

A Different Kind of Brotherhood:

A Historical Perspective on the Massachusetts Alpha Chapter of Sigma Phi Epsilon

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**A Different Kind of Brotherhood: A Historical Perspective on the Massachusetts Alpha****Chapter of Sigma Phi Epsilon**

Sigma Phi Epsilon, also known as SigEp, has been a unique part of the world of national fraternities for the past 111 years. It was founded on the basis of three cardinal principles: virtue, diligence, and brotherly love. Throughout the past 111 years, the fraternity has seen tremendous growth in size and has acted as a model for other national fraternities. SigEp is considered a fraternity of firsts in the world of Greek-letter organizations. It was the first fraternity to charter in all 50 states, establish a National Housing Corporation, develop a traveling staff to assist the development of its undergraduate chapters, receive a federal grant from the federal Department of Education to enhance education programs, and provide financial assistance to graduate students through the Resident Scholar program; it was also the first fraternity to eliminate race, religion, and sexual orientation as a requirement for membership (McKee, Heckman, & Carpenter, 2011).

Although it is not the first fraternity to be chartered at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, it is still one of the oldest fraternities on campus. In the fall of 2012 the Massachusetts Alpha chapter of Sigma Phi Epsilon celebrated its one-hundredth year of existence at UMass. Celebrating a centennial is a great accomplishment for any fraternity nationwide, and the Massachusetts Alpha chapter has proved the test of time. Like any other long-term organization on campus, SigEp has faced many issues throughout its time - particularly after the Second World War. Due to the draft and declining enrollments of young men at the Massachusetts Agricultural College, now known as UMass Amherst, fraternity membership took a turn for the worse (Sanctuary, 1942). After the war ended, and the G.I. Bill was enforced, fraternities saw an increase in membership on the UMass campus, especially in SigEp (Audette, n.d.; Sanctuary,

1942). The reconstruction period for the Massachusetts Alpha chapter of SigEp can be categorized as a golden age for the fraternity (Audette, n.d.).

Throughout this paper, I will be exploring the growth and development of the Massachusetts Alpha chapter of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity from the years of 1912 to the early 1950's. I could not explore the history of the Massachusetts Alpha chapter, without discussing a general overview regarding the creation of Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity. I will also briefly explore the impact World War II had on the membership of Massachusetts Alpha chapter and how the fraternity rebuilt itself to become a strong asset to the Greek Community.

### **A Brief History of Sigma Phi Epsilon**

Sigma Phi Epsilon was founded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century at Richmond College, in Richmond, Virginia. At the time, fraternity membership was considered a necessity for the college man (Horowitz, 1987). Approximately 200 students were enrolled at Richmond College and almost all of these students were affiliated with one of the five fraternities that existed on campus – Kappa Alpha, Phi Kappa Sigma, Phi Gamma Delta, Pi Kappa Alpha, and Kappa Sigma (McKee, Heckman, & Carpenter, 2011). For a group of 12 students, the hunger for brotherhood could not be satiated by the organizations that currently existed in the Richmond College's Greek system (Sigma Phi Epsilon, 1950). Carter Ashton Jenkins, a young man who transferred from Rutgers University, led the charge for a new fraternity at Richmond College.

Jenkins transferred to Richmond and sought the same companionship he once had at Rutgers, as a brother of Chi Phi fraternity. During his first semester, he found five men, William Hugh Carter, Thomas Temple Wright, William Lazell Phillips, Benjamin Donald Gaw, and William Andrew Wallace, who were searching for a similar bond. Jenkins urged them to join him in applying for a charter for a Chi Phi chapter at Richmond College. Despite their efforts,

the request for a Chi Phi charter was denied. Chi Phi felt that Richmond College was not large enough for the establishment of another chapter (McKee, Heckman, & Carpenter, 2011). In September of 1901, these six men decided to create their own local unchartered fraternity, titled The Saturday Night Club (Sigma Phi Epsilon, 1950). The goal of the Saturday Night Club was to “recruit the best men of college – that they might be more closely bound together” (Sigma Phi Epsilon, 1950, p. 5). The snobbish fraternity men at Richmond shunned the local fraternity, which motivated them to create a new nationally recognized fraternity (McKee, Heckman, & Carpenter, 2011).

