

THE CASE OF THE

GEORGIA PSI BOOK: A Sigma Alpha Epsilon Mystery



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It all started innocently enough. The e-mail read:

“My family has a book belonging to your organization, I believe it to be written in the 1860’s. The book has been in my family for a very long time. It is hand written and includes all the names of those who were members, along with the by-laws for Sigma Alpha Epsilon. All students listed were from Tennessee. Although a ΣAE member from Macon GA. Did sign the last page.”[sic]

These few simple lines were the start of a mystery that lead to what may be the best, and the most important, new source of early Sigma Alpha Epsilon history in recent memory.

Correspondence with the book's owner's son began to produce clues. The book contained the statement "We, the students of the College of William and Mary," but the book's owner had checked with school records, and none of the student names matched the college's student list. The book also indicated that it was an original copy written by Henry R. Goetchius (Georgia 1871) of Columbus, Georgia. The book contained several autographs as well: Four presidents of Georgia Psi at Mercer from 1876-1878 signed the book, along with chapter brothers Lovick R. Jeter (1875) and Methuen T. Freeman (1879). Freeman's signature indicated that he was a delegate to the Richmond Convention in 1877.

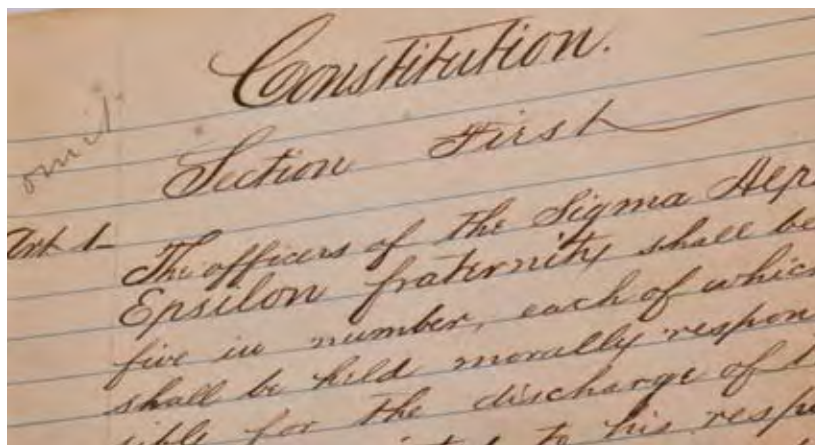
The mystery continued. What chapter had students almost exclusively from Tennessee? According to early Fraternity catalogues, the only one that met the criteria was Tennessee Lambda at Cumberland, during the period from 1867-1871. What could all of this mean? What did Virginia Kappa, Georgia Beta, Georgia Psi and Tennessee Lambda have to do with each other in a book that appeared to span two decades and a civil war? And how did this book happen to be in a family for at least four generations with no known Sigma Alpha Epsilon ancestors?

After some correspondence and discussion with the book's owner, Kathleen Vanscoy, and her son, Robert Sellers, the Sigma Alpha Epsilon Foundation was able to secure the book, on loan, for a year so that we may be able to study, photograph and exhibit it while learning from this valuable resource. The book, a small red ledger with numbered pages, arrived late in the afternoon of October 3, 2008, and brought with it even more questions.

The book is entirely handwritten and contains two versions of the constitution. The first is the earliest known constitution to date. It was copied from the original constitution of Virginia Kappa at William and Mary, which was open from 1858-1861. The document was by Hiram Cassey Jr. (Southern Mississippi 1868). It was later transcribed for Tennessee Lambda by Sidney Dell (Cumberland 1867), who was one of the founding members of the chapter. When transcribing the constitution, Dell kept the original reference to the College of William and Mary instead of substituting Cumberland University for the name of the school. The book also contains a list of chapter members, their hometowns, graduation years and majors, along with each man's *topos* on one of seven pre-designated topics that each member selected to research with the aim of a presentation to the general chapter. Written on the last few pages of the book are a set of by-laws that were adopted by the chapter on May 3, 1867. The second constitution was transcribed from, as the book states, an "original specimen copy transcribed by R. H. Goetchius, Columbus, GA August 1871 and transcribed for KEΦΨ [Georgia Psi] by W. [William] I. Smith, Macon GA September 1871."

