

Town Square

Shortly after the Founders created Delta Gamma, they walked these streets in the Oxford Town Square and acquired two items. First, a leather-bound book with a lock and key. This was the first Delta Gamma minute book; it is now kept at the Frances Lewis Stevenson Archives at Executive Offices. The second item was the first Delta Gamma badge; it was not in the shape of an anchor but rather in the shape of an “H” to stand for “hope.” To this day, no original H badges have been found, and they are believed to have been melted down.

The square has changed much since Delta Gamma’s founding, but you can still find one business that was in operation when the Founders walked these streets, Neilson’s Department Store, which opened in 1839. While it too had been burned down along with the rest of the square during the Civil War, the owner, William Smith Neilson, had converted all his money to gold and buried it before the Union troops arrived. This allowed him to rebuild and re-open his store by 1866. Three of his daughters joined Delta Gamma: Ada, Anna Louise and Mary Neilson, all Psi I-Lewis School.

Upon entering Oxford Town Square, notice the large courthouse seated proudly in the center with the rest of the town sprawling out around it. This was the most common layout for towns in the 1800s as the courthouse was where many important events for the local community would occur, such as trials, political speeches and sometimes weddings.

During the Civil War, in August 1864, Union troops came to Oxford. Almost immediately after arriving, they received word of a raid on Memphis, Tennessee, and were ordered to return. Before leaving, the Union troops burned the courthouse, town square and the homes of prominent officials. By the time the Founders arrived almost ten years later, the square and courthouse had been rebuilt.

Today, the square features markers that remind us of the era and events through which the early members lived. A statue dedicated to Confederate soldiers stands on the south side of the courthouse and on the east side sits a memorial plaque to the victims of lynching in Lafayette County. And it is notable that Mississippi had the highest number of lynchings in the United States, with more than 600 reported.

With their studies complete at the end of the school year in 1874, the Founders went home to Kosciusko. They each married and had children – and all have Delta Gamma descendants. Mary and Anna both became teachers. And at one point, during their adult lives, all three Founders lived along the same street in Kosciusko. Anna’s life was cut short when she passed away at the age of 51. Mary and Eva remained close friends and after reconnecting to Delta Gamma, attended several Conventions and Delta Gamma events later in life. Eva passed away in 1934 at age 78 with Mary at her side during the last few weeks of her life. Mary said of her dear friend, “This friendship of so many years is rare, yet it is ours.” Mary was able to see her granddaughter initiated into Alpha Psi-Mississippi before she passed away in 1940 at the age of 84.

The Founders lived during an extraordinary time in history and saw incredible societal changes during their lifetime. They created an organization that has grown into one of the largest international women’s organizations with more than 260,000 members, 150 collegiate chapters and 183 alumnae groups. A thriving organization, the Do Good Sisterhood has prospered by remaining adaptable and resilient for a century and a half. It continues to strive to meet its objective to, “foster high ideals of friendship among women, to promote their educational and cultural interests, to create in them a true sense of social responsibility and to develop in them the best qualities of character.”

Consider the following questions and discuss them with your tour group:

- The Founders lived through wars, the earliest days of women's suffrage and many more extraordinary historical events. Compare these to the historical events you have lived through.
- What does Article II, "The objects of this Fraternity shall be to foster high ideals of friendship among women, to promote their educational and cultural interests, to create in them a true sense of social responsibility, and to develop in them the best qualities of character." mean to you?
- What would have been considered normal for the Founders that would not be considered normal today? What might they find strange or interesting about our society today?