

ISAAC M. JORDAN

Joseph C. Nate¹

The third founder of Sigma Chi to enter into the Chapter Eternal was the gifted and loyal Isaac M. Jordan. For some years prior to his tragic death in December, 1890, he had been more closely in touch with the Fraternity and its membership than was then any other founder. He was known in our publications, as everywhere, simply as Isaac M. Jordan. In the Introduction to this volume is a statement of the discovery in the preparation of this History that he had changed his name in his early professional career from the original, baptismal name, Isaac Alfred Jordan.²

After the death of Founder Jordan, this was written of him:

He was in life and character the very personification of the Order he has done so much to establish—of its governing spirit, of its tendencies, and of its conscience. He put honor above all else, and in his friendships he was pure, unselfish, and enduring. He loved the companionship of his friends and always held up to them the sunny side of life. He loved his fellow man, and rejoiced in making others happy. He was loyal to every conviction of duty, whether in his profession, in politics, or in the social and home circle. His heart was broad and true, and decked with Christian graces.

The tribute was paid by the Hon. James W. Newman, Gamma '61, who had himself attained prominence in Ohio public life and had known the Fraternity almost from the beginning. He had also known Isaac M. Jordan intimately throughout those years, and his words may well serve as a key in following the development and unfolding of Founder Jordan's life:

Isaac M. Jordan was a descendant of an English family that settled on the banks of the Susquehanna River, in east-central Pennsylvania, in the years soon after the Revolution. It is the region

¹ Joseph Cookman Nate. *The History of Sigma Chi 1855-1925*, Vol. III, pp. 1-11.

² A special explanation may here be made as to the familiar name, Isaac M. Jordan. In the preparation of the initial volume of this History the author noted the uniform use of the name, Isaac A. Jordan, during the years of this founder at Miami University. This may be found in the signature of Brother Jordan [as reproduced under his picture which proceeds this text]. There was also noted the regular use, subsequent to the graduation of Founder Jordan from Miami University, of only the middle initial, "M," without any full name. Considerable correspondence with former associates of Founder Jordan failed to clear up the discrepancy. Finally, however, the circumstances were ascertained of the dropping by Brother Jordan of his middle name, Alfred, and the adoption simply of the initial "M," without any full name. (Nate, History, Vol. III., p. vi)

known in Sigma Chi as that of Lewisburg, the home of Bucknell College and of Kappa chapter. As the years passed, members of the Jordan family continued to make their homes there, in the adjoining counties of Union and Snyder. The parents of Founder Jordan were Amos and Sarah Smith Jordan. The son, Isaac Alfred Jordan, was born upon a farm in Union County, Pennsylvania, May 5, 1835,³ and was the youngest of eleven children. When this boy was only two years of age, the family moved to Ohio and located at Springfield in that state.

Two of the five, Robert N. Jordan and John S. Jordan, practiced their profession in Logan County; while the fifth, Nathan E. Jordan, was associated with our founder of Sigma Chi in the law firm at Cincinnati. These lawyer brothers enter closely into the Jordan story, as their interest in the youngest boy, Isaac, and the associations he had with them, were direct influences in his career.

The brother, Robert N. Jordan, was married at Springfield, Ohio, in the spring of 1849, and a year later removed to West Liberty, Ohio, where he engaged in the cooperage business. It was after the Civil War that he studied law, was justice of the peace at West Liberty for many years, and also served the city as its mayor. The parents also presently removed to West Liberty and, with them, the boy, Isaac. West Liberty was the boyhood home, also, of Founder Benjamin P. Runkle of Sigma Chi. The latter has left us the story of their first acquaintance:

Jordan came to our little home village when perhaps fourteen years of age. . . . When a new boy came to town of course, after the manner of boys, we hunted him up to find out what stuff he was made. I found Ike near the cooper-shop and challenged him to play marbles. He informed me that he only played "for keeps." We played, I with confidence and he with skill. He won all my marbles, lent them back again and again and won them again and again. At last he told me to "go somewhere and practice," and we never played together any more. Then we tried boxing. It was without gloves—naked fists—give and take. Ike had long arms, and in due season we both had nose bleed. We ceased to fight one another, and took to the field as companions in arms and fought every other boy we could find. While at Geneva Hall—a strict Covenanter academy—we fought many a terrific battle with the "townies," and more than once we had to help The Jordan home after he had fought, almost literally to the death, some bully, twice his weight.

