

**Brothers before Enemies: Phi Kappa Sigma in the American
Civil War**

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Introduction

“College students,” wrote William Raimond Baird in 1879, “have always shown a more or less marked tendency to form themselves into societies.”¹ In 1964, Tom Charles Huston—the vice chairman of the conservative youth group Young Americans for Freedom—extended Baird’s assertion further: not only were fraternal organizations important components of collegiate life, but they were also “an integral part of the American dream. [They] stand as a bulwark in defense of what once were accepted as eternal verities: truth, honor, love, duty, country.”² Today, with fraternities still very much a staple of North American university life, these remarks still hold remarkable credence. Yet, current conventional wisdom no longer recognizes the “great importance”³ of fraternities understood in nineteenth-century America; in that, quite frankly, they are considered to be nothing more than a juvenile rendezvous for students to engage in irresponsible hazing rituals, excessive alcohol consumption, and the like. Although such a negative perception is not completely without merit, it does not give proper attention to the benefits of said organizations as elucidated above by Huston. This kind of unfavourable opinion, furthermore, may contribute to the overall lack of recent scholarship on this longstanding and storied American tradition. Indeed, it appears the breadth of such scholarly study reached its apogee in the early twentieth century.

With the next five years marking the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, the role of college fraternities during this critical conflict in the United States’ history has also remained an under-researched subject area. Since the war disrupted American society in many

¹ William Baird, *American College Fraternities: A Descriptive Analysis of the Society System in the Colleges of the United States with a detailed account of each Fraternity* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1879), 9. Baird—a member of the fraternities Alpha Sigma Chi and later Beta Theta Pi—can be considered the first true archivist of American fraternities as this manual was the first that chronicled the histories of each fraternity.

² Quoted in Nicholas L. Syrett, *The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 238.

³ Baird, *op. cit.*

key respects, it is commonly assumed that fraternities suffered a similar fate. Even Baird, after asserting in a later passage that “The civil war put an end to college enterprise everywhere [and] when peace was declared, fresh activity was observed among the ranks of college men,” goes on to list the fraternities that revived after the war.⁴ Thereby implying, as the historian Craig L. Torbensen notes, “[that] students left college to fight in the war [and] fraternity membership naturally declined as college enrollment declined.”⁵ Such statements simply reinforce the notion that, during the Civil War, the vitality of fraternities depended on the stability of universities. However, when one joins a fraternity, he does not simply become a member, he becomes a *Brother*. The true strength of a fraternity derives not from the amount of its members, but from the strength of the relationships *between* each member. Put differently, if certain values are cherished and upheld, a fraternity does not necessarily need to be affiliated with a college campus for validation, preservation, or even legitimacy—it can achieve such in a myriad of other ways.

The Phi Kappa Sigma (ΦΚΣ) fraternity’s experience during the Civil War, moreover, is an excellent case in point. With chapters in schools located in both the North and South United States, ΦΚΣ was particularly vulnerable both at the outbreak of the war—with the issues of slavery and secession often dominating chapter correspondences regarding ΦΚΣ expansion—and after: all eight of its Southern chapters ceased to exist by the conflict’s end in 1865.⁶ In his manual, Baird noted that this fraternity, compared with others, had been “peculiarly unfortunate” as a result.⁷ Yet, in spite of these hardships, the fraternity not only managed to survive the war, but in many ways succeeded; insofar as the actions of certain Brothers towards one another,

⁴ Baird, *American College Fraternities*, 18.

⁵ Craig L. Torbensen, “From the Beginning: A History of College Fraternities and Sororities,” in *Brothers and Sisters: Diversity in College Fraternities and Sororities*, ed. Craig LaRon Torbenson and Gregory Parks (Cranbury, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 30.

⁶ Baird, *op. cit.*, 98

⁷ *Ibid.*

albeit on opposing sides, served to reinforce the strength of the ΦΚΣ Brotherhood. The Civil War, then, did not sound the proverbial death-knell for fraternal organizations. It did, of course, cause devastating setbacks, but as this paper will attempt to illustrate, the actions of ΦΚΣ, at least, challenge the prevailing convention wisdom that fraternities stood idly as war engulfed the nation and shattered fraternal bonds. Remarkably, they most certainly did not—the benevolence of Brotherhood was able to transcend the catastrophe of conflict.

