

50 Sphinx Tomb

Hanover, New Hampshire



The Sphinx Tomb, located on East Wheelock Street in Hanover, New Hampshire, is one of the only aspects of the Sphinx secret senior society that isn't a secret. That doesn't mean the Sphinx Tomb is easily seen or found, as it is nestled among large trees and located between a fraternity house and dormitory on the Dartmouth College campus. This windowless, one-story poured concrete building was constructed in 1903 as the Sphinx Society's headquarters, and is owned by the Sphinx Alumni Corporation. The Sphinx Tomb was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2005. The Tomb also has the distinction of being the first building in Hanover to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The building was designed in the Egyptian Revival architectural style popular at the turn of the century by architect William Butterfield to resemble an Egyptian tomb. The Temple of Dendur, moved from Egypt to the United States in the 1960's and a popular exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, served as the model for the Sphinx Tomb. Butterfield originally designed a Romanesque hall with rusticated stone for the society's headquarters, but ultimately pursued a cheaper Egyptian Revival style.

Perhaps the most fascinating component of the Sphinx Tomb is the entrance façade. Flanked by two columns, the stairway leads to a shallow porch and doorway that is topped by a symbolic winged disk. There is question as to whether or not this "entrance" was ever actually used as the wooden door shows no signs of wear, there is no handle, and the steps leading to the door remain unworn. On the east side of the building, an unassuming basement-level, secured-entrance exists with flagstone paths leading in each direction. A large addition was planned for the building in 1923, but construction never commenced. An Easter morning fire in 1932 destroyed the interior, which was rebuilt at a later time.

Shrouded in secrecy, Sphinx is generally thought to have been founded in 1885 by 14 students. It is the oldest of the eight senior societies at Dartmouth. Because it is a secret society, this all-male organization is not required to state its purpose to the public. However, some have speculated that Sphinx members are involved in anonymous community service deeds and actions. According to a former treasurer of the Sphinx Corporation, one of the main selection criteria for new members was community leadership.

Each year during Winter Carnival Weekend, Sphinx seniors select individuals from the junior class and discretely inform them of selection to become new members of the society. This

process is known as “tapping.” The members’ identities are kept secret until their graduation ceremony, when members carry Sphinx canes in the commencement procession.

Sources:

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