How Well Do You Know Georgetown? 12 Little-Known Facts

1. 1789 as a founding date originated in a mistake.
When the university published its first catalogue in 1851, it claimed that “in 1789 the first house was built,” when actually, construction of the first building began in 1788 and was completed in 1790. This misinformation was repeated until the catalogue of 1873 substituted the founding of the institution for the erection of the first building. And so, “founded in 1789” became the standard account of the institution’s beginnings—a serendipitous date, which made Georgetown’s birth year the same as that of the Republic.

2. Georgetown had an international student body from its beginnings.
During the first decade of its existence, nearly 20 percent of its students came from outside the United States, mostly from the West Indies.

3. Among major benefactors of the institution, from the 1800s to the 1960s, women predominated.
In the 1830s, Susan Decatur, the widow of Stephen Decatur, donated $7,000 to the College—the largest gift in Georgetown’s first 40 years of existence. Elizabeth Dahlgren’s gift of $30,000 in the 1890s to build a chapel was the largest benefaction the university had known to that date. In the following decade, Ida Ryan was the principal donor to the university by providing the funds for the construction of a residence/dining hall and a gymnasium. Finally, in 1966, Florence M. Dailey made Georgetown the beneficiary of a legacy worth $9,600,000—nearly as much as its entire endowment at the time.

4. During the Civil War, the alumni of Georgetown’s two schools, the College and Medicine, were overwhelmingly Confederate and Union, respectively, in their support and participation.
Approximately three-quarters of the College alumni who fought in the war did so for the Confederacy; about the same proportion of Medical alumni wore the Union blue. So the Blue and Gray colors that the university adopted a decade after the end of the war could be seen to stand for the two schools’ links to the Confederacy and the Union, as well as that of individual students.

5. “Hoya Saxa” has no meaning.
The renowned cheer, originating in the early 1890s, is not a cryptic reference to “The Stonewalls,” an intramural baseball team in the 1860s, but one of several “nonsense” yells that Georgetown students shouted at football and baseball games in the 1890s. For whatever reason, “Hoya Saxa” prevailed to become the institutional cheer.

6. The first bull terrier mascot for Georgetown teams was a war hero.
“Stubby,” a dog of very mixed pedigree in fact, became the regular mascot in 1923. He had served overseas during World War I with the 102nd Infantry. Both the American and French governments decorated him for his valorous service.

7. Georgetown has had many, if not most, presidents from George Washington to Barack Obama appear on campus but only one pope.
In October 1936, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli received an honorary degree from the university in Gaston Hall. Three years later he was elected pope and took the name Pius XII.
8. From the 1920s to the Second World War, the Philodemic Society was the preeminent academic debating group in the country. In a remarkable string of successes from 1921 to 1938, the Society went undefeated in intercollegiate competition, defeating traditional powers such as Columbia, Dartmouth, Harvard, Princeton, William and Mary, and Yale.

9. Seven Georgetown Jesuits served as chaplains during the Second World War. One of the seven, Martin O’Gara, S.J., chair of the Religion Department, died in a plane crash on his return to the States at war’s end. The O’Gara building (on the site of Village C) was subsequently named after him.

10. During the Second World War the main campus of the University became primarily a camp (“Camp Georgetown”) for the selection and training of soldiers for future deployment. As host for both the Army Special Training Program (ASTP) and the Specialized Assignment and Reclassification (STAR), Georgetown had over 1,800 military personnel on campus at the height of the war in 1943.

11. Georgetown played a role in the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany. In February 1951, Georgetown hosted a two-day secret meeting, subsequently known as “The Georgetown Conference on Germany,” between officials of the provisional government of West Germany and representatives of the Truman administration that resulted in the United States recognizing the legitimacy and autonomy of the new government as well as guaranteeing their security.

12. Professors Donn Murphy and members of Mask & Bauble produced the artistic performances that Jacqueline Kennedy introduced to the White House during her husband’s administration. At Mrs. Kennedy’s invitation, Murphy and M&B staged 21 programs at the White House. Featured artists included Pablo Casals, Grace Bumbry, Leontyne Price, André Watts, and prominent ballet companies.

For more great facts about Georgetown, check out the new three-volume A History of Georgetown University by professor emeritus Robert Emmett Curran to be published in October 2010:

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