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# The History of the Dance Cards of Gettysburg College

Jessica N. Casale  
*Gettysburg College*

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# The History of the Dance Cards of Gettysburg College

## **Abstract**

The annual dances at Gettysburg College were the most popular social activity for students for over fifty years. The dance cards held in Special Collections at Musselman Library sparked an interest in the history of these dances and why they are not continued today. This research project uncovers the reason for the sudden extinction of a social event once adored by college students. It includes the prevalence of Greek life on campus and its effect on social life.

## **Keywords**

Gettysburg College, Dance Cards, College Dance

## **Disciplines**

Anthropology | Cultural History | History | History of Gender | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Social History | United States History

## **Comments**

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Jessica Casale

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### The History of the Dance Cards of Gettysburg College

Gettysburg College, founded in 1832, is a private four-year liberal arts institution located in historic Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The college has seen many significant events throughout its existence that has changed its social scheme. I am studying the transformation of the social activities at Gettysburg College over a span of one hundred years. The purpose of this paper is to present how and why the social events have changed over the years. I research several events between the years of 1900 to the present day in order to show the transition. Today, we have social events such as activities at the Attic, dances, field day, Greek life, sporting events, and much more. What entertained students in the past? Why have these events changed? Some events such as the annual dances used to be a prevalent aspect of the social spectrum in the college's history, yet have been lost in time. How did this happen and which events replaced the older activities? I find that by focusing on the history of the weekly dances, I can conclude how an event can slowly become less important to students over time. My project is based on materials from Special Collections, which is located on the fourth floor of the Musselman Library at Gettysburg College. All of the sources used for this project are primary sources because they consist of artifacts, photographs, articles, and personal records. They include dance cards, historic photographs, two Gettysburg College publications, and two Gettysburg student's personal scrapbooks. The majority of the sources were found in Special Collections online and/or at its location on the fourth floor of Musselman Library

at Gettysburg College. I describe these sources in detail to provide a clearer understanding of what they are. I examine the sources in order to draw conclusions about the transformation of social activities throughout the history of Gettysburg, beginning with dance cards and then transitioning into the photographs, publications, and scrapbooks. I analyze dance cards and the photographs found in Special Collections as a visual example of the change in the social life at Gettysburg. I use student publications such as the student newspaper as a primary source because it will be helpful to get a first person viewing of the life at Gettysburg. I also examine personal accounts of the daily life of Gettysburg students, such as Lybarger's and Clara A. Baker's scrapbook. This college is rich in its history and fully involved in engaging its students in activities outside the classroom, therefore I am very intrigued to discover how this has been a part of Gettysburg for so many years.

I came across the dance cards from the early to mid 1900s when my first year seminar class first visited Special Collections. Dance cards are tiny personal booklets that were given to each female student attending the college's dances (Dance cards, display case 5). They were usually decorated according to the theme of the dance and on the inside they included the location, for example- the Eddie Plank Memorial Gymnasium, the source of live music, the sponsors, the patrons/patronesses, and the names of the ladies' dance partners. The collection included 45 dance cards spanning from 1882-1952. The majority of them were from 1936-1939. They are available only in Special Collections. This source is the main focus of this project. The dance cards are unique visual items that reflect the social themes of certain years. Many of the themed dances were repeated over the years, but the dance cards for those dances differ greatly in their

appearances. I am using the dance cards as an example of how an extremely popular social event in the college's history can be lost through time. I have found mentions of the dances in publications and in pictures for supporting evidence.

A second source is the photographs found in Special Collections. They were found on Special Collection's GettDigital database, which consists of various items that were significant to the college's history and social life. The collection of photographs includes 140 pictures of college events spanning from 1875 to 1925. The events include dances, plays, special days on campus, sporting events, field games, and much more. I use two specific photographs from this collection; "The Gettysburg Academy" by Williams and the "Inter-fraternity Dance" by Tipton. These photographs are connected to the dance cards because they provide a visual image of what the dances actually looked like.

Several publications provide me with additional information. *The Gettysburgian* has been the college's campus newspaper since 1897 and still continues today. The newspaper keeps students up to date on the latest events or issues on campus. It is archived online and can also be found in Special Collections. Today, it can be picked up daily in the CUB. This is a great source because it provides a variety of outlooks on prevalent topics (*The Gettysburgian*). *The Spectrum* is the college's student published hardcover yearbook that began in 1892 and continues today. Each year, the yearbook is decorated with a design that reflects the year it is published. On the inside, the book contains the highlights of the year on the Gettysburg College campus, including clubs and organizations of the time, special events, athletic events, Greek life, and much more.

