

THE STORY OF THETA CHAPTER PHI GAMMA DELTA

The man who conceived Theta chapter was John Mason Martin. He was evidently a brilliant, honorable, and somewhat erratic young man. A review of his activities are to be found under his picture in the Gorgas Library. "Hon. John Mason Martin, A.B., A.M., LL.D., Founder of Theta chapter of Phi Gamma Delta; Son of Joshua Lanier Martin (Governor of Alabama, 1845 – 1847) and Sarah Mason; born Jan. 20, 1838; A.B. University of Ala, 1856, A.M. 1859; LL.D. Centre College, Central University and Georgetown University; State Senator and President of Senate 1873 – '76; U.S. Congressman, 49th Congress, from 6th District of Alabama 1885 – '87; Instrumental in re-establishment of University of Alabama School of Law in 1872; Professor of Law, University of Alabama, 1875 – '86; married Lucy C. Peck (sister of Samuel Mintern Peck, Poet Laureate of Ala.) of Tuscaloosa; died in Bowling Green, Ky., June 16, 1898."

Theta's evolvement is an interesting affair and worthy of note throughout the fraternity. Prior to its inception at the University of Alabama, there existed four other fraternal organizations, Kuklos Adelphon, Delta Kappa Epsilon, Alpha Delta Phi, and Phi Beta Kappa. Phi Beta Kappa was, by then, an honorary organization and of the others, only Delta Kappa Epsilon remains.

John M. Martin states in his "Recollections" that he had the idea of founding a society to be called Phi Alpha Fraternity. During the summer of 1854, he wrote a constitution for his proposed organization but on returning to the University of Alabama in the fall of that year he gave up that idea. Instead, he had gotten the idea of petitioning Phi Gamma Delta for a charter. He was a member of Kuklos Adelphon at the time and persuaded two of his fellow members, Theodore G. Pierce and John J. Harris, to join with him in his efforts to secure a charter from Phi Gamma Delta. Martin wrote an Alabamian at Union University, Tennessee, and through that chapter finally submitted a petition to the Grand Chapter at Canonsburg, Pa. It contained the names of the three confederates mentioned previously, plus Walter C. Roper, a late joiner. After a period of inquiry the charter was granted.

During the period of inquiry, Martin had become involved in an affair of honor and had been forced to leave the University of Alabama. It seems that a member of D.K.E., James J. Cook, had passed some disparaging remarks about the clothing of a young female relation of Martin's who lived in Tuscaloosa. Martin became angered and sought Cook out to see if the reports were true. When Cook told him that the reports were true, Martin initiated combat with him which resulted in Cook being stabbed in the abdomen by a knife wielded by young Martin. His father's timely arrival saved him from serious trouble, but the affair was so scandalous that University officials required his resignation.

A short time after this, Woodlief Thomas of Union University arrived in Tuscaloosa to install the new chapter of Phi Gamma Delta. Thomas decided that since the Grand Chapter had accepted Martin for membership in the fraternity, he could be initiated with the others who had been included in the petition. Therefore, at 10:00am on Saturday, May 11, 1855, Thomas initiated Martin, Pierce, and Harris into Phi Gamma Delta, at the City Hall of Tuscaloosa. Roper, who could not be present that morning, was initiated that

afternoon at the same place. The new members adopted the name of "Euilada Chapter" for themselves, the name Theta coming later. Martin left Tuscaloosa immediately following the ceremony and entered Centre College, Kentucky, where he had been promised admission to the Junior Class.

An event of great importance to the new chapter of Phi Gamma Delta occurred at about the same time that it was born. Internal dissension caused dissolution of Kuklos Adelphon, in which three of Theta's charter members help membership. Some of its members, Sumpter Lea and Benjamin Carter Adams, certainly affiliated with Martin's group.

This explains the ties that definitely existed between the new fraternity and the older one and also accounts in large degree for the strong position that Phi Gamma Delta enjoyed from the very beginning.

In regards to a cherished legend of Theta concerning Noble Leslie DeVotie and the founding of S.A.E., the following facts have been ascertained. DeVotie was a member of Kuklos Adelphon. Brother John M. Bradley relates in a letter of Maj. Frank Kekc (C.C.N.Y. '72) that, in an interview with Sumpter Lea, Lea told him that he knew DeVotie well and that it was largely on his account that DeVotie attended the University of Alabama. Lea was most positive in his affirmation that DeVotie was indeed a member of Kuklos Adelphon. John M. Martin treated the subject himself in his "Recollections", which were published in the Phi Gamma Delta in 1879. Brother Martin related as follows: "I was just then beginning my junior year at the University, and had devoted much of my time, during the summer vacation, to the preparation of a constitution and by-laws for a society, which I proposed to establish, to be known as the 'Phi Alpha Fraternity'. Digressing for a moment, I might say that when I abandoned this purpose and sought admission to our own Fraternity, I gave the manuscript (familiar to myself only) to a fellow student who afterwards was one of the founders of the 'Sigma Alpha Epsilon Fraternity' and have reason to believe that I am the true author of their constitution, etc. The conclusive reasons for this impression do not now concern us, and are withheld." Credibility must be given to the foregoing statements in view of their author. John M. Martin was a public figure in Alabama and at the time of the writing of his "Recollections" he was the Dean of the Law School and had been associated with that body for a number of years. The word of such a man must be taken as true at this late date.