From Discord to Accord: Phi Kappa Sigma in the Antebellum Era

Prior to the Civil War, it is crucial to note, any semblance of the fraternal accord that was to occur during the upcoming conflict was not readily apparent: ΦΚΣ was deeply influenced by the sharpening divide between the North and the South, specifically over the issues of slavery and secession. In effect, this meant that the fraternity's prewar experience, for a while at least, acted as a microcosm of the United States itself. Southern chapters, like the southern states, were at odds with their Northern brethren over the direction that should be uniformly pursued amidst this crisis. For instance, much like concerns over the status of slavery in the admittance of new states into the Union—as in Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska for example—ΦΚΣ shared similar concerns in principle albeit to a much smaller degree: whether new chapters should develop in the North, and as such have no colour barrier, or be racially exclusive.⁸

A veritable example of this debate can be seen in discussions regarding the development of a chapter at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts in 1856. Stephen A. Tyng, a Phi Kap transferring from Columbia College in New York, spearheaded the initiative on April 4 and received favourable feedback from Alpha Chapter at the University of Pennsylvania to

⁸ Thomas Goodrich, *War to the Knife: Bleeding Kansas, 1854-1861* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 5.

pursue said expansion.⁹ Unanimous consent from all ΦΚΣ chapters was necessary, and on April 22, Robert H. McGrath, the Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, sought such concurrence in a letter, albeit with traces of pessimism: “I sincerely hope your chapter will not blackball this Williams Chapter. It is one of the first colleges in the North and will be of great importance to us.”¹⁰ Undoubtedly, McGrath harboured some doubts at attaining unanimity amidst a period of increasingly intense political strife, and his worries, as it would turn out, had merit as the proposal met stiff resistance shortly thereafter. Eta Chapter at the University of Virginia, in particular, attributed their opposition to a constitutional technicality. The Massachusetts Constitution, unlike the US Constitution, banned slavery in its territory, with the ΦΚΣ Constitution explicitly affirming its adherence to the latter. As John A. Poisal, a member of Eta, asserted, “we deem that men of Massachusetts could not support their own Constitution and the Constitution of the United States at one and the same time.”¹¹ This was not so much because of any proslavery sentiments since “many [of our] Brothers...think slavery [is] wrong,” but more to respect the authority of the US Constitution, regardless of its stance on this controversial issue.¹²

The debates regarding states’ rights and slavery clearly had marked influence on ΦΚΣ and threatened to cause further discord in inter-chapter relations. To the fraternity’s founder Samuel Brown Wylie Mitchell, this was appalling, and his resolution at a September 16, 1856 meeting at Alpha Chapter reinforce such concerns: “Resolved, That in order to promote the

⁹ The term ‘Phi Kap’ is another name to refer to a member of the fraternity. Also, discussions regarding expansion always involved the Alpha Chapter (the first ΦΚΣ chapter) in the process of moving forward. The first letter from Tyng to the fraternity regarding expansion to Williams was dated April 4. (Stephen S. Tyng, to Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, 4 April 1856, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma and Secession,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania).

¹⁰ The Upsilon was in charge of inter-fraternal relations, so obviously McGrath was in charge of distributing Tyng’s proposal to the other ΦΚΣ chapters, which he did on April 22. (Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, to all Phi Kappa Sigma chapters, 22 April 1856, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma and Secession,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania).

¹¹ John A. Poisal, to Dr. Morris J. Asch, Alpha Chapter alumnus, 2 June 1856, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma and Secession,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania).