During October 1901, the original six men of the Saturday Night Club recruited six new members, Lucian Baum Cox, Richard Spurgeon Owens, Frank Webb Kerfoot, and Thomas Vaden McCaul. The twelve men met on the second floor of Ryland Hall, one of the dormitories at Richmond College, to discuss a proposition for establishing a recognized fraternity called Sigma Phi at Richmond. Jenkins, Gaw, and Phillips were appointed to plead their case to the administration later that month (McKee, Heckman, & Carpenter, 2011). The administration challenged these students with questions regarding the need for another fraternity on campus and how the fraternity would thrive with seven of its current members graduating. But one of the most important questions pertained to the fraternities’ name. Sigma Phi was already a nationally recognized fraternity. The administration agreed to recognize this group of young men as a fraternity in the Richmond Greek-system, under the condition that they change name of the fraternity. On November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1901 Sigma Phi Epsilon was born.

During its first two years, SigEp struggled with growth and expansion. The low numbers of college enrollment between 1902-1903 and the increased competition between the other five fraternities on campus posed a problem for the success of the fraternity (Sigma Phi Epsilon,

1940). If the local organization was not converted to a national one, the fraternity's future was in grave danger. On October 22, 1902, SigEp was granted a charter by the Secretary of the Commonwealth of Virginia (Sigma Phi Epsilon, 1940). By the end of the academic year, SigEp had established chapters at five other colleges in the region. William Lazell Phillips, better known to fraternity brothers as "Uncle Billy" because of his maturity and older age, played a critical role in the growth and expansion of the fraternity to other campuses (Sigma Phi Epsilon, 1940).

### **Establishing the Massachusetts Alpha Chapter**

Uncle Billy never graduated from Richmond College; instead, he made a career out of the expansion and success of Sigma Phi Epsilon. In its infancy, Uncle Billy took responsibility for the continued growth of SigEp. He traveled from campus to campus in order to establish other chapters and foster the development of the fraternity across the nation. In 1912, eleven years after the birth of SigEp, the central office of the fraternity answered a petition by the local fraternity Sigma Tau Delta at the Massachusetts Agricultural College, also known as Mass Aggie (Sigma Phi Epsilon, 1950). Uncle Billy was one of the individuals responsible for reviewing this petition and granting a SigEp charter.

Sigma Tau Delta was founded as a local fraternity in December of 1909 and at the time of the petition for a SigEp charter they had a total of twelve undergraduate brothers (*The Index*, 1912). On April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1912 Sigma Tau Delta became the Alpha chapter of Sigma Phi Epsilon in Massachusetts, becoming the first chapter in the state to become affiliated with the national fraternity (Johnson, 1951). With the assistance of other brothers from the neighboring region, Uncle Billy led the initiation ceremony, signed the original charter and declared the nineteen initiated brothers as the founding fathers of their chapter. The members of Massachusetts Alpha

chapter dedicated the acceptance of their petition for a SigEp charter to Albert Wesley Dodge, who graduated from Mass Aggie in 1912 (Wheeler, Smith, & Clark; 1914). Dodge wrote the petition before he graduated and is the reason that Sigma Tau Delta received the charter to become the 38th chapter of SigEp (McKee, Heckman, & Carpenter, 2011; Wheeler, Smith, & Clark, 1914). Brother Dodge '12 was a loyal supporter of the chapter's continued success after his graduation and was often present at meetings and social functions (Wheeler, Smith, & Clark, 1914).

For the next several years, SigEp became a strong asset to the Greek community at Mass Aggie. They recruited young men who were not only scholars, but also athletes. In the spring of 1920, the Massachusetts Alpha chapter initiated five new men; all of them were on athletic teams (Eaves, 1920). Mass Alpha had brothers involved with Varsity athletics as captains and managers, as class presidents in student government, on planning committees for social events, and at the top of their classes (Eaves, 1920). SigEp was a powerful force on the Mass Aggie campus, and continued to maintain a consistent membership size, which was recognized by the national fraternity.

