



2-8-2017

## A Bid for Brotherhood: The Civil War and the Emergence of the Lexington Triad

Jonathan G. Danchik  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Danchik, Jonathan G., "A Bid for Brotherhood: The Civil War and the Emergence of the Lexington Triad" (2017). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 188.  
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/188>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/188>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# A Bid for Brotherhood: The Civil War and the Emergence of the Lexington Triad

## **Abstract**

There is little controversy in claiming that the Civil War casts a long shadow. Whether you're a history enthusiast, a reenactor, or even someone who doesn't study history, it's hard to completely get away from it. Shifts in political discourse and race relations are the most commonly discussed results of the conflict, but the war also brought about a considerable change in dominant moral philosophies that led to the establishment of several organizations, which continue to enjoy prominence to this day at different institutions of higher learning across the United States.

*[excerpt]*

## **Keywords**

Gettysburg College, Civil War, history

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

---

### A Bid for Brotherhood: The Civil War and the Emergence of the Lexington Triad

*By Jon Danchik '17*

There is little controversy in claiming that the Civil War casts a long shadow. Whether you're a history enthusiast, a reenactor, or even someone who doesn't study history, it's hard to completely get away from it. Shifts in political discourse and race relations are the most commonly discussed results of the conflict, but the war also brought about a considerable change in dominant moral philosophies that led to the establishment of several organizations, which continue to enjoy prominence to this day at different institutions of higher learning across the United States.



Otis Glazebrook, founder of Alpha Tau Omega, and veteran of the Battle of New Market. ca. 1866. Via  
Virginia Military Institute Archives Digital Collection

I speak particularly about Greek letter organizations. You can debate their merit in current times until you're blue in the face, but that's not what this is about. The Greek system was directly influenced by the Civil War, and it is that development which I hope to trace. There is, after all, a reason why the span of three decades after the war is commonly referred to as "the golden age of fraternities." The founders and advocates of Greek letter organizations all cite different interpretations of morality as the inspiration behind their actions, and a general consensus came about in the wake of the Civil War that there were several prevailing moral deficiencies which actively obstructed not only the integrity of individuals, but also the total reunification of the United States. The emergence of several Greek letter organizations after the war, particularly in the South, shows an attempt to aid civic reconciliation by creating societies and orders focused on codes of honor and integrity.

Language of fratricide often goes hand-in-hand with discourse on the Civil War—it seems as if it is only a matter of time before you hear the phrase "brother-against-brother" in literature. With the realm of politics being, at the time, almost entirely the domain of men, surely the uncomfortable political climate could be indirectly tempered by organizations which sought to unite men beneath various standards of character. The dominant honor culture of the South provided the ideal template.

Let's start with a familiar face. Robert E. Lee recognized the need for national unity after he returned to his life as a private citizen. He was the face of Southern military brilliance, but saw no need for further waste of human life. Realizing that further conflict would not bring about any positive change, he encouraged former Confederates to accept their place in the Union after the defeat of the Confederacy, and to live their lives in accordance with the laws of their country. Lee's clear sense of civic and moral duty drew the attention of the board of trustees at Washington College (Now Washington & Lee University), who saw fit to offer him the presidency of their institution.

In his letter of acceptance, Lee made it clear that his goals for the presidency did not simply end with an efficient administration; rather, he wanted to make the school into a place where people could move past their divides and work toward the common good of the nation. Lee wrote to the trustees: "I think it is the duty of every citizen, in the present condition of the country, to do all in his power to aid in the restoration of peace and harmony." Lee's decision to stress gentlemanly conduct and personal honor served as inspiration to the founders of the Kappa Alpha Order, which was founded in 1865 at Washington College under Lee's tenure. Admiration for their morally-upright president caused Lee to be officially named the "spiritual founder" of their fraternity in 1923. Even today, it is not uncommon for Kappa Alpha chapters to display a portrait of Lee or a cannon outside of their houses as a sign of their Civil War heritage.

Just as Lee sought to remedy the problems he diagnosed in society from his position of power, so too did Francis H. Smith, the first superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute. Smith wrote at the time of secession that “confidence is destroyed; fraternal feeling has been supplanted by intense sectional hate; the spirit of conciliation has been smothered and crushed, and the affections of the people North and South, East and West, appear to have been entirely withdrawn from their government.” Fearful anticipation during the high point of secession gave way to cautious hope during the war, and more fear upon its conclusion. Smith lamented such a breakdown in the relationship of the reunited countrymen, but used his position at VMI to encourage cadets to critically examine their thoughts and behavior in the years after the war. Just as VMI would rebuild itself after General David Hunter’s raid, Smith would attempt to forge a new bond between young men during their education at VMI.

In late 1868, three VMI cadets attended a bible study at Smith’s residence, continuing their discussion as they left. Discussions on the teachings of the Bible caused them to consider the culture of hazing that had emerged at VMI in the pursuit of rigid military discipline, and how it conflicted with their sense of right and wrong. At the edge of the Institute’s parade grounds, they formed a secret society intended to promote character traits of a higher standard than what they saw amongst their fellow “Brother Rats,” as VMI cadets often called each other. On New Year’s Day in 1869, that society publicly announced itself as the Sigma Nu fraternity. Today, Sigma Nu honors Smith as the spiritual founder of the organization, just as Kappa Alpha honors Lee.

Kappa Alpha and Sigma Nu make up two-thirds of the so-called “Lexington Triad:” a group of three fraternities all founded in Lexington in the four years following the Civil War. The third fraternity from this group is Alpha Tau Omega. One of its founders, Otis Glazebrook was a deeply religious veteran of the war, who saw rampant demonization between countrymen as the biggest obstacle to the successful reunification of the United States. He founded Alpha Tau Omega to work toward this goal as the first Greek letter organization to specifically align itself with Judeo-Christian ideals. Glazebrook’s admiration of the ancient Greeks allegedly started and ended with their language, and so he looked elsewhere—to his Christian upbringing—to inform the philosophy of his new organization. Thus, postwar Lexington saw the rise of yet another group attempting to heal the deep wounds left behind by the Civil War when Alpha Tau Omega established their first chapter at VMI in 1865.

The Lexington Triad did not come about in a vacuum. Northern Greek letter organizations were hesitant to expand southward after the Civil War due to fears of regional instability. Additionally, the Morrill Act of 1862 saw the setting-aside of more lands for higher education, providing more opportunities for the Greek system to spread. As a result, several groups formed on their own south of the Mason-Dixon Line and expanded well beyond it, sharing a part of the South’s postwar legacy which is still visible today. Other notable fraternities founded in the South in the decades following the Civil War include Kappa Sigma (founded in 1869 at the University of Virginia) and Sigma Phi

Epsilon (founded in 1901 at Richmond College). What is now Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia would see four new Greek organizations for women— Kappa Delta, Sigma Sigma Sigma, Zeta Tau Alpha, and Alpha Sigma Alpha—form between 1897 and 1901 alone. While the Greek system existed in America before the Civil War, it was forced to reinvent itself by such widespread upheaval. Think whatever you'd like about the current trajectory of Greek life, but if you want to understand it, you need to know where it came from.

---

Sources:

Bederman, Gail. *Manliness and civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Capps, Randall. *Sigma Nu: A Heritage History*. Lexington: Sigma Nu Fraternity, 1978.

Smith, Francis H. *Secession Crisis Letters, 1860-1861*. Lexington: Virginia Military Institute Archives.

<https://gettysburgcompiler.com/2017/02/08/a-bid-for-brotherhood-the-civil-war-and-the-emergence-of-the-lexington-triad/>