

The Diagnothian Literary Society of Franklin and Marshall College, 1835-1960

By J. Gabriel Neville

Ah, now they're standing all forlorn,
or turned to other use;
While we their sad condition mourn,
Their ruinous abuse—
Their ruinous abuse, my boys;
Yet still they wake to view
The times lamented that were ours,
When these two Halls were new;
When these two Halls were new, my boys,
When these two Halls were new!¹

Dr. William Marvel Nevin wrote the above lines at Franklin and Marshall College in 1886 in reference to the two halls that the members of the Diagnothian and Goethean literary societies were forced to abandon in 1853. Marshall College left Mercersburg in that year to unite with the wealthier Franklin College in Lancaster. The Greek revival edifices were left for conversion to other uses by the town after only six years of occupancy.

In 1989, the reconstructed Diagnothian Literary Society at Franklin and Marshall College reprinted Nevin's lines in its members' handbook, this time with reference to the two halls at the current campus that flank Old Main on the Academic Quadrangle. The halls—built, mostly paid for, and previously owned by the societies—are now occupied by the departments of Government and Music. The ornaments removed, the elaborate frescoes painted over, and the libraries long since assimilated into the Shadek-Fackenthal collection, the

present society reprinted this final stanza of the seven-part poem to express a sense of loss very similar to that felt by their forebears 136 years earlier.

The Diagnothian Literary Society, in its prime, brought a measure of *éclat* to the college. Together with its rival society, it had among its ranks of benefactors and honorary members Henry Clay, Horace Greeley, King Frederick Wilhelm III of Prussia, and Albert Einstein. Presidents John Quincy Adams, James K. Polk, James Buchanan, Abraham Lincoln, and several other presidents also placed their names on the honorary rosters.²

After a long and proud history the societies disbanded in 1960, finally succumbing to overwhelming competition from fraternities and other student organizations. In 1989 both societies were revived, and they continue in active, if more modest, capacities today.

Founding at York, 1835

The Diagnothian Literary Society was founded at the preparatory school of the Theological Seminary of the German Reformed Church in York, Pennsylvania, in 1835.³ There were ten founders, two of whom went on to become college presidents in Pennsylvania. A previous organization known as the "Diagnothian Debating Society" had been founded by Samuel Reed Fisher—a seminarian—a few months before, out of which the Diagnothian Literary Society and its rival were created.

Fisher was a graduate of Jefferson College in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, which since 1869 has been Washington and Jefferson College. According to Joseph Henry Dubbs, he had there been a member of either the Philo or the Franklin literary society and wished to create similar societies at the Reformed Church seminary and preparatory school.⁴

When Fisher arrived at the seminary, there already existed a languid literary society. Working with the Canonsburg model, Fisher set about transforming the organization. He wrote in his autobiography:

Having some knowledge of human nature, I knew it would require much prudence and considerable effort to accomplish my ends. No one likes to be dictated to, or to be approached by any one with the air of a reformer. Accordingly, my first efforts were confined to speaking to individuals and sometimes to small groups, in reference to that which was on my heart explaining to them the nature and workings of such societies, and their vast importance to those engaged in literary pursuits. At first my progress seemed slow. I found it difficult to awaken the interest I desired, and which was necessary to the accomplishment of the end I had in view.⁵

Fisher accomplished his project one step at a time. He invited a number of students to meet and discuss the founding of a single debating society. "The meeting was held, and the organization of such a society resolved upon. I was appointed chairman of a committee to draft the necessary constitution . . . and in the draft inserted 'Diagnothian Debating Society' as the name of the

organization.”⁶

It has never been conclusively determined how Fisher chose this name. It was held for a period that it had been the name of one of the literary societies at Jefferson College, but a letter from President J.D. Moffat of Washington and Jefferson College dated September 10, 1902, established that no such organization had ever existed there.⁷ Some have also surmised that he took the name from the ancient Greek Skeptic Diogenes. Regular discussion of the etymology of the name during the early history of the society, however, refutes this postulation. In an address to the society on January 7, 1839, Emanuel Vogel Gerhart said, “the name Diagnothian is very significant. It is derived from a Greek word which means ‘to examine narrowly, to ascertain clearly,’ it indicates that the object of an Association to which it is applied, is patient, systematic investigation and the acquisition of thorough knowledge.”⁸

Likewise, in a letter to the society in which he accepted an honorary membership, John Quincy Adams inferred from the name of the society that “its main object is the acquisition of a *thorough knowledge* of literature. . . .”⁹

It has been suggested that the name may have been indirectly inspired by a “Diagnostic Society” founded at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1816.¹⁰

The Diagnothian Debating Society was successful enough that after only a few months, it was decided that the division that Fisher had hoped for could occur. A meeting was held on the second floor of the High School building on George Street in York on June 8, 1835, to that effect. Fisher came to the meeting with a new constitution intended for the common use of both divisions.

