

A History of Secret Societies at Longwood University and  
Their Relationship to Student Power and Agency

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### **Abstract**

The foundation of secret societies at Longwood University reflects the desire of college students to create organizations through which they are able to assert power and influence. Since the eighteenth century, college students have taken it upon themselves to take control from oppressive and authoritative institutions and claim it as their own. The most visible manifestation of students claiming authority and exercising collective agency are student government associations, which are present at almost every college in the United States of America. Groups and organizations such as fraternities, sororities, and clubs were also created by students and made into outlets through which they could claim authority and influence. Historically, Longwood University existed as a female-only institution. The school's administrators instituted strict standards and rules for Longwood's female student population, limiting their mobility and social activities. In the late 1890s, due to the university's administration lessening its strict policies, the students of Longwood began to socialize more frequently and freely. The result of this was a rapid expansion of new organizations on Longwood's campus, all with their own aims and goals. Secret societies were created in the late 1890s and early 1900s by the student population of Longwood University with the intent of overcoming the oppressive and authoritative barriers created by the society they lived in.

## Early Secret Societies at Longwood University

Collegiate secret societies are present at many campuses across the United States.<sup>1</sup> At Longwood University, secret societies have survived for over one hundred years. Longwood has a rich history of secret societies that has worked itself into the social fabric of the university's culture. These societies formed for a variety of reasons and served many different roles on Longwood's campus. Some served as honor societies and social clubs, while others took on formal and significant roles. These secret societies were sources of empowerment for the female students, who were able to socialize with freedom and affect the campus where they lived. There are currently three known active secret societies on Longwood's campus: CHI, Princeps, and Cahoots. These active secret societies carry on one hundred years of tradition and continue to serve as outlets through which students influence the culture of Longwood.

The ladies of Longwood founded the first known secret society and the first sorority on Longwood's campus in 1897. According to the 1897 edition of the *Virginian*, the Mystic Three was the first known secret society created on Longwood's campus, founded on 13 February 1897. Three students founded the Mystic Three, who called themselves the "Great High Jingree of the Needle," the "Appointed Prophetess to Mystic Three," and the "Most Exalted Keeper of the Records." This secret society met on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, and 23<sup>rd</sup> of each month. While their purpose is unknown, this was the first of many secret societies to follow. Over the next thirty years, students founded a wide range of new secret societies at Longwood. The secret societies founded at Longwood between 1900 and 1930 are as follows: CHI (1900), LK Society (1901), GCGC, RPCPP, S.T.A.R (1903), I.M.P.S (1909), Black Cats, W.A.N.K., FANGS, Mu Omega (1912), S.S. (1914), BOMO (1916), OWLS, Zeta Tau (1920), Quo Vadis Ignoramus (1921), and

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<sup>1</sup> J. Blanchard, "Secret Societies in Colleges," *The College Courant* 10, no. 15 (April 13, 1872): 169.

C.A.L.S. (1925).<sup>2</sup> The exact purpose of many of these organizations is unknown, with their only public records being photos, mottos, and colors that are stated in the *Virginian*, which is Longwood's yearbook. Based on their short-lived lifespans, one can infer that most of these organizations were social groups and likely close friend groups; the *Virginian* also displays a great deal of overlap in membership between these organizations. By the 1930s, the culture of the university slowly shifted to acknowledge the need for women to have a voice and freely socialize, and the desire of students to gather in secret slowly faded away.<sup>3</sup>

Secret societies sprang into existence at the start of the twentieth century when Longwood was undergoing a great deal of social change. Joseph Jarman became the President of Longwood at the start of the 1900s and began extensive building projects aimed at expanding Longwood's student recreational facilities, and he permitted far more socialization and free time for the all-female student population; this was far from the social norms of the early twentieth century and was a change far ahead of its time.<sup>4</sup> These changes brought about a rapid expansion of extracurricular activities, and secret societies served as a way for the female student population to socialize and form their own identity away from the conformist and patriarchal society they lived in. At the time, students were not permitted to leave campus without permission, speak to men through their dorm windows, smoke tobacco, drink alcohol, miss meals without permission, were made to adhere to a strict dress code, and were expected to be quiet in all public spaces, among many other rules.<sup>5</sup> Most of these secret societies faded from existence, and by the 1930s, CHI stood alone. While one can not be entirely sure of the reason for their decline, as these secret societies produced very few public records, it is assumed that

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<sup>2</sup> "Chi Celebrates its 100 years Years of Service during Oktoberfest," *The Rotunda* 80, no.5 (Farmville, VA), Oct. 12, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Shepard, *Longwood University, the First 175 Years*, (Farmville, VA: Longwood University Foundation, 2014), 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

they faded due to the need for private socialization becoming less prominent and the widespread expansion of Greek Life, which also took root at Longwood in 1897.<sup>6</sup> Despite this, CHI persisted and has left a long and rich history.