Two scrapbooks give a personal perspective of the social events at Gettysburg. They were also found during my visit to Special Collections in the library. One of the scrapbooks belonged to Donald Fisher Lybarger, valedictorian of the 1919 graduating class (MS-019). He was president of the Student Government, Editor of the *Gettysburgian*, Secretary of the Press Club, a varsity track runner, debater, and a founder of the Theta Kappa Nu Fraternity chapter on campus. The other scrapbook belonged to Clara A. Baker of the 1930 graduating class (Clara A. Baker Class of 1930 Scrapbook). She kept an in-depth scrapbook of pictures, items, posters, newspaper articles, and personal messages/letters. She was heavily involved in the Girl's Glee Club, the woman's basketball team, the sorority Beta Lambda, the Owl and Nightingale Players, and the many social events that occurred on campus. Both are located in Special Collections, but only the Lybarger scrapbook is found online.

The change in the importance of dances can be seen from the dance cards, which begin in 1882 and end in 1952. The earlier dance cards are heavily decorated according to their theme. For instance, there is a Soph-Frosh hop dance card from both 1938 and 1950. The 1938 card is steel with a hot pink booklet covered by an aluminum cut out of a figure of a woman and a man dancing, while the 1950 one is a larger booklet with beige paper containing a blue and orange design on it. The dances are the same but the vibrancy and detail in the dance card differs greatly. The dance cards from the 50s are much more simple and less stylish; all the same size, plain, and only containing two pages (see table 1). It was also found that after 1939, the times of the dances changed from 9pm-1am to 8pm-12am. Now, events at the attic sometimes do not begin until 11pm and end at 2am (Attic Events).

Table 1

Identification and description of dance cards

Name of Dance	Month, Year	Description of Booklet
Banquet of Theta Chapter of the Sigma Chi Fraternity	June, 1882	Plain beige
Junior Prom	1928	Larger blue velvet, with gold etching of Glatfelter Hall
The Spring Pan-Hellenic	April, 1936	Plain white
Military Ball	November, 1936	Larger blue velvet, with silver sketches of military men
Fall Pan-Hellenic Dance	November, 1936	Blue
Alpha Upsilon of Alpha Tau Omega Pledge Dance	October, 1936	
Gamma Phi Sorority Spring Formal	May, 1936	
The Fall Formal Dance- Psi Chapter of Tau Kappa Epsilon	December, 1936	Triangular booklet
Ivy Ball	April, 1936	Brownish green velvet
The Apple Blossom Dance Co-ed Spring Formal	May, 1937	Beige with green

Annual Ivy Ball	April, 1937	Beige velvet with green clover
Spring Pan-Hellenic Dance	April, 1937	
Pan-Hellenic Fall Dance	November, 1937	Music notes cut out from gold foil
The Frosh-Soph Hop	February, 1937	
The Junior Prom	February, 1937	Black Velvet
I.F.C. Stardust Ball	November, 1937	Sketch of a man and woman dancing with gold stars surrounding them
Chi Omega Dinner Dance	April, 1937	Tiny circular booklet
Alpha Upsilon of Alpha Tau Omega Spring Party	May, 1937	Large blue velvet, including pages for spaces to write “engagements” for each day of the year
Pennsylvania Delta Sigma Alpha Epsilon Pledge Dance	October, 1937	Sketch of a man and woman
Alpha Upsilon of Alpha Tau Omega Christmas Week End	December, 1937	Small gold sparkled
Alpha Upsilon of Alpha Tau Omega Pledge Dance	October, 1937	Booklet shaped as a wooden paddle
The Co-ed Christmas Formal	December, 1937	Miniature
Fall Pan-Hellenic Dance	November, 1938	Sketch of a woman with a pink and sparkled gold background