It was a constitution, not designed merely to meet present events, and provide simply for effecting an organization, leaving the future to provide for wants, as they should arise; but one, making provision for a society in full operation. My reason for framing a constitution of this description, as explained to those present at the time was, that I thought it would be decidedly to the advantage of the society in the end. What portions of the constitution could not be met with present numbers, and present facilities, could be temporarily suspended, and the society, in the meantime, go forward, continually aiming to fill out all the requirements or provisions of the constitution, as early as possible.¹¹

The new constitution was adopted by the Debating Society in this, its last, meeting and then voted common property of the two divisions that were then created. Fisher appointed two students—Charles F. McCauley and Moses Kieffer—to alternately select members. Kieffer, who went first, selected Fisher, ending his association with the Diagnothians.

The second of the two divisions, which composed the ten founding members of the Diagnothian Literary Society, included John Henry Augustus Bomberger, Michael Eyster, Emanuel Vogel Gerhart, Isaac E. Houser, John R. Kooken, George H. Martin, Charles F. McCauley, Jesse Steiner, Andrew Straussburger Young, and Jacob Ziegler. E.V. Gerhart continued his association with the

society throughout most of his life as the first president of Franklin and Marshall College and as president of the Theological Seminary of the German Reformed Church.

Predictably, the two new societies immediately entered into a contest for the name "Diagnothian." Fisher resolved the dispute by convincing his group to name themselves after the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who had died three years before.¹² The names of the societies proved through the years to be more significant than Fisher or any of his 19 friends could have predicted. The Goethean Literary Society continued to attract students of Germanic stock until the middle of this century, prompting the Diagnothians to call the Goetheans "The Dutch" and, during the Second World War, uglier names.

The Diagnothian Society, on the other hand, while including a number of students of German descent, was primarily attractive to "English" students. One student wrote in 1858 that, "The Diags swear at the Dutch Goetheans, and some of them cannot speak decent English."¹³ The Diagnothian Society, perhaps because of its "Anglophile" status, was also the most attractive society for those students who came from Maryland and other states south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

The Germanophile status of their rivals often put the Diagnothians at a disadvantage, particularly when "electioneering," or recruiting. This disadvantage presented itself early on when the principal of the High School aligned himself with the Goetheans. A refugee from political oppression in Germany, Frederick Augustus Rauch reportedly took the name of the society as a personal compliment. After an entreaty by Charles McCauley, Rauch relented and announced that he would be impartial henceforth. According to Joseph Henry Dubbs, Rauch asked McCauley

Do you blame me? If you were a poor refugee in a foreign land, as I am, would you not be pleased if a literary society were named after the greatest man of your native country? I thought your society could depend for its membership on the prevailing English element of this country, and that I might safely urge those who are proud of German descent to do honor to the name of Goethe; but I find I was wrong, and henceforth I will occupy a strictly impartial position between the two societies.¹⁴

At the first meeting of the Society, in one of the second-story recitation rooms at the school, a committee was appointed to meet with a similar committee from the Goethean Society to draw up the "Articles of Agreement," which guaranteed that neither society could gain any unfair advantage in their dealings with one another. The articles proved short-lived, but as long as they were enforced, they went a long way toward guaranteeing the mutual disposition of "beneficent rivalry" that was hoped for at the beginning.

It was also decided from the beginning that a library would be collected and that honorary memberships would be bestowed on men whose money, fame, or knowledge could aid the society.

Relocation to Mercersburg, 1835-1843

In November of 1835 the High School moved to Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. The Church had decided to found a college there, for which the High School would prepare students, and which in turn would prepare students for the seminary. This was Marshall College, and it was there that the society began to flourish, as an adjunct of the college.

Fourteen High School students were loaded into two stagecoaches for the trip, leaving many behind (two students traveled otherwise). When the society arrived in Mercersburg it had only six members and feared for its future. But the quickly improving reputation of Marshall College helped the society considerably. Frederick Rauch, John Williamson Nevin, and Philip Schaff, the theological triumvirate of the seminary and college, increasingly brought the institutions fame by way of their "Mercersburg Theology." By spring of 1836 the membership had doubled, and dedicated efforts by the organization to improve itself paid off quickly.

In the winter of 1836-37, a second "oratorical contest" was held between the societies. One had been held the year before, creating a great amount of jealousy and animosity between Diabothians and Goetheans. Theodore Appel, in his memoir *Recollections of College Life*, gives Rev. Frederick A. Rupley's account of the competitive zeal surrounding the contest.

Then at the end of the Winter Term, it was the order of the day for the Societies to hold a public Contest, in which they were to show their skill respectively in declamation, composition, original oration, and debate. For months before this literary Contest came off, it became the subject of remark. The whole community seemed to be in sympathy with one or the other of the two parties. Partisan zeal and partisan spirit akin to that exhibited in a Presidential campaign, seized upon the people in and around Mercersburg for miles, in view of this contemplated struggle between the Societies. One of the factors in the excitement, adding largely thereto, was the secrecy maintained by the respective sides. So much was this the case that the names of the contestants, representing the Societies, were not fully known until a few days prior to the contest.¹⁵

This was the second, and last, such contest. The faculty, witnessing the brawls that they produced in the yard, called them off.¹⁶

At least as early as 1837 a German literary society was created as an annex to the Diabothian Literary Society. Interested members could join the *Rauch Literarische Gesellschaft* (the Goetheans had one named after Schiller) and conduct, in German, the same literary activities undertaken in the mother society. A brief history of the German annexes is provided by Appel.