The new chapter, successful and important as it was, was not destined to last more than four years. The University passed a regulation in 1859 which disbanded all secret fraternities then in existence on the campus. "Bairds Manual" states that Theta maintained a *sub rosa* existence for some time after 1859 but there are no records to prove this and Martin says in his "Recollections" that the chapter ceased operations after the passage of the anti-fraternity regulation.

The anti-fraternity regulation was repealed in 1876. John M. Martin and John J. Harris joined in a successful effort to re-establish Theta Chapter at the University of Alabama. The new chapter was as good as its predecessor and numbered many prominent young men among the student body. New anti-fraternity regulations were passed in 1879 and the chapter surrendered its charter for the second time in its history.

Theta appeared again on the University scene on Monday, June 3, 1901. Fraternities were by this time encouraged at the University and the situation has remained the same ever since. Two men from the second chapter were greatly influential in the third reopening of Theta Chapter. They were Sterling A. Wood (Ala. '77) and Tennent Lomax (Ala. '78). The first meeting was held for the purpose of initiating new men. Thirteen men were admitted to membership, the place being the Kappa Sigma hall. Meetings of the new group were held on a bimonthly basis until increasing membership and the growing business of finances forced meetings to be held once per week.

The first known house was located at 324 Queen City Avenue. The house was known as the "Little Home". This structure was occupied from 1909 to 1910. The second rented home occupied by Theta Phi Gams was located at 14 Thomas Circle. The chapter occupied this dwelling from 1910 to 1914.

By 1914, the chapter was of such size and importance that a new home had been called for. Theta became the first fraternity to build a house on campus. It was built in the southern colonial style. This house was a memorable one in the University history, in that it was the first to be erected on what is now known as "Old Row".

World War I reared its ugly head and the men of Theta contributed in the fullest measure to America's part in the conflict. One member, John S. Henry (Ala. '17), was the first University man to make the supreme sacrifice. A plaque commemorating this fact now resides in the fraternity house. Over thirty of Theta's men served with the armed forces in one capacity or another during the war, an enviable record in the annals of the University of Alabama fraternity system.

The period following the war saw Theta return to a period of normal operations. The yearly reports of the chapter historians are filled with accounts of the activities of our ever-changing body of undergraduates. Athletics, scholars, and ladies men are all to be found in those reports. The chapter was awarded the Baker Cup during this period and its scholarship was held at a consistently high level. It was during this period that house mothers were incorporated into the fraternity system at the University. Phi Gamma Delta was in the first group to arrange for the services of a house mother. Mrs. Emma Scarborough (mother of A. G. Scarborough, Ala. '19) was our first, serving from 1932 – 1937; Miss Lucia Chambers (later Mrs. Joe Stickney) followed and served from 1937 – 1944. The outbreak of World War II saw Theta again preparing for service to its country.

The chapter history for the school year 1942-42, written by brothers Bill Wertz and Charlie McBurney, paints a picture of a serious and responsible group of young men who were not taking their responsibilities to the war effort lightly. Corsages for their dates at dances were purchased at low prices and the difference made up in Defense Stamps, which were attached to the wrappings of the corsages. Almost every man in the chapter, with the exception of the men in premedical and pre dental programs, was in the Advanced ROTC. The vast majority of this group saw service with the military during the war. The University took over the house and housed Army personnel in it for the duration. The chapter greatly reduced in size, continued operation on a small scale in a rented home for the same period.

With the cessation of hostilities, a great influx of students was experienced by the University. Many Fiji's returned to further their educations or continued where they had been forced to break off. The house, once again in proper hands, was filled to overflowing. Membership at Theta reached its highest peak in our history during this period. The chapter, as was to be expected, resumed its position in the front rank of fraternities on the campus. Positions of leadership and honor were won by its members in all phases of campus life.

In November, 1963, the first fraternity house built on the campus of the University of Alabama burned to the ground. The graduate brothers began immediately to re-build the house in approximately the same location as the "original house". In less than two years, the chapter had raised enough funds to begin work on the new and current home. During this time, the chapter rented another house on Tenth Avenue in a place that Bryant-Denny stadium now occupies.

By September, 1966 the new house was ready to occupy. William Alfred Rose was instrumental in raising the funds to build the new house and we thank him dearly for his efforts.

Early, Phi Gam was based on traditional values of character and morality. Its members strived for, and usually attained, excellence in scholarship, leadership, and morality. Historically, Phi Gam set a tone of achievement the rest of the campus found hard to follow.