

Thinking back 191 years ago this evening, to the circumstances and the people that came together to form the beginnings of the Chi Phi Fraternity as we know it today, it was a very different way of life from what we know on college campuses today. December 24, 1824: Princeton, New Jersey. Then known as the College of New Jersey, what we now know as Princeton University, was housed mainly in Nassau Hall, built in 1756 at the time of the founding of the college. At the same time, the President's house was built, later to bear the name of John Maclean. Closely related to the College was the Princeton Theological Seminary, formed in 1812 as a specialized institution for religious studies.

Nassau Hall, known as "Old Nassau" was the largest building in New Jersey and the largest academic building in all the American colonies. It has quite a storied history, in fact it still bears cannon fire scars from the Battle of Princeton in 1777. In 1783 it served as the capitol of the United States, and it housed the entire American government. At the time of Chi Phi's founding, it included space for classrooms, a library, chapel, and residential rooms for both students and faculty.

The Maclean house has served as the home to ten Princeton presidents. In now serves as the headquarters of The Princeton Alumni Association, in honor of John Maclean Who in 1826 instigated the formation of an alumni association to promote the college and its graduates. He even Recruited James Madison to serve as Alumni president until His death in 1836. It was in this house, in the first floor Office, that John Maclean Jr would find the old records of The Chi Phi Society of 1824.

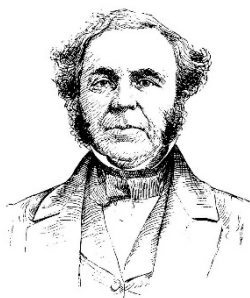


Above: Nassau Hall with the President's House in the foreground; at right, the main faculty room in Nassau Hall



The Maclean House: One can only wonder what went on here during the tenure of John Maclean, and that moment when his nephew John Maclean Jr found the old papers of the Chi Phi Society, which led to the rebirth of Chi Phi.

The Chi Phi Society at Princeton was originally founded by professors, rather than students. Even though we acknowledge that the "modern" Chi Phi Fraternity stems from the second founding at Princeton in 1854 and the subsequent mergers with the Hobart and Southern Orders, if it were not for these early pioneers in 1824, the history of our fraternity would have been inexorably altered – for there would never have been those early records to stir the imagination of John Maclean Jr to revive Chi Phi. Each of these professors, and later the three students admitted to the Chi Phi Society have a very interesting story to tell about themselves, about the times at Princeton, and about the character of men that would come together to form a college secret society at the time.



R. Baird.

Robert Baird

We generally give Robert Baird the credit of “founding” the Chi Phi Society. He was a clergyman and a tutor at the College from 1822 to 1827. Records of him are scant in terms of his relationship to Chi Phi, but he was a prolific writer on religious topics, and after his service to Princeton he traveled extensively in Europe, and during the Civil War was a strong advocate of the Union position against secession. He gathered around him at least six other faculty members and later, at least three students, as members of the fledgling Chi Phi Society. We do not have a solid understanding of the complete makeup of the Chi Phi Society because when the original papers were discovered, the names signed to the constitution were cut off, and it is only through extensive research and study of correspondence in the late 1800s that we became privy to these names.

Let’s talk about some of the other founders of the Chi Phi Society. James Carnahan was President of the College in 1824. He assumed that office in 1822 following a period of great turmoil at the College that was slow to respond to the changes of the times as Colleges became more secular. His predecessor had clung to customs of the past and seen the enrolment decline from 120 to less than 70 students. There had been rebellion and rioting among the students, and dismissals from the faculty and administration. He was the longest serving President of the College – over 30 years, until succeeded by his Vice President, John Maclean, Jr. in 1854. Under his leadership, the College rebounded, and by the end of his tenure enrolment had increased to 250, and during that time he oversaw the graduation of more students than had graduated over the entire prior history of the College.