In the year 1839 we found that there was a German Literary Society as well as two others which were purely English. . . . It was a Literary Society in all respects like the other two in the same institution; but it lacked a library and the principle of rivalry, which infused life into the two other societies.

. . . One of the English Societies at this time had in some degree monopolized the principle of law, the other of Freedom to a like extent. They grew out of two other still deeper principles, Liberty and Necessity, upon which as poles all history is said to revolve. . . . The two principles, no longer only antithetical and complementary, became antagonistic; and the result was a division. Two societies were formed, one named after Rauch and the other in honor of the poet Schiller. . . . The Societies did better than ever before. They made a beginning in getting together libraries, on whose shelves all of the great German Classics were to find a place; but owing to some cause, which we could never understand, they declined when the removal of the College was agitated, and they never got to Lancaster.¹⁷

Also in 1837, an event occurred that demonstrates the extent to which the Diagnothians would go in defense of free speech. That Mercersburg was home to a number of runaway slaves was well-known, and slavery was consequently a very sensitive issue there. A Diagnothian named Daniel Kroh had once spoken against slavery in a society meeting and was therefore called an abolitionist and sharply criticized. Kroh said later, "I was not by any means radical in my views at the time. I merely maintained that the subject should be freely and fairly discussed, so that the Slave States might be induced to liberate their slaves in their own way, as Pennsylvania had done years before."¹⁸

His situation was made worse when he allowed a Rev. G. Blanchard to stay in the boarding house that he kept with his two sisters. Rev. Mr. Blanchard was in town to deliver an address on slavery, and for that reason could find no other lodging. Neither could he find a place to give his lecture, so he planned to stay a few days and then leave, without giving his speech.

The night before Blanchard was to leave, he and Kroh left the house to attend a Methodist church service.

But before we entered the door, he suggested to me that I should keep away from him, assuring me that he could find his own way back to the house; but the boys had a sharp eye on him and pelted him with a shower of eggs and stones in front of the church. He retreated to the boarding house kept by Mr. Jonathan Wolfensberger where he found protection. As the crowd were closing in upon him, Mr. Jacob Ziegler, a student boarding there, met the rioters at the door and defended the house. By this time, hearing what was going on, I came out of the church, and calling a police officer I escorted Mr. Blanchard to my house. Captain William Dick, my next-door neighbor, an officer in the war of 1812, stacked up some arms, and prepared himself to defend us in case we should be attacked; but we passed the night without any further trouble. I attended to Mr. Blanchard's clothes in a back room, and . . . he delivered to us a family lecture on his favorite topic. Next day we sent him off to Greencastle in a private conveyance. . . .¹⁹

Kroh was reprimanded by the faculty of the college for his involvement in what was called "The Abolition Riot."

The Diagnothian Society early on sought to attract honorary members. Aside from the prestige of having presidents and literary geniuses attached to the organization, contributions of money, books, and advice were hoped for

and often obtained. In 1837, John Quincy Adams accepted an offer of honorary membership with the following letter.

Mr. J. H. A. Bomberger. Diagonthian Literary Association of Marshall College,
Mercersburg—Franklin County, Penns^a

Washington, 26 March 1837

Sir

I received some weeks since, your letter of the 31st of January last, informing me that the Diagonthean Literary Association [*sic*] had done me the honour to inscribe my name on the list of their honorary members. Inferring from the name of the Society and its location at a College, that its main object is the acquisition of a *thorough knowledge* of Literature, which is of course connected with a competent knowledge of all other good and useful things, I am flattered in having been thought worthy of honorary association with a community founded for so wise and benevolent purpose. The pursuit and the application to good uses, of knowledge, is the great duty, comprizing all others, of civilized man, it is the purpose for which Life is bestowed by The Creator as a trust, and a student in his seventieth year, cannot receive a more precious reward for whatever proficiency he has made, than by the invitation of youthful fellow students to write in honour his name with theirs. I tender to the Society my thanks for this honour conferred upon me by them, and my best wishes that their pursuit of thorough knowledge in Literature, may be favoured by the approving smile of Heaven, for the improvement of themselves, of their Country, and their race. And please to accept, Sir, the respectful and friendly salutation of your associate

John Quincy Adams²⁰

In 1840, when the society was looking for a new, permanent motto, honorary members were asked for suggestions. James Fenimore Cooper wrote the following letter to the society.

Washington Feb 8—1840

Dr Sir;

I owe you an apology for not having given earlier attention to your letter, and my excuse is partly founded on my incapacity to help you in a matter, so purely dependent upon taste, as that about which you have done me the honor to consult me.

Badges of distinction have been adopted by almost all Societies kindred to yours; but these are nearly as various as the names of the Societies, and their mottos have been borrowed from almost every tongue.—A rose formed, round a centre of silver and gold, bearing a motto, and worn upon the breast of a coat, was as neat a badge of distinction as I recollect to have seen.

You can have no difficulty, I am sure, in finding an appropriate motto for the *Diagonthian Society*. Its name imports its object; and the classics of every language, abound in maxims appropriate for its motto. Thorough knowledge, the translation of your Social Name, is a theme which has so often called forth the praise of the wise & good, both of ancient & modern times, that it cannot be difficult to find on the pages upon which their wisdom

is spread, some sentence which the world should receive as a maxim & which you may borrow for a motto.

