

COLLEGIATE SECRET SOCIETIES: LEGENDS, LORE, AND LEGACY FROM THE REALMS OF ELITE HIGHER EDUCATION TO THE WORLD AROUND US

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WHAT ARE COLLEGIATE SECRET SOCIETIES?

Academic or collegiate secret societies are organizations found on some college campuses that make a significant effort to keep their affairs, membership rolls, signs of recognition, initiation, or other organizational aspects secret from the public.

Collegiate secret societies vary in how secretive they are as well as how closely tied they are to their institution. Alumni involvement and support also varies by organization and institution, creating a shroud of mystery that extends beyond the ivy halls of academia and invites further investigation.

WHAT ARE COLLEGIATE SECRET SOCIETIES?

Membership can be all male (most common), all female, coeducational, limited to junior or senior students (class specific), or limited to a certain academic discipline. New members are 'tapped' or chosen for membership by current members.

Secret Societies are typically limited to individual colleges or universities (unlike traditional fraternities, sororities, honor societies or other groups which typically have chapters that exist at many colleges or universities)

Members of Secret Societies can (and often are) members of other student organizations, honor societies, or fraternities / sororities. The resume of newly tapped members often contributes to their selection to the secret society.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF SECRET SOCIETIES

- Many collegiate secret societies were initially founded as honor societies or debate / literary clubs in the early 1800s
- Over time, new groups were founded to compete with already established groups, or in response to denials of membership to certain individual(s) who in turn created new or rival societies
- Some secret societies evolved into honor societies or social fraternities that now exist at multiple schools
 - Phi Beta Kappa is the best example – started as a Secret Society at William & Mary in 1776, evolved into an Honor Society that now has 293 chapters across the country
- The inspiration for secret societies comes from the non-academic world and organizations like the Freemasons, Knights Templar, Illuminati, or various religious sects
 - Many founders of collegiate secret societies had traveled to Europe and were inspired to establish organizations that mimicked those found at European universities
- From the beginning, secret student groups and even higher education itself was reserved for the most affluent, wealthy, and elite members of society
- This aura of secrecy tends to attract an interested following; everyone loves a good secret or conspiracy theory!

DEBATE OR LITERARY SOCIETIES

The **Wren Society** is a **student secret society** at **William & Mary**. Founded in 1832 to honor the 200th Anniversary of the birthday of **Sir Christopher Wren**, students are "tapped" into the society based on their dedication to commitment to service, academics, and their demonstration of exceptional leadership in the College community.



The **Hasty Pudding Club** was founded on September 1, 1795. Members came together "to cherish feelings of friendship and patriotism." The club is named for hasty pudding, a traditional English dish popular at that time in America that the founding members ate at their first meeting. Originally, the club engaged in holding mock trials, which became more elaborate over time. This culminated in a member, Lemuel Hayward, secretly planning to stage a musical on the night he was to host the club's meeting, he and other members staged *Bombastes Furioso* in room 11 of Hollis Hall, which began the Hasty Pudding Theatricals



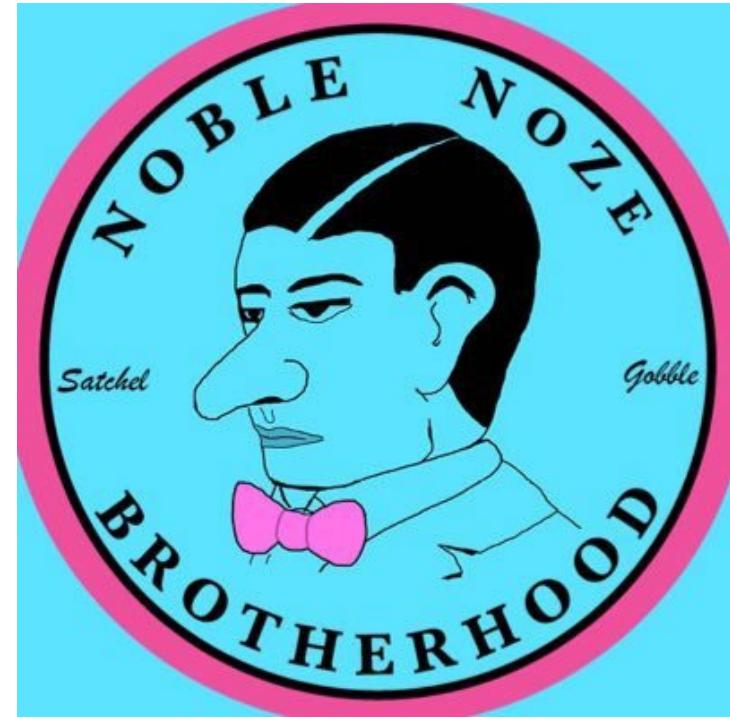
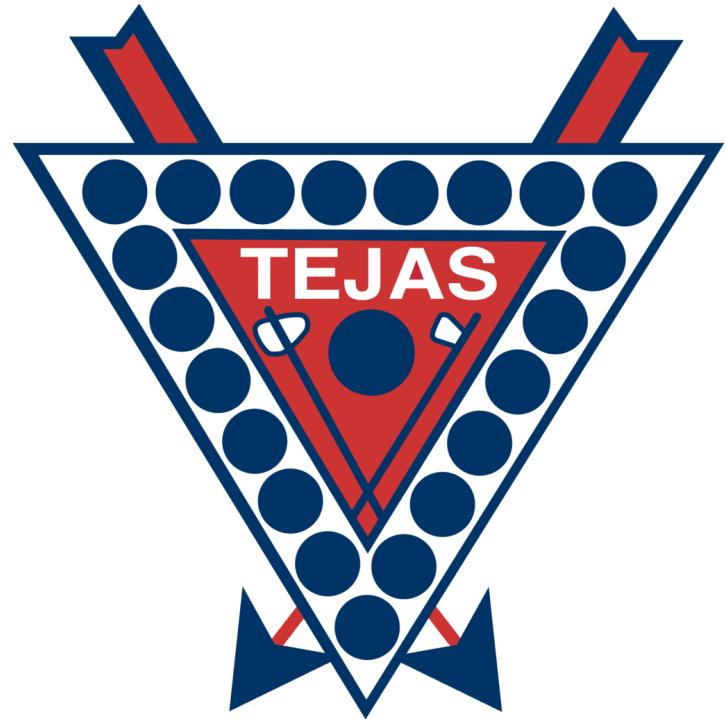


HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF SECRET SOCIETIES

- First established Secret Society in North America was the F.H.C. Society established in 1750 at the College of William & Mary (Virginia)
- Members include Thomas Jefferson, Edmund Randolph, various politicians, academics, authors, other notables
- F.H.C. stood for *Fraternitas, Humanitas, et Cognitio* which translates from the Latin to mean *Brotherhood, Humanity, and Knowledge*
- F.H.C. has also come to mean the Flat Hat Club (likely due to the common practice at the time of students wearing mortarboard caps)