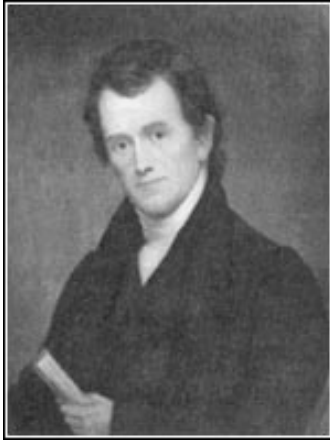
James Carnahan



John Maclean Jr.
Class of 1816; Princeton President, 1854–68

The success of Carnahan’s tenure would not have been possible without the help of another member of the Chi Phi Society (although he later denied it), John Maclean Jr who is the Uncle of another John Maclean Jr who would be instrumental in a second phase of Chi Phi’s history. He graduated from the College in 1816 – the youngest member in his class. He was the son of John Maclean, America’s first professor of chemistry and an immigrant from Glasgow, Scotland. To know his father, John Maclean, Sr is to understand in part the kind of man that John Maclean was. His father entered the University of Glasgow at age 13, and by the age of twenty he had risen as a member of the faculty of physicians and surgeons there.

Attracted by American political ideals, he immigrated to the US in 1795, settling in at Princeton where he delivered the first American undergraduate course in chemistry. In 1797 he published a paper that helped overthrow Priestley’s phlogiston theory and usher in the era of modern chemistry as we know today. John Maclean Jr, born in Princeton in 1800, was to serve the College all his life. Following his graduation in 1816, he attended the Princeton Theological Seminary, where he earned a divinity degree. He then began his career at the college 1818 as a tutor in Greek. In 1823 he was a professor of mathematics at the College. Perhaps due to his association with President Carnahan, he devised a plan to help resurrect the College involving the establishment of an Alumni Association, and enlarging and improving the faculty. The plan was accepted by the Board of Trustees, and he was subsequently appointed Vice-President and served in that capacity until he became President in 1854. Had he not taken the initiative at the low ebb of Princeton’s existence, it is quite possible that President Carnahan would have recommended the school be closed – once again altering the course of Chi Phi history.



Archibald Alexander came to Princeton in 1812 to accept appointment as the first Professor at the newly Created Princeton Theological Seminary. He had previously served nine years as the President of Hampden-Sydney College, but the Seminary at Princeton would be his home for 39 more years until his death in 1851. When he began, the seminary boasted all of three students, but the enrolment steadily increased and in 1817 a building was constructed, which would later be named Alexander Hall in memory of his years of dedication to the Seminary.



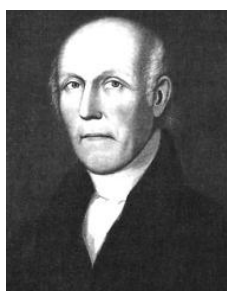
Princeton Seminary



Archibald's eldest son, James Waddel Alexander, who had been born while His father was President at Hampden-Sydney, entered as a student at the College of New Jersey in 1817 and graduated in 1820, then moving on to the Princeton Seminary to study theology, and was later appointed as a tutor there in 1824. Interestingly, one of his two sons, William C. Alexander, became the youngest of the six original founders of the Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity while in attendance at the University of Virginia in 1868.



Charles Hodge entered the College of New Jersey in 1812, the same year that the Princeton Seminary was established. Hodge met Archibald Alexander through tutoring in Greek, and traveling with Alexander on preaching trips. After completion of his studies at the College he then entered the Princeton Seminary, graduating in 1820. He was then appointed as assistant professor at the Seminary and later became full professor of Oriental and Biblical Literature. With a stable job, he married Sarah Bache, great-granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin. From 1826 to 1828 he traveled to Europe to further his studies, and by 1849 he had become the senior professor of the Seminary. He was a prolific writer, and a strong nationalist and leader in the fight among Presbyterians to support the Union.



