The Columned Building: A Gettysburg Legacy

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Description
A new Eisenhower Institute for Leadership and Public Policy is currently being installed at 157 North Washington Street, the house which was home to a young Dwight Eisenhower and his family during the summer of 1918. Eisenhower became a longtime friend of Gettysburg College, and as President Katherine Haley Will states, “We claim Ike as our own.” However, a summer rental by a future national hero does not fully capture the historical value of this residence to our campus. In fact, it was owned for over forty years by Alpha Tau Omega and its story traces the birth of the College fraternity scene while also providing a detailed illustration of campus life during World War II. If you walk North Washington Street, you may pass the historic house without a glance, but, as was my experience, once you stare straight at its imposing white columns, you sense its import. [excerpt]

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Keywords
Gettysburg College, Eisenhower Institute, Katherine Haley Will, Alpha Tao Omega, Dwight D. Eisenhower

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Hidden in Plain Sight:
The Columned Building: A Gettysburg Legacy

History 300
Historical Methods
Dr. Michael Birkner

By
Brett Jackson

Fall 2006
A new Eisenhower Institute for Leadership and Public Policy is currently being installed at 157 North Washington Street, the house which was home to a young Dwight Eisenhower and his family during the summer of 1918. Eisenhower became a longtime friend of Gettysburg College, and as President Katherine Haley Will states, “We claim Ike as our own.” However, a summer rental by a future national hero does not fully capture the historical value of this residence to our campus. In fact, it was owned for over forty years by Alpha Tau Omega and its story traces the birth of the College fraternity scene while also providing a detailed illustration of campus life during World War II. If you walk North Washington Street, you may pass the historic house without a glance, but, as was my experience, once you stare straight at its imposing white columns, you sense its import.

Alpha Upsilon, the Gettysburg chapter of Alpha Tau Omega was chartered in 1882, two years after its northern inception at the University of Pennsylvania, as the sixth fraternity to come to campus. ATO was the first national fraternity established after the Civil War, and as one of the first charters above the Mason Dixon Line, Gettysburg’s Alpha Upsilon represented a northern attempt to fulfill “the spiritual reunion of the nation,” by nurturing a brotherhood which would “unite fraternally the young men of the south with those of the north in permanent peace,” on the very battlefield whose name rang of national division and bloodshed. C.W. Baker became Pennsylvania College’s first initiated brother, prompting the chapter to “immediately become active in fraternity matters,” with the publication of Alpha Tau Omega’s national magazine from 1882-1888, The Palm, and the compiling of the premier ATO Song book. The chapter organized despite College opposition to fraternities, which viewed them as subversive groups which threatened order by maintaining secrecy.
The College’s antagonism of the emerging fraternal scene began to soften after the *College Monthly* in 1887 ran quotes from Andrew White, then President of Cornell University, in which he defended the secret societies by employing a logic which Glatfelter explains as, “Wipe out the fraternities and some other “cliques, clubs, parties, and intrigues” will take their place.” The College subsequently allowed one or two members of each fraternity to attend their national convention, yet maintained only a vague catalogue reference to “Greek letter societies” which had begun to build meeting houses on campus. These meeting houses became essential as rising membership in each fraternity made the confines of a member’s dorm room a less than ideal arena for chapter meetings. Indeed, the College *Spectrum* of 1899 estimated that 417 out of a graduated total of 1,068 men had been members of a fraternity. This 39% Greek campus of over a century ago nearly rivals the 2005 College statistics of a 43% Greek rate and demonstrates the need which initiated the construction chapter houses.

It was out of this need that in 1904, ATO followed four other fraternities and laid the cornerstone for its chapter house on North Washington Street on a lot it had purchased for $7500 from a local real estate entrepreneur. As Glatfelter states, by 1904 fraternities “had won their battle for recognition and were already establishing themselves as formidable centers of student power and alumni loyalty.” Accordingly, fraternity chapter houses, which had been one story structures consisting of one or two meeting rooms, began to be replaced by the construction of dormitories in which “with faculty and trustee permission, members ate, slept, and otherwise lived together.” The original ATO house, located directly across from what was the college’s main entrance, was as Elwood Christ describes it in the building’s Historical Resource Survey Form, was a “three-story, brick, Sullivanesque styled structure. The first story porch, recessed under the upper stories was accented by ogee or flattened gothic arches . . . the front of the roof . . .
. . included the letters ATO. This dormitory style house was the fraternity’s first permanent stake around the college campus and was the base from which Bob Fortenbaugh Sr, class of 1913, and future ATO National Vice President, along with the first graduating classes of the fraternity would develop and promote its brotherhood.