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

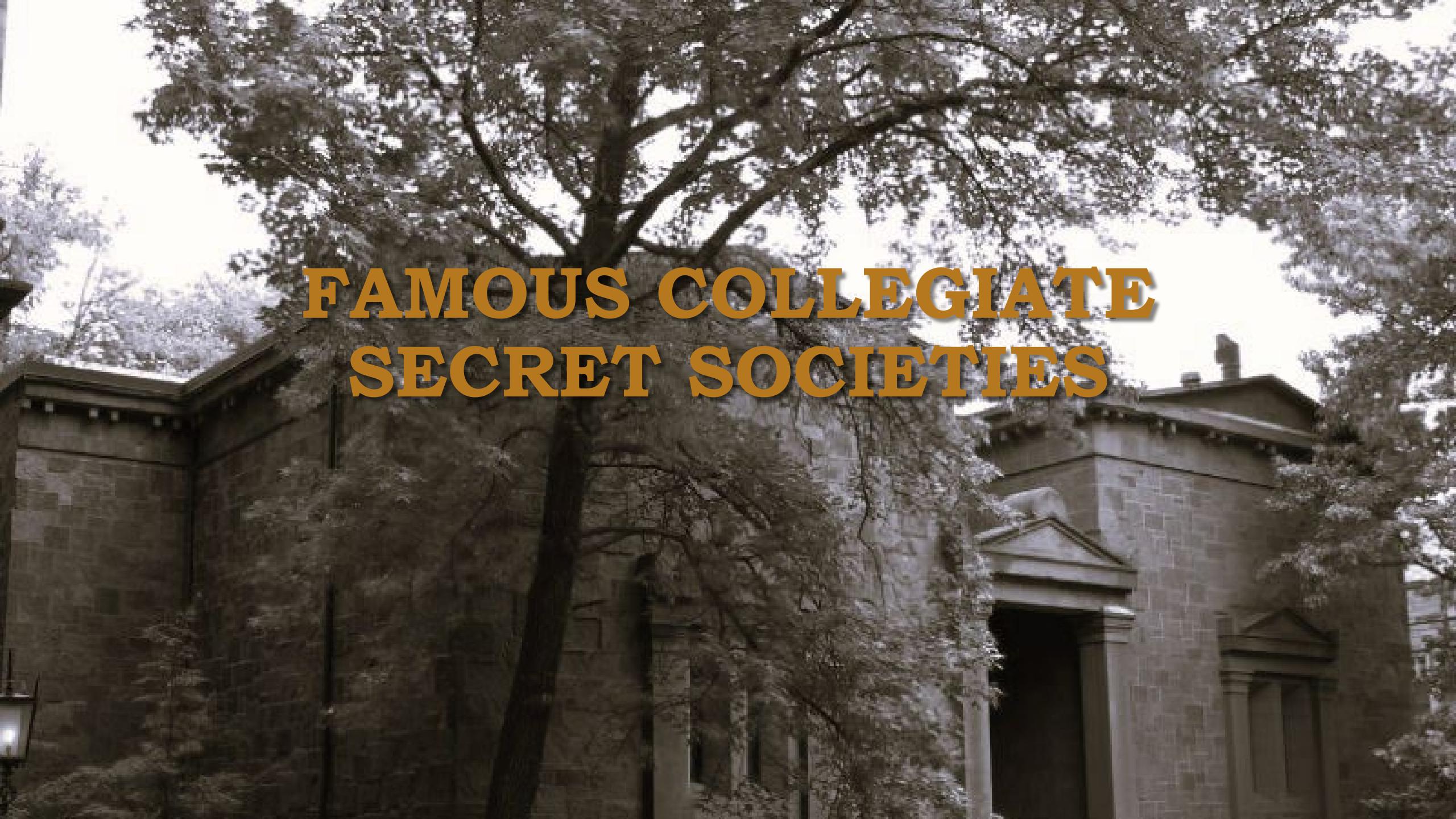
- As noted earlier, many secret societies vary greatly in their efforts to be secret
- While collegiate secret organizations can be well known, many of their private activities (membership criteria, new member selection, initiation, meetings, alumni, and real-world influence) are often shrouded in mystery
- There are at least 130 known collegiate secret societies at approximately 56 colleges and universities
 - Most colleges with secret societies are found in the original 13 states
 - Yale University has the most (20) secret societies, followed by the University of Virginia (16), Dartmouth (11), Harvard (6)
 - Yale tends to generate the most lore that fuels interest in secret societies – some estimate 40+ secret groups on campus
 - Two secret societies are known to exist in Texas – The Tejas Club at UT Austin, and the NoZe Brotherhood at Baylor



COLLEGIATE SECRET SOCIETIES IN TEXAS

WHY JOIN A SECRET SOCIETY?

- Why does any college student join any organization?
 - Networking
 - Career advancement
 - Fellowship
 - Legacy
 - Etc...
- The more exclusive or prestigious the organization, the greater the potential benefits
 - Most student organizations and clubs are open to any enrolled and interested student
 - Honor societies restrict membership to those with high academic achievement
 - Traditional fraternities and sororities are open to everyone, but they control their membership invitations
 - Secret societies are closed to everyone, new members are 'tapped' or chosen based upon unknown criteria
 - Those chosen often represent the best of the best in terms of academics, campus leadership, extracurricular participation, future potential, family legacy, etc.