### **The History of CHI**

CHI is the second oldest known secret society founded at Longwood University, with a history spanning over one hundred years. CHI's stated purpose is to "promote and maintain a spirit of cooperation among students in every phase of college life," fostering loyalty and respect for Longwood.<sup>7</sup> The organization states that to fulfill its aims, they hope to represent the entire student body and commits itself to recognizing the efforts of students, faculty, and campus organizations.<sup>8</sup> The symbol of CHI is the Longwood Rotunda, with each of the four pillars representing loyalty, character, respect, and challenge, the horizontal bar representing responsibility, the triangle representing their purpose, and the dome representing the student body.<sup>9</sup> The current colors of CHI are blue and white.<sup>10</sup> CHI aims to serve as an organization that is representative of the Longwood student body and binds Longwood's campus together by promoting the abstract idea of the "spirit of Longwood." CHI has not always existed in its current state, though, and has undergone tremendous change throughout its history. CHI evolved and adapted with Longwood's campus, and its purpose, iconography, and membership have changed over its one hundred and twenty-year history.

Founded on 15 October 1900, CHI originally served as an honor society for the three sorority alpha chapters founded at Longwood University; CHI admitted the fourth alpha chapter

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<sup>6</sup>"Chi Celebrates," *The Rotunda*.

<sup>7</sup> "X CHI 2006 X," *The Rotunda* 85, no. 13 (Farmville, VA), Jan 26, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> "CHI: Founded October 15, 1900," LU-073, CHI Collection, Greenwood Library Archives and Special Collections, Longwood University, Farmville, VA.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

founded at Longwood into its ranks following its foundation.<sup>11</sup> These sororities are as follows: ΚΔ (1897), ΣΣΣ (1898), ZTA (1898), and ΑΣΑ (1901); CHI invited fourteen members of these sororities each year for membership.<sup>12</sup> CHI became known as “The Sorority of Sororities,” and the precedent that entry to CHI was only possible through invitation became set in stone.<sup>13</sup> CHI established itself into a prominent position on Longwood’s campus, acting as a sort of early precursor to the National Panhellenic Conference and as a major honor society. Because of its prominent position and its ability to adapt, CHI survived the decline of secret societies on Longwood’s campus. The first appearance of CHI is in the 1901 edition of the *Virginian*, with the first photo appearing in the 1903 edition. There are very few public records of CHI’s presence and activities on campus at this time beyond photo’s in the *Virginian*.

CHI underwent many changes over its first thirty years and moved away from simply being an honor society for Longwood’s sororities. According to the 1939 edition of the *Virginian*, CHI adopted a new aim and worked in coordination with the Honor System to prevent the breaking of rules and help maintain high standards on Longwood’s campus. This period of CHI can be categorized as “old” CHI, as this organization is hardly recognizable compared to the modern CHI. The colors of old CHI were red and white, their symbol was the *Memento Mori*, a red skull and bones that was a common icon of many secret societies and sororities dating from the latter half of the nineteenth century, and their song included far more cryptic lyrics.<sup>14</sup> In 1939 they adopted red and white robes featuring a red X.<sup>15</sup> Instead of commending the students and faculty of Longwood’s campus, as modern CHI does, old CHI condemned students that they deemed to have broken the morals and values of Longwood. As recounted by their former

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<sup>11</sup> Shepard, *Longwood University*, 50.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid*

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> “All the way from FANGS to chi, Longwood’s had its ‘secret societies’,” *The Rotunda* 53, no. 23 (Farmville, VA), Dec. 5, 1973.