When the entire house burned to the ground around 1:30 am February 22, 1914, the Gettysburgian would lament that the brick structure was “practically new and modern in every respect,” the fitting home of a fraternity said to be “in a very prosperous condition.” Everything in the house was reduced to ash, including the totality of the fraternity records. Only the four walls remained. Sebastian Hafer recounted a story that Bill Hutchinson, who he said was “quite the sportsman,” had used a high power gun to try and make a wall topple. While the fire was an enormous loss for the brotherhood, it was completely covered by insurance and ATO rebuilt immediately upon the same foundation. The new $20,000 structure was dedicated in on April 15, 1915, and its unveiling during Commencement Week was commemorated with the printing of brown programs which included a short chapter history and pictures of the old house, new house, and the current chapter members. This program reveals the pride Alpha Tau Omegas had in the resurrected house and the optimism they held for their future saying:

Our new home is truly a memorial to Alpha Tau Omega and that means every one of us. . . the noble monument which stands as a Phoenix on the ashes of the old house is a fitting tribute to our beloved fraternity. Fine as it is in appearance its true worth is rather the fact that it is a memorial to our brotherhood bought with the true spirit of devotion at the cost of much hard cash from many of us and many hard hands for the active men of the chapter of 1914-1915.

The members exalted the fact that their chapter now had twenty-one members, the most numerous ATO had been at Gettysburg, declaring, “that it should stand among the best with nothing to offer for the great part of the year shows a true grasp of the ideals of the fraternity.” They enjoined their alumni to return saying, “You can only appreciate the prominence and honor
which Alpha Tau Omega now enjoys and will continue to enjoy by coming back and seeing for
yourself.” Indeed, ATO and the other fraternities were growing in campus prominence as
evidenced by the fact that the College President, Dr. W.A. Granville spoke at the house
dedication, followed by a performance of the College orchestra. The house from which he spoke,
still stands today, and is an architecturally impressive neoclassical structure, with imposing
columns which dominate the surrounding buildings. Robert Fortenbaugh Jr., an ATO of the
class of 1944 said, “that interesting front porch is what distinguished it,” and although its
future longtime owner Sebastian Hafer personally liked the first structure, he admits, “this one is
more striking.

It was perhaps the prominent nature of the building that enticed Dwight and Mamie
Eisenhower to rent the fraternity house in May of 1918. Mamie had grown up in a wealthy
family and was accustomed to elegant homes, while Gettysburg’s Camp Colt was Ike’s first
substantial command position since graduating from West Point. When their rented apartment,
on the second floor of Ma Hutchinson’s General Store proved unsuitable to Mamie, who had to
walk through the store to enter the primitive space, the college provided the couple with the
empty fraternity house. As Elwood Christ said in interview, Ma’s old store is now “Kollege
Korner,” and the storefront is still visible. According to Mr. Hafer, while the Eisenhower Society
created markers for each of the three WWI Eisenhower residences, a marker has yet to be placed
on the store. As Mr. Hafer said, before renting the ATO house, the Eisenhower’s had “moved
from Army billet to Army billet,” making the frat house Mamie’s first home. In his book Red
Carpet for Mamie, Alden Hatch incorrectly identifies their main Gettysburg house as one on
Springs Avenue which the Eisenhowers rented for only a month after the fraternity brothers
returned, and before Ike was transferred. This is a common misconception according to both Mr.
Fortenbaugh and Mr. Hafer, who insist that the history of Ike’s stay at the frat has been largely lost both in ATO history and town lore.  

Hatch suggests that the Mamie’s home would have been a used for entertaining, saying, “the Commanding Officers’ wife had to entertain all the top brass, the big shot politicos, and the important industrialists who came to inspect Camp Colt . . . for here was an experiment unique in the annals of the American Army.” This image is perhaps overly-romanticized notion of the couple’s social engagement for while at Camp Colt Ike was busy ensuring the productivity of a tank-training post on Big-Round Top without the luxury of tanks, (recalling in his memoir that “someone had the notion of mounting the machine guns on truck trailers”), while simultaneously dealing with a Spanish flu outbreak which eventually killed 175 soldiers and civilians. Nevertheless, Mr. Hafer confirms Hatch’s characterization of the house as “Club Eisenhower,” by noting that the couple was very social minded and that the house afforded them an “excellent place for entertaining,” even though the frat house’s basement kitchen forced Mamie to cook on a hotplate upstairs and wash dishes in the sink.