¹² Ibid.

peace, harmony, and union of the fraternity, the members of Alpha Chapter, as such, pledge themselves to abstain from all discussions having a religious or political tendency.”¹³ Although Mitchell’s 1856 resolution would later serve as an important precedent for the fraternity’s conduct during the Civil War, it invoked little inspiration amongst Southern brothers towards the latter part of the 1850s. Indeed, as one leader of the Delta Chapter at Washington-Jefferson College in Pennsylvania noticed by November 1860, “The action of the secessionists seems to affect our Southern correspondence.”¹⁴ McGrath, furthermore, was especially cognizant of the parallels between what he called “the political world” and the Northern and Southern chapters of the fraternity.¹⁵ The number of correspondences from the Southern chapters had decreased substantially as political tensions between the North and South escalated, and he somberly warned that “when enmity or disunion shall reach our Fraternity then indeed the spirit of Phi Kappa Sigma will be gone, and we were better we had never been.”¹⁶

This political turmoil, furthermore, also made race an issue in the fraternity. This repercussion manifested most notably, and most regrettably, in mid-December 1860 when the Theta Chapter at Louisiana Centenary College proposed an amendment to the fraternity’s constitution that they hoped might alleviate the increasing fraternal discord. Of all the resolutions, clearly the most disconcerting was that which called for the fraternity to be “for white men and white men only.”¹⁷ In essence, the proposal called for the Brotherhood to

¹³ Phi Kappa Sigma Alpha Chapter, Minutes of Chapter Meetings, Meeting of 16 September 1856.

¹⁴ John L. Stewart, Upsilon of Delta Chapter, to Morris J. Asch, Alpha Chapter, 15 November 1860, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma and Secession,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

¹⁵ Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, to Epsilon Chapter, 5 December 1861, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma and Secession,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Quoted in John L. Stuart, Upsilon of Delta Chapter, to Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, 19 December 1860, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma and Secession,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

degenerate into being ‘skin-deep’ only, as if one’s skin colour reflected their character or whether they could uphold and embody the values and ideals of the fraternity. The reaction to Theta’s resolutions was divided. In the North, the chapter at Washington-Jefferson College called the proposal “absurd and foolish to the highest degree”¹⁸ and McGrath, in a letter to the Epsilon Chapter at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, deplored the chapter’s lack of “fraternal spirit.”¹⁹ The ΦΚΣ chapter at the University of Mississippi, to boot, disapproved of the proposal and affirmed its support for Mitchell’s 1856 resolution that politics should not influence fraternal matters.²⁰

In correspondences from the Mu Chapter at the University of Louisiana, however, the division was palpable. On December 14, 1860, the chapter held a special meeting to discuss Theta’s resolution and by the 18th, a special committee of five Mu Brothers drafted an open letter to all Phi Kaps that affirmed the acute necessity to settle on the future course of ΦΚΣ. They proposed to do this at a National Convention to be held in New York City in late December 1860—a forum wherein all the chapters would send delegates to plot the fraternity’s next course of action. It denounced “an exhibition of indifference to the political tempest” and it hoped said forum would be “the most feasible and certain mode of strengthening and perpetuating our existence.”²¹ When the open letter was sent to the Alpha Chapter, though, the Upsilon of the chapter M.W. Chapman attached a personal letter to McGrath and stated the open letter “does not meet my views entirely and expresses the opinions of the most moderate men (who are a

¹⁸ John L. Stuart, Upsilon of Delta Chapter, to Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, 19 December 1860, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma and Secession,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

¹⁹ Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, to Epsilon Chapter, 19 December 1860, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma and Secession,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Mu Chapter Hall, University of Louisiana, to Members of the Phi Kappa Sigma Fraternity, 18 December 1860, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma and Secession,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

minority), of the Chapter.²² Chapman outlined an honest albeit revealing concern that many of his Brothers felt. It was sent out on December 20, the same day South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union, and due to its sober depiction of the southern position at this time of great ambivalence, it is quoted at length:

[The Letter] does not in my opinion, touch a question of vital importance to us as members of the Fraternity; a question which lies at the very heart of our existence: ‘Can I, as a Southern man, fraternize with a Black Republican[?]...Can you doubt that the answer of every loyal Southerner would be? Shall he strike hands in a fraternal grip with [someone] who, if the Constitution authorizes slavery; who, if the Bible authorizes slavery, will have neither Constitution nor Bible? Nay, who in the very depth of his horrible blasphemy, declares that ‘if God Himself authorizes slavery, will have no God? ...they have come to regard [blacks] as socially equal to their own and the intermarriage of the races follows by an easy gradation. We of the South hold slavery to be right, that it is the normal condition of the negro, that the institution was entrusted to us by Almighty God to conserve and hand down to the next generation, and by His blessing we mean to do it, come what may. The Glorious news from South Carolina came over the lines this morning and the Pelican flag was today flung to the breeze in New Orleans...the names of Lincoln and Seward...will be handed down to the just execrations of posterity while...the [other] scores of Abolitionists...will...rot.’²³

To Southern Brothers like Chapman, because of their misguided understanding of religion, they had no single morsel of sympathy for those blacks stricken by the albatross of slavery, and as a result, they promulgated supercilious opinions of race that affected their conception of the future of ΦΚΣ.

