

Brief Society History- Wilson Library, University Archives Description

The University of North Carolina opened its doors on 15 January 1795. The first recorded meeting of its student Debating Society occurred less than five months later, on 3 June 1795. Undoubtedly, Tutor Charles W. Harris had some influence on its creation, since he had been attended the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) and was familiar with the Whig Society there. Thirty-one members pledged to abide by the laws of the Debating Society. However, at its third meeting, on 25 June 1795, a motion was made to divide into two separate societies. Voting on the motion was postponed for a week; and at a meeting on 2 July, a vote was taken, the motion passed, and a second society was created. It was called the Concord Society. The records of the societies do not reveal why the division was made. Historians have suggested that it may have been because of political differences, or disagreement over the powers of the Censor Morum (the Debating Society officer who inspected the conduct and morals of the members), or simply a desire to provide more frequent opportunities for debate. The following year both societies changed their names to the Greek equivalents. The Debating Society became the Dialectic Society on 25 August 1796, and on 29 August 1796 the Concord Society became the Philanthropic Society.

In his History of the University of North Carolina, Kemp P. Battle wrote, "The Fundamental Laws, afterward called Constitution, and the course of proceedings of the two societies were much alike. In the Concord for a short while new members could be admitted by a majority vote. . . I notice no other material differences, and I make no further distinction between the two in endeavoring to reproduce their action." The stated goals of both societies were the cultivation of friendship and the promotion of useful knowledge. The latter included development of the members' debating skill, writing style, and knowledge of parliamentary rules. Officers of the societies included a president; a clerk; a treasurer; a censor morum; and two correctors, who reviewed the members' compositions. The censor morum, whose powers were more restricted than those of the Debating Society officer, was later replaced by a vice-president.

Members were divided into three classes; and alternately at each meeting one class read, another composed, and the third spoke. Reading meant reading aloud a passage from an author, while speaking (or declaiming) meant reciting from memory a passage from a famous speech. Those composing had to read aloud short essays they had written. Meetings were held once a week (later, twice a week). In addition to the three activities described above, each meeting included a debate, in which two of the members would argue a predetermined question. The societies awarded diplomas, and although not an academic diploma, a society diploma was a distinct honor conferred on a member who was well respected and had performed his society duties outstandingly.

In support of their activities the societies acquired, by gift and purchase, extensive library and portrait collections. For the most part, books were purchased from funds provided by dues and fees imposed on the members. Eventually, the societies' combined libraries became larger than the university library. According to Kemp P. Battle, "as early as 1835 there were about 6,000 well-selected books in the two, probably the best collection in the State." By 1875, the Dialectic Society alone had amassed 6,943 volumes. In 1886, the two societies merged their library holdings into the university's collection.

Until 1848, the societies met in their libraries, which were on the third floor of South Building. The additions to Old East and Old West completed in 1848 included new quarters for the societies--the Dialectic in Old West and the Philanthropic in Old East. In 1860, the societies moved to chambers in New East and New West.

By virtue of their concern with the conduct of their members, the societies also functioned as the campus student government for over a century and were instrumental in the development of the Honor System. Bad conduct by one member was thought to reflect on the entire society. The societies imposed fines for various offenses, and it was not uncommon for them to impeach members for repeated or excessive misconduct. Around 1890, the faculty, interested in fostering student self-government, began to refer cases of cheating to the societies. But by 1910 the societies' disciplinary role in cases of cheating, hazing, and numerous other offenses had been assumed by the Student Council (established in 1904 as the University Council).

Throughout most of the university's history, membership in the societies was voluntary; and new members were admitted by a vote of the old members. Nevertheless, until the twentieth century, almost the entire student body belonged to one of the two societies. Generally though not exclusively, students from the eastern portion of the state joined the Philanthropic Society and those from the western portion joined the Dialectic Society. This practice may have grown out of the early sectional rivalry between east and west.

The societies disbanded during Reconstruction, when the university was closed. But following the university's reopening in 1875, they reorganized and flourished. In 1885, a resolution of the Board of Trustees required all enrolled students ("except medical, law, and students taking postgraduate or special courses, and such as may be specially excused by the faculty") to belong to one of the societies. This action resulted from the urging of University President Kemp P. Battle and the faculty, who wanted to foster the societies' disciplinary function. By 1895, however, the university had dropped this membership requirement; the course catalog published in that year states that "although membership in the societies is entirely optional, yet it is earnestly recommended by the faculty."

In 1919, the Philanthropic Society reorganized itself according to the plan of the General Assembly of North Carolina and became the Philanthropic Assembly. In 1924, the Dialectic Society reorganized as the Dialectic Senate. Over the next several decades, more and more student groups emerged to vie for members; and by the mid-1950s, membership in both societies had declined to an alarming level. In 1959, in an effort to ensure continuation of the organizations, the Senate and the Assembly merged into the Dialectic and Philanthropic Joint Senate.

More detailed information on the history of the Dialectic and Philanthropic societies will be found in the following sources:

Battle, Kemp P. *History of the University of North Carolina*, 2 volumes, 1907, 1912.

McLean, Hallie S. "The History of the Dialectic Society, 1795-1860" (Thesis, M.A.), University of North Carolina, 1949.

Murphy, Evangeline Burbank. "The Growth of the Library of the Philanthropic Society at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1797-1822" (Thesis, M.S.L.S.), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1979.

York, Maurice C. "The Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies' Efforts at Library Development at the University of North Carolina, 1875-1906" (Thesis, M.S.L.S.), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1977.