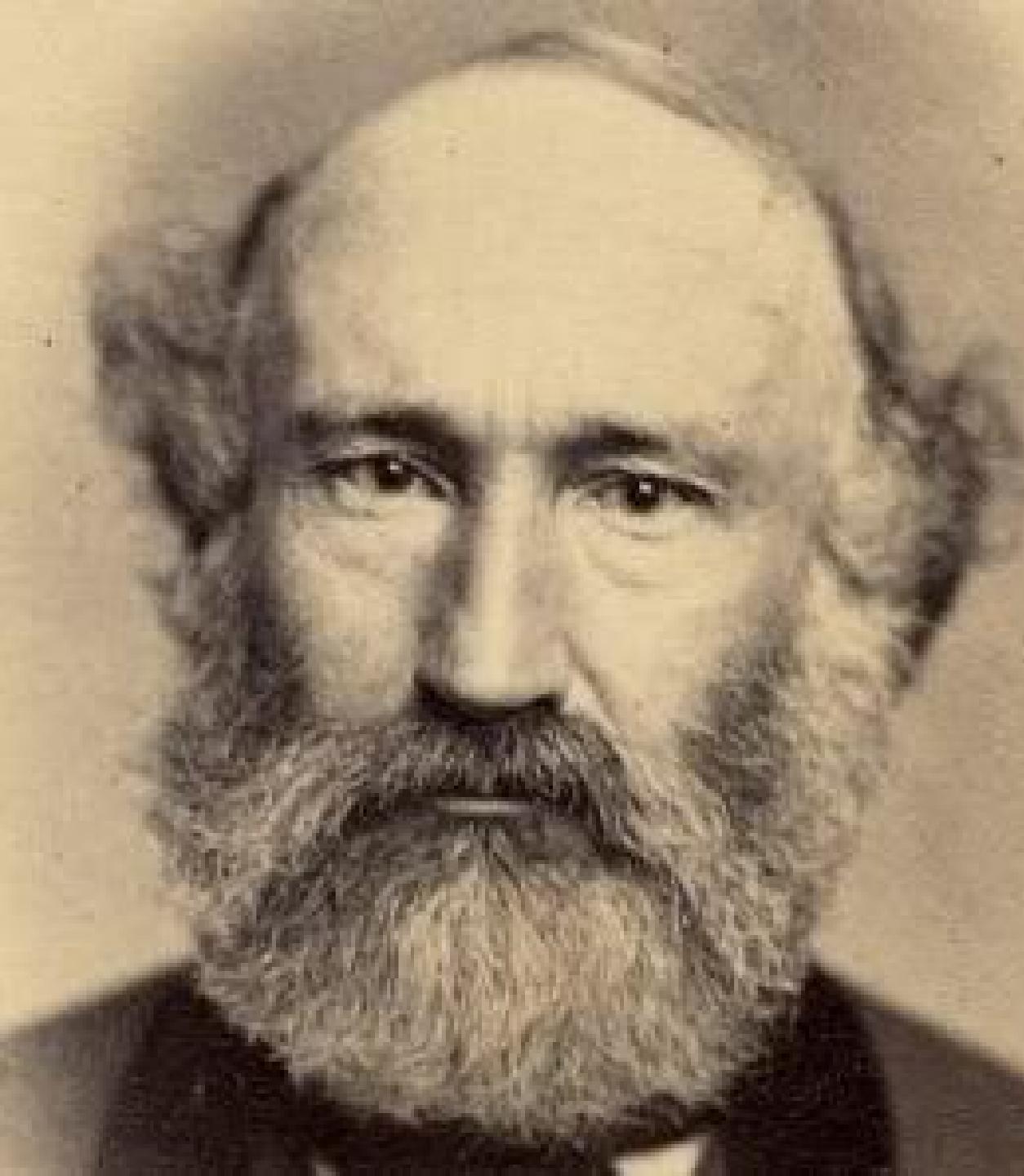


A dark, atmospheric photograph of a stone building, possibly a college or university building, with a large tree in the background. The building has a classical architectural style with columns and a pedimented entrance. The image has a grainy, high-contrast look.

FAMOUS COLLEGIATE SECRET SOCIETIES

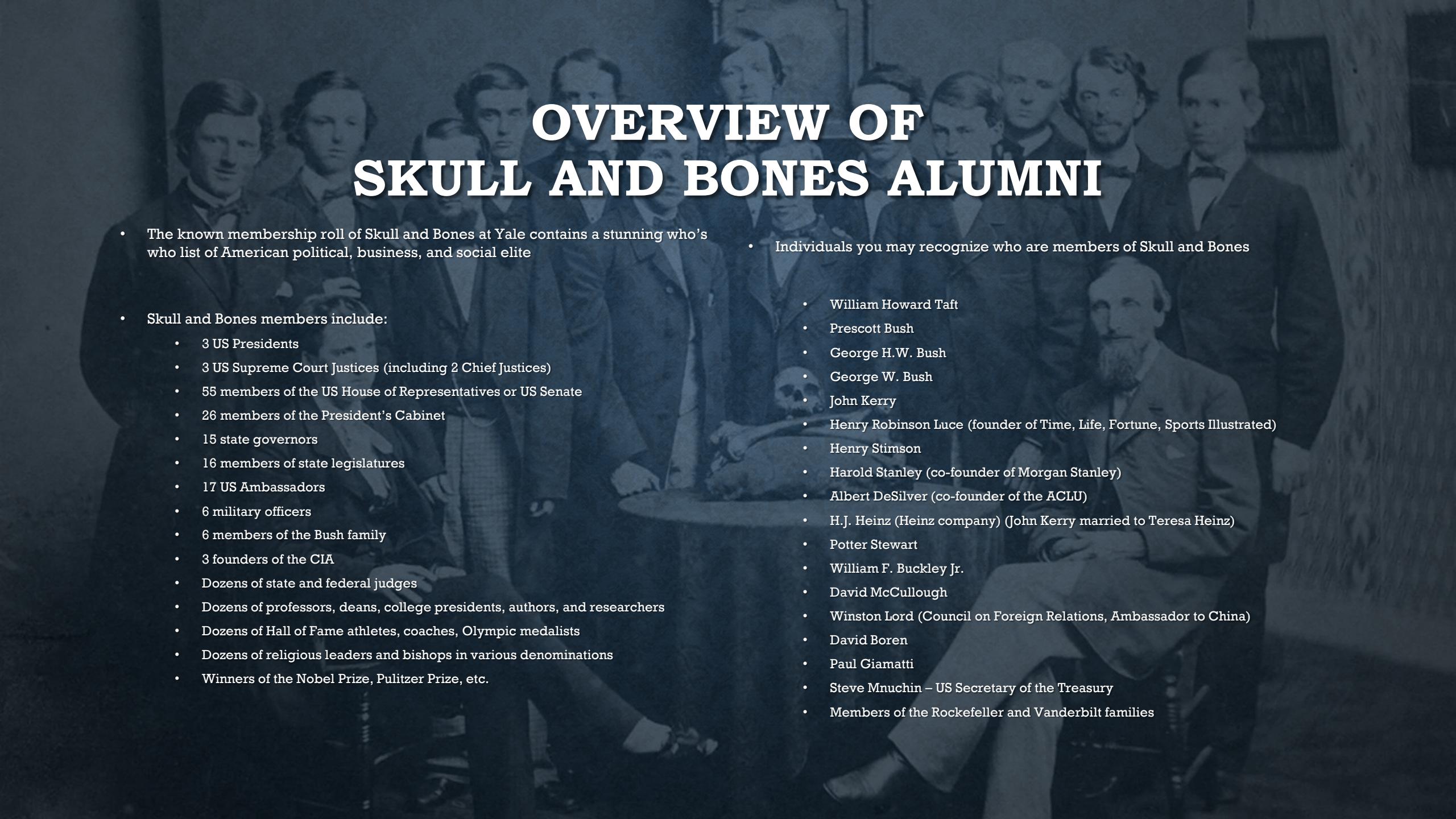
FAMOUS COLLEGIATE SECRET SOCIETIES

- Of the 130+ secret societies, a few stand out and contribute most to the legend, mystery, and lore that fuels popular interest in these organizations
- The most famous secret society is Skull and Bones at Yale University
- Founded in 1832, Skull and Bones has an impressive membership roll that includes 3 US Presidents, 3 Supreme Court Justices, countless US Senators, CIA founders, and many other Political and Business elite
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Skull_and_Bones_members
- The '322' in the society emblem is thought represent the year 322 BC, year of the death of Demosthenes, a notable Greek statesman and orator. His death ushered in a new Greek government based on plutocracy – or rule by the wealthy. Documents linked to Skull and Bones indicate that society members measure time from this date *Anno-Demostheni*
- Many Secret Societies utilize symbolism that features symbols of death or the macabre