Receive yourself and present to your Society my best wishes for your and its prosperity and usefulness.

Yours respectfully
James Cooper

Mr. Wm. P. Schell²¹

The society had held the motto "Wisdom, Virtue, Equity" for a few years, but apparently was looking for a new one. Eventually, and we do not know how it was selected, the motto "Virtue crowns her followers" was adopted. The motto was in Greek, which accounts for various English expressions of it.

As the library of the society became substantial and sufficient to the society's needs, greater emphasis was placed on the creation of what was called the "cabinet"—a collection of scientific specimens, including geological and biological collections. The following letter accompanied the donation of a geological specimen to the society.

Maguelomes River
Alta California
16th Feby, 1850

To the Diagonthian Society

Gentlemen—Feeling an interest in the success of your Society, and wishing to do it service by aiding your museum, I have ventured to hope that a few specimens of the gold found in this country & dug by my own hands may be both interesting & useful. I have therefore taken the liberty of forwarding them to you.

With this expression of my good wishes, Believe me

Gentlemen

Most respectfully yours

J. B. McKinnie²²

The First Hall, 1843-1853

During the summer of 1835, when High School Principal Rauch was planning the move to Mercersburg, a student wrote to the Synod of the German Reformed Church asking that "suitable and commodious halls" be provided for the societies.²³ No action was taken. In January of 1836 the Diagonthians suggested it again, but the Goetheans felt it was better to wait until the finances of the institution were more stable.

In the meantime, both societies held their meetings in the prayer hall of the seminary building, which served also as the college building. Secrecy was difficult to maintain under such circumstances, and so in 1843 the Diagonthians decided that it was time to make a serious effort in the direction of building themselves a hall. On January 3, 1843, the Diagonthian Society formed a Building Committee.

The finances of the college had not significantly improved by 1843, but, ironically, this made the building of a society hall possible. The trustees of the college had previously purchased a large number of bricks with which to build a college building separate from the seminary. Too poor to actually begin construction, and not pressed by necessity, the college had allowed the bricks to sit unused on the campus for some time. Aware of the students' desire to erect halls for their societies, President of the College John Williamson Nevin, Rauch's successor, proposed that a portion of the bricks be used for that purpose.

The Building Committee's most difficult task was to raise the necessary funds, as only \$1,000 was given to them by the Board of Trustees. The total cost was nearly six times that amount. A pledge was drawn up and signed by each member of the society. It pledged them to "the sacrifice of their personal interests and obligate[d] them to put forth every effort in their power to accomplish the end in view."²⁴

The funds for the building of the hall were raised almost entirely by the individual efforts of the members and alumni of the society. Documents were made up and given to alumni making them authorized agents of the society. "During the several vacations these agents thus armed with their certificates scoured the country of eastern and southern Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia in their heroic efforts to raise the necessary funds."²⁵

A number of scholarships were donated by the college or bought by the students and sold for a profit. Dr. Nevin sold, at a reduced rate, a large number of copies of his theological treatise "The Anxious Bench" to the society. These were sold for a sizable profit.

In the fall of 1844 the contract for the building was made and ground was broken the following spring. The Diagnothians, having been the first to bring up the subject of the halls with Dr. Nevin, were allowed first pick of a site. The college still hoped to build itself a recitation hall separate from the seminary, and it was decided that the two societies should build their halls on either side of an empty lot. The Diagnothians chose the south side, which left the north side to the Goetheans. At this time the society decided to incorporate itself, and was granted a charter by the Franklin County Court on December 3, 1844.

The cornerstone of the Greek-revival hall was laid on July 4, 1845. Independence Day had become the traditional date on which the society celebrated its anniversary. These annual celebrations were very formal occasions on which the members showed their skill at oratory and declamation. Given the added reason for celebration in 1845, an additional orator was invited. Dr. Lewis Green, from the Western Seminary at Allegheny City, spoke on "The Puritan." Theodore Appel commented that "It was a long and very able address of its kind, such as he perhaps thought was needed for the latitude of Mercersburg."²⁶

The new hall was formally opened and dedicated on July 2, 1847. It immediately became the center of all society activity. The meeting hall, on the second floor, was decorated in an ornate fashion, resembling a senate chamber.²⁷ The first floor contained the library and the cabinet, the development of which now became the focus of the society's efforts.

After a long series of negotiations, an act of consolidation of Franklin and Marshall colleges was passed by the state legislature in Harrisburg on April 19, 1850. Having occupied the new hall for only three years, it was clear that the society would have to abandon it. When, in 1853, the college moved to Lancaster, the society had occupied its hall for only six years. Several years later Goethean Hall burned. Diagnothian Hall, however, still exists in a converted form. Parts were removed and used in the construction of a large home. What was left standing is now part of a garage.²⁸ The Mercersburg *Merchant* noted in 1984: "On the walls you can see where the blackboards were."²⁹

Relocation to Lancaster and the Second Hall, 1853-1864

Franklin College had existed in Lancaster since 1787, although sometimes only on paper. Its origins lay in a post-Revolutionary attempt by Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin, and others to assimilate Pennsylvania Germans into the mainstream. This project proved to be a failure and the institution eventually settled on becoming an academy for the children of Lancaster. By selling off most of a 10,000-acre land grant given to it by the Commonwealth, the academy accrued a considerable endowment, but never succeeded in becoming a full-fledged college. When Marshall College found itself in precisely converse circumstances, it was proposed that the two institutions merge, which they finally did in 1853, with James Buchanan as the Chairman of the Board of Trustees. Until the recitation hall (Old Main) was built three years later, Franklin and Marshall held classes in the small, poorly-equipped Franklin Academy building on North Lime Street.

