To understand Sigma Phi Epsilon, you must understand the American college fraternity.

The year 1776 holds special significance because it marks the birth of the United States of America and the beginning of the American Revolutionary War.

That year is of importance for another, lesser-known reason.

The “revolutionary spirit” in the American colonies also found its way into the realm of higher education and aided in the beginning of the American college fraternity.

College students in this period had a limited and strict curriculum. Studies centered on Greek and Latin, and electives were virtually non-existent. Higher education emphasized strict discipline and was primarily limited to book learning; little time was allowed for fun and relaxation.

This is not to say, however, that extracurricular activities did not exist. Students had to make an extra effort to find relaxation and to learn about life and reality outside of the classroom.

In 1750, a group of students at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va., would gather at Raleigh Tavern and talk over a bowl of punch. Some regulars of this punch-bowl discussion formed an exclusive group limited to six student members at a time (but also including alumni, instructors and townspeople as members) and known only by the initials “F.H.C.” Those were likely initials for Latin words; outsiders sneered at the exclusivity by calling it the Flat Hat Club. These men, unknowingly, had organized the second college fraternity (the first was Crotonia, which was founded in 1738 at Yale).

Other groups at William & Mary followed their example. They concerned themselves with becoming literary societies in hopes of meeting with faculty approval. They met to discuss or critique compositions or to stage oratorical contests. The names they called their groups denoted their purpose: Ciceronian, Calliopian, and Philopeuthion, to name three.

For many of these organizations, the loftier purposes evaporated over time. Thomas Jefferson, an F.H.C. member when he attended William & Mary in the early 1760s, noted that the society “had no useful object.” Primarily about socializing and drinking at a local tavern, it failed to survive the Revolutionary War.

One of these groups determined that a student, John Heath, a superior Greek scholar, was unworthy of membership. Undaunted, Heath decided William & Mary needed another but more serious-minded society. He took three Greek letters and four friends and held the first meeting of what was to become the first secret

I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past.

~Thomas Jefferson
Greek-letter society or fraternity—Phi Beta Kappa. The Apollo Room of the Raleigh Tavern, where Phi Beta Kappa was born, was also the place where men such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Patrick Henry met to discuss the ideas that led to the birth of another great society in that same year—the United States of America.

Phi Beta Kappa developed a secret grip, mottos, ritual, code of laws, and distinctive badge. Those five elements remain today as the trademark elements of fraternities. The most important legacy of Phi Beta Kappa, however, is its commitment to moral ideals, scholastic achievement, and friendship among men. Phi Beta Kappa believed the college experience should prepare the student for future responsibilities by preparing him socially. They shared this belief with other campuses and founded new chapters at Harvard and Yale in 1779 with more to follow. Eventually, Phi Beta Kappa turned its attention toward purely intellectual matters and became a scholastic honorary, revealing that its name meant “Love of learning is the guide of life.” Today, Phi Beta Kappa recognizes undergraduate men and women who show superior achievements in academics and extra-curricular activities on 280 college campuses.

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The Union Triad

While Phi Beta Kappa became national in character with its expansion to Harvard and Yale in 1779, the social roots of fraternities did not come to seed until a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa was established at Union College in Schenectady, N.Y. Inspired by this founding, John Hunter and other members of the class of 1826 formed the Kappa Alpha Society (not to be confused with Kappa Alpha of 1812 or the modern Kappa Alpha Order) which was to become the first national organization that still endures as a men’s social fraternity. Due to its secrecy, this society was opposed by the Union faculty and some students. Other students, admiring the Kappa Alpha Society concept, founded Sigma Phi and Delta Phi in 1827. These three, known as the Union Triad, put the American college fraternity on the map. Eventually, Union students founded six fraternities which earned Union College the honored epithet of “Mother of Fraternities.”
Fraternities continued to expand with Sigma Phi founding a second chapter at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. Hamilton students, inspired by this founding and seeking an alternative to two rival literary societies, founded Alpha Delta Phi, another Greek-letter society, in 1832. Alpha Delta Phi expanded to a second chapter, this time west of the Allegheny Mountains at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

**The Miami Triad**

A prominent student of Miami University, John Reilly Knox, envisioned a society similar in organization and spirit of Alpha Delta Phi but based on “good without the ingredient of evil.” With this in mind, Knox formed the first fraternity founded west of the Alleghenies, Beta Theta Pi, in 1839.