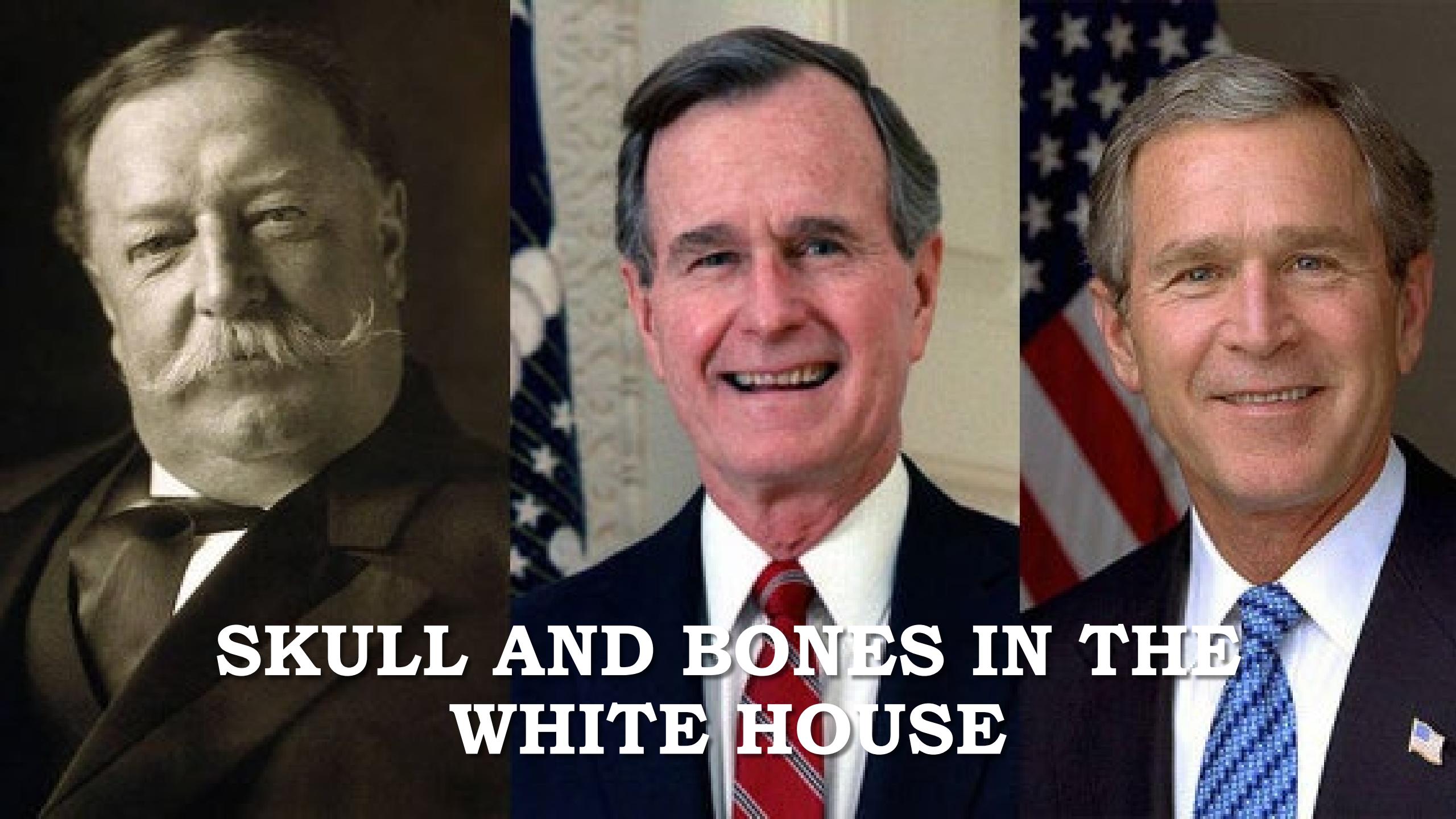
SKULL AND BONES

- Established at Yale in 1832 by William Huntington Russell, Alphonso Taft, George Ingersoll Wood, Adam J. Silkwood, Frederick E. Mather, and Phineas T. Miller
- William H. Russell and Alphonso Taft were denied membership in Phi Beta Kappa and sought to establish a new, rival society
- Russell had traveled to Europe and may have been inducted into a secret society in Germany which laid the foundation for his establishment of a similar secret society at Yale
- Germany is well known for his connection to secret societies and their development
- Since 1856 and continuing to this day, the business name of the Skull and Bones Society is the Russell Trust Association, named after William H. Russell. The RTA manages society assets and property. Public records reveal that the RTA has a worth of \$4 million in assets and property and another \$17 million endowment



OVERVIEW OF SKULL AND BONES ALUMNI

- The known membership roll of Skull and Bones at Yale contains a stunning who's who list of American political, business, and social elite
- Skull and Bones members include:
 - 3 US Presidents
 - 3 US Supreme Court Justices (including 2 Chief Justices)
 - 55 members of the US House of Representatives or US Senate
 - 26 members of the President's Cabinet
 - 15 state governors
 - 16 members of state legislatures
 - 17 US Ambassadors
 - 6 military officers
 - 6 members of the Bush family
 - 3 founders of the CIA
 - Dozens of state and federal judges
 - Dozens of professors, deans, college presidents, authors, and researchers
 - Dozens of Hall of Fame athletes, coaches, Olympic medalists
 - Dozens of religious leaders and bishops in various denominations
 - Winners of the Nobel Prize, Pulitzer Prize, etc.
- Individuals you may recognize who are members of Skull and Bones
 - William Howard Taft
 - Prescott Bush
 - George H.W. Bush
 - George W. Bush
 - John Kerry
 - Henry Robinson Luce (founder of Time, Life, Fortune, Sports Illustrated)
 - Henry Stimson
 - Harold Stanley (co-founder of Morgan Stanley)
 - Albert DeSilver (co-founder of the ACLU)
 - H.J. Heinz (Heinz company) (John Kerry married to Teresa Heinz)
 - Potter Stewart
 - William F. Buckley Jr.
 - David McCullough
 - Winston Lord (Council on Foreign Relations, Ambassador to China)
 - David Boren
 - Paul Giamatti
 - Steve Mnuchin – US Secretary of the Treasury
 - Members of the Rockefeller and Vanderbilt families