In the spring of 1925, Uncle Billy, who became the Grand Chapter Secretary of SigEp, visited the chapter to assess their successes since his first visit in 1912 (Ross, 1925). Massachusetts Alpha won their first scholarship cup for outstanding performance in the 1925 - 1926 academic year and then received another on for the following academic year (SigEp Journal, 1930). In the spring of 1930, Mass Alpha led the campus in college activities, holding a title for interfraternity athletics in basketball, initiating the editor of the Collegian as well as the president of the drama society, the Doister Doisters (Nickerson, 1930). Mass Alpha's successes

continued until the late 1930's when the chapter faced a difficult challenge due to the outbreak of war (SigEp Journal, 1939).

### **An Unfortunate Time for Fraternity Membership**

As happened on all college campuses across the nation, World War II sent most college-aged men into battle and many college-aged women into the workforce (Dillman, 2006). During the 1939-1940 academic year, total student enrollments at colleges and universities across the nation were just under 1.5 million (Thelin, 2011). Like many other fraternities across the nation, the Mass Alpha chapter of SigEp faced a decline in membership during the years during World War II. Many organizations were shut down because they could not support themselves with the little manpower they had left (Syrett, 2009). Smaller local fraternities merged with larger national fraternities in order to survive. Many fraternity and sorority houses were used to house troops, as campuses often became primarily recruiting and training centers (Syrett, 2009).

In September of 1942, President Hugh P. Baker wrote a letter to the faculty advisers of fraternities at Mass Aggies, now known as Massachusetts State College. The letter was written to address the issues the campus was facing due to the outbreak of war. In the letter, Baker states, "there is increasing evidence that a number of the men ... will not return [to campus] because of the draft. This may mean that one or more, or all of the fraternities, will find ... that the houses are only partly filled. In this war period, we should like to work even more closely with the fraternities, particularly to help in meeting financial obligations" (Sanctuary, 1942, p. 1). The letter offers up some immediate solutions to the decline in fraternity membership.

Since the fraternities were not allowed to charge non-affiliated brothers rent, one of the solutions suggested was that the Treasurer's Office would charge rent to non-affiliated men if they choose to be housed in fraternity homes and turn the funds over to the fraternity, in order to

help support their financial losses (Sanctuary, 1942). In 1945, Mass Alpha lost of their first house located on North Pleasant Street due to the financial and social restrictions inflicted upon them because of the low membership and the war (Johnson, 1951); the house was rented to a family (personal letter, 1945). The loss of the Massachusetts Alpha fraternity house was even more detrimental to the declining number of members (Johnson, 1951).

After WWII, the GI Bill brought an enormous influx of men into the college system. The G.I. Bill, which was passed in 1944, provided a variety of benefits to World War II veterans, such as college tuition (“Fort Devens”, 2012). In 1945, right down the road from Mass State, Amherst College administration banned fraternities on campus, because they discriminated based on race, religion, and wealth; they also dominated the social life of the college (Syrett, 2009). Luckily, Mass State did not follow suit because the influx of college enrollments due to implementation of the G.I. Bill gave the Mass Alpha chapter of Sigma Phi Epsilon a second chance at success.

### **The Rebirth of Massachusetts Alpha**

Post-War enrollments exceeded the accommodation numbers at the Massachusetts State College campus located in Amherst (Dillman, 2006; “Fort Devens”, 2012). In 1946, Mass State opened up a temporary campus at Fort Devens (“Fort Devens”, 2012). Fort Devens was a former WWII army base in Ayer, Massachusetts and operated as a junior college (Dillman, 2006). This campus was only made available to former male veterans, and former barracks were converted into dormitories, which meant some students had over 20-40 roommates (Dillman, 2006); these conditions were both “noisy and unfavorable” (“Fort Devens”, 2012). After two years most students graduated and moved to the main campus in Amherst (Dillman, 2006). In 1947, the



Massachusetts State College changed its name to the now know University of Massachusetts Amherst (“150 Years of UMass Amherst History”, 2013).