Soph.-Frosh. Hop	February, 1938	Silver metal cutout of a man and a woman with pink foil in the background
The Co-ed Christmas Formal	December, 1938	Wood cover
Apple Blossom Dance	May, 1938	Floral printed
Junior Promenade	February, 1938	Black velvet
Ivy Ball	April, 1938	Same as 1937 booklet
Spring Pan-Hellenic Dance	April, 1938	
Alpha Upsilon of Alpha Tau Omega Pledge Dance	October, 1938	
Chi Omega Spring Formal	April, 1938	
Spring Pan-Hellenic Dance	April, 1939	Blue velvet, with circular multi-colored pattern
Fall Pan-Hellenic Dance	November, 1939	Larger booklet
Apple Blossom Dance- Women's Division	May, 1939	Pink with picture of a watering can and flower
Student Council Dance	November, 1939	
Alpha Upsilon of Alpha Tau Omega Pledge Dance	October, 1939	Sketch of "pledge" with arm around woman
Alpha Tau Omega Christmas Parties	December, 1939	Christmas tree cutout from red foil
Alpha Tau Omega Spring	May, 1939	Larger horizontal, with blue velvet

Parties		
Phi Gamma Delta Spring House Parties	May, 1939	Wooden
Soph-Frosh Hop	February, 1940	Plain blue velvet larger booklet
Spring Formal Tau Delta of Chi Omega	April, 1940	Larger horizontal, with black snake print
The Interfraternity Council Thanksgiving Dance	November, 1946	Sketch of a man and woman with a yellow sparkled background
Phi Kappa Rho Fraternity Christmas Dance	December, 1946	Larger cardboard-like gray
The Interfraternity Council Autumn Interlude	November, 1948	Larger plain beige
Santa's Christmas Formal of Phi Kappa Rho Fraternity	December, 1948	Larger red cardboard-like
The Interfraternity Council Spring Ball	April, 1948	Large, green velvet with sketch of man and woman dancing
Colonial Ball	February, 1948	Largest of all booklets, beige with small sketch of man and woman dancing
Annual Christmas Dance of Phi Kappa Rho	December, 1949	Large with sketches of Christmas trees
The Junior Prom and	February, 1950	Large plain

Soph-Frosh Hop		
The Ivy Ball	April, 1950	Large cardboard-like with only two pages
Christmas House Party of Phi Kappa Rho Fraternity	December, 1950	Small horizontal
Military Ball	April, 1950	Largest, plain beige
Annual I.F.C. Ball	November, 1950	Largest, plain yellow
Phi Kappa Rho Spring Formal	May, 1951	Largest, plain blue
Phi Kappa Rho Christmas House Party	December, 1951	Plain green
Phi Kappa Rho Spring House Party	May, 1952	Plain gray

In the Inter-fraternity dance picture from 1907 taken by William H. Tipton, students each have a designated dance partner who they are slow-dancing with. The women are wearing white gowns with silky white gloves while the men are in tuxedos and bowties. In another dance picture taken by M. F. Williams from 1920, the women are wearing all different types of dresses: some are long-sleeved, some sleeveless, some short, some long. Some of them are wearing headbands and none seem to be wearing gloves. Meanwhile, the men are still in tuxedos but only some have bowties on. The comparison of these two photographs shows the sudden changes in formality over the

course of about a decade. The dances seem to become less formal and more casual as time goes on.

Several pages in the *Spectrum* yearbooks highlight the college's dances. The dances dominated the social events at Gettysburg for many decades, yet as time went on, the students seemed to become less passionate and excited for them. The 1915 *Spectrum* included three pages dedicated to the Junior Promenade. The full-page description of the joy of the dance was almost poetic- "Take us back to that starlit night when we ragged and fancy danced with the ladies of our dreams" (*Spectrum*, 1915 p.193). The 1921 yearbook was also very enthusiastic about the Junior Promenade. The Junior Prom committee wrote about the dance, "the event which every college man looks forward to for two whole years" (*Spectrum*, 1921 p.166). They even had a live orchestra play for the students. The concentration on the Junior Prom seemed to shift in 1933 when the Sophomore-Freshman Dance "marked the high spot of the year in activities" (*Spectrum*, 1933 p.78). The dances shifted even more in 1954 when "The Thing" Committee was formed to sponsor dance events every Friday night when a campus event wasn't scheduled (*Spectrum*, 1954). The dances became less prevalent and continued as a tradition within the Greek system. In the 1966 *Spectrum*, the only mention of a dance was of the traditional Inter-Fraternity Dance held in October by the Inter-Fraternity Council (IFC) (*Spectrum*, 1966). The yearbooks the following years barely mentioned any dances at all if they were not fraternity related. It seemed as though the legacy of holding recreational dances at Gettysburg College was coming to an end and that the dances would now be tied to the fraternities.