Given the harsh conditions at Camp Colt, Ike’s time at home was limited, but nevertheless, their months in Gettysburg bonded the young couple to each other and to Gettysburg. As Ike said in his memoir At Ease: Stories I Tell My Friends, “While I could not be at home all night, whenever possible I would go there in the evening. My duties required getting up early in the morning but it was fun to have the chance to see my son growing up and spend the evenings with my wife.” In a letter that Mamie Eisenhower wrote in response to Sebastian Hafer, which he recently gave to the College in a box of things he “felt belonged to the house,” Mamie said that Icky had taken his first steps in the front bedroom, and this Mr. Hafer thought was her proudest memory of the home. According to Hatch, at Camp Colt, “where Mamie
shared her husband’s problems and success, they became the team they have been ever since.”34 Later, when relaying why the couple decided to retire in the town, Ike wrote “Gettysburg had been significant in the early years of our married life and our sentimental attachments were reinforced by its significance in American, as well as our personal, history.”35 Eisenhower received a Distinguished Service Medal for command of Camp Colt, and in 1954 a plaque and a tree planted in the soil of the forty-eight states were dedicated as a “tribute to the affection and high esteem of his 1918 Tank Corps comrades.”36 Ike would not return to Gettysburg until 1946 when, as a national hero, he would speak at commencement and receive an honorary Doctor of Laws from Gettysburg College.37 Thus, in the fall of 1918, the columned house was retaken by the Alpha Tau Omegas, most of whom had no idea who had spent the summer in their fraternity or the impact he would have during the war that would shape the lives of many ATO’s.

That fall the house continued to host many dances as they were fast becoming the most popular social activity of the time. Bob Fortenbaugh Jr., said that ATO “had regular dances like all fraternities did,”38 and that everyone brought dates. Even though Bob never took his future wife (who he comically recounted attended Gettysburg because it was $100 cheaper than Bucknell) to an ATO dance he confirmed that fraternity dances were “a lot of fun . . . the record player was going all the time.”39 He asserted though that it was “very different in those days” because each dance was heavily chaperoned.40 Indeed, the role frats began to play in the campus social scene remained heavily supervised, for example, as Glatfelter relates, in 1914 six members of an interfaternity dance committee were suspended for two weeks for permitting “some of the modern dances.”41 Nevertheless, as the 1935 Spectrum stated of one November weekend, “these dances furnished the nucleus for one of the most successful and enjoyable week-ends that Gettysburg students have ever enjoyed.42 Bob Fortenbaugh Jr. was a second generation ATO and
a self described “townie,” who “basically lived his whole life on campus,” as the son of Robert Fortenbaugh Sr., a 1913 graduate, long time professor and eventual national chaplain for the fraternity. After describing the house-hosted dance scene which dominated his campus weekends, he related to me the sobering reality of attending college during WWII, which is almost completely foreign to today’s draft-less generation.

ATO on North Washington Street was dramatically changed by the onset of World War II. As Bob Fortenbaugh said, “the war just changed everything.” ATO had been a significant contributor to “the big thing on campus,” having had several men on football scholarships. Bob said “I think the last year we were able to play football was the fall of ’42, we were already losing people to the draft, and football was becoming less and less important in the life of the school, although it had been very popular.” In October of 1945 ATO’s chapter publication, “The Battlefield Guide” supported Bob’s assertion that during the war “the whole collegiate atmosphere was drastically changed,” by demonstrating how the conflict forced the fraternity’s focus to shift from football games and dances to military matters which would envelope the lives of its members until armistice. Each article in the pamphlet is saturated with war concerns. One author praises the ATO class of 1940 which “had the remarkable record of all earning commissions in the armed services,” another attests to the value of brotherhood in times of crisis, saying “fraternities are proving their character and their capacity for stability during the present emergency,” and another thanks alumni whose support “during the war years has been of great value to the continuing activity of the chapter.” Reading that “the letters from many of the brothers in the service tell how very anxious they are to get back to college,” one can imagine that the columned fraternity house and the ribald serenity of fraternity life must have been conjured up in countless soldiers’ minds as they penned the address. “The Battlefield
Guide” dedicated a full page to the news and addresses of these brothers, now identified as either a Lt., Cpt., or Pf.c, under the title “A Letter a Day to a Brother Still Away!” Obituaries were printed of brother’s killed, like 1st Chas Edward Myers who the pamphlet said was awarded the purple heart post-humously when he was “killed by enemy fire when attempting to knock out three German mark V’s that were holding up the advance.” Bob Fortenbaugh Jr. also appeared in this issue under the heading “Bob Fortenbaugh Jr. Helps with Atomic Bomb.” As a chemistry major, Bob said he was sent to work on high energy particles for the army, which subsequently sent him to engineering school allowing him to graduate with his Gettysburg class.