Beta Theta Pi and Alpha Delta Phi both had to exist in secret due to the disapproval of the Miami faculty. In 1847, members of the organizations were expelled after they were found to have taken part in a student revolt against the Miami University administration. This left the campus virtually without fraternities. To fill this void, Phi Delta Theta was founded in 1848 and Sigma Chi in 1855. Thus, Beta Theta Pi, Phi Delta Theta, and Sigma Chi became known as the Miami Triad.

**Founding of Sororities**

The 1850s also marked the beginning of women’s fraternities and sororities with the founding of the Adelphian Society at Wesleyan Female College in Macon, Ga., in 1851, and the Philomathean Society in 1852. For 50 years, these remained local, until expanding with the Greek names Alpha Delta Pi and Phi Mu Fraternity, respectively. Sororities were on the move.
Civil War to the Present

By the 1860s, 22 present-day national fraternities had been founded. However, in 1861, fraternities, as well as the nation, were threatened by the outbreak of a great conflict pitting brother against brother—the Civil War. The war forced many colleges and fraternities to close and halted expansion and development of new ones. Only one fraternity was founded during the war, Theta Xi at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., in 1865. Theta Xi was formed as the first professional fraternity and later became a general college fraternity.

During the war, whole chapters enlisted in the South to fight for the Confederacy. Men from fraternities, North and South, fought each other for four bloody years. What fraternities had sought to achieve—friendship among brothers—was almost destroyed by the war, leaving the country with deep wounds to heal.

Because of their beliefs and commitments, fraternities were well suited to the task of healing those wounds. Alpha Tau Omega was the first to answer the call, becoming the first fraternity founded after the Civil War. Close behind was Kappa Alpha Order in 1865, Pi Kappa Alpha in 1868, and Sigma Nu and Kappa Sigma in 1869. All of these were founded in Virginia, and all exist today.

Following the war, many changes occurred in the fraternity world. The most significant of these was the increased enrollment of women in colleges across the nation. Some women noticed the advantages and admired the qualities of the fraternal experience and began forming their own groups. I. C. Sororsis, now Pi Beta Phi (not to be confused with Pi Beta Phi of 1813), was founded at Monmouth College in
Monmouth, Ill., in 1867, becoming the first national sorority. I. C. Sororsis was followed by Kappa Alpha Theta in 1870 at DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind. Kappa Alpha Theta is known as the first women's Greek-letter society. Sororities were now established on American college campuses.

Fraternities experienced hard times near the end of the 1890s as anti-fraternity legislation threatened their existence. However, the strong fraternities survived, as people again realized the importance of fraternities and what they endeavored to achieve. Several fraternities were founded at the beginning of the new century, and others continued expanding.

A few ambitious men were working hard to found fraternities based on high moral ideals, scholastic achievement, and lifelong friendship among brothers. In the year 1901, one such farsighted individual was attending Richmond College in Richmond, Va. He formed a bond of fellowship with five other men and sought to create a new fraternity, based on the love of God and the principle of peace through brotherhood. These six men were to be the first Founders of our great Fraternity, Sigma Phi Epsilon.

Now, Sigma Phi Epsilon has a chapter at the College of William & Mary, Miami University (Ohio) and on over 240 other campuses across the United States.
Ryland Hall, 1901, at Richmond College, the birthplace of Sigma Phi Epsilon. Members originally met in the dormitory room of Founders Gw and Wallace. The group was eventually granted the Tower Room in the center of Ryland Hall for official fraternity functions.