**SKULL AND BONES IN THE
WHITE HOUSE**

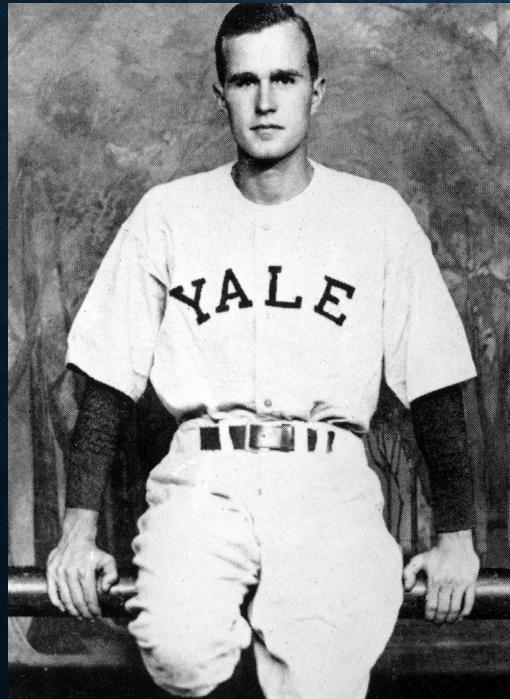


SKULL AND BONES IN THE WHITE HOUSE

- William Howard Taft was the son of Skull and Bones Co-Founder Alphonso Taft
- Alphonso Taft himself was US Attorney General and Secretary of War in the Grant Administration
- William Howard Taft was the 27th President of the United States (1909-1913)
- Taft served on the US Supreme Court after his time as President (the only president to do so). He was the 10th Chief Justice of the United States from 1921-1930

SKULL AND BONES IN THE WHITE HOUSE

George Herbert Walker Bush
41st President of the United States
11th Director of the Central Intelligence Agency

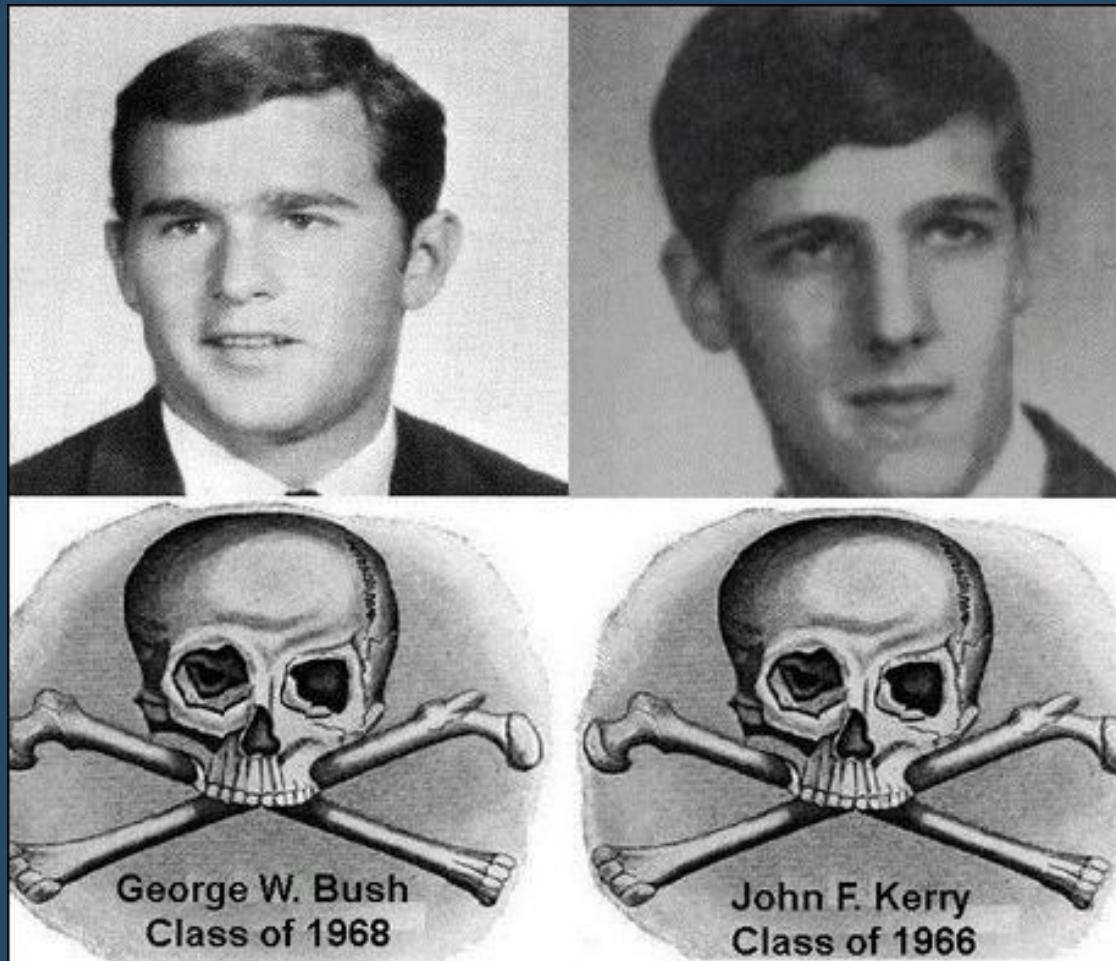


George Herbert Walker Bush with fellow Bonesmen at Yale
The skull in the photograph is thought to be that of
Geronimo – the famous Apache Chief – stolen by his father
Prescott Bush