<sup>15</sup> “Secret Groups History Interestingly Unusual,” *The Rotunda* 44, no. 14 (Farmville, VA), March 10, 1965.

faculty advisor Dr. Raymond French, their methods of condemnation included painting red X's on students' foreheads, writing notes to students and burning the edges of the papers, and announcing condemned students' names at an old version of a CHI burning.<sup>16</sup> The criteria for being condemned included having poor grades or acting outside of the 'morales' of Longwood.<sup>17</sup> CHI acted as an outward extension of the Honor and Conduct system until the 1970s.<sup>18</sup>

Following the World Wars, many students became more apprehensive of authority. While CHI was founded with the intention of creating power for students, to many, it came to be seen as an authoritative group. Students and faculty alike began speaking out against the actions of CHI during this period, with many *Rotunda* articles being published on the topic. An example of this comes from 1948 when students and faculty felt that CHI had overstepped its bounds by replacing the original Joan of Arc statue that was donated to the school in 1914 and was housed in the Rotunda throughout both World Wars.<sup>19</sup> Various articles appeared in the *Rotunda* questioning the existence of CHI at all. Following a CHI burning in 1950 where seventeen CHI members were revealed and four students were publicly condemned, a *Rotunda* article questioning CHI's existence stated that "secret societies with no acknowledged purpose have little place on a modern campus," that CHI's only "outstanding accomplishments" were twice throwing the campus into an uproar by replacing the Joan of Arc statue and announcing a CHI walk, throwing the freshman dorms into a frenzy, and that CHI only existed to serve as a "Boogie Man" to scare campus into obeying the rules of the college.<sup>20</sup>

At this time, CHI insisted that its goals and motives were to remain a secret, questioned the *Rotunda's* right to question their right to exist, stated that secret societies were still a part of

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<sup>16</sup> "All the way from FANGS," *The Rotunda*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> "The Student Government Association," *The Focus* (Farmville, VA), Oct. 1911.

<sup>19</sup> "Was Chi Wrong Again?," *The Rotunda* 27, no. 28 (Farmville, Va), May 12, 1948.

<sup>20</sup> "Why CHI . . .," *The Rotunda* 29, no. 26 (Farmville,VA), May 10, 1950.

many college campuses, that the campus would remain uninformed about CHI, and that the *Rotunda* was responsible for creating negative attitudes towards them.<sup>21</sup> Despite the *Rotunda* publishing that they felt a majority of campus stood behind their negative analysis of CHI, their response was not conducive to preserving their longevity. At the same time CHI's existence was being challenged by campus, a spin-off group known as Cahoots was formed in the early 1950s.<sup>22</sup> By the 1960s, Cahoots became a prominent secret society on campus; the membership of Cahoots was not a secret.<sup>23</sup> Cahoots presented itself as the opposite of CHI, hosting "Freezings" rather than "Burnings," and aimed to make campus laugh rather than enforce standards and rules.<sup>24</sup> At a time when CHI condemned members of the student body at their Burnings, Cahoots commended students at their Freezings.<sup>25</sup> Like CHI, Cahoots also held walks, but instead of walking in the dark of nights through the colonnades draped in robes, Cahoots dressed as clowns and sang songs through the Rotunda, aiming to make campus laugh. The first iteration of Cahoots faded out of existence in the late 1980s but stood as an example of the student body's negative attitudes towards CHI.

By 1970, CHI changed its course and acknowledged its need to adapt. CHI began to do away with its old methodologies and iconography and began to open up and justify its existence to Longwood's campus. In 1970, CHI wrote a letter to a Mr. Butler stating that "CHI of 1971 had just begun its long walk" as well as listing their positive influences and gifts to campus, including a new scholarship fund as well as various plaques and cornerstones.<sup>26</sup> In 1971, CHI published a welcome letter to all faculty and staff stating that it had changed its colors to the

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<sup>21</sup> "The Situation Stands . . ." *The Rotunda* 29, no. 27 (Farmville, VA), May 27, 1950.

<sup>22</sup> "Extra . . .," *The Rotunda* 29, no. 26 (Farmville, VA), May 3, 1950.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> "Learning is Burning but Freezing is Pleasing," *The Rotunda* 47, no. 6 (Farmville, VA), Nov. 8, 1967.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> CHI letter to Butler 1970, LU-073, CHI Collection, Greenwood Library Archives and Special Collections, Longwood University, Farmville, VA.



school colors, blue and white, did away with the *Memento Mori* iconography in favor of the blue word CHI and the Rotunda symbol, rewrote their song from having lyrics warning students to beware of CHI to lyrics intended to promote the “spirit of Longwood,” and committed itself to recognizing the efforts of students and faculty instead of condemning them.<sup>27</sup> It was also at this time that the *Longwood College Songbook* was written and published by CHI.<sup>28</sup> This songbook intended to help create a positive image of CHI and encourage school spirit. These were massive changes to the organization and overall serve as the second major example of CHI adapting to ensure its self-preservation.

