Literary Societies of Wofford College

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LITERARY SOCIETIES
WOFFORD COLLEGE
SPARTANBURG, S.C.
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Less than two months after Wofford College opened, on Aug. 1, 1854, eight students met to organize a literary society. Their primary purpose was to practice their skills in debating, oratory, parliamentary procedure and writing, all of which were important skills for college students to develop.

As the college grew, so did the number of societies, with a second one being organized in 1858, a third in 1905 and a fourth in 1920. Over the college’s first century, the literary societies were integral to student life, and they made many lasting contributions. The oldest societies established libraries, began building the college portrait collection and eventually started three student publications. Their weekly meetings helped organize some of the primary events of student life, and they provided some of the ceremonial activities of annual Commencement week festivities. Though the literary societies ceased to exist after World War II, their influence on the college continues in the three student publications they founded, their contributions to the library and the portraits that are part of the college’s permanent collection. Some of their ledgers, photo albums, programs and papers are part of the College Archives collection.
The Calhoun Literary Society, named for South Carolina Sen. John C. Calhoun, was founded in September 1854 by eight students. The society’s weekly meetings generally included a debate on a topic selected by the society, which could be a political, literary or historical question.

Members of the society took turns engaging in debate and presenting speeches as well as in critiquing the presentations. These debates and orations gave students a chance to practice their oral presentation skills, which, no doubt, would be helpful as they entered public life after leaving Wofford.

The society secretary kept minutes of each meeting to record the names of those assigned to debate or speak or to serve on society committees, along with any resolutions approved by the society. The minutes also included the topic for the next meeting’s debate. The president and secretary signed the minutes. Future faculty member, trustee and Methodist Bishop William Wallace Duncan, who was the son of original faculty member David Duncan, signed the Nov. 25, 1854, minutes as secretary and in July and October 1857 as president.

The Calhoun Society designed a small pin in the shape of a palmetto tree for its members. It also commissioned a large portrait of John C. Calhoun by Albert Capers Guerry.
In 1860, during Commencement, Preston sent the society a bust of Patrick Henry, who was his great-uncle, with the words, “Give this bust of Patrick Henry to the Preston Literary Society of Wofford College and say to those dear boys, ‘God bless them.’” The society engraved part of his message onto a plaque that hung in the society hall for the rest of its existence.

With two societies, rivalries naturally emerged. At first, the larger Calhoun Society tended to dominate in the selection of marshals and speakers, but, eventually, the two societies came to an agreement to share in the selection of orators, marshals and managers. The Preston Society collected several notable portraits, including ones of Sen. William C. Preston, Professor William Wallace Duncan, Professor Warren DuPre and President James H. Carlisle, all of which are part of the college’s permanent art collection.

The minutes come from the Dec. 10, 1859, meeting of the society, where the debate question proposed for the next meeting involved the justification of the allies in helping restore the Bourbons to the French throne in 1814-15.
The CONSOLIDATED SOCIETY
1863-1866

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 saw most of the student body leave for military service. Eventually the two societies merged into the Consolidated Society, which continued until 1866.

The Calhoun Society met again on March 1866 to elect a few new members, and then again on Oct. 5, when it notified the Consolidated Society that it was withdrawing from the joint body. The Preston Society did not resume its regular meetings until October 1867. The minutes from both the Preston and the Calhoun societies show the suspension of Calhoun meetings in 1863, the resumption of Calhoun meetings in 1866 and of Preston in 1867.
Each literary society maintained its own library and elected a librarian to serve as the custodian of its books. Often these books were gifts from faculty members or alumni, and they came to number more than 2,000 in each collection.

The societies kept catalogs of their books as well as records of which society members had borrowed each book; these records are in the College Archives. In the fall of 1894, the society libraries, which numbered around 5,500 books, merged with the college library, which at that point had about 4,000 volumes. Until 1910, the college library (pictured below) was in Main Building, on the second floor, in the rooms east of the auditorium (today’s English hall).

Some of the books in this catalog remain in the collection. Look for Pro-Slavery Argument on the display shelves. This title was cataloged as number 91 by the society library. You'll see DuPre’s entry for checking it out and then returning it in the circulation ledger (page 106) pictured above.
The Preston and Calhoun literary societies each took part in Commencement activities from the college’s earliest days. Each society generally sponsored its own debate for alumni and friends and sometimes heard a valedictory address by one of its senior members.

Additionally, the two societies held a joint debate as well as an address by a guest speaker before the societies. The societies generally supplied the marshals who helped organize the Commencement activities. These programs represent a number of different society lectures and programs during late 19th century Commencement weeks. The societies also awarded diplomas to their graduates, signed by all of the society members.