The scrapbooks provide personal examples of what a student at Gettysburg College would have enjoyed during their four years there. The scrapbook by Donald F. Lybarger, the 1919 Valedictorian of Gettysburg College, displays the experience of a heavily involved student on campus. Lybarger was a part of the debate team, the fraternity Phi Sigma, the student council, the track team, and the R.O.T.C. Despite his involvement in various social activities, Lybarger still attended dances at the college. On a page labeled “Social Events, 1917,” included were dance cards for the Philomathean Literary Society Spring Dance of 1917, the Phi Sigma Spring Dance of 1918, the Military Ball of 1918, the Phi Sigma Mid-Winter Dance of 1919, and a small leather dance card for the Junior Prom of 1919. Another scrapbook by Clara A. Baker, class of 1930, displays some of the experiences of the women on campus. Clara was heavily involved in the Owl and Nightingale Players, the Women’s Glee Club, and the sorority Beta Lambda. She also advocated for women’s rights and participated in many activities ran by women. She included in her scrapbook an article about the Girl’s Annual Dance, the R.O.T.C. Military Ball, and the annual Frosh-Soph Hop. She also included other articles of social events in her scrapbook such as the “First Annual Indoor Circus” for the Benefit of the Boys’ Work Fund, the various performances by the dramatic club, and the latest results from sports teams.

*The Gettysburgian* highlights the campus’s news. Each newspaper includes various articles written by students at the college. Each edition includes information about upcoming events and evaluations of the highlights of the week. By searching for the keywords “dance” and “prom” in the Gettysburgian Newspaper Archive, I am able to view the any article that was written about dances held at the college. In the 1909

*Gettysburgian*, the Junior Promenade was described as “the most brilliant social function of the year” (*Junior Prom*). In the 1912 issue, the night at the Junior Prom was the headliner and considered “the main topic of interest” (*Collegiana*). The *Gettysburgian* also evaluated and recorded the success of each dance. At the 1927 Junior Prom, “The floor was crowded to capacity with about one hundred and sixty couples, who danced until the last number” (*Junior Prom Scores Success*). One of the headliners on the first page of the 1930 newspaper read “Frosh-Soph Hop Attracts Large Crowd... Many Consider Dance One of Best Hops Ever Held At Gettysburg; Four Hundred Attend” (*Frosh-Soph Hop Attracts Large Crowd*). In 1932, it was decided that the Greek organizations would now hold closed dances by invite only (*Greeks Hold House Parties*). Many students now attended the Greek dances instead of the dances that were open to everyone. The 1935 *Gettysburgian* contained an article titled “What Is Wrong?” concerning the results from the Junior Prom and the Soph-Frosh Hop. Contrary to the previous results from the years that these two social events were widely supported, it turns out that “less than one-fifth of the college men supported either one or both of the dances.” The article discusses the possible cause for the students’ disinterest. The writers concluded that the students “might find other activities more to their interest” or it may have been due to the cost of the dance instead of the program itself (*What Is Wrong?*). This seemed odd contrary to the success of the Junior Promenade in 1933 which was considered “not only a huge success socially, but financially” (*Dance Chairman Gives Report On Junior Promenade*). Gettysburg College’s first co-ed dance was then held that same year and deemed quite successful- “The success of Gettysburg’s first formal co-ed dance last Friday night augurs well for the future of the social program of the women’s

division” (*Dance Success*). In an attempt to draw the non-fraternity men back to the dances, in 1936 Gettysburg began holding Saturday night informal dances (*Saturday Night Dances*). These “informal dances” began a controversy because outsiders, nicknamed “gate crashers,” began showing up at the dances and ruining the atmosphere (*Gate-Crashers*). The event planners at the college continued to hold the annual Junior Prom and Soph-Frosh Hop, hoping that they would be successful. Yet the 1940 article titled “Dance Plans Get Nowhere” concerned the unusually low number of tickets sold for the Junior Prom and Soph-Frosh Hop (*Dance Plans Get Nowhere*). The last mention of the Junior Prom was in 1966 (*Prom, Class Show, Snow Sculpturing To Close Weekend*). The dances that Gettysburg used to hold annually seemed to have come to an end, leaving the majority of the dances held by the fraternities. Which events replaced the dances that used to be the most popular social activity at Gettysburg College? I researched the newspapers from 1966 until today to figure this out. In 1967, an article was written about the prevalence of the Greek system on campus- “fraternity men pointed out that there is a place for everyone on campus, with the fourteen fraternities... fraternities encourage college loyalty, and serve as a place where students can practice living in society” (*Forum Views Fraternities*). The popularity of fraternities escalated in 1975 when 76% of the freshmen men rushed and 207 out of 275 accepted their bids along with 43% of the freshmen women who rushed and 88 out of 152 who accepted their bids (*Two-Hundred-Seven Freshmen Pledge Fourteen Fraternities In 1975 Rush*). The social activities on campus began to shift toward partying and excessive drinking at these fraternities. The 1976 *Gettysburgian* included an article concerning the patterns of alcohol use and social interaction on the college campus. The Residential Life

