

The Dialectic Literary Society
[North Carolina University Magazine Old Series Vol. XXIX no. 2, Dec. 1898, New Series
Vol. XVI P.85]
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The first recorded account of a literary society at the university of North Carolina is under the date June 3, 1795, about a month after the college first opened. It was a meeting of "The Debating Society," which had probably been organized at some previous date. We learn that this society lived and flourished and that its meetings were held on Thursday night of each week. The literary exercises were about equally divided between reading, speaking, and giving exercises in composition. The membership fee was twenty-five cents.

It was evidently thought that two societies could do better work than one, for on July 2nd of the same year a division took place, the new organization bearing the name of "Concord Society;" this later becoming the Philanthropic Society. The original body remained with its name unchanged until August of the same year when it was given the name "Dialectic." The change of name however did not affect the internal workings of the society, and the laws and constitution of the Dialectic Society to-day are, with some changes and additions practically the same as those in use in the "Debating Society."

The names and duties of the officers are now about as they were a hundred years ago.

The societies originally had no halls of their own, but on different nights of the week held their meetings in Person Hall, the Old Chapel. In 1815 the South Building was completed and two halls were provided for the societies on the third floor. The library occupied the walls of the rooms. Here the young men held their literary meetings for thirty-three years. To meet the growing needs of the societies, better halls were provided for them by building additions to the north ends of the Old East and Old West. In the fall of 1848 the Dialectic Society occupied its new quarters on the second floor of the Old West building.

The first meeting, which was held in the new hall on September 9th, was presided over by Kemp P. Battle. This seems to have been quite a memorable occasion. The following paragraph is taken from the minutes of that meeting: "It being the first time the Society had assembled in this Hall, the rev. Dr. William Mercer Green opened the exercises with a prayer, which was immediately followed by a Dedicatory Address by Samuel F. Phillips, Esq. To say that it was eloquent and racy, abounding in pathos and replete with solid instruction, noble exhortation and excellent advice, is but paying a faint tribute to this effort." The minutes go on to speak of the "affecting and interesting" scene produced by James Mebane, who had been one of the founders and the first president of the Dialectic Society, fifty-three years before, who having returned to witness the dedication of the new hall, addressed the audience.

A library room was provided for the society on the third floor of the Old West directly over the hall. It was open to students twice a week, on Wednesday and Saturday. The colors of the Society are blue, and it was at this time the custom on commencement occasions for the members to distinguish themselves from others by wearing blue bows and ribbons. The seniors who spoke on commencement wore long black silk gowns, which were the property of the society.

From this time until the breaking out of the Civil War the Dialectic Society shared in the prosperity of the University. In the spring of 1861 the fine, large hall in the New West Building was first occupied. The formal dedicatory ceremonies were never held owing to the sudden and exciting turn of political affairs. The large debt incurred in furnishing the hall was never entirely paid until the re-opening in 1875. The library occupied a large room on the floor above the hall. During the war the membership dwindled in numbers until at one time there was not enough to fill all the offices without using some Freshmen. In 1868 the doors of the University were closed.

After the refounding of the Society its growth in numbers and usefulness has steadily increased with slight exceptions until the present time. In 1886 the two societies united in placing their body of books in the University library. The collection owned by the Dialectic Society at this time numbered about 8,000 volumes. Much of the discipline of the University was at an early date placed in the hands of the two societies. So well was the move received that much of this self-governing spirit is exerted by these bodies to-day.

The objects of the Society in the past have ever been to stimulate a love for literary work and knowledge of parliamentary law, to develop the power of extemporaneous speaking to the extent of being able to form thoughts quickly and accurately while on the floor and give expression to these in good form.

At the present time its meetings are held each Saturday night of the collegiate year. Besides the usual weekly debates each member is required to prepare and deliver an oration to the society during his senior year. There are three inter-society debates which give the opportunity for one Freshman, two Sophomores, two Juniors, and one Senior to debate in public. There is a public society debate in the spring of the year in which any member may compete for a handsome prize. The annual University debate with the University of Georgia gives the members an opportunity to strive for the high honor of crossing swords with opponents from another state. On Washington's birthday the Society has an orator represent it. Four members are annually chosen as editors of the University Magazine, and in other ways as well is the literary ability of the society given an opportunity to develop. The hall is a very beautiful one. Last year a new carpet costing several hundred dollars was spread upon its floor; thirty oil portraits of illustrious members adorn its walls. Among these one may see the faces of college presidents, men who became famous in war both by land and by sea, prominent men in business and philanthropy as well as political men high in the Nation's favor. Legislators, governors and senators are there and the President's chair is not without its representative.

With a large membership of strong courageous young men the Dialectic Society is ever moving forward with its grand work, calling with cheer and good will to its sister society, while its members proudly bear aloft the ancient banner of their fathers bearing the motto: "Love of Science and Virtue."