The move to Lancaster was a blow to the Diagnothian Literary Society. Without a hall, they met in the Odd Fellows Hall on South Queen Street. It also became clear that the college's location in the heart of the "Pennsylvania Dutch Country" played to the advantage of the Goetheans. "The Diagnothians vigorously claimed that all the 'Dutch' fell in with the G. L. S., which largely did out-number the D. L. S.," wrote one alumnus in retrospect. "But to a great extent the choice of a society was a matter of inheritance, the boys . . . generally joining the society to which their fathers or their pastors belonged."³⁰ Nevertheless, the society now had solid foundations and a large number of supportive alumni. One result of the move pleased the members of both societies. "Just as the removal from York to Mercersburg had resulted in the complete separation of the Society from the Seminary, the new hegira made it possible to throw off that connection with the Preparatory Department which had so

long offended the [societies] of college standing."³¹

When the new location for the college was chosen and the recitation hall was built, the societies began to agitate for new halls. The societies, injured by the relocation of the college, felt that the trustees owed them assistance in building new halls. One angry Goethean wrote,

I must be excused for suggesting to the Society the propriety of procuring a deed for the ground, on which the new Hall is to be erected, or bond of indemnification from the Trustees, in case, a new *crotchet* entering the brain of these worthy gentlemen, they should again make a removal of the Institution. *Experientia docet*. As one who toiled willingly in the Past for Society's good, I can *never* forget that she was *required* to give up her old Hall, without even getting an adequate remuneration."³²

The trustees initially felt that they had done enough by assuming the societies' debts, which amounted to more than \$1,600, but eventually relented far enough to adopt the following two resolutions.

Resolved—that the Building Committee be authorized & directed to appropriate sites for the Erection of Halls by the Diagnothian & Goethean Societies on ground belonging to the College, but that no buildings shall be erected on the sites until the plans thereof are submitted to & approved by the Executive Committee.

Resolved—that the sites that shall be designated & appropriated by the Building Committee to the use of the Literary societies of the College shall be held & used by these Societies exclusively for their use, so long as they remain the societies of the College, subject to the control of the Board of Trustees.³³

Later, the trustees agreed to give each society \$1,000 and to loan each society an equal sum, without interest, to use in the construction of new halls. Early in 1855 the Diagnothians began soliciting subscriptions. Raising funds proved very difficult as the nation fell into the antebellum financial panic. Joseph Henry Dubbs, of the class of 1856, and later the Lewis Audenried Professor of History at the college, wrote in 1909:

The Diagnothian Society was generally weakest in numbers, and at that time, I believe, there were but nineteen members . . . When the societies determined to build halls, as they had done in Mercersburg, I made a subscription too large for my means; and as I did not like to ask my father to help me I stinted myself in many ways and actually seemed stingy, though I longed to be liberal. I was not alone in making such sacrifices. . . .³⁴

E. V. Gerhart, a founder of the society and the first president of the merged colleges, went on a tour of Pennsylvania and Maryland to solicit funds for the two societies, with some success.³⁵ On July 20, 1856, the cornerstone was laid. Both societies had claimed the south side of Old Main, but the Diagnothians presently changed their mind and took the north site. Thus, the society halls flanked the main college building, as had been the intent in Mercersburg.

The new hall was dedicated on July 29, 1857. The orator was Rev. George B. Russel who spoke on the subject of "The Principle of Virtue and the Virtue of Principle." The society met for the first time in the hall on Saturday, December 5, 1857. That day, Henry Kyd Douglas wrote in his diary:

The Diagnothian Literary Society met in the New Hall this morning, for the first time. A suitable speech was made by T.D. Fisher, the President of the Society. He referred to the former and present glory of the Diagnothian Society and the joys it must occasion in all Diagnothian hearts, to assemble again in a hall dedicated to the cause of Literature and the works of their own exertions. Long live the D. L. Society, and may those who are sent from the beautiful Hall be worthy of the crown with which Virtue crowns her votaries.³⁶

Although the society was successful in its efforts to erect a new hall, the society continued to attract only a small portion of each year's freshman class. The society had always relied, in Mercersburg, on Southerners for a large component of its membership. In Lancaster, the college attracted fewer students from the South, and as the tensions that led to the Civil War worsened, the situation waxed into a near crisis. For many years the Diagnothians were in the minority, and often their very existence was threatened on this account. There was no way of compelling an equal division of students between the societies, as there had been in the early days in Mercersburg when the Articles of Agreement were enforced.

The plight of the society was aggravated by the internal divisions caused by arguments over the South's "peculiar institution." The society, though smaller than before, still had a sizable component of southern members, who came in sharp conflict with their northern comrades over slavery. Several Diagnothians later fought each other in the ensuing war. Society meetings grew steadily more heated and divisive. Some worried that the society might not survive the war.

