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David A. Goss, O.D., Ph.D.
Editor, dgoss@indiana.edu

PHI OMICRON: THE FIRST OPTOMETRIC FRATERNITY

Collegiate fraternities have been an American tradition since the Colonial Era, beginning with the secret “Flat Hat Club” (FHC) organized at the College of William and Mary (WM) in 1750, and the still-extant Phi Beta Kappa founded at WM in 1776.¹ The FHC was created by students—like Thomas Jefferson—frustrated with the prescribed classical curriculum purported to prepare men for the professions of law, medicine or theology. The FHC provided a safe space for the intellectually curious to pursue proscribed, rarified extracurricular scholarship based in empiricism.^{2,3} The FHC embodied three elements: suitable society, academic rigor and ethical conduct. These characteristics would come to define the kinds of fraternities we have today: social, academic honors (as PBK would become) and professional.

The first professional fraternity was created in 1819 for medical students.⁴ A century later, on August 2, 1904, American Association of Opticians (AAO) President John C. Eberhardt invited 18 fellow members attending the 7th annual AAO convention banquet at the lush Plankinton Hotel in downtown Milwaukee, WI to form the first ever optometric fraternity: Phi Omicron.⁵

The Greek letters Φ (Phi) and Ο (Omicron) were chosen to represent the words “Physiological” and “Optics.” The founding members of the fraternity defined themselves as “desirous of seeing the profession...elevated to [a] dignified position.” Members were pledged to “encourag[e] a fraternal spirit” and “observe and act with principles.” The purpose of Phi Omicron was to “discuss research and exert moral influence in abating methods derogatory to our science” thereby “obtaining respect and consideration of the general public.”⁵

Unlike the FHC, the first optometric fraternity was neither secret nor collegiate, but it was similar in character, embracing the ideals of fellowship, scholarship and ethics. Phi Omicron didn’t last long,

but optometric fraternities and honors societies popped up at almost every school during the next three decades. The following list includes the earliest, many of which still exist today.^{6,7}

Epsilon Psi Epsilon (OSU, 1911)
Pi Omicron Sigma (MSO, 1912)
Omega Delta (NICO, 1917)
Gamma Omega Phi (PSCO, 1919)
Omega Epsilon Phi (Columbia, 1919)
Phi Theta Epsilon (PSCO), 1920)
Phi Theta Upsilon (ICOO, 1925)
Pi Kappa Rho (NICO, 1928)
Mu Sigma Pi (NICO, 1932)
Omega Beta Sigma (LACO, TAQ 1932)
Omicron Delta Epsilon (PSCO, 1932)
Phi Beta Rho, Sor. (PSCO, 1934)
Phi Omicron Sigma, Sor. (OSU, TAQ 1940)
Gamma Omicron, (SCO, ca. 1975)

Kirsten Hebert, BA
Contributing Editor
khebert@aoa.org

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