³ Note by Nate in original text: Cf. Errata, Volume III, p. 434 for verification of date. Although the year 1836 is in some records, there is ample proof that 1835 is the correct year.

In the classroom and literary halls at Geneva and Miami it was the same story, rivals with one another, allies against the rest of the world.

Stories of Jordan's determination and physical courage recur during the years at Miami University. Better still, however, his youth also often revealed his moral courage. In mature years, like most men of a truly courageous type, everything of personal contention and difference was distasteful to him; and the deeper motives of love and kindness ruled his life.



Geneva Hall, Northwood, Ohio, in 1853.

The public-school training of the boy Jordan was at Springfield and at West Liberty, Ohio. From the latter place he and Runkle together entered Geneva Hall, the Covenanter academy at Northwood, Ohio, for the year 1853-54. Their work there was completed with the Commencement of 1854, and that fall the two entered Miami University at Oxford, Ohio. "My father," wrote Runkle, "a stern Presbyterian elder, who approved of Jordan, took us both there and placed us in a boarding house." Jordan seems thereafter to have made his home, when not in college, with his brothers located at Dayton. The old records of Geneva Hall give his home address while there as at West Liberty. Added to his signature, "Isaac A. Jordan," to the original Constitution-Ritual of Sigma Chi, of January-February, 1856, is the address, "Dayton, Ohio": while that of Runkle continues as at West

Liberty. These home addresses are continued in various college programs, as reproduced in Volume I of this History, including that of the graduation of Jordan and Runkle at the Commencement of 1857.

The stories of Geneva Hall, Miami University, and the founding of Sigma Chi are told elsewhere in these volumes. Training in the literary societies at "Geneva" had given the boys unusual readiness in their college work, and within a few weeks they were initiated together into Delta Kappa Epsilon. Again, we have the story told by Runkle:

We were green country boys whose fitness for a first-class fraternity would not in these times of wealth and style be considered for a moment. Whitelaw Reid was, however, prince and premier; he sized us up and discounted our possible future. Jordan took part in a debate in Erodolphian Hall and I read an essay. Both of us had been carefully trained in the Covenanter academy [Geneva Hall] and profited a little perhaps, by the training. So we were taken into the Delta Kappa Epsilon Fraternity.

Jordan's college career was in keeping with these beginnings. He was especially earnest in his studies, and was known as one of the best speakers and debaters in "Old Miami." His own recollections of the ideals of chapter life in Alpha of Sigma Chi after the Fraternity was founded were given in his oration before the Fifteenth Grand Chapter, held at Cincinnati, Ohio, in August, 1884. His address as then delivered is a classic in our Fraternity literature and will live while Sigma Chi endures. He said, in part:

In my judgment our Fraternity has grown to be what it is, by adhering to the principle with which we started in the beginning, of admitting no man to membership in it who is not believed to be a man of good character, of fair ability, of ambitious purposes, and of congenial disposition. In a word, by the admission of none but gentlemen; and in no other way can such a society be continued. It is much more important that we should have but few chapters and have them good ones, than to have many chapters or many members. The decadence of other societies can be traced to a violation of this principle, and to an ambition to have many chapters and a large membership.

In the present college age of immense student bodies, houselife, and other factors, the size of almost all fraternities and chapters has enlarged,

doubtless beyond anything of which the speaker then could dream. The principle he enunciated, however, of the whole circle of chapters as shamed and hurt by one unworthy group, cannot be outgrown. Equally germane in every decade of fraternity life are these further words, then spoken:

And let me here give a word of advice and admonition to the members of every chapter. Whenever you find an unworthy member of your society, expel him at once and without hesitation. Evil communications corrupt good morals, and one dishonorable man will bring reproach and dishonor upon your chapter and upon the whole Fraternity. The amount of mischief which one abandoned and dissolute young man can do is incalculable; he destroys everything around him; avoid him as you would a pestilence. One drop of poison will defile the purest spring. Avoid by all means the poison, the virus, the hemlock of bad associations.

