

The Carolina Di-Phi Societies Still Survive
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Once men like Thomas Wolfe, Sam Ervin, and Frank Porter Graham debated, politicked, and composed speeches in these rooms. Until the Societies threw them out (they tore up too much of the furniture) the old Student Legislature used to hold its sessions here. Even now, the debating and politicking go on, on a smaller scale, and occasional chamber ensembles come up to practice or hold recitals.

Except for that, few students ever see the Dialectic and Philanthropic Society chambers any more. A pity, since the halls, homes of UNC's two traditional literary and debating societies since World War I, are among the last vestiges of the University's nineteenth-century heritage.

The "Di" and the "Phi" were formed in 1795, just months after the University opened, by students who wanted to polish their speaking abilities. Gradually, the Societies expanded their scope to include public readings in contemporary literature (since no English curriculum existed at that time), and socials like the Commencement Ball.

Professors soon found it easier to entrust student discipline to the societies than try to enforce it themselves. Thus, by the 1820s, the Di and Phi were, in effect, UNC's student government, and every new student was obliged to join one or the other.

UNC alumni continued to identify themselves as Di's or Phi's for the rest of their lives. Until the founding of the Alumni Association, the Societies were the main link between the University and its former students. It was natural that portraits of distinguished former members were donated to the Societies or bought by the students themselves. By the time of the Civil War, the Di and Phi, their paintings, and their individual private libraries (each of which was larger than the entire university collection) occupied almost all of New West and New East respectively.

In fact, the two buildings had been erected in 1859 for the expressed purpose of housing the societies' activities. For a short time, they were actually named, "Di Hall" and "Phi Hall," but the unofficial names stuck and prevailed.

Almost everyone who writes about their student days at the University from Kemp P. Battle to Robert B. House and Albert Coates recalls their awe, as freshmen, on entering the Di or Phi chambers.

The two plush halls were more elegant than anything else in the entire state, even the State Capitol itself. Around the heavy mahogany desks of the rostrum arched row after row of chairs made of red velvet and scrollwork iron. Green damask curtains hung from the windows, around the doors, and over the rostrums proscenium arch.

And on the walls, sometimes three deep, hung the paintings themselves.

Time and the twentieth century, however, soon caught up with the Di and Phi. Interest in college debating declined in favor of football and other team sports. Modern academic departments in English, speech, and political science assumed much of the Societies' teaching function, while fraternities (which were officially banned at UNC until 1885) usurped much of their social role.

The *Yackety-Yack*, the *University Magazine* (ancestor of the *Carolina Quarterly*), and the intercollegiate debate team, all former Di-Phi joint projects, became independent organizations. An independent student government, founded in 1911, assumed enforcement of the Honor Code.

In 1886, the Di and Phi merged their collections with the University to form the modern UNC Library. Hence almost every book in the library bears the stamp: Endowed by the Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies.

By 1924, then, both Societies had shrunk to such an extent, that their meeting halls were transferred to less spacious quarters on the top floors of New West and New East. In the new rooms, neither the Di nor the Phi had adequate space to display its paintings. Consequently, many were loaned to various University locations.

Among these are the portraits of Justice Thomas Ruffin in the Law School Library, Prof. Elisha Mitchell in the Geology Library, and Charles D. McIver in the lounge of McIver Dormitory. Several others hang in South Building.

Perhaps as many as nineteen have disappeared entirely, due to disruptions like the First World War or simply to past neglect. Several of those loaned to other offices have turned up years later, apparently forgotten in attics and closets.

Others have been slashed or punctured by carelessness or vandalism. The portrait of Congressman David Outlaw, for example, had its eyes punched out with a ball point pen. Until recently, each Halloween, the McIver portrait used to be decorated with a plastic mask . . . attached to the canvas with plasti-tak. McIver residents voluntarily ceased the custom before serious damage resulted.

For the most part, however, those portraits actually hanging in the society chambers are in fairly good condition. These tend to be the best of the collection and constitute a major academic resource of the University community.

Not only are the paintings the sole collection of significance owned and controlled entirely by students in the United States; they also serve as an important source of historical information concerning North Carolina and the South.

The portrait of Charles Manly, badly scarred and mildewed after years in the attic of Manning Hall, is, for instance, apparently the only known likeness of the North Carolina Governor. In a corner of the portrait of N.C. Governor William Miller is one of only two known representations of the original state capitol.

The Societies' portrait of James K. Polk is one of the only likenesses of the president painted from life. It was executed by Thomas Sully in the White House in 1847. Also in the Di chamber, over the President's dais, is Charles Willson Peale's portrait of William R. Davie, N.C. governor, Revolutionary War Hero, and "father of the University."

On the rear wall hangs the portrait of Thomas L. Clingman, U.S. Senator, Confederate general, and one of the most eminent naturalists of his time. The painting, among the most notable in the collection, is unique in the foreshortening of Clingman's upraised right arm, a difficult artistic technique seldom seen in portraiture.

Perhaps the most outstanding work in either chamber is the Phi's portrait of James Cochran Dobbin. Dobbin, while a state representative, made an eloquent speech credited with winning the entire Assembly over to the funding of a State Home for the Insane, advocated by Dorothea Dix. Later, as Secretary of the Navy under Pierce, Dobbin built the U.S. Navy into the best in the world, ironically a major factor in hastening the end of the Civil War.

The two Societies, among the last organizations of their kind in the United States, merged in 1959 into a Joint Senate and continue to meet weekly in the Dialectic Chambers.

The new body still debates, still conducts public readings, and, in addition, occasionally passes resolutions on the state of the campus and the world in general. In 1963, for example, the Di-Phi officially abolished Student Government as a waste of time, and have not yet seen fit to re-establish it.

Less frivolously, the societies attempt to act as a forum for ideas concerning the improvement of University life. In 1963 and 1964, an ad hoc committee of Di-Phi members exposed and attacked racial-discrimination clauses in the charters of several campus fraternities. In the spring of 1974, the Societies opened a continuing series of seminars on the role and functions of UNC Student Government, with the object of suggesting possible reforms.

Each semester, the Di-Phi stages public debates between UNC faculty members on significant issues, and each year, awards the Willie P. Mangum medal to the graduating senior delivering the best original speech in a public competition. Currently they are attempting to raise money to pay for the restoration and preservation of damaged paintings in their possessions.

The halls may not echo as loudly as they used to, but at least they still echo.