SKULL AND BONES IN THE WHITE HOUSE

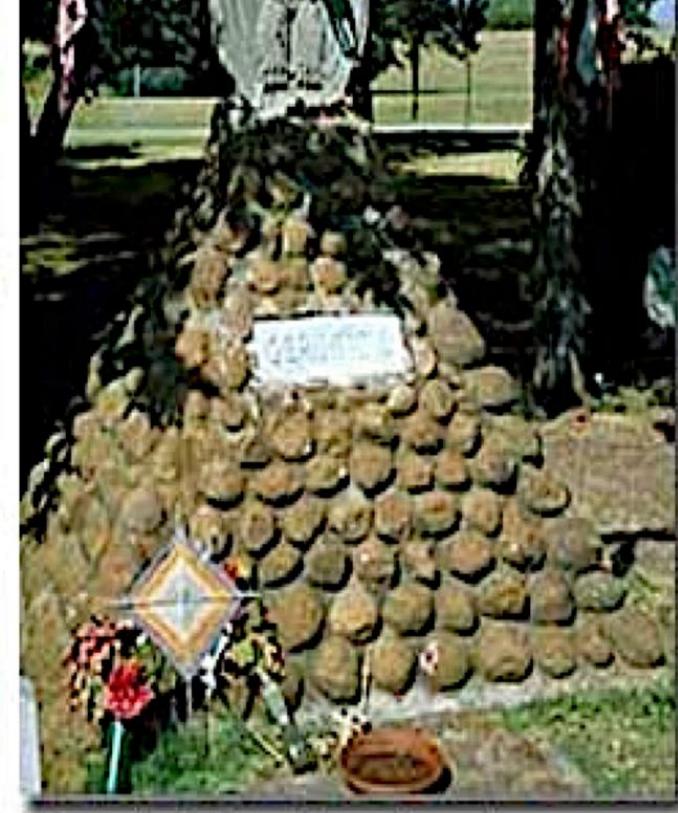
- The 2004 Presidential Election featured two Bonesmen running against each other for the nation's highest office
- George W. Bush class of 1968
 - 46th Texas Governor
 - Son of 41st US President
 - Grandson of Prescott Bush class of 1916
 - 43rd President of the United States
- John Kerry class of 1966
 - US Senator from Massachusetts
 - Eventual US Secretary of State
 - Married to Teresa Heinz (who has family that were Bonesmen)



SO, WHAT EXACTLY IS SKULL AND BONES?

- Membership limited to incoming Yale seniors; new members (typically 15 per year) are tapped by the graduating senior members each Spring
- The membership list was published and kept in the Yale Library until 1971; membership lists were also published in the Yale yearbook
- Until 1991 membership was limited to males
- In the early 2000s popular media began to focus attention upon secret societies in book, film, and other media. *The Atlantic* reported in 2021 that secret societies at Yale were 'utterly transformed' from the exposure
- Skull and Bones tapped its first entirely non-white class in 2020; recent membership selection seems to be focused on diversity and separation from tradition
- Does the organization influence outcomes in the real-world, or does it choose members who possess natural leadership skills to literally change the world? In short, which comes first, the horse or the cart?
- Are secret societies overrated or is their importance over emphasized? Do they wield little or much influence in the real-world?

TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION



Gerónimo's burial marker at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where Prescott Bush, and five other alumni of Yale and Yale's secret Skull and Bones Society, allegedly plundered the grave during World War I as a prank. They stole Gerónimo's skull, along with two bones, a horse's bridle, and stirrups. The skull is reportedly displayed under glass in the secret group's clubhouse in New Haven, Connecticut near Yale University.



- Skull and Bones members have a reputation for participating in outlandish acts of 'crooking' or stealing of symbols from other secret societies, notable buildings, monuments, and even graves
- Skull and Bones has been accused of possessing the skulls of Martin Van Buren, Geronimo, and Pancho Villa
- Geronimo was buried at Fort Sill Oklahoma following his death in 1909
- In 1916, Prescott Bush and 5 other Bonesmen were stationed at Fort Sill and as legend goes, they dug up and removed the skull and secreted it away to The Tomb at Yale where it remains
- Letters and ledger entries that have been discovered tend to support the rumor
- 2009 Lawsuit brought by descendants of Geronimo was dismissed in 2010 over legal technicalities without formal resolution of the claim

SKULL AND BONES: NOT SO SECRET

**The Skull Tomb at Yale University
64 High Street – New Haven, CT**



**Deer Island Skull and Bones Retreat
St. Lawrence River – New York**



DEER ISLAND – SKULL AND BONES RETREAT

ST. LAWRENCE RIVER – UPSTATE NEW YORK

Photo by K. Fritze in July 2024 showing main Deer Island boat house and lodge on south shore of island



Photo by K. Fritze in July 2024 showing structure on southwest end of Deer Island – resembling The Ledges a previous structure



DEER ISLAND – SKULL AND BONES RETREAT

ST. LAWRENCE RIVER – UPSTATE NEW YORK

Photo taken by Kevin Fritze 7-30-24 of remains of The Stone House on Deer Island



The Stone House c. 1908 – contained a library and archives (beheading knives, ancient Roman armor, Norse shields, extensive library, destroyed by fire in 1949