During the last two years of my course the Diagnothian Society was greatly disturbed by political questions. We were approaching the era of secession, and the feeling between the North and South was very bitter. The Southerners in the society were apparently "spoiling for a fight," and took offense at the slightest allusion to "the peculiar institution" of the South. Indeed, on several occasions we seemed on the verge of personal conflicts, and once the faculty was called to preserve order.³⁷

A.J. Heller, an alumnus of the college, described the same time period in this way:

The presidential campaign of 1860 caused no little excitement amongst the students. . . . The question as to the right of a State to secede from the Union loomed up and found a few advocates. After the election and inauguration of President Lincoln the Southern States proceeded to carry out their threats of secession. At the close of the college year the Civil War was already on. Members of each society enlisted in the ranks of the opposing armies. . . .³⁸

A Period of Stability, 1865-1941

In 1865, when the Civil War ended, the society was thirty years old. Over the course of those three decades, the society experienced an almost constant succession of upsets, not least of which was the war itself. The hall was used by the Union Army as a hospital in the fall of 1861, causing some damage.³⁹ The war caused a sharp decline in enrollment, as college-aged men went off to war. Reconstruction-era economic troubles hurt the college as well, which inevitably affected both societies. The founding of Mercersburg College on the old Marshall College campus and the founding of Ursinus College in 1869, in Collegeville, Pennsylvania—the result of theological controversy within the church—drew potential freshmen away from Lancaster.⁴⁰

The new prestige brought to the college by Rev. Dr. Gerhart's successor, John Williamson Nevin, helped the college weather these storms and by the beginning of the 1870s the college and its societies entered a long period of stability that lasted until the First World War. The Diagnothian Society concentrated on paying off its debt and improving its programs.

When the college moved to Lancaster, the session schedule was changed such that the anniversary celebrations had to be moved to the third Friday in May. The anniversaries became major events for the college and the town. Even with the new, commodious halls, the audiences at the anniversaries grew so large that it was necessary to rent Fulton Hall in downtown Lancaster to accommodate them. Generally, the hall was decorated with elaborate floral arrangements by the society's female admirers and beautifully printed invitations were sent out in large numbers.

Until the 1870s, a freshman was chosen to deliver the Prologue, a sophomore served as the speaker of the evening, a junior delivered the Eulogy, and a senior gave the Anniversary Oration. In the 1870s it was customary to deliver a "Salutatory" rather than a Prologue, as it was considered more modern, and all the addresses were delivered by able members regardless of class.⁴¹ Orations were named in honor of prominent Diagnothians of the past, such as E.V. Gerhart and Henry Harbaugh. The Anniversary Oration, however, remained the highlight of the evening.

James Buchanan, though the Diagnothians had lost in a fight with the Goetheans over his honorary membership, often attended society anniversary celebrations. "At the society anniversaries Mr. Buchanan's courtesy was especially apparent. For each of the youthful speakers he had a kind word which was borne away as a precious remembrance."⁴²

In 1886 the oratorical contests, banned by the faculty in 1836, were revived by the Diagnothians and held internally. Sophomores competed with freshmen. The contests were considered a good idea, and by holding them internally the brawls that resulted when they had been held between the two societies were prevented. In 1880 repairs to the hall became a vital necessity and money was

raised to pay for it. The hall was refrescoed in a Gothic style under the direction of a German artist from Reading. Although of artistic merit, the quality of the materials was substandard and the hall was redecorated in 1889 with a neoclassical motif. This second renovation was paid for by the alumni and done with more durable materials.⁴³

Almost until the turn of the century the society prospered, enjoying the sense that it was age-old and that it would exist forever. But as the turn of the century approached and as the college and its curriculum slowly began to adapt to the tides of change, it became more difficult for the society to maintain itself in its traditional role. In the 1890s, interest in the societies began very slowly to diminish.

The erection of the Watts-DePeyster Library in 1897-98 detracted from the unique value of the society library to its members. In 1920, both societies moved their collections into the new building and allowed their first floors to be used for lectures and offices.

New tactics for attracting members were invented, including the "mock trial." Mock trials were very successful, but also signified a change in the interests of the student body slightly away from academic rigor. Diagnothians assumed identities and costumes in order to stage a trial in the hall. Uproariously funny verdicts such as "innocent, but don't do it again" were not unusual.

As the college became more diverse, as electives, majors, and the natural sciences were introduced into the curriculum, the college drifted further away from the pious, Mercersburg Theology-dominated atmosphere, which had been so conducive to a classical literary society. Students became more interested in fraternities and other student organizations, and so, in 1912, the faculty voted to rescind the old rule requiring each student to belong to one society or the other.

The society continued in a stable, if smaller, existence—temporarily halting its activities during the First World War. As time went on, the memberships of both societies continued to slowly shrink, prompting a number of essays in *The College Student* by students, faculty, and alumni promoting the societies and lamenting their troubles.

In 1932, the faculty dealt another blow to the societies by ruling that membership was no longer required for Phi Beta Kappa honors. This had been one of the least pure motivations for joining, but nevertheless this further reduced the rosters of both societies.

It was a matter of some pride, though, that the Diagnothian Literary Society could reasonably claim to have outlasted almost every literary society in the nation, and shared with the Goetheans the distinction of being the oldest "continually operating" literary society in the nation. The society continued with the momentum of history and the support of its alumni, who again completely renovated the hall.

