

Beginnings (1959–1963)

The inception of the society was a consequence of a request by Dean Brown, in May 1959, of those members of the faculty who are Phi Beta Kappa members to investigate the chances of our being granted a chapter at Transylvania.

The initial group of members consisted of L. H. Boyarsky, G. E. Dodds, J. F. Harrison, F. Jennings and D. C. Rose, with Boyarsky serving as chairman, at the request of Dean Brown. An initial contact was made in June 1959 with Mr. Billman, secretary of the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa, indicating our interest in applying for a chapter. We were informed that the selection of colleges that were being considered for that triennium had already been made, but that we would be sent materials in the spring of 1961 relating to applying for the next triennium.

During the academic year of 1959–1960, the committee met and concerned itself with defining minimum requirements for eligibility and procedures for election, attempting to pattern these rather closely upon typical Phi Beta Kappa standards, with the hope that such conformity might facilitate our acceptance by Phi Beta Kappa, and that such action might be retroactive to include all our initiates.

Two reports were made to the Faculty. In May 1960, suggestions for minimum requirements for eligibility were proposed to the faculty, including an evaluation of each course offering as being either liberal arts, or non-liberal arts in nature, emphasis or content. For those courses where there was some valid and justifiable exception to the evaluation, a change in designation was made.

In June of 1960, after further consideration on our part of procedures for election, notification and initiation, and of the aims and organization of the group, a report was made to the faculty. The name, the Holleian Society, was recommended, in honor of the former president of the College, the Reverend Horace Holley, who had exerted a very favorable academic influence during his presidency.

During the academic year of 1960–1961, the composition of our Phi Beta Kappa group had changed with the arrival of C. M. Holmes and the departure of D. C. Rose. Following upon the suggestion to include among the members two representatives-at-large from the faculty, for two-year appointments by the Dean, L. Rose and B. F. Lewis completed the faculty membership in the Society, under the chairmanship of G. E. Dodds. Four students were elected to membership that year.

The materials for application were sent to us in the Spring of 1961, but were unfortunately misplaced long enough to eliminate us from consideration for that triennium.

In the year 1961–1962, the chair rotated to J. F. Harrison, with B. F. Lewis and G. Probst serving as faculty representatives, students were elected in the Fall and in the Spring quarters.

By 1962–1963, the group had expanded to six Phi Beta Kappa members with the inclusion of J. Binford. G. Probst and F. H. Mitchell served as faculty appointees. Holmes served as chairman and F. Jennings as secretary. Two students were elected to membership.

During May of 1963, the constitution was revised. In addition, there was considerable discussion of the feasibility of our being granted a chapter in the next triennium because of certain areas of our program: i.e. our library holdings, language requirements, upper-level curricular offerings and athletic policy. Our concern in these areas was communicated in letters to the various people concerned.

Horace Holley (1781–1827)

A New Englander by birth, Holley was educated in Yale University (1799–1805), where he studied theology and philosophy. He served as minister of the Unitarian Church on Hollis Street in Boston (1809–1817), where he earned the reputation of being one of the best speakers in the nation. But, as he was allegedly averse to publishing his sermons—perhaps to avoid furnishing texts for the pretexts of his adversaries—little has come down to us beyond his discourses given in Transylvania University. He also served as a member of the Board of Overseers of Harvard University; and enroute to Kentucky was invited to address the House of Representatives in Washington. In the course of his theological career Holley had progressed from Calvinism to Unitarianism. To the vision of the progressive Board he appeared to be eminently qualified for the presidency of Transylvania University.

During the administration of Holley (1818–1827) some remarkable reforms were implemented. The curriculum was reformed; and new academic and procedural standards were introduced. The Law Department was reestablished; the Academic Department was strengthened; and a special library and a collection of scientific apparatus were acquired for the Medical Department. Above all, Holley was responsible for bringing to the University a number of scholarly professors. The reputation of Transylvania spread and, in consequence, attracted large numbers of students.