As Abraham Lincoln famously proclaimed during a June 16, 1858 senatorial campaign speech, “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free.”²⁴ Of course, Lincoln was assessing the future of the United States, yet his remarks also correlate well to the deepening tensions felt amongst Phi Kaps by the end of the decade. ΦΚΣ could not stand disunited, and as Mitchell noted in an

²²‘Black Republican’ denotes a member of Lincoln’s Republican Party. (M. W. Chapman, Upsilon of Mu Chapter, to Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, 20 December 1860, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma and Secession,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.)

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Quoted in William J. Bennett and John T. E. Cribb, *The American Patriot’s Almanac* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2010), 215.

undated letter, the fraternity must hold itself to be “above all temporary excitement and make it the most sacred and most enduring of all social ties.”²⁵ As such, while both the United States and ΦΚΣ appeared to be on parallel paths to danger as 1860 drew to a close, it was the former’s failure to rectify its own problems—and, conversely, the latter’s ability to overcome obstacles—that ensured each would pursue divergent paths come wartime. For ΦΚΣ, when chapter delegates convened at the Fifth Avenue Hotel in New York City on December 27, 1860, the opportunity presented itself to do something the Union could not accomplish: actually *be* united. Resolving the growing divisions within the fraternity took precedence on the convention’s agenda, and the chapter representatives debated on the issue throughout much of the first day and into the next. “It was argued,” as McGrath noted in the minutes of the Convention, “that the...prosperity of the Fraternity would depend upon our not interfering with the individual opinions of members...and ...to still and allay all agitation of or interference with either politics or religion.”²⁶ Significant headway was made the second day when an amendment—signed by all chapter delegates—was introduced to the fraternity’s initiation process as the first by-law: “Do you pledge yourself both by your influence and example to still all political and religious interference and agitation, whenever and wherever it may arise in the Fraternity?”²⁷ This was a crucial achievement, for it meant that not only would any potential Phi Kap have to agree to this edict to attain membership, but it also, more importantly, signified that unity in the future of ΦΚΣ was no longer a quasi-utopian ideal in breadth and scope as the Phi Kap Brotherhood was much more than ‘skin-deep.’ In his closing remarks at the Convention, the fraternity’s President Edmund Pechin implored ΦΚΣ to continue to be “superior to all political disaster and change” because,

²⁵ Samuel Brown Wylie Mitchell, undated letter, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma and Secession,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

²⁶ Robert H. McGrath, Minutes of Phi Kappa Sigma Convention of 1860, Meeting of 28 December 1860.

²⁷ Ibid.

...the sympathies of our better nature...constitute a bond of Brotherhood as true and dissoluble as it is honorable and delightful. To such a brotherhood the selfish interests and passions of men, and the gloomy events of the times, are but as the passing clouds to the distant star,—they affect not the luminary, because they have no organic connection to them.²⁸

This Convention established a stronger, more vigorous bond of Brotherhood amongst Phi Kaps; to such a fervent degree, in fact, that, as one delegate Joseph C. Dellamy would reflect years later, “We felt so sure, with the fraternal enthusiasm so warmly bubbling over in our souls and hearts that there could not possibly be any war.”²⁹ Dellamy et al were soon to be disappointed, of course, but their excitement was a crucial step in order to preserve, if even strengthen, fraternal bonds as the civil earthquake approached. What Dellamy also failed to realize, furthermore, was that the quickly dissolving Union was simply unable to fix their own major problems. There was no landmark equivalent to the ‘Convention of 1860,’ because, in part, as one historian has contended, “from the very founding of the United States, the ‘question of Union or Disunion’ was inseparable from the issue of slavery’s destiny [and as a result] the republic was fragile.”³⁰ The series of compromises, acts, and the like passed by Congress through the antebellum era did more to prolong the problem than arrive at a final solution. The Convention of 1860, though, was an immensely significant event that arguably saved the fraternity, and reinforced the crux of true fraternity heading into the War Between the States.