CHI of the 1970s continued to attempt to improve its image across campus, and this was seemingly received positively by the student body. In 1972, an article in the *Rotunda* stated that CHI was an organization that was “aware of its traditions and place in the college, but at the same time seeking new ways to implement itself into the college community.”<sup>29</sup> These changes made by CHI are representative of a larger shift at Longwood towards modernization and changing attitudes towards what it meant to be a woman. Many of the former oppressive and authoritative rules that were in place at Longwood had faded by this point, and student attitudes on campus reflected the idea that Longwood must “project itself into the future and march with the times or it will cripple itself into non-existence;” the *Rotunda* stated that CHI must do the same.<sup>30</sup> By the 1980s, old CHI began to closely resemble modern CHI. They now commended students, faculty, and organization’s by handing out wax-sealed jars of ash from the burnings, continued their tradition of doing hooded CHI walks, encouraged students to uphold the four aspects of student life - social, recreational, intellectual, and spiritual - encouraged participation

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<sup>27</sup> CHI letter to Faculty and Staff, LU-073, CHI Collection, Greenwood Library Archives and Special Collections, Longwood University, Farmville, VA.

<sup>28</sup> “Longwood College Songbook,” LU-336, Vertical Files, Greenwood Library Archives and Special Collections, Longwood University, Farmville, VA.

<sup>29</sup> “The New Spirit,” *The Rotunda* 51, no. 22 (Farmville, VA), April 26, 1972.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

in student organizations, and committed itself to upholding the Honor and Judicial codes.<sup>31</sup> By the 1990s, the campus at large no longer resented CHI as they once had, with many positive articles being published in the *Rotunda* throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Despite all the changes that CHI underwent throughout the 1900s, many of its public traditions and contributions have remained. Visible evidence of CHI on campus includes CHI walks and CHI burnings, which have persisted throughout their entire history, as well as the blue Rotunda symbols that are found in front of Lancaster Hall and at Stubbs lawn, which are seen as symbols of the “spirit of Longwood” by Longwood’s campus. CHI burning and walks remain the most public events CHI hosts. CHI walks are where the members of CHI walk across a section of campus shrouded in hoods. CHI burnings are the most important event held by CHI, where CHI reveals its senior students and commendations are handed out. At these burnings, CHI emphasizes that it is not an organization intended for the individual but rather that, according to a member of CHI, “CHI is a spirit.”<sup>32</sup> Further evidence of CHI includes the various banners they place around campus demonstrating support for organizations and events, CHI droppings, which are good luck charms left around campus for students to find, and their scholarship fund. CHI has remained a secret organization throughout all this time, stating that secrecy is vital to its mission; its goal is not to emphasize the individual but to promote the “spirit of Longwood.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Contemporary Secret Societies**

The 1990s saw a resurgence of students’ founding secret societies at Longwood. Students founded at least three new secret societies during this period, all seemingly with good intentions. The Society of the Fraternity and the Nineteen Hidden Polyester Lords were two minor and

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<sup>31</sup> “CHI Speaks,” *The Rotunda* 65, no. 5 (Farmville, VA), Oct. 15, 1985.

<sup>32</sup> “The Spirit of CHI Supports Longwood,” *The Rotunda* 71, no. 1 (Farmville, VA), Oct. 8, 1990.