Commission of Gettysburg College called for an improved quality of residential living in order to decrease alcohol abuse (*Res. Life To Sponsor Forum On Alcohol Use And Partying*). Regardless, weeknight parties became a growing social function for Gettysburg students. An entire page of the 1986 *Gettysburgian* concerns the growing “party” atmosphere at Gettysburg, mainly stemming from the fraternities- “Gettysburg College is not the same institution it was one or three or five decades ago...It is difficult to find a night of the week in which alcohol does not flow at some house... Some students say that belonging to a Greek society is the only way to have a social life at Gettysburg” (*Greek System At Odds With Goals Of The College*). The lack of participation in the campus-sponsored events became a huge concern for faculty members. They asked the students directly what had happened to the once stimulating, engaging and diverse campus environment and how the current social life contrasts this environment. Bobby Bruns class of 1988 said, “without parties by the fraternities, there is *no* social life on the campus” and Bruce Welch class of 1986 claimed, “I feel the campus to be too fraternity-oriented...Perhaps if offered more opportunities with diverse social settings we could achieve this “stimulating” goal” (*Student Speakout- New Society Purpose?*). It seems as though the social life at Gettysburg shifted from focusing on the school-sponsored activities such as the dances to focusing on parties at the fraternity houses. Neil W. Beach, a student at Gettysburg in 1987, wrote a letter to the editor of the *Gettysburgian* about the student’s negligence to attend any of the events sponsored by the CUB- “I have difficulty with the argument that there is nothing to do except attend parties on the weekend when I see the lack of attendance at campus sponsored events” (*No Attendance For Alternatives*). As time went on, concern about the prevalence of

alcohol on campus continued to grow. I have come to the conclusion that, unfortunately, the Greek system and its weekend parties have replaced the annual school dances. Many other students at Gettysburg realized that this was occurring and wrote numerous letters to the editors of *The Gettysburgian*. Ray Sheely, an alumnus of Gettysburg College class of 1933, happened to put the pieces together quite perfectly. In his letter to the editor of *The Gettysburgian*, he wrote, “The alcohol problem was not always like it presents today... In the 30’s, 40’s and 50’s fraternities enjoyed their five dances a year. The entire student body enjoyed the five formal dances held at the Plank Gym... It was during the liberalizing of college standards that occurred in the 60’s and the early 70’s” (*Alcohol Destroying Frat System*).

Today, the Campus Activity Board (CAB), a student-run organization, creates and plans social events for the campus community. These activities are usually held in the Attic or at the Majestic Theater. I found examples of these activities on the CAB event calendar on Gettysburg College’s website. They include movie nights, recreational tournaments such as ping pong or capture the flag, or just a hangout at the Attic with snacks, music, and board games. The dances on campus are held by the fraternities twice a year, a winter formal and a spring formal. Once every few months, the Attic will host a themed dance during the weekend (The Attic Events).

Based on my research of dance cards, historical photographs, two Gettysburg College publications, and two Gettysburg student’s personal scrapbooks, I am able to draw conclusions about the declination of a popular social activity that entertained students at Gettysburg College in the past. From the early 1900s until the 1960s, the campus-sponsored dances were the highlight of social events at the college. They were

what every student talked about and looked forward to on the weekends for over fifty years. The dances used to be a continuous social and financial success until the 1960s when attendance declined and money was lost. The decline may have been due to the coming of a new decade focused on liberation during college. When the co-ed dances began to form, old traditions were lost to modern ways. The fraternities crept in and became a symbol of freedom and a right of passage into the social life at Gettysburg. As a result, a larger percent of the student body joined Greek life, which became the center of social activity on campus. The parties held during the week and on the weekends at the fraternities became more popular than the campus-sponsored events. Students and faculty members recognized this change and continued to hold events in the CUB or at the Majestic Theater, but attendance was still not as high as it used to be. Unfortunately, this remains true to today. Gettysburg continues to hold events sponsored by CAB and has made more clubs and organizations available to its students, but in the end it is up to the individual to decide which social path he/she wants to take.

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