Brother Sigmas, we belong to a society worthy of our highest regard and warmest affection. We are united in the strong and enduring bonds of friendship and esteem. Let us each and all so do our duty and conduct ourselves that we bring no dishonor upon our society or each other. And we may have the high and proud satisfaction of knowing that our beautiful White Cross, at once the badge of our society and the emblem of purity, will never be worn over any breast which does not beat with pure, generous, and noble emotions, and by no man who is not a man of honor.

Following the graduation of Brother Jordan at Miami University, on July 1, 1857, he at once took up the study of law in the office of his brothers, Jackson A. Jordan and Nathan E. Jordan, at Dayton, Ohio. He was admitted to the bar of Ohio in 1858, and for some two years practiced law with his brothers at Dayton. During some of the toilsome student years in that city, Isaac M. Jordan slept in a small rear room of the law offices and cared for them. For a part of the time, he made his home in the family of William D. Howells, which had moved to Dayton from Hamilton, Ohio. The future novelist was near the age of Jordan. The elder Howells was in newspaper work; and the boys, William D. Howells and Jordan, had some training together as "printers' devils." A memory which Jordan always held as Howells became famous in letters, was how the latter never failed at night to find his way downstairs for a fond "Good night" to his father and his mother. The Howells' home in Dayton was just next door to the parental home of Henry Eugene Parrott, who became a charter member of the Gamma, second chapter of Sigma Chi, as established at Ohio Wesleyan University in December, 1855. John Parrott, of both Alpha and Gamma,

was a Dayton lad; and other boys of the town became members of Sigma Chi at Oxford or Delaware.

It was at Dayton that Brother Jordan ceased the use of his middle name, Alfred, and assumed, instead, simply the initial "M," without any full name for which the initial stood. The change was due to the fact of similarity in the written name of his oldest brother and his own, simply with the initials, as then commonly used. The names were thus J. A. Jordan and I. A. Jordan. Some confusion of mail and other writings occurred, with the result that the founder of Sigma Chi thenceforth became Isaac M. Jordan in all records.

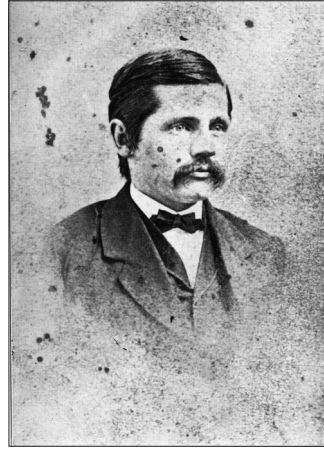
After nearly two years in Dayton, young Jordan decided that the city of Cincinnati offered larger opportunities for his life-work. The story of his early experiences and professional success at the bar is a romance of the triumph over difficulties by real ability, high spirit, and laudable ambition. The "Memorial" of the bar meeting of Hamilton County at the time of Jordan's death, said:

To have entered upon the practice of law in Cincinnati thirty years ago, a friendless and unknown youth, when many distinguished lawyers of the older class occupied the field and were in full practice, and to have soon taken his place among the brilliant galaxy of men whose talents, character, and legal attainments, make the present bar of Cincinnati among the most illustrious in the United States, and to have won his way to the front ranks among such men, is in itself indisputable proof of his superior abilities.

The young lawyer first secured deskroom in the office of Judge Thomas M. Key, and soon afterward was permitted to assist Judge Key in the trial of a case of unusual public interest. We have an account of the young lawyer making his first address in a Cincinnati court of record. It is said that "when he rose to make the opening argument for the plaintiff there was probably not one person in the courthouse, beside the Court and counsel trying the case, who even knew his name. Before he closed his argument, the court room was filled with lawyers, several of whom introduced themselves, tendering congratulations upon his debut and extending their welcome to the bar." From that time forward he was steadily engaged in professional labors, which increased in importance and responsibility until there were but few leading cases tried in the city of Cincinnati in which he was not employed.

