

A Brief History of Phi Beta Kappa's Key

In 1963, Phi Beta Kappa published a brochure titled *The Insignia of Phi Beta Kappa*, by ΦBK Senator William T. Hastings, who had been asked to trace the evolution of the emblems of Phi Beta Kappa from the medal of 1776 to the modern key. Hastings originally sought information from the chapters, many of which had a few old keys, but few had any definitive historical knowledge. He then published a request for information to the general membership through the *Key Reporter*, with "excellent results." Here are some of the illustrations, all full size, from the brochure.

1. One of the original badges of the Society, the medal of Peyton Short, is in the archives of the College of William and Mary, where the Society was founded. The one-inch-square silver medal is engraved on one side with SP, for the Latin *Societas Pbilosophiae*, and the date of the founding, December 5, 1776. The other side carries the Greek initials of ΦBK plus three stars symbolizing the three aims of the Society: "friendship, morality, and literature" [learning].



Peyton Short
William & Mary
1780



4. Yale continued to innovate, and so the medal soon became a key. A 1798 silver medal had a small upper stem with a ring and a swivel. The 1806 badge shown here is a gold key that has an upper stem with swivel, plus the now traditional lower stem. The lower stem here is an iron ferrule with a square hole for watch winding. (The iron ferrule subsequently gave way to a gold lower stem, at first hollow, then solid.)



Nathaniel Chauncey
Yale 1806



2. The second chapter of Phi Beta Kappa was established at Yale in 1780. The medal shown here—the earliest one in Yale's collection—is brass, and the ring at the top is supported by a draped laurel wreath. The medal is slightly larger than the William and Mary one.



E. D. Griffin
Yale 1790



5. In 1827, Yale introduced the oblong shape that is characteristic of the modern key. Later keys introduced a broader border with a leafy vine design, as shown in the Carter key here. By 1855, Yale keys had become smaller; the Cobb key here also carries "Yale" and the class year on its face.



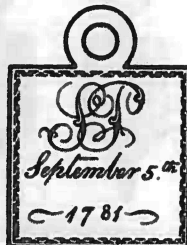
Calvin H. Carter
Yale 1851



3. This early medal at Harvard, which established the third chapter, is virtually identical with the William and Mary medal except that the date is that of the founding of Harvard's chapter.



Benjamin Pickman
Harvard 1784



Henry N. Cobb
Yale 1855



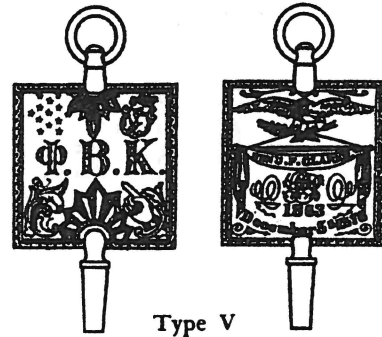
6. Harvard retained the medal for more than a century. This 1823 medal shows the SP and the date in roman letters, not script, and five stars (one for each *Alpha* chapter, a practice started by the Union College chapter). The owner's name is in a panel at the bottom.



Ellis Gray Loring
Harvard 1823



9. The engraving of the key has undergone more changes at Brown than at any other chapter. Hastings reproduced these illustrations from the pamphlet *Pbi Beta Kappa Keys at Brown* (1937):



7. The oldest known Harvard key is this 1900 one, which is gold and has nine stars.



Owen D. Evans
Harvard 1900

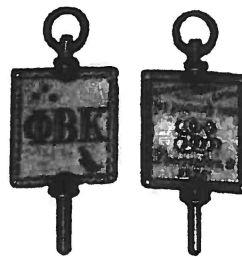


10. Here are some other keys that illustrate various engraving styles on insignia of the 19th and early 20th centuries, before the Society settled on the official key designs now in use and, in 1917, appointed an official jeweler to produce them.

8. Examples of early medals and keys from other chapters include these:



Thomas Odiorne
Dartmouth 1791



Sarah S. Lyon
Mount Holyoke 1906



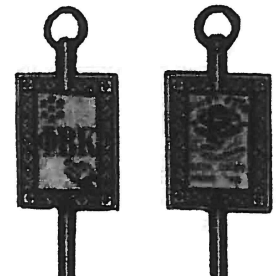
Gertrude Hemingway
Cornell 1907



Joseph Painter
Union 1829



Gladys Walley
Boston 1905



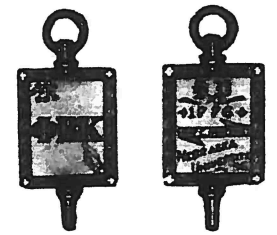
Clara A. Eastman
Colby 1909



Early Bowdoin medal.
Original owner
not known.



Anna G. Richey
Vassar 1899



May C. Whiting
Nebraska 1896