Surviving “The Perfect Blaze:” Phi Kappa Sigma during the Civil War

With this historical background and framework in place, the activities of ΦΚΣ

²⁸ Edmund C. Pechin, “Closing Address to the Convention Hall of the Phi Kappa Sigma Fraternity,” 28 December 1860, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “The Convention of 1860,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

²⁹ Joseph C. Dellamy, undated letter, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “The Convention of 1860,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

³⁰ Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion!: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789 – 1859* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 337.

Brothers during the Civil War are more appreciable, if downright better understood; in that, the development of brotherhood was not some random occurrence, it was a long process that underwent—nay, needed—crucial changes in order to reach its zenith come wartime. On April 14, 1861, when Union forces surrendered at Fort Sumter after a surprise Confederate attack two days earlier, it became clear that the Union could not survive the growing North-South schism short of fighting a war against their one-time countrymen.³¹ President Lincoln called on volunteers to aid the Unionist cause, and demanded the rebels abandon their cause within twenty days.³² The Confederacy, meanwhile, was brimming with confidence, and this was no more evident than with the remarks of Jefferson Davis' Secretary of War LeRoy Pope Walker: "The [Confederate] flag that now flaunts the breeze here will float over the dome of the Capitol at Washington before the first of May."³³ Indeed, as the conflict intensified, more and more Phi Kaps left college to fight. According to archival records, at least 259 Brothers fought for the Confederacy, with one out of every five being from Northern chapters, and at least 164 for the Union, with only five Brothers total enlisting from the fraternity's Southern chapters.³⁴ Among other things, this indicates that the fraternity was less divided in a regional sense and more in an ideological one; that is to say, just because a Brother was in the South did not mean he would fight for the Confederacy, and vice versa. Put differently, the Brothers dispersed according to their own political beliefs, which, as per the resolutions formulated at the 1860 Convention, were condoned so long as such politics was kept to oneself and away from fraternal matters.

³¹ Frederick Thomas Jones, *A History of the United States in Chronological Order from A.D. 432 to the Present Time* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Pioneer Press, 1888), 198.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Benson J. Lossing, *A Centennial Edition of the History of the United States: From the Discovery of America, to the End of the First One Hundred Years of American Independence* (Hartford, Connecticut: Scammel and Company, 1876), 555.

³⁴ Statistics of Phi Kappa Sigma by Chapters in the C.S.A and in the U.S.A, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File "Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States," Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

Through 1861 and 1862, with many Brothers, especially in the South, enlisting to participate in the conflict, inter-fraternal relations markedly diminished and inspired bittersweet feelings of hope and pessimism amongst some Brothers. “The whole South is in a perfect blaze,” read an anonymous, undated letter from Nu Chapter in Tennessee, “If I ever meet a Phi Kap on the field of battle, or anywhere else, I shall always extend to him the hand of a brother.”³⁵ Such suggests the essence of the ΦΚΣ experience being involved in the conflict: the circumstances were bleak, but the spirit of fraternity *always* remained—they never simply gave up. McGrath, for one, embodied such spirit, as concerns over the safety of his Brothers were a frequent topic of his wartime letters. In a May 6, 1861 letter, he conceded that “the fraternity is shaken by these conflicts with our Sister State...and until this strife is past, we cannot tell what has become of them or whether we shall ever again be a happy and prosperous Fraternity.”³⁶ As the historians Steven E. Woodworth and Kenneth J. Winkle attest, the vast majority of the war was fought in the South with damages costing the beleaguered territory more than funding the war itself.³⁷ McGrath, in letter from later in February 1862, testifies to the effect such had on the Brotherhood: “Our northern chapters though generally are flourishing, while the southern ones are, I fear, hopelessly gone...I have little hope of our Fraternity in the South.”³⁸

McGrath’s letter represents perhaps the low-point in terms of optimism regarding the fraternity’s chances to emerge from the war intact. As he grimly noted, ΦΚΣ was without its entire Southern branch of chapters, and it was difficult to facilitate correspondence with many

³⁵ Mu Chapter, to anonymous, undated, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

³⁶ Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, to anonymous, 6 May 1861, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

³⁷ Steven E. Woodworth and Kenneth J. Winkle, *Atlas of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 336.