SigEp saw an increase in the number of freshmen pledges in the fall of 1947, but by the spring of 1948 only three pledges remained, Al Turcott, Ed Canty, and Joseph Dillman (Dillman, 2006). These three individuals were all seniors who were interested in reviving SigEp at the University of Massachusetts (Johnson, 1951). Dillman, a resident and student of the Fort Devens campus, utilized his connections to recruit a group of men interested in rebuilding the fraternity (Dillman, 2006). Almost all of these new pledges were veterans who were older and more mature than most fraternity men; they did not want to subject themselves or their pledges to hazing (Thelin, 2011), they just wanted to build a brotherhood. They had the advantage of remaking SigEp into what they believed the fraternity should be (Johnson, 1951). With the help of the Mass Beta chapter at the Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Mass Alpha was able to become self sufficient (Dillman, 2006; Johnson 1951). Three out of the forty-eight pledges, including Dillman, were initiated by Mass Beta and taught the basics chapter operations like performing the ritual and chapter operations (Johnson, 1951). At the end of the fall 1948 term, SigEp was invited to rejoin the Interfraternity Council (Landry, 1948). On January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1949 SigEp agreed to rejoin and the chapter began its reactivation on campus (Landry, 1949).

The brothers of Mass Alpha contacted the still existing, but rather dormant, alumni board about the rebirth of the chapter and donations began pouring in to reestablish the chapter and purchase a new house (Dillman, 2006). The alumni board created a Housing Committee in the spring of 1949 to investigate housing options for the Mass Alpha chapter (Johnson, 1951). The committee investigated over twenty houses, including an old farm, a large garage, and a large mansion on the corner of Amity Street and Lincoln Avenue whose deceased owner refused to

subject his home to “the chaos of fraternity life” (Johnson, 1951). In the summer of 1949, the fraternity found a home at 9 Chestnut Street (Audette, n.d; Johnson, 1951). Brothers and their pledges worked throughout the summer months to get the house ready for move-in, and many of them returned to campus three weeks early to finish up the work (Dillman, 2006). Some of the construction consisted of dividing the one-room cellar into four rooms, pouring the cement floor in the basement, reconstructing the entire 2<sup>nd</sup> floor bathroom, putting in ceilings and other forms of physical labor (Dillman, 2006; Johnson, 1951). SigEp even received some help sprucing up their new home from the ladies of Chi Omega sorority, who were repaying the gentleman of SigEp for the generous gesture they showed in aiding in the repairs to a portion of the Chi Omega house that was lost in a fire in the spring of 1949 (“Chi O’s Help at Sig. Ep.”, *The Collegian*, 1949). SigEp held their chapter meetings in the seminar room of the Old Chapel prior to the purchase and completion of the house on Chestnut Street (Johnson, 1951).

In the fall of 1949, forty-two brothers moved into the facility (Johnson, 1951). The total cost for room and board and dues for brother who lived in the chapter home was only fifty-five dollars per month (Dillman, 2006). The brothers had an official house warming event in October 1949, which included a faculty reception, an official ribbon cutting, and a dance in the evening with an attendance of approximately 1200 people (Johnson, 1951); this event became a university tradition and the brothers invited all UMass students to attend (Audette, n.d.). Since SigEp was in a reconstructive stage, they did not have a traditional pledge process like many other Greek organizations at UMass, which helped them recruit more members (Johnson, 1951). They approached the pledge program in a positive way. Pledges were responsible for planning and running a complete party by themselves, electing pledge officers for house management and

other important tasks, and actively participating in other campus activities, intramural sports, and other collegiate events (Johnson, 1951).

The brothers of Mass Alpha displayed incredible maturity and soon SigEp became a strong force within the UMass Greek community. Mass Alpha became known as the first fraternity to have completed a sweep of the Greek Week competitions (Audette, n.d.). They swept the competition in the Greek Week events of 1949 and 1950, winning first place in the three major events, Greek Sing, Skit night, and the house party competition. SigEp also won first place in the Winter Carnival party competition with their nautical themed event (Johnson, 1951). During the early 1950's, the Mass Alpha chapter became recognized as one of the number one houses on campus for their involvement with campus activities, support of the Greek community, and the contributions they made to the social scene of the Greek community at UMass (Audette, n.d.).