The presidents of the literary societies in 1860 were brothers R.W. Simpson and T.N. Simpson. The 1888 ceremonies featured a debate on the statement “The federal union will probably remain permanent.”
Both societies maintained meeting rooms in Main Building. The society presidents generally wore robes to preside over meetings, and the societies kept photo albums with pictures of their presidents.

Pictured here is the Calhoun Society’s third-floor meeting room during an 1892 meeting, an 1898 photograph of the room, a group photograph of the society from 1936 and a picture of society president Thomas Gordon McLeod of the class of 1892. McLeod went on to serve as governor of South Carolina from 1923 to 1927.
Preston Society Growth

The Preston Society’s meeting space was also on the third floor in the room nearest the chapel.

Pictured here is the society’s meeting room in 1898 and 1920, a group photograph from 1891 and a portrait of society president George Clark Leonard of the class of 1895. Leonard became a Methodist minister and college trustee; Leonard Auditorium in Main Building is named in his honor.
Between 1889 and 1915, members of the literary societies founded three publications. In 1889, students began to publish a literary magazine, the Wofford College Journal.

For more than 25 years, the Journal included essays, stories and poems as well as news, sports, alumni notes and commentaries on other college literary magazines. Over time, the Journal went from being published monthly to four or five times a year, to once a semester, and, finally, to an annual publication. For the past 10 years, it has been published as a part of the yearbook.

In 1908, the societies established a yearbook, which they named The Bohemian. It has been published continuously since.

In 1915, the societies founded a weekly newspaper, the Old Gold and Black. It continues to be published five or six times a semester.
In the beginning, membership in one or the other of the two societies was voluntary, and, according to then-college historian D. D. Wallace, they flourished, though partly because of the lack of any other activities. In 1872, the college’s trustees voted that “they had proved themselves of such value that the Faculty ought not to permit any student to remain in college who declined to unite with one of them.”

The societies often elected honorary members, and one album contains letters from faculty as well as notable figures accepting their elections. The album contains a letter from Robert E. Lee, then president of Washington College in Virginia, and another letter (pictured) from Sen. Lucius Q.C. Lamar of Mississippi.

The societies were active throughout the year, sponsoring other joint debates, contests and exhibitions.
With growth in the student body from fewer than 150 students in the 1890s to more than 250 by 1905, the Preston and Calhoun societies realized the need for a third society. The student body convened in October 1905 and founded a new society. The members chose to honor the college’s third president, Dr. James H. Carlisle, by naming themselves the Carlisle Literary Society.

The Carlisle Society met in the classroom in Main Building where Dr. Carlisle often had lectured.

Pictured are the Journal article about the organization of the society, the first page of its minutes, portraits of the society in 1911 and 1931 and the portrait of the society’s first president, M.T. Wharton of the class of 1906.
Continued growth in the student body to around 350 students in 1920 led to the need to establish a fourth society, as the Calhoun and Preston societies often had to divide into two sections.

In the fall of 1920, the Snyder Literary Society became the fourth of the societies at the college. The 1872 rule requiring students to join a society was still in force, but the Snyder Society never was as strong as the older societies.

Pictured are the Snyder Literary Society in 1921 and a list of the society’s charter members.
Despite the continuing rule that students had to join one of the societies, other activities and sources of entertainment continued to draw student attention away from debating and oratory. During the 1920s, the rule requiring students to hold membership in a society was relaxed, requiring only first-year students to join in the hopes that they would continue into subsequent years voluntarily.

That hope proved to be unfounded, and on June 1, 1935, the faculty made society membership completely voluntary. Within two years, the newest Snyder Society merged with the oldest Calhoun Society to form the Calhoun-Snyder Society. In 1943, that society merged with the Carlisle to form the Carlisle-Snyder Society, dropping the historic Calhoun name. In the early 1950s, the Preston merged with the Carlisle-Snyder and adopted a neutral name, the Wightman Literary Society, in honor of the college’s first president, William M. Wightman. After 1952, even that was too much, and a century of literary society activity came to an end.
Though the literary societies no longer exist on campus, their influence continues in a legacy of student creative activities.

The student publications they started are still being published. Their early focus on writing, which helped fill the pages of the college literary magazine, continues to influence the college today in a variety of ways, perhaps the most visible being the program in creative writing. The longtime Wofford Writers Series brings numerous authors to campus for readings and discussions of their works. The college has had debating clubs, student literary salons and recent student-led presentations such as Native Tongues, where students read literary works in their original languages.

The spirit of the literary societies lives on in the extra- and co-curricular activities scheduled throughout the year that engage in and promote critical thinking and communication skills; free, open and collegial inquiry; and community engagement.