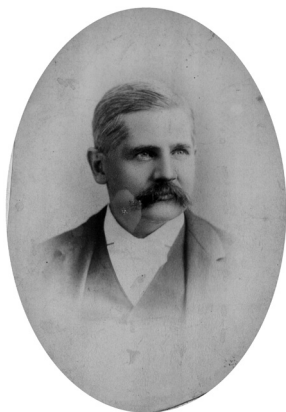
After a brief association in law business with Thomas Washington, Jordan became the law partner of the Hon. Flamen Ball, a prominent

member of the bar who had observed his work in the courts. Mr. Ball had been the law partner of the Hon. Salmon P. Chase, until the latter became a member of the cabinet of President Lincoln, in 1861. During the years of Civil War five of the fellow-founders of Sigma Chi were in the armies, and the sixth, Daniel W. Cooper, was beginning his ministerial labors in central Ohio. Yet there were some contacts with one another. William L. Lockwood, while back in Oxford on brief furlough after his wounds received at Fort Wagner, found his old friend Jordan in Cincinnati. Benjamin P. Runkle, then a colonel, found him at the siege of Cincinnati in 1862 vigorously at work in the trenches about the city, and recalled him from that duty and attached him to his own staff. The years were but few since they had all been together in the college days at Oxford, but life and war were already bringing their own stern realities. Early in the war years, Mr. Ball was appointed to special service, and the two brothers of Jordan, namely, Jackson A. and Nathan E., formed a partnership with him in Cincinnati, a firm which was to figure conspicuously in the legal history of that city for many years under the name Jordan and Jordans.



Jordan at Thirty Years

Brother Jordan was united in marriage with Miss Elizabeth Phelps of Covington, Kentucky, on May 5, 1863. She was the daughter of a prominent member of the bar of Kentucky, and of a family influential in that state and in the South. A number of her brothers and cousins were then in the southern armies, and among them were some members of the first southern chapters of the Fraternity. Mrs. Jordan was a lady of unusual accomplishments, whose social and intellectual attainments were highly appreciated in Cincinnati, and in Washington during Founder Jordan's term in Congress. The Cincinnati home was a beautiful residence in Clifton. It was built by Mr. and Mrs. Jordan upon the site of the former Ball homestead, originally one of the first log-cabin structures at Cincinnati. The children of the family were five, of whom two daughters—Mrs. Elizabeth Jordan Kinney of Cincinnati, and Mrs. Katharine Jordan Magoun, of Chicago—still survive. Two children died in childhood. A son, Isaac Alfred Jordan, grew to manhood; was educated at Yale University, where he was a member of Psi Upsilon Fraternity; and became a member of his father's former law firm in Cincinnati. His death occurred in 1914. It is of interest that he also dropped the name Alfred, and became known as Isaac M. Jordan, Jr. In 1882 Mr. Jordan was made the Democratic candidate for Congress in the



Jordan the Congressman

Second Cincinnati District. The District was strongly Republican, but he was elected by a majority of two thousand votes. His re-election two years later was regarded as assured, but the death of his older brother, Jackson A. Jordan, of his law firm, and the large and important character of its litigation made it necessary for him to decline a re-nomination. His place in Congress had been quickly won, especially under the traditions attaching in that body. This was due to the high quality of his intellectual endowments and to his ability in discussion and as an orator.

In his oratory, Brother Jordan splendidly fulfilled the high promise of his college days. In the fullness of his years, he was described as being small of stature, his hair and mustache snow white, with a complexion almost pallid, which gave added keenness to his piercing blue eyes; and as having unusual power with the assemblages which he addressed. An oration delivered at the Jackson Day banquet of the Kentucky Democratic Club of Covington, Kentucky, on January 8, 1890, had wide publication as a political classic. Only a few months before his death he was chosen to pronounce the eulogium, on March 8, 1890, in memory of the Hon. George H. Pendleton, United States Senator from Ohio, before a distinguished concourse in the great Music Hall at Cincinnati. The two men had been devoted friends, and it was written at the time that the utterance "was one of the most eloquent and touching addresses that ever fell from mortal lips."