As social chairman of the Massachusetts Alpha chapter in 1950-1951, Harvey Segal tried to avoid binge drinking at the fraternity house on the weekends (Segal, 2006). He began to plan weekly events on Saturday night, which included a party theme and a floorshow. During the floorshow, Segal would close the bar and alcohol would not be served (Segal, 2006). These floorshows became well known around the Amherst area on Saturday night and as the weekly events became more and more popular talent from other fraternities and sororities began to perform at these shows (Audette, n.d.). Faculty members who were supposed to chaperone the events would willingly attend on a weekly basis (Segal, 2006). SigEp even created their own band, called The Gauchos, which became a popular attraction at the floorshows. Mass Alpha created a long-term tradition within the Greek community at UMass. The brothers of Mass Alpha were also known for their Christmas caroling tradition (Audette, n.d.). The SigEp

Serenaders, as they referred to themselves, would travel door to door to the other fraternities and sororities as well as throughout the dorms on campus singing Christmas carols before the holidays (Audette, n.d.).

The Mass Alpha chapter even made their mark on the national fraternity. At the time, many fraternities had membership restrictions based on race and religion (Horowitz, 1987). Mass Alpha chapter led the charge to eliminate race and religion as membership restrictions by hosting a group of 10 delegates from other SigEp chapter in the region to write a petition to abolish the discrimination clauses in SigEp's national membership guidelines (Audette, n.d.) A number of brothers from the Mass Alpha chapter attended the National SigEp Convention in Chicago to bring this petition to the national fraternities attention (Dillman, 2006). Harvey Segal, Mass Alpha's first Jewish pledge, graduated from UMass in 1951 and was initiated as a full fledged member during his time as a student, long before the fraternity lifted the restrictions on religious affiliations as a membership criteria at the 1959 Conclave in Washington D.C (Dillman, 2006; "Conclave Press Release", 1959). The Mass Alpha chapter was apart of a crucial turning point in the history of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity.

The Massachusetts Alpha chapter continued to excel within the UMass Greek community. The chapter's continued success is beyond the scope of this paper, however they recently celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of the fraternities' birth. Mass Alpha has been through significant historical events over the past 100 years and still continues to be a strong chapter within the UMass Greek system.

### **Conclusion**

One hundred and eleven years ago, twelve men came together at Richmond College to create a different kind of brotherhood. Sigma Phi Epsilon quickly became a nationally

recognized fraternity with the help of brother William Lazell Phillips, better known as Uncle Billy, who traveled to many campuses to charter other chapters. In 1912, only eleven years after the birth of SigEp, the Alpha chapter of Massachusetts was established at what is now known as the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The Massachusetts Alpha chapter was a strong asset to the national fraternity and was recognized for their achievements in academics, recruitment, and campus involvement.

World War II took a toll on the development and continued success of the Mass Alpha chapter. The chapter lost its original house and was forced to become inactive for a number of years. After the implementation of the GI Bill, enrollments at UMass skyrocketed and the Mass Alpha chapter was given a second chance at establishing once again. The journey to success was a difficult one for the Mass Alpha chapter, however the years after WWII can be considered the golden age of Massachusetts Alpha. With the help of the Mass Beta chapter, the Mass Alpha chapter was once again able to stand on it's own. Soon, the previously dormant alumni board began to collect donation to purchase a new home. Mass Alpha was truly reborn when the housing committee purchased the fraternities home on Chestnut Street.

Overall, the Massachusetts Alpha chapter has become an integral part of the Greek community at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Like many of the other Greek organizations that have been in existence for as long as SigEp at UMass, Mass Alpha has taken part in the growth of the university over the past one hundred years. The fraternity revolutionized what it meant to be affiliated with a Greek organization at UMass post-war. The Massachusetts Alpha chapter continues to add on the legacy that was created here at UMass over one hundred years ago.

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