³⁸ Robert H. McGrath, to anonymous, 16 February 1862, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

Brothers because $\Phi\kappa\Sigma$ was without its founding Alpha Chapter as well. Indeed, McGrath was the only Alpha member who was not serving in the armed forces on either side, so he was left with the yeoman task of essentially helping to sustain $\Phi\kappa\Sigma$, along with the aid of Edmund Pechin, until his Brothers were able to ‘find their footing,’ so to speak, which meant growing more comfortable with the realities of the turbulent conditions imposed by the war.

By 1863, the unified fraternal spirit kindled during the Convention of 1860 appeared once more to be on the rise. Gamma Chapter, at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, for instance, played a pivotal role in this regard and also in the revival of the largely dormant Alpha Chapter. With “the course of the Gamma run[ning] smoothly,” so affirmed the chapter’s leadership in mid-March, 1863, it spearheaded efforts to resuscitate Alpha.³⁹ In early April, a Gamma leader wrote “One of our men...left a few days ago to enter the University of Pennsylvania. I feel...he will be able to build up the Alpha. We only need a good energetic fellow to sustain our now almost famished Mother Chapter.”⁴⁰ The efforts appeared to have a positive impact, not so much for influencing increased membership immediately but rather to restore the kind of optimism that so excited Phi Kaps prior to the beginning of the war. McGrath, in a letter in mid-October 1863, exhibited this kind of enthusiasm, even going so far as to predict that “[The Alpha chapter] shall soon be under way again.”⁴¹ By mid-1864, it was again functioning as the head of the $\Phi\kappa\Sigma$ chapters, corresponding with Brothers on both sides of the war.

³⁹ Gamma Chapter, to Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, 17 March 1863, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

⁴⁰ Gamma Chapter, to Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, 8 April 1863, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

⁴¹ Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, to Epsilon Chapter, 16 October 1863, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

If the correspondences between those not in combat reinforce the notion that $\Phi\K\Sigma$ was resilient, the battlefield experiences of Phi Kaps, then, are a stunning embodiment of the cherished fraternal values and ideals that superseded the political and religious differences many Americans simply could not overlook. The northern Brothers' relations with the Southern 'Silver Skulls' during the war, as such, have entered $\Phi\K\Sigma$ lore as an excellent example of fraternal concord amid civil discord. Southern Phi Kaps began the tradition, in the late 1850s, of wearing 'Silver Skull' badges, and when they enlisted in their respective armies, they proudly wore these badges on their uniform. After General Robert E. Lee's forces lost at Gettysburg in early July 1863, not surprisingly, a sizable number of Confederate troops were captured and imprisoned at prisons including Fort Delaware and Johnson's Island.⁴² Among these were several Brothers who donned the 'Silver Skull' badge. Upon hearing the news, other Southern Brothers, including the prisoners themselves, sent letters to the Alpha Chapter, where McGrath and Pechin organized the collection of donations—in the form of clothes, other necessities, and some \$100 in currency—from other Phi Kaps to be forwarded to these destitute Brothers.⁴³ These acts of generosity were promulgated among Southern Phi Kaps, and, months afterward, they requested the names of Northern Phi Kaps imprisoned in Confederate strongholds so that they might reciprocate.⁴⁴ One Phi Kap prisoner of Johnson's Island, Lieutenant Thomas Ruffin of the Army of Virginia Medical Corps, wrote a letter to McGrath in late September 1863 that reinforced the strength of $\Phi\K\Sigma$ fraternal bond:

⁴² "History of Phi Kappa Sigma," Phi Kappa Sigma International Fraternity, accessed 10 January 2011, <http://www.pks.org/history.shtml>.