The death of Founder Jordan occurred on Wednesday morning, December 3, 1890, and was of sudden and tragic character. He was leaving his offices on the third floor of Lincoln Inn Court, and had paused and turned at the elevator door to greet a friend. Without his observing it, the elevator ascended to a floor above, and the door remained partly open. With face still turned in greeting and with his natural, quick movement, Mr. Jordan stepped into the shaft and plunged to his death. The tragedy created a shock throughout the city of Cincinnati. All courts adjourned, and for a time even public business was stilled. The newspapers of the day devoted entire pages, with prominent headlines and drawings, to the dreadful occurrence. The Cincinnati *Enquirer* of the day following said, "Probably no other man's death would have caused more general sorrow and regrets throughout the city. In so far as the fate of a single individual could be so considered, it was regarded as a public calamity—a great and irreparable loss to the community."

At a memorial meeting of the Bar Association of Hamilton County, held on December 13, 1890, there were striking tributes to his "prominent and enviable distinction" among his associates of that bar, and to his high qualities of personal character, innate courtesy, and kindliness of spirit. Mr. W. G. Williams, who had then been a member of the Jordan law firm for seventeen years, said:

Isaac M. Jordan was by nature or aptitude a brilliant lawyer, but, joined with this, he was a most laborious student. His great qualities brought him to the front rank of this bar very early in his career. Even at the beginning of our association he was recognized as a very extraordinary man. He advanced beyond even this high position, year by year, until this whole community, bar and court, were witnesses of the thoroughness, alertness, power and success of his profession.

Another utterance, at the same meeting, was that of Judge John C. Healy, in subsequent years the law partner of Judge Howard Ferris, Mu '76, of Sigma Chi, and of Malcolm McAvoy, Zeta Psi '97:

He not only had personal magnetism, but he had intense ambition, and his success was the result of that ambition, by which he was forced to devote the greatest energy and closest application to the trial of every case in which he was engaged. His success was not the result of great genius, but it was the result of the greatest labor, and I think the members of the bar, engaged either with him, or against him in the trial of cases, will bear witness with me that he probably came to the trial of a case the best equipped man that would appear on the occasion. There was nothing in all the details of a case with which he was not perfectly familiar. This, added to his great personal magnetism, to his great natural gifts as an orator, which he studiously cultivated, and to his genial and pleasant manners, which attracted every person with whom he came in contact; and these, combined with an extensive knowledge of the law, made him, I think, probably the most formidable antagonist that I have ever known of the Cincinnati bar.

Such references of friends and admirers, of the public press, and of societies with which Mr. Jordan was identified, might be greatly multiplied. Of these, a writing especially appreciated in Sigma Chi was the sketch by James W. Newman, Gamma '61, as hereinbefore mentioned. Of Jordan's place as a lawyer, Brother Newman wrote:



Cincinnati in the 1880s. Looking east on Fourth Street at Vine.

It is needless to say that it will be as a lawyer—a great lawyer—that Mr. Jordan will be best known and remembered. He possessed an active mind and a keen and searching intellect. In his chosen profession he won a proud eminence. In the city of Cincinnati, noted for its strong array of legal talent, he stood among the foremost. He fought his way to verdict and judgment with a zeal of one who owed everything to his client. As an advocate he possessed wonderful forensic power. Before a jury he was forceful and captivating. In the trial of a case he was adroit and watchful, and never was taken by surprise. In the examination of witnesses he was keen and penetrating. In the interpretation of the law and its application to the case he was clear and cogent; and in his pleadings he was safe and careful. While he was aggressive and fought to win, he yet treated his opponent with graceful courtesy and dignity—for he was always a gentleman—the Chevalier Bayard of the Bar.