Instead of providing answers, the book was deepening the mystery. How did Tennessee Lambda's constitution and by-laws come to be in the hands of Georgia Psi? Convention minutes and other records in the archives provide some clues. Tennessee Lambda was first founded in 1860, lay virtually dormant during the Civil War and was resurrected in 1865 after the war's end. The chapter surrendered its charter in 1871 due to low enrollment at the university. When Tennessee Lambda returned its charter, it is likely that it also sent the book to Georgia Beta, which was then the Grand Chapter. The Grand Chapter was elected at each convention to run the Fraternity before the establishment of the Supreme Council and national headquarters.

If the book was given to Georgia Beta, how did it pass to Georgia Psi? It is rather curious that this book, with such an outdated copy of the constitution, would go to live with Georgia Psi. The chapter had been around since the fall of 1870, well before Tennessee Lambda closed and Smith added his portion to the book. Significant changes had been made to the constitution at the 1869 and 1870 Conventions, and such an old copy would be rather useless in governing chapter affairs. Perhaps a member of



The painstakingly written book always seems to create new mysteries.

Members of Γ. A. E.		TOPICS		Year of Graduation	
Names	Residence				
W. S. Talapone	Brownsville, Tenn	E. a. Eloquence	June, 1868	Law	
Henry W. Conroy	Jackson, Tenn	E. a. Politics	June, 1867	"	
Wm. L. Luper	Jackson, Tenn	E. a. Literature	June, 1867	"	
Richard Courthorn	Jackson, Tenn	I. a. History	June, 1867	"	
James D. Pack	Franklin, Tenn	E. a. Politics	June, 1868	"	
Sidney Dell	Seneca Co., N. C.	I. a. History	June, 1867	"	
Wesley Hopkins	Nashville, Tenn	II. a. History	June, 1870	Literary	
Aphense C. Stewart	Lebanon, Tenn	II. a. History	June 1868	Law	
Jno. Edward Matthews	Murfreesboro Tenn	E. a. Literature	June 1868	Law	
Cyrillid. Galbreath	Georgetown, Tenn		Jan'y, 1869	Law	
Quaker G. Bond	Jackson Tenn	II. a. Literature	Jan 1870	L. D.	
Emmet D. Pullen	Jackson Tenn	Eloquence	Jan 1870	L. D.	
L. C. Talbot	Jackson Tenn	E. a. Politics	Jan. 1870	L. D.	
J. F. Wilson	Gallatin Tenn	Poetry	June 1869	L. D.	
W. D. Ambrange	Ripley, Miss	E. a. History	June 1869	L. D.	
C. H. Stephens	Jackson, Tenn	E. a. Literature	Jan'y, 1870	L. D.	
James Oldham	Ripley Tenn	E. a. Politics	June 1870	L. D.	
W. W. Trotter	Waverly, Miss	E. a. History	Jan'y, 1870	L. D.	
L. S. Woods	Lexington Tenn	E. a. History	Feb 21 1867	L. D.	

The book also serves as a ledger, where each man's name, hometown, major and graduation year was entered along with his selected topics.

Georgia Psi took a liking to the book and asked Georgia Beta if he could have it. Maybe Georgia Psi wanted to get a better understanding of Fraternity history. After all, a movement was afoot to recapture Sigma Alpha Epsilon's early history, one that was already starting to slip away. Unfortunately, we may never know for sure, as no correspondence of this transaction appears to exist.

Once Georgia Psi got the book, the brothers made it their own. The cover and inside leaf have glued-on cut-outs from the 1872 member catalogue. On the page following the table of contents, penned by Dell, is a brief table of contents for the Georgia Psi addition. A full table of contents begins on page 101, the page after Tennessee Lambda's membership list. Smith then listed Georgia Psi's

members and copied in the current constitution. Unfortunately for us, pages 102-107 which contained part of the table of contents and the membership list, were cut out and are no longer with the book. This was obviously a well-used book as shown by its condition, pencil corrections and revisions to the text. In addition, an inserted section was sewn onto one of the pages of the 1871 constitution.

The corrections and revisions seem to end after the 1875 Convention. The book may have attended the 1877 Convention as the convention delegate, Methuen T. Freeman, added his autograph and noted that he was a "Delegate to Richmond Convention." The convention made many changes to the constitution. It voted that all prior copies of the constitution

were void and directed the Grand Chapter with making copies of the convention minutes and revised constitution for all of the chapters. While previous conventions had passed similar resolutions, the changes approved during this convention apparently were too great to warrant an update to the book.

The book appears to have remained with Georgia Psi for at least another year, as the dated autographs go up to 1878. Just when and how the book fell out of circulation and made its way through several generations to the Vanscoy family is still a complete mystery. We will continue to work with Vanscoy to identify the common link, both to appease our curiosity and help to fill out her family tree. 🌟