⁴³ Ibid. As an aside, to put the currency donation in perspective, according to an online inflation calculator which relies on data from *The Statistical History of the United States* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1975) and *Statistical Abstracts of the United States* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2009), \$100 in 1863 is worth over a thousand dollars today. See "The Inflation Calculator," Steven Morgan Friedman's Personal Website, accessed 11 January 2011, <http://www.westegg.com/inflation/infl.cgi>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

I have made diligent inquiry and search but have not been able to find [possible other Phi Kaps] on the island...Please send me a Catalogue of the Fraternity [as] I wish to...call upon [other chapters' Upsilon] for assistance...I would be glad if you would underscore the names of those whom you think a letter would most likely reach and who would most likely assist me. [The other] Phi Kaps [here are] all well. They send their regards.⁴⁵

Of course, since Ruffin was imprisoned, it was impossible to aid any other Phi Kaps himself, yet his drive to communicate with other Brothers shows, as McGrath noted in an open letter nearly a month later, “[that] the fraternity feeling amongst our Southern members is not a whit diminished.”⁴⁶ For those Southern Brothers who *could* help, though, they did not refrain from offering similar assistance to Northern prisoners of war in Confederate prisons. The letter from Anthony Sambola, an organizer of Theta Chapter—the chapter, if the reader may recollect, that once called for ΦΚΣ to be segregated and hence let religious and political beliefs influence fraternal affairs—to Alpha Chapter President Edmund Pechin simply reinforces the unity of the brotherhood through the substitution of said beliefs. In light of the “the kindness lately shown to some of our southern brothers and in accordance with the teachings and objects of the fraternity,” Sambola requested the names “[of] any members of the ΦΚΣ fraternity...now prisoners of war in our hands.”⁴⁷

Northern Brothers, upon hearing expressions of fraternal affection through letters akin to Ruffin’s and Sambola’s, were quick to laud this kind of protean support for ΦΚΣ Brothers. Letters from the Delta Chapter, for instance, illustrate a chapter clearly favouring such activities. In a letter from October 20, 1863, the Delta Chapter asserted that it was “ever ready” to assist

⁴⁵ Lieutenant Thomas Ruffin, Medical Corps of the Army of Virginia, to Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, 21 September 1863, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

⁴⁶ Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, to all Phi Kappa Sigma chapters, 16 October 1863, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

⁴⁷ Anthony Sambola, Theta Chapter, to Edmund Pechin, Alpha Chapter President, 29 January 1865, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

Southern Phi Kaps because “their being skulls is sufficient to open the hearts and pockets of all of us.”⁴⁸ Five days later, in another letter, Delta proudly noted that “Although we may be greatly opposed to them politically their being Skulls is enough to cast aside all party spirit and ill-feeling and to extend to them the arms of comfort.”⁴⁹ Yet, perhaps the most dramatic and significant illustration of fraternal brotherhood during the war, is the experience of Leroy S. Edwards of the Eta Chapter. In 1864, Edwards left the University of Virginia and enlisted at the Confederate base at Petersburg, Virginia.⁵⁰ However, when given a uniform, there were no more of the traditional Confederate grey uniforms and, instead, he was forced to don a blue uniform that resembled Union attire, albeit with a slightly lighter tone.⁵¹ In early May of that year, he was captured during the Battle of the Wilderness in Northern Virginia by General Grant’s troops; and, since he was wearing the blue uniform, he was immediately looked upon with great suspicion. Upon arrival at Union headquarters, Edwards was stunned to find out that he was suspected of being a Confederate spy and was subject to an immediate trial with a Court Martial.⁵² If convicted, the offence was punishable by death, and Edwards was certain such a verdict would be handed down. During the trial, a captain walked up to him, and Edwards, not concentrating on the man, paid little attention. The captain smiled at Edwards, “Sgt. Edwards, don’t you remember me?”⁵³ Edwards was awestruck and concentrated for a second, “yes, you are a Phi Kap.”⁵⁴ The man was Isaac. B. Parker of Epsilon Chapter—a man he had met during

⁴⁸ Andrew W. Mitchell, Delta Chapter, to Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, 20 October 1863, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

⁴⁹ Andrew W. Mitchell, Delta Chapter, to Robert H. McGrath, Upsilon of Alpha Chapter, 25 October 1863, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

⁵⁰ Son of Leroy S. Edwards, undated letter, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File “Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States,” Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

the Convention of 1860 in New York City.⁵⁵ Parker promptly offered to act as a counsel for Edwards, and the charges were soon dismissed after Parker convinced the court that he knew Edwards and considered him to be an honourable man.⁵⁶ As Edwards' son, who recounted the story, acknowledged, "Phi Kappa Sigma has much of which to be proud."⁵⁷