DEER ISLAND – SKULL AND BONES RETREAT

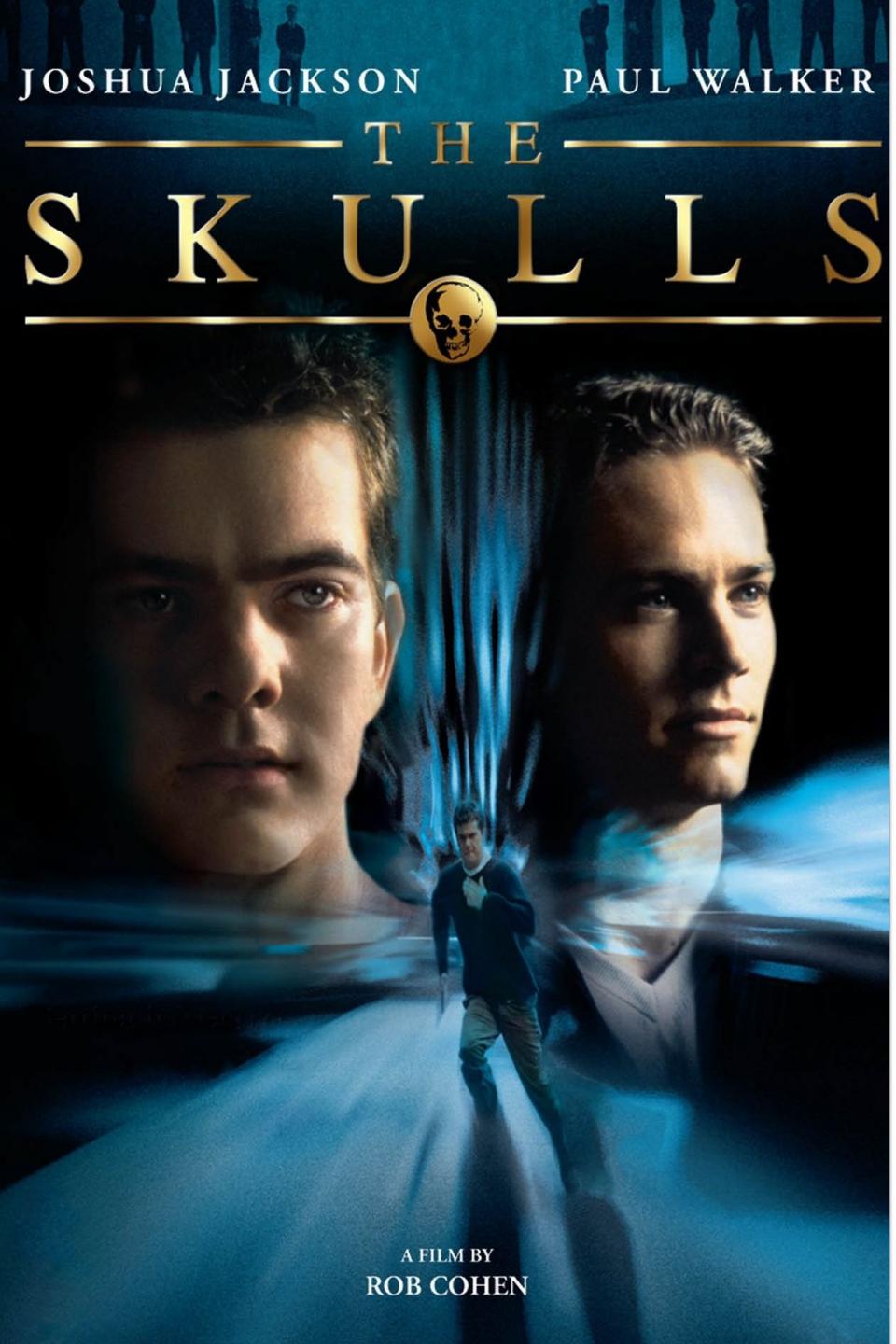
ST. LAWRENCE RIVER – UPSTATE NEW YORK

Deer Island from above



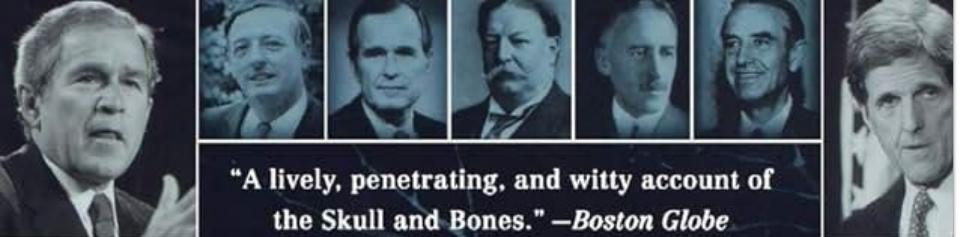
**K. Fritze cruising by Deer Island,
Boat House in the distance**





SKULL AND BONES IN POPULAR CULTURE

- *The Skulls* was a movie released in 2000 that was inspired by the Skull and Bones society
- Many dramatic liberties were taken, but the film does depict aspects of the lore surrounding the society – including scenes at Yale and Deer Island
- The film was followed by two sequels in 2002 and 2004 that were less well received, but still based on the storyline from the original