Alongside his presidency Holley also served as the Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy. Thus he was able to teach his enlightened philosophy of religion to the students (especially the senior class). Among the textbooks used by Holley were: *Lectures on the Philosophy of Human Mind* by Thomas Brown of Edinburgh and the *Evidences of Christianity* by William Paley. Holley himself had no reason to doubt that his teachings might become the occasion of criticism against his administration. When he came to Lexington he wrote in his journal (cf. “A Journey from Boston to Lexington commenced Feb. 3, 1818, by Horace Holley”, MS dated 1818):

“There is indeed, in my opinion, no good reason for opposition to me, or for jealousy towards my principles or objects, on the grounds of my religious doctrines and mode of instruction. I aim to be liberal without indifference, moderate without coldness, rational without skepticism, evangelical without fanaticism, simple without crudeness, natural without licentiousness, and pious without the spirit of exclusion or intolerance. I see much to admire in all the sects, and something in all that needs correction. The sectarian names by which report has distinguished me, I do not deserve.”

But Holley was gravely mistaken in his estimate of all the reasonableness of the clergy. They made, without good reason, his very rationalism the target of their attacks. These attacks, which were initially subtle and indirect, became direct and abrasive subsequently. They succeeded in discrediting and defaming him, and in bringing about his downfall.

When Holley resigned (1827), he also submitted an objective résumé of the achievements of the University during his presidency. Therein he states: “This alone is, and will be considered by the candid public as a full unanswerable refutation of the calumnies which our enemies have invented and industriously circulated.” (cf. “Trustee Reports”/31 December 1827/MS in T. U. Archives). The student members of the Union Philosophical Society (cf. Letter/2 March 1827/MS in T. U. Archives) recorded their gratitude for Holley’s enlightened leadership. However, we owe the most objective assessment of the merits and contributions of President Holley to Professor Caldwell. In his *Discourse on the Genius and Character of the Rev. Horace Holley* (1828), written immediately after Holley’s departure and unexpected death at sea, Caldwell defended Holley with such intellectual and moral courage as to leave the vociferous clergy (who were now the inheritors and rulers of his University) speechless.

This depicted Caldwell (*Discourse*/1828: p. 74, 76, 88, 97) the character of Holley and the circumstances of his fall:

“That a deadly conspiracy was formed, not only against him, but against Transylvania...is known to be true. That falsehood, defamation, and treachery were employed, by that conspiracy, as worthy instruments for the perpetuation of its purposes, is equally true. Nor is it less so, that the institution owes its present humbled fortunes to the machinations of the conspirators, and the profligacy of their minions, indefinitely more than to any immediate influence of the indiscretions of [Holley]...

Like an *electron per se*, he shone with an inherent lustre, independently of the contrast of surrounding objects...

Were I to attempt, in miniature, a sketch of his intellect, I would say, that its predominant features consisted in a boldness to encounter the most difficult enterprises, a capacity to acquire knowledge with unwonted rapidity and retain it with a corresponding degree of tenacity, a power to wield and apply in to its uses with wonderful promptitude, force, and splendor, and a strong propensity to great temporary efforts, with an equal antipathy to persevering toil...

On knowledge thus attained he dwelt with steadiness, carefully analyzing it, viewing it in all its connexions and relations, and making it repeatedly a topic of conversation, and even of soliloquy, until it was completely assimilated to his intellect, and had become, in its adhesion to it, so settled and confirmed, that he had a perfect command of it, and the union was indissoluble.

Consequently Dr. Holley was most acutely alive to the beauties of nature, and all the splendid productions of art. On few individuals has there ever been bestowed so keen a relish for this elegant and inexhaustible source of enjoyment...On beauty of every description he gazed with feelings of high-toned rapture; and turned from what was unsightly, with an offended sensibility bordering on pain. Hence arose the refinement and peculiar excellencies of his taste as an amateur, and the well known correctness of his judgment as a critic...

The world has lost in [him] one of its rare and highly gifted inhabitants...

To augment the collective loss, almost the entire intellectual opulence of Dr. Holley is, with his corporeal relics, ‘in the deep bosom of the ocean buried.’ For, of all his vigorous and glowing thoughts, his rich conceptions, and his brilliant fancies, all his refined and lofty philosophical disquisitions, and the famed discourses, whether theological, academical, or popular, that were breathed in soul-subduing melody, or rolled forth in awakening thunders from his lips, he has left but little behind him either in manuscript or print.”

The literary remains of Holley, such as they are, are gathered in our selective Bibliography. No adequate biography of Holley has been published. But Mary Holley, his wife, who settled in Texas, has inspired a literary biography: Rebecca Lee’s *Mary Austin Holley*, published by the University of Texas Press, 1962.