At the time of the death of Brother Jordan, the Cincinnati press stated that “while at college he founded the Sigma Chi Fraternity, now a national organization.” The “Memorial” of the bar of Hamilton County similarly recorded that, “while at Miami University in 1855 he was mainly instrumental in the formation of the Sigma Chi Fraternity.” It is needless to say that Brother Jordan never held this thought of his relation to the founding of Sigma Chi, and would have wholly deprecated any suggestion of it. It was, however, a somewhat natural conclusion at the time, and especially

in his home city. Of all the founders, he alone was then so situated as to be in touch with the membership and movements of the Fraternity. He had followed its progress, especially during the decade of the eighties, while the others who survived were widely scattered over the land and were deprived of opportunity to learn of the Fraternity and its affairs. Brother Jordan had aided in the organization of the Cincinnati Alumni Chapter, in 1881; he was also identified with the plans and work of the Fourteenth Grand Chapter, held at Chicago in 1882, and of the Fifteenth Grand Chapter at Cincinnati in 1884. He was the Orator of the latter Convention; and he continued warm in his interest and helpful in his fellowships, especially with the wearers of the White Cross in Cincinnati. There was, therefore, a natural publicity as to his activities in Sigma Chi which led to the emphasis upon his supposed initiative in the founding of the Fraternity. The true order of events in that connection have been indicated in the initial Volume of the Fraternity *History*.

Founder Jordan was not an active chapter worker in the old Alpha in the way that Lockwood, Runkle, Scobey, and Bell were such workers. Circumstances gave to Scobey and Runkle certain historical priorities in the formation of the new Fraternity; and they, with Lockwood and Bell, exercised a tireless activity in the working tasks and affairs of chapter life—the records, finances, extension, charter-making, correspondence, and the first Grand Chapter session, at Cincinnati. The relation of Cooper, Jordan, and Caldwell to the chapter life and its work was not less vital, but it was different—and it differed as among these three. Jordan was mature, and earnest about his college work. He honored the chapter in the classroom and literary hall. It need not be added that he was faithful and capable in every duty assigned him by his chapter. He shared honors with Daniel W. Cooper

as a trusted counselor in the emergencies and was respected for his ability and substantial qualities. For the second half of the college year 1855-56 he was chosen as Consul Primus, or presiding officer, of old Alpha. It was the only term that Cooper did not serve in that office until the graduation of both with the class of 1857, and the office was the only one in the chapter known to have been held by Jordan. For the first Grand Chapter, the historic event at Melodeon Hall, Cincinnati, in 1857, he was the unanimous choice



The Abiding Cross at Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati, Ohio

of Alpha as its Orator for the closing banquet.

Thus, he had always kept the working unities of Sigma Chi, its fellowships and its ideals, in his memory-and in his heart. In the Grand Chapter address of 1884, he said:

It is now more than a quarter of a century since the organization of our Fraternity, and yet every circumstance connected with it is as fresh in my mind as if it had all occurred but yesterday. Memory, ever faithful, brings back the whole scene before me, and I seem to see it painted with the most real colors. Bell and Cooper, and Scobey, and Caldwell and Runkle, all seem to stand before me as when I saw them last. The room where we met, the table at which we sat, and everything connected with it, rises distinct before my eyes.

And so will Sigma Chi keep them all, and the chivalrous Lockwood, who became the seventh of their Circle, enshrined in its heart as it fares on.



When Jordan died, his friend Newman said, "Upon his monument in Spring Grove Cemetery should be engraved the White Cross he loved so well, emblem of the purest friendship, at whose shrine he devoutly worshipped." Isaac M. Jordan rejoiced in his later years that the Fraternity rolls had come to include as many as three thousand names. But the Seven built far better than they knew. Tenfold three thousand names of Sigma Chis, living or gone before, were represented in the dedication of the beautiful monument, with its sculptured emblem, in Spring Grove, on June 16, 1929. And the memorial is the gift of the three thousand among them who were then in college halls, the wearers there of the White Cross.



Dedication of Jordan Monument