:

"The ranks of active fraternity men have been depleted all over the country... these are trying times, and for some chapters, they will be crucial ones."

He also recommended that each chapter buy a Liberty Bond to help fund the war effort.

As an institution, Sigma Phi Epsilon survived World War I well. While three chapters were in danger of closing, only one—Rhode Island Alpha at Brown University—actually failed to survive the war.

Expansion during this period was slowed as the Great Depression descended upon the nation; only 15 new chapters had been installed by 1930.

In 1938, a major development took place—a merger between Sigma Phi Epsilon and the Theta Upsilon Omega national fraternity. Four chapters of **TYΩ** merged with four of SigEps existing chapters, and seven others became Sigma Phi Epsilon chapters. With the merger, scores of dedicated **TYΩ** alumni became members in the Fraternity, and many became important leaders in Sigma Phi Epsilon.

In 1940, there were 69 active chapters. The 1940s saw the Fraternity's expansion increase, with 27 new charters granted by 1949.