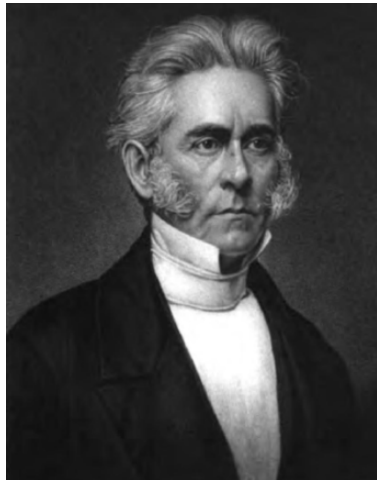
The one remaining faculty member in the Princeton Chi Phi Society was the Reverend Luther Halsey Jr, son of Luther Halsey Sr who had graduated there in 1777. A graduate of Union College, he landed at the College of New Jersey in 1824 as a professor of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and Natural History. He remained there until 1829. No photos are known, but one could imagine a likeness to his father.

Luther Halsey Sr, Princeton 1777

Three students were known to have been added to the rolls of the Chi Phi Society at Princeton. Even less information is readily available about their lives at Princeton. The Reverend Charles Hall graduated from Hamilton College and enrolled as a theology student at the Princeton Seminary in 1824, remaining there until 1827 when he left to pursue other opportunities with the Church.



Edward Norris Kirk had entered the College of New Jersey at age fifteen, graduating in 1820. He took up the study of law in New York, but decided to pursue the ministry following a meeting with some friends, and he then enrolled at the Princeton Seminary under the tutelage of Archibald Alexander in 1822, and in 1826 he began his work as a Preacher. Like several of our founders, he too included travels to Europe as part of his work. When asked to comment, John Maclean Jr (after his retirement as President) remarked: "He was bright, frank, fond of the society of his young friends, and a favorite with them." One incident at the College was noted in his biography, at an exhibition where the virtues of "inhaling gas" were made known, he came upon the stage under its influence, exclaiming "My Kingdom for a horse!" In contrast, among his papers is an oration delivered at the College as a senior, on the subject of slavery. It took great courage to speak of this at the time, when the nation itself was focused on the ongoing debate upon the Missouri Compromise. And yet, at seventeen years of age, he presented a petition to Congress to abolish slavery.



The last of these three students was William Swan Plumer. He graduated from Washington College (now Washington & Lee University) in Virginia in 1825. According to records at the Seminary, he did not enter class until July 1825, so how he was to be affiliated with the founding of Chi Phi is a mystery that will perhaps be unearthed with further research. But since he's listed in many fraternity sources, we'll make the assumption he was present at the time, perhaps traveling there before officially enrolling in his studies. Following his graduation from the Seminary in 1826 he pursued church expansion in North Carolina and Virginia, and had the rare distinction of being the only man to serve twice as the Moderator (Chairman) of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian church.



Seal of Princeton University

The Latin reads "Seal of Princeton University" and the motto "Under God's Power She Flourishes" Adopted in 1896



Original Seal of the College of New Jersey

Adopted in 1748, the outer text reads "Seal of the College of New Jersey in America" and the Motto in the banner above the Bible reads "I Restore Life to the Dead"

Taking a few moments to soak in all the accomplishments of these men and the mark they left on society in the early years of America helps one to understand how unique circumstances were leading to the founding of this short-lived Society. And yet, having existed for only about a year before merging into another campus organization, the Philadelphia Society, the religious and scholarly aspects of this early organization live on through the reorganization along modern lines in 1854 and are still with us today. We are truly fortunate to have such a well-respected and influential group of men as the founders of the earliest organization that we know as the Chi Phi Fraternity today.

References:

I have not had an opportunity to make footnotes and citations to this essay but here is a list of sources for the information contained within:

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The Chronicles of Chi Phi

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The Life of Edward Norris Kirk (library of the Princeton Theological Seminary)

Princeton Companion, Princeton University: John Maclean, Jr

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Princeton, 1746-1896 by Jefferson Wertenbaker, 1964

The Story of Princeton, by Edwin Mark Norris 1917

This Day in Presbyterian History, Archives & Manuscript Repository for the Presbyterian Church of America



Above, George Macintosh Maclean, father of the second John Maclean, jr born in 1837 and who would later reorganize the Princeton Order in 1854 (Photo taken sometime around 1843)

Right, a sketch of the Princeton campus around the time of the founding of the Chi Phi Society