Decline and Disbandment, 1941-1960

It was the Second World War that struck the most serious blow to the two societies. Aside from generally disrupting the whole college community, the post-war era and the G. I. Bill of Rights brought on a crush of students, which by the 1950s forced the college to oust the societies from their halls to make more classroom space. The importance of the halls to the longevity of the Diagnothian and Goethean literary societies is considerable.

The societies struggled for twenty years to hang on to their existence, abandoning their anniversary celebrations, oratorical contests, and mock trials and instead holding weekly meetings with faculty speakers, student debates, or music. Secrecy was forgotten and everyone was invited to attend. Notices were placed in *The Student Weekly*, inviting members of the college community to meetings.

McCarthyism Debate at Diag Meeting

McCarthyism will be debated at the Diagnothian meeting tonight at 7:30. Mr. Henry Eaton will essay a defense of the controversial Senator and his methods, while Martin Lasky is scheduled to lead the attack. Speaker Ted Focht, while announcing the meeting, also noted that there are more than ten prospective members who require only this controversial meeting to fulfill their membership requirements.

Following the formal presentation of arguments, the discussion will be thrown open.⁴⁴

Rivalry continued, or perhaps worsened. It was generally conducted in a painfully civil fashion, as shown by the following letter.

Goethean Literary Society,
Lancaster, Pennsylvania,
April 15, 1942.

Diagnothian Literary Society,
Franklin and Marshall College,
Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Dear Sirs,

The members of Goethean Literary Society find that they will be unable to reply in person to the charges made by the Diagnothian Literary Society on the evening of April 10th at the regular Goethean meeting. The cultural advantages of a concert scheduled for Thursday evening entice us from your Hall.

We appreciate the gentlemanly manner in which the members of our neighboring Society conducted themselves while attending our meeting, though we regard with great concern their impoliteness in leaving our meeting en masse, during its progress, without thanking either their hosts or the soloist of the evening for the kindness shown in entertaining them. Consequently, we are inclined to be hesitant in freely negotiating our differences in Diagnothian Hall for fear that Goethean criticisms might lead to an exodus of Diagnothians from their own Hall, with the further exhibition of heretofore concealed ungentlemanly traits.

The reprehensible fact that a picture of Diagnothian Hall adorns the pages of the "History of the Goethean Literary Society" is deeply rued by the members of the Goethean Literary Society. We find solace only in the inordinate pleasure which must be yours upon finding some mention of your society in our worthy publication.

For Goethean Literary Society,
I am sincerely yours,
[signed]
John G. Heacock, President.⁴⁵

By the 1950s, memberships had dwindled to such an extent that in 1953 there was seemingly some question as to whether or not the Goethean Society had died and then been revived.⁴⁶ Membership continued to wane until in 1955 the Diagnothians and their rivals of 120 years found themselves in the same desperate boat. In a last attempt to maintain literary activity on the campus, the two societies merged under the name "Diagnothian."⁴⁷

In a series of articles in *The Student Weekly*, intended no doubt to bolster the hurting societies, Donald Lasky observed the downfall of the societies in March of 1954, the last semester before the merger.

Yet neither of our two societies nor indeed any literary society is flourishing today. Somewhere during the transition to the modern collegiate institution, the literary societies fell by the wayside. The increased enrollment, motivated by a growing specialization in studies, developed clubs allied with their fields of interest. The initial blow on our campus was struck by the Porter Scientific Society. Meanwhile, fraternities rapidly assumed the social function of the societies.

Short of their totality, literary societies throughout the nation folded, Diag and Goethean being preserved solely because of their halls. No one institution could span the abyss of these nobly conceived societies. The lesser groups, which in the aggregate provide the activities previously centralized in the literary societies, span their individual fields in a commendable fashion. However the synthesis is lacking. This is unfortunate, for it would seem that the integrative [*sic*] approach manifested by the literary societies is precisely the proper supplement to the liberal arts education by the college.⁴⁸

In 1960 the society had only four members and didn't last through the year.

Endnotes

1. "When These Two Halls Were New," by William Marvel Nevin originally published in Appel, Theodore. *Recollections of College Life* (Reading: Daniel Miller, 1886), pp. 138-40.

2. *Catalogue of the Members and Library of the Diagnothian Literary Society*. Diagnothian Literary Society (Baltimore: Woods and Crane, 1843). In later years no catalogues were published, but a nearly complete collection of acceptance letters exists in the Shadek-Fackenthal Library Archives at Franklin and Marshall College. No acceptance letter has been found from Abraham Lincoln. However, an anonymous note found amongst the papers of the society in the archives states, "Hon. A. Lincoln of Illinois was elected May 19, 1860, and accepted the election in a letter of June 16, 1860." The letter has apparently been lost or stolen.

3. In 1832 the "Classical School" was founded to prepare students for the Reformed Church seminary and in 1835 its name was changed to the "High School of the Reformed Church." See Dubbs, J. H. *History of Franklin and Marshall College*. (Lancaster: Franklin and Marshall College Alumni Association, 1903), pp. 158-59. For a general history of the seminary see Richards, G. W. *History of the Theological Seminary of the Evangelical and Reformed Church* (Lancaster: Theological Seminary of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, 1952).