<sup>33</sup> “Chi Through the Years,” LU-073, CHI Collection, Greenwood Library Archives and Special Collections, Longwood University, Farmville, VA.

short-lived secret societies that came from this period. The Society of the Fraternity, founded in 1991, aimed to recognize faculty members they deemed worthy on behalf of the student population by leaving pumpkins at the faculty's houses.<sup>34</sup> The Nineteen Hidden Polyester Lords, founded in 1992, claimed to hold a great secret they intended to later reveal to campus in order to bring down “priests or kings who happened to be in authority at the time.”<sup>35</sup> *Princeps*, founded in 1992, was the third and only surviving known secret society dating from this period.<sup>36</sup> All three new secret societies faced great scrutiny by Longwood’s campus, with articles from the *Rotunda* stating that they were “concerned with the recent trend toward the increasing number of secret societies on Longwood’s campus.”<sup>37</sup> These articles also pointed out that the campus as a whole was not consulted regarding their formation and activities and questioned who gave them such authority to carry out their actions.<sup>38</sup> While students founded these secret societies with good intentions and they follow the theory that students founded secret societies with the intent of empowerment, they were not initially received well. The Nineteen Hidden Polyester Lords and the Society of the Fraternity faded with time, but *Princeps* has survived onto Longwood’s current campus.

*Princeps* is one of three current active known secret societies on Longwood’s campus and is the second oldest active secret society at Longwood. The “Seven Pillars of PRINCEPS” announced the creation of *Princeps* in the *Rotunda* on 5 February 1992; *Princeps* stated that the founding members were influential leaders from across Longwood’s campus.<sup>39</sup> They stated that *Princeps* was founded with the intention of promoting leadership on Longwood’s campus.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “Letter to the Editor,” *The Rotunda* 71, no. 14 (Farmville, VA), March 4, 1992.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> “Letters to the Editor,” *The Rotunda* 71, no. 10 (Farmville, VA), Feb 5, 1992.

<sup>40</sup> “Letters to the Editor,” *The Rotunda*.

Physical evidence of Princeps includes “droppings,” which are good luck charms left around campus for students, the seven black crowns painted at various points on Longwood’s sidewalks, and small paper sevens left on doors of campus residences, with red signifying the president's list and black signifying the dean's list. The symbol of Princeps is a seven, and their motto is “to lead is to serve.”<sup>41</sup> According to interviews conducted with alumni from this time period, students founded Princeps out of dissatisfaction with the way CHI operated. There is no written evidence to corroborate these statements, but this was the conclusion drawn from various interviews. Princeps did not intend to compete with CHI, denoting in its founding document that it was to focus on leadership. In 1994, it appeared in the *Rotunda* that CHI advocated for school spirit, and Princeps advocated for the advancement of leadership on campus. CHI and Princeps now exist as well respected and prestigious honor societies on Longwood’s campus.

On 12 February 2018, students announced the return of Cahoots in the *Rotunda*. This new Cahoots was modeled after its former predecessor, retaining the traditions and iconography of Cahoots from the mid-1900s. Cahoots reemerged at a politically unstable period in the history of the United States and stated that they exist to “support the bond between students, faculty, and staff.” Cahoots stated that its membership was diverse and representative of Longwood’s campus as a whole and made it known that they did not aim to compete with CHI or Princeps, but rather wished to fill a gap that they felt was missing on campus. As with their forebears, Cahoots hosts walks and freezings and leaves droppings around Longwood’s campus. As with CHI and Princeps, they stress that secrecy is necessary to lessen any emphasis that may be put on an individual and to strengthen the community. Similar to its many predecessors, Cahoots serves as an example of students seeing a need and filling it. Cahoots may not serve to attempt and

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<sup>41</sup> “All the way from FANGS,” *The Rotunda*.

overcome oppressive barriers, as many early secret societies founded on Longwood's campus may have, but the premise for its founding is similar. As this is such a recent development, there is little published information regarding the current activities of Cahoots.

### **Conclusion**

The secret societies formed on Longwood's campus, primarily CHI and later Princeps, are prime examples of students coming together to create powerful student organizations. Since 1897, secret societies have been a part of the cultural fabric of Longwood University, influencing both students and faculty alike. Students founded many of these secret societies to fill a need, primarily overcoming social barriers created by authoritative and patriarchal institutions. In doing so, they created power for themselves by going against the status quo of their day, empowering the female population of Longwood to operate beyond their prescribed means. While Longwood's campus was, for many years, indifferent or hostile to secret societies, they have become a part of the many beloved traditions present on Longwood's campus while still maintaining some form of power for students. The current active secret societies on Longwood's campus are CHI, which promotes spirit, Princeps, which promotes leadership, and Cahoots, which promotes community. These secret societies fill a particular need on campus and serve as powerful and prestigious student organizations.

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