However, the back cover of this Battlefield Guide introduced the possibility of change for ATO. Under the heading “Buy a Bond for the House Fund,” the back page was devoted to a discussion titled “What is Your Idea About a New ATO House?” Art Sipe, class of 1926, opened the dialogue by declaring: “The present ATO house at Gettysburg is inadequate to meet the demands of an aggressive Alpha Upsilon Chapter in the immediate future,” Sipe laid out options to either “enlarge our present structure by building in the rear as far as the law allows,” purchase “Hutch’s store and the corner property north of the building, thus giving ATO’s the entire corner,” or, most radically, to abandon the house on N Washington and move onto “campus proper.” Alumni like Edward Addison of ’43 favored this plan to move, but reminisced about the meaning of the house on North Washington Street, which had always been accepted as a symbol of ATO’s uniqueness. In his editorial Addison remembered,

Recall how we would say- “yeh an attractive house in nice; but what’s important are the men in the Chapter and baby-that’s how we have it all over those mansion home chapters. . . . there were times when our inadequate building resulted in the loss of good men who pledged to the Fraternity with the pretty façade and swanky interior. No powder room and eating in the cellar didn’t help our cause with the coeds either. Yeah- but that old house at the south end of the campus was my home- your home- our home, for four years. Memories hidden in every little corner-every closet-yes our attachment to the house is great by virtue of what it serves to remind us. If the house could talk I’m sure
that its main topic would be women with—“when will we get a new house” a close second. Within its walls the chapter grew and developed.48

While sentimental about the house, Addison and others expressed the need for a new structure to serve the expanding fraternity. Calling for $100 per alumni, Addison said: “If I want a new house and you want a new house, then we'll have a new house!”49 ATO made this a reality and on October 21 1954, when the cornerstone for the current house was laid on campus amid “fraternity row.” Ninety-five year old Dr. Menges, the oldest ATO, was the primary speaker and within the ceremony Robert Fortenbaugh Sr. was installed in his office as the national vice president of the fraternity.50 The Gettysburgian article detailing the ceremony included one of the last descriptions of the previous house, which in subsequent ATO publications was overshadowed by the new residence and mentioned only in the recurring phrase “the present chapter house was dedicated in October 1955 when a nearby site on North Washington Street was vacated.51 Peter Showvaker, a current ATO, agrees that hardly any of his brothers are aware that 157 N. Washington was the residence in which their fraternity “grew and developed.”52

When ATO moved onto campus proper, the fraternity leased the columned house to the College which used it to house the Alumni, Development, and Public Relations Offices. 53 In 1962, when the college found alternate buildings, ATO sold the property to the Gettysburg Youth Center, which put on programs for children and teens until 1971. Kenneth Mott, current professor at Gettysburg College recalls painting the downstairs “a God-awful orange,”54 to please the kids enrolled in the Head Start Program at which he volunteered. The Youth Center sold the building to Zentz Rentals, Inc in 1971 and this company sold the property to Sebastian Hafer, who would live there for over twenty years starting in 1976. When I interviewed Mr. Hafer, he told me that the Eisenhower legacy attached to the house was the sole reason he
purchased a building which cost him double the purchase price to remodel. The self-described “Civil War buff” had begun his search looking for a Civil War Era home, but after none seemed suitable he decided that a former Eisenhower residence would be “just as historically interesting.” Upon inquiring about the house after researching its ties with Ike, Mr. Hafer and the realtor who sold him the property remarked at the pervasiveness of the town myth stating that Eisenhower’s primary stay during 1918 was at the Springs Avenue address.55

Mr. Hafer told me that when the College was leasing the property, the FCC had moved into the second floor to conduct “super secret training exercises” involving large amounts of communication wire which was still upstairs when he moved in. He told me that he assumed they were working on some type of alternative communication hub for the Pentagon, but those involved, even after the war, would always remind him of their pledge to secrecy. He also explained that after the Gettysburg Youth Center moved out, the Calvary Baptist Church was founded in the building before moving to Biglerville. However, Mr. Hafer during his stay in the home was intent on asserting the property’s association with a young Eisenhower, and he was instrumental in getting the historical marker placed in front of his residence. He told me, “I wanted to make it known that Ike lived there I was proud of the fact that Ike had lived there. Not many people believed that he had, even though he lived there longer than any other place.” The Historical Society was initially hesitant because of the many Eisenhower markers in town, and actually insisted that Mr. Hafer pay for it. He had to negotiate with the Society over the wording of the marker, insisting that the word “Supreme Commander” appear on it, after all as he said, “there are many generals.” Thus, although Patton was his true hero (“he was a soldier’s soldier”), Mr. Hafer said: “I admire Eisenhower and think the world of him.” During his time in the home, Mr. Hafer worked with much success to dispel the myth that the Eisenhower house of 1918 was
located on Springs Avenue because to him “it was mind-boggling why it was lost in local history where Ike really lived.”