4. Dubbs, p. 160.

5. Fisher, Samuel Reed. *History of the Founding of the Goethean and Diagnothian Literary Societies of Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster PA. At York, Pa., June 12-19, 1835: An Extract from the Autobiography of the late Samuel R. Fisher, D.D.* (Philadelphia: Reformed Church Publication Board, 1882), p. 5.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 5. Starting some time after the Civil War the name was spelled both "Diagnothian" and "Diagnothean" until the former was eventually settled upon as the standard.

7. "The literary societies of Jefferson College were the Philo and Franklin," stated Moffat in a letter dated September 10, 1902. See Dubbs, p. 160.

8. Gerhart, E.V. "Thorough Knowledge." *Diagnothian MSS*, Franklin and Marshall College.

9. *Diagnothiarn MSS*.

10. Young, H. J. *Historical Account of the Goethean Literary Society of Franklin and Marshall College*. Franklin and Marshall College Studies No. 3 (Lancaster: Franklin and Marshall College, 1941), p. 13.

11. Fisher, p. 7.

12. This made the Goetheans the first of several, possibly hundreds, of societies named for Goethe worldwide.

13. Brubaker, J.H., III. *Hullabaloo Nevonia: An Anecdotal History of Student Life at Franklin and Marshall College* (Lancaster: Franklin and Marshall College, 1987), p. 50.

14. Dubbs, p. 162.

15. Appel, pp. 95-96.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 149-50.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 108.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-110.

20. *Diagnothian MSS*.

21. *Diagnothian MSS*.

22. *Diagnothian MSS*.

23. Young, p. 27. Young argues that this was probably Samuel Fisher.

24. Gerhart, E.V. *History of the Diagnothian Literary Society*. *Diagnothian MSS*.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Appel, p. 138.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 141. No photographs or detailed descriptions of the early hall exist, probably because of the high level of secrecy maintained by the society. Covertness was taken so seriously that H.K. Douglas would not even confide what went on in Diagnothian Hall to his diary on January 30, 1858. "It is often a great temptation to write down many of the interesting things and doings which transpire in the Society but the secrecy prevents. We are an association whose duties are often the troublesome business of life, as well as the vexatious mysteries of Literature." In Douglas, H.K. *The Douglas Diary: Student Days at Franklin and Marshall College 1856-1858*, Klein, F.S. and J.H. Carrill, eds. (Lancaster: Franklin and Marshall College, 1973), p. 118.

28. Interview with Mr. Ernest A. Staley. Archivist. Mercersburg Academy.

29. *The Merchant*, April 2, 1984, p. 1.

30. Walter E. Krebs, "The Literary Societies Half a Century Ago," *The College Student* (April-May 1910): 264.

31. Young, p. 35.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

34. J.H. Dubbs, "College Days in Olden Time," *The College Student* (December 1909): 92.

35. See diaries of E.V. Gerhart, Lancaster Theological Seminary Archives. 11/18/1858: ". . . at Charleston & collect for Halls. \$7.00." 11/20/1858: "The whole day going from house to house collecting money."

36. Douglas, p. 93. The last sentence is a reference to the motto of the society.

37. J.H. Dubbs, "College Days in Olden Time," p. 92.

38. A.J. Heller, "The Literary Societies Before the Civil War," *The College Student* (April/May 1910): 255.

39. J.W. Killinger, an alumnus of the society and a member of Congress, succeeded in getting \$150 in compensation for the society. Killinger may have been particularly interested in the condition of the hall as he had been the first chairman of the Building Committee in Mercersburg. See letter from Killinger to E.V. Gerhart dated May 10, 1862, Diagnothian MSS.

40. Both of these colleges were founded under the primary influence of alumni of the Diagnothian Society. J.H.A. Bomberger, one of the ten founders of the society, was the founder of Ursinus College, and Henry Harbaugh, a member from the Mercersburg period and later pastor of First Reformed Church and president of the theological seminary, both in Lancaster, was the primary influence in the starting of Mercersburg College. Another college, Palatinate College in Myerstown, Pennsylvania, is mentioned as competing with Franklin and Marshall for students in Klein, H.M.J., *History of Franklin and Marshall College* (Lancaster: Franklin and Marshall College Alumni Association, 1952), p. 104.

41. "History of the Diagnothian Literary Society," Gerhart, E.V., J. H. Apple, and J. G. Neville, in *Virtue Crowns Her Followers: The Members' Handbook of the Diagnothian Literary Society*, (Lancaster: D.L.S., 1989), p. 27.

42. Dubbs, J.H., *History of Franklin and Marshall College*, p. 261.

43. Gerhart, Apple, and Neville, pp. 27-28.

44. *The Student Weekly*, March 17, 1954.

45. Diagnothian MSS.

46. *The Student Weekly*, November 4, 1953.

47. From 1955-60 the name of this society varied, according to the composites printed in the college's yearbook, *Oriflamme*. Merged initially as the "Diagnothian Society" it was, in succeeding years, also listed the "Diagnothian-Goethean Society." This serves as evidence of the instability of the organization, while in its death throes, and as evidence of a surviving element of inter-party rivalry right up to the very end.

48. Donald Lasky, "Literary Societies," *The Student Weekly*, March 3, 1954.

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