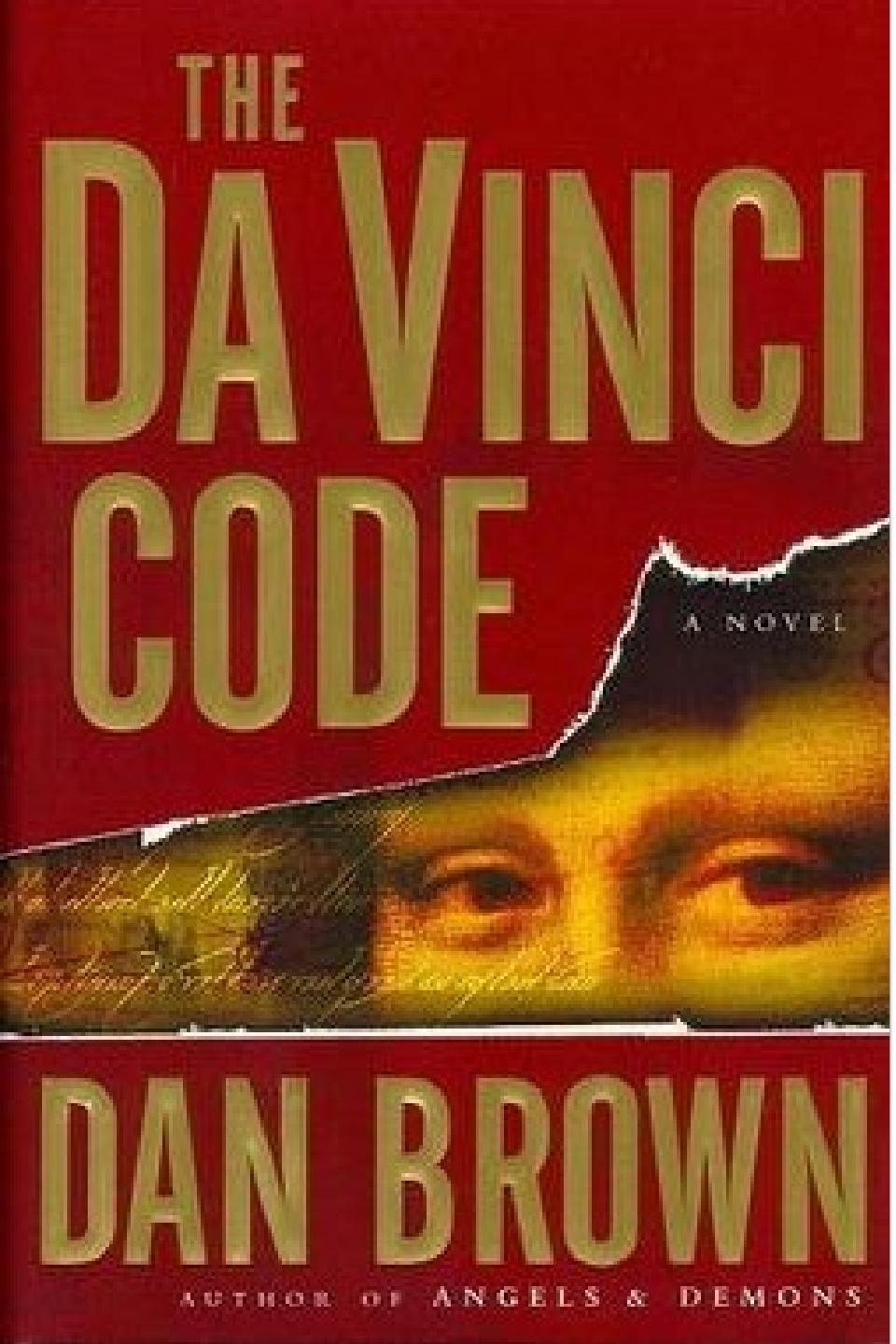
SECRETS OF THE TOMB

SKULL AND BONES,
THE IVY LEAGUE,
AND THE HIDDEN
PATHS OF POWER

ALEXANDRA ROBBINS

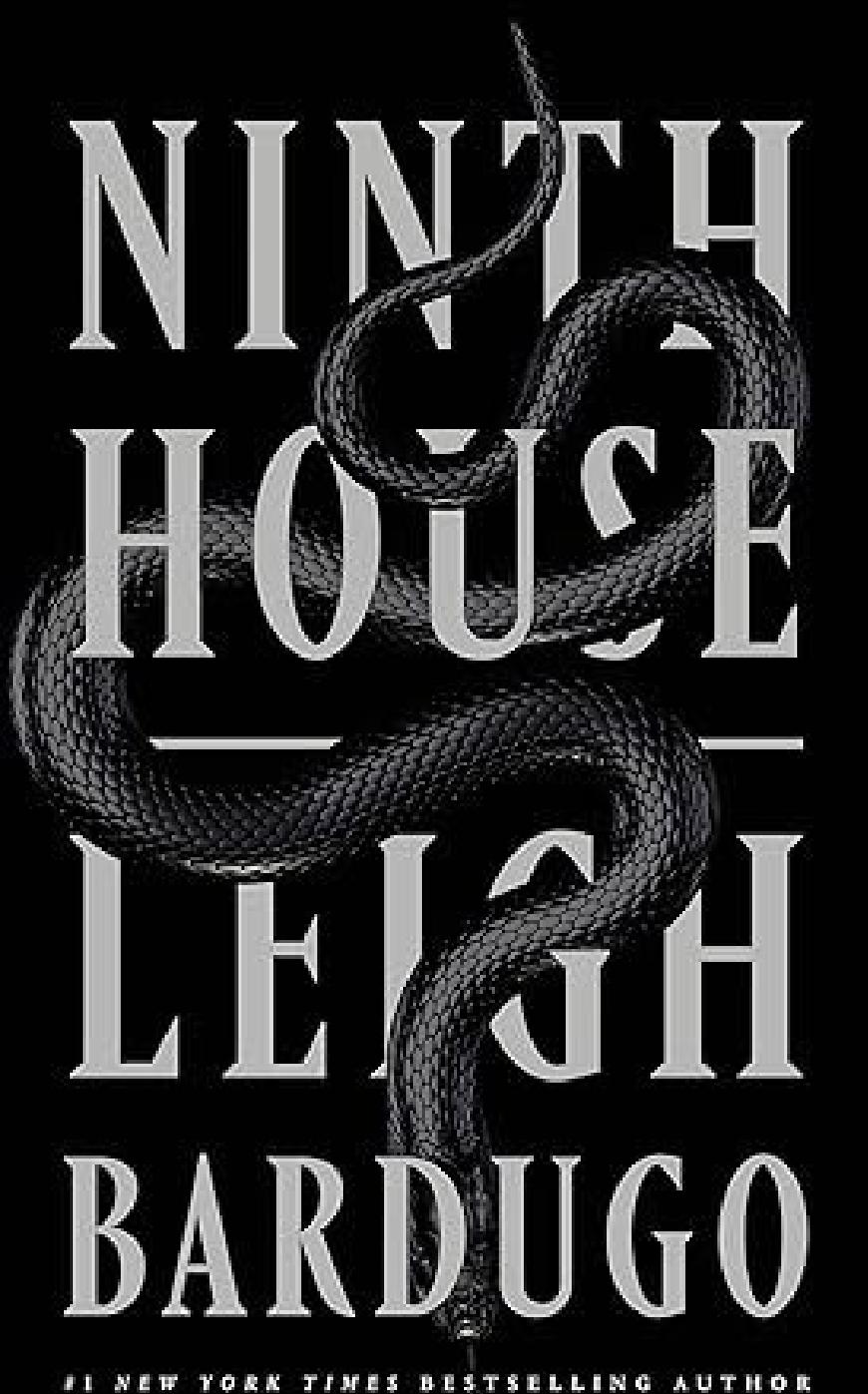
SKULL AND BONES IN POPULAR CULTURE

- *Secrets of the Tomb: Skull and Bones, The Ivy League and the Hidden Paths of Power* by Alexandra Robbins was published in 2002
- This book has been well received and added greatly to the popular media surrounding secret societies after the 2000 premier of *The Skulls*.
- This book was a timely precursor to the 2004 Presidential Election between Bonesmen George W. Bush and John Kerry



SECRET SOCIETIES IN POPULAR CULTURE

- A notable contribution to the increased interest in secret societies and symbolism related to the same can be traced to the publication of The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown in 2003
- The novel has sold over 80 million copies, has been translated into 44 languages, and remained on the best seller list for over 2 years
- The novel led to increased interest in previous works by Dan Brown, especially Angels and Demons. This work involved symbolism and an appearance by the Illuminati, a well known historical secret society
- The main character in many Dan Brown novels is Professor Robert Langdon, a Professor of Symbology at Harvard



SECRET SOCIETIES IN POPULAR CULTURE

- *Ninth House* by Leigh Bardugo was published in 2019
- Bardugo is a new, bestselling author who blends history, legend, and lore to create popular fiction
- In *Ninth House* she follows a young woman with a dark past who is given a second chance to attend Yale, but she must monitor the university's secret societies, which engage in dark magic and raise the dead.

OTHER COLLEGIATE SECRET SOCIETIES

Scroll and Key at Yale



Wolf's Head at Yale



OTHER COLLEGIATE SECRET SOCIETIES

Berzelius at Yale



Book and Snake at Yale



OTHER COLLEGIATE SECRET SOCIETIES

Sphinx Society at Dartmouth



Z Society at The University of Virginia



THE SKULL TOMB AT WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS (PHOTOS BY K. FRITZE – JUNE 2022)



A RIDDLE WRAPPED IN A MYSTERY INSIDE AN ENIGMA

IN SUMMARY

- Our culture loves a good mystery, we constantly strive to gain knowledge about the unknown
- In our pursuit to solve the mystery, we often add to the legend and distort the ultimate truth
- A part of us wants to believe in the mystical, supernatural, and impossible
- With Skull and Bones in particular, it is hard to ignore the depth of their known membership roll. It is far easier to believe that Skull and Bones contributes to world influence through its members than it is to believe it was so lucky for the past 192 years to choose as members those individuals who just happen to change the world by the day...
- Final thoughts and comments?

REFERENCES

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