Of his own time there, Mr. Hafer said that he and his wife lived in it as a “typical family home,” with three of their children for “virtually all of their married years.” Mr. Hafer left the house after his wife died in 1998, and the house has “had no maintenance,” and been vacant ever since. Mr. Hafer began to relate that he had sold the property to the College with the understanding that an Eisenhower Center was to enter with offices on the ground floor and student rooms upstairs. When I told him that in fact I was to live in the building after renovation, he was extremely interested in hearing any news I could share. He went on to describe to me how many aspects of the house had “fallen into disrepair,” and that he had told Pete North of College Facilities: “You’re going to pay double what you paid for it renovating it,” to which Mr. North replied, “Possibly more.” Mr. Hafer exclaimed to me: “It’s going to be a million dollar building!”

Thus, like ATO in 1945, Gettysburg College is also expanding, and the acquisition of 157 North Washington Street and the subsequent launching of the new Eisenhower Institute for Leadership and Public Policy, will not only deepen the College’s embrace of its ties to Ike, but also preserve the history of his family’s formational summer in 1918 through the house which will bear his name. However, equally as important to campus history is the over forty year period in which Alpha Tau Omega lived, danced, and grew within behind its columned porch. In their story, the house traces the birth of fraternity life on campus, illustrates the trials of brotherhood during war, and attests to the legacy of an organization which still thrives to this day.
1 Katherine Haley Will email to Gettysburg College Campus 16 Aug. 2006.
2 The Battlefield Guide. Alpha Upsilon. April 1957 Alpha Tau Omega. Special Collections.
3 Gettysburg College Spectrum 1940 p. 148.
6 Ibid., 338
7 Ibid, 338.
8 Ibid., 339 and Gettysburg College website.
10 Glatfelter, A Salutary Influence, 621.
11 Ibid, 626.
15 Ibid., pg 5.
16 Sebastian Hafer. interview by Brett Jackson, 30 September 2006.
17 “A.T.O House Burned,” p. 5. and Sebastian Hafer interview.
18 Samuel Hefelbower. A History of Gettysburg, (Gettysburg PA: Gettysburg College), 382
19 Alpha Tau Omega pamphlet Commencement Week 1915. Special Collections.
20 Ibid.
23 Sebastian Hafer interview by Brett Jackson.
24 Elwood W. Chist Pennsylvania Historical Resource survey Form, 4
27 Robert Fortenbaugh Jr. interview by Brett Jackson, and Sebastian Hafer interview by Brett Jackson
28 Alden Hatch, Red Carpet for Mamie Eisenhower (New York: Popular Library, 1954), 92
29 Dwight D. Eisenhower, At Ease: Stores I Tell To Friends (Garden City, NY: Double Day & Company, 1967), 140
30 Ibid., 149
31 Alden Hatch Red Carpet for Mamie, p.87 and Samuel Hafer interview by Brett Jackson
32 Dwight D. Eisenhower, At Ease: Stores I Tell To Friends, p. 150
33 Sebastian Hafer, interview by Brett Jackson
34 Alden Hatch Red Carpet for Mamie, p. 95.
36 Alden Hatch. Red Carpet for Mamie, 95 and Gettysburg Times 1969. I found a photocopy of this plaque and what seemed to be a newspaper tribute to the President after his death at the Adams County Historical Society, but it was undated other than it can be assumed that “General Eisenhower now “belongs to the Ages”” gave some idea that it was in 1969.
Ibid.

Glatfelter A Salutary Influence, p. 626

Gettysburg College Spectrum Nov. 1935 as quoted in Glatfelter, A Salutary Influence, p. 626.


Ibid.

Alpha Tau Omega. The Battlefield Guide. Oct. 1945

Robert Fortenbaugh Jr. interview.

Alpha Tau Omega. The Battlefield Guide. Oct. 1945

Ibid.

Ibid.


Alpha Tau Omega The Battlefield Guide. April 1957

Peter Showvaker, interview by Brett Jackson September 27. and Alpha Tau Omega. The Battlefield Guide. April 1957.


Sebastian Hafer, Interview by Brett Jackson

Ibid.

Ibid.