With General Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House in Virginia on April 9, 1865, some Union troops fired rifle volleys in celebration until Grant ordered them to stop, famously asserting, "The war is over, the rebels are our countrymen again, and the best sign of rejoicing after the victory will be to abstain from all demonstrations."⁵⁸ Grant's remarks reflect an individual worn out by war, worn out by the destructiveness and cataclysm of the bloodiest war in American history.⁵⁹ 620 000 Americans perished in the conflict, of which at least 78 were members of ΦΚΣ.⁶⁰ The fraternity, as mentioned, lost all eight of its southern chapters, and even those that survived had to rebuild not only their membership, but also their affiliations with their respective universities. As Baird notes in his 1879 manual, at least ten chapters could not overcome the burdensome conditions that characterized the immediate postwar period, and the fraternity, much like the US, underwent a process of reconstruction.⁶¹ However, the actions of ΦΚΣ Brothers during the war are exemplary, not only for the actions themselves, but also how such actions are especially noteworthy given the rather discordant state of the fraternity in the late 1850s. In the country's most catastrophic conflict, the bonds of brotherhood were strained

⁵⁵ Son of Leroy S. Edwards, undated letter, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File "Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States," Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Quoted in James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 850.

⁵⁹ Cole Christian Kingseed, *The American Civil War* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004), 28.

⁶⁰ Statistics of Phi Kappa Sigma by Chapters in the C.S.A and in the U.S.A, Phi Kappa Sigma Archives, File "Phi Kappa Sigma in the War Between the States," Phi Kappa Sigma International Headquarters, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania.

⁶¹ Baird, *American College Fraternities*, 98.

but not torn, compromised but not abandoned, strengthened but not surrendered. Politics and religion are highly contentious subjects often eliciting heavy debate, and as the Convention of 1860 elucidated, ΦΚΣ would consider such matters secondary to fraternal bonds that united men as brothers. The experience of ΦΚΣ during the Civil War showed an organization that managed to survive, if not thrive, the conflict in certain respects. Although they lost chapters, and those members who paid the supreme sacrifice, the brotherhood clearly meant something to these individuals, and, among other things, shows that such fraternal unions can offer extraordinary benefits even in the most dire and extraordinary of circumstances.

Conclusion

The experience of ΦΚΣ, both approaching and during the American Civil War, as this paper has attempted to prove, is a remarkable instance of fraternal unity overcoming intense civil discord and, as such, challenges the prevailing conventional wisdom in two key respects. First, it questions the belief that fraternity brotherhood offers a meaningless and rather empty relationship for its members. Second, it confronts the notion that since said conflict impeded the activities of colleges and universities, it surely must have crippled and in some cases destroyed fraternal organizations outright. ΦΚΣ's transition from dissonance during the late antebellum era to consonance during the War Between the States is the apotheosis in a process of renewed vigour within the Brotherhood of the fraternity. Prior to the war, although some prominent figures in ΦΚΣ were adamant that one's personal political and religious beliefs remain fundamentally separate from fraternal issues, some Brothers still could not separate the two. In several ways, as a result, the fraternity appeared destined to follow the path of the United States as a whole: civil war. The most regrettable example of this inability, furthermore, was the deplorable suggestion by some Brothers to segregate the fraternity, thereby making it racially

exclusive. Thankfully, though, ΦΚΣ organized a conference that served as a vital turning point for the future of the fraternity. Whereas the Union began to dissolve first with the secession of South Carolina in late December 1860, ΦΚΣ reached a pivotal consensus that granted the allowance of different political and religious beliefs amongst Brothers, except in discussions of a fraternal nature. The resulting Civil War, moreover, may have bent the bonds of fraternal Brotherhood, but it did not break them. The generous acts of goodwill demonstrated by Brothers to one another strengthened the ΦΚΣ Brotherhood regardless of membership losses by the war's end in 1865. They were able to have amiable relations with one another despite involvement in the bloodiest war in American history. The ΦΚΣ narrative, then, adds a provocative new dimension to our social historical understanding of the conflict, and, at the very least, invites further research in this under-developed subject area.

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