Syracuse University Libraries

SYRACUSE

150 YEARS OF TRADITION

AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS RESEARCH CENTER
Introduction

At the February 1870 Methodist State Convention in Syracuse, a resolution was passed to found a university. Measures were taken to raise $500,000 to endow it, with the city of Syracuse subscribing $100,000. Reverend Jesse T. Peck, who would be elected president of the Syracuse University Board of Trustees, suggested purchasing fifty acres of farmland in southeast Syracuse. The Board of Trustees of Syracuse University signed the University charter and certificate of incorporation on March 24, 1870.

In September 1871 the University opened the College of Liberal Arts in rented space in the Myers Block in downtown Syracuse. Forty-one students, including seven women, were admitted. The University held its first Commencement in June 1872. In February 1873, Alexander Winchell was inaugurated as Syracuse University’s first Chancellor. That following May the Hall of Languages, the first building on the new campus, was dedicated. All the founding pieces were now in place for the University to begin forming a legacy of traditions.

Syracuse University boasts a history of traditions that have inspired Orange pride, united the University community, and connected its past with its present. Many of these customs and beliefs have origins that are over a century old. Others have been created more recently to embrace new-found values. Selected from the University Archives, the photographs, memorabilia, and other materials on display are a testament to a university with the strength to foster a diversity of traditions while also letting go of those that have lost their meaning. Whether they are old, long gone, or new, these traditions show how Syracuse University has roots in its past and passes its heritage forward into the future.

Curated by Meg Mason, University Archivist
Hallmarks of a University

Along with the University seal, the color orange and the Block “S” have historically represented Syracuse University. These old traditions and insignia elicit spirit and pride in students, alumni, and other members of the campus and greater community.

Syracuse University declared pink and pea green as its first colors in 1872, though a year later they changed to pink and blue. Students were unhappy with these colors, and, in 1890, the senior class agitated for change. A committee was formed and discovered that no other college or university had claimed the singular color orange. That year the faculty, Board of Trustees, and Alumni Association gave their approval, and orange became Syracuse University’s official color. Since then, the color orange has become an emblem of the University, saturating its history, from pennants and athletic uniforms to Otto the Orange and even the name of the student newspaper, The Daily Orange.

At an 1893 Athletic Governing Board meeting, the Block “S” was officially established as the highest award for a Syracuse University athlete. Baseball player George Bond, Class of 1894, was the first to wear the Block “S” when he sported it on a sweater at a baseball game that spring. For decades the letter was awarded to athletes at an annual Block “S” Dinner. While the Block “S” has historically been a symbol of Syracuse University athletics, the wider University community also identifies with it. “The Block ‘S’ allows us to respect the past and represent the future,” stated Athletic Director Daryl Gross when he announced the Block “S” as the University’s official athletics logo in 2005. “The ‘S’ represents not only the University and its athletics program, but the entire Syracuse community.”

Songs of Syracuse

Collective singing has been a tradition at Syracuse University since its opening, when students and faculty regularly gathered together at Chapel to sing hymns. Beyond Chapel, student groups formed to sing and strengthen community bonds. The first, the Men’s Glee Club, was established in 1873.

Gradually there emerged songs about Syracuse itself, celebrating and reinforcing University values such as community, loyalty, athletic excellence, and spirit. Throughout Syracuse’s history, students and alumni have sung of their affection for the University, in solidarity with a campus group, to express their faith, and to call sports teams to action. Members of the University community uphold a special tradition whenever they sing the Alma Mater, written in 1893 by Junius Stevens, Class of 1895. With those lyrics, they proudly embrace the past and strengthen the University’s identity for future generations of the Orange family.
The Legacy of 44

At Syracuse University, 44 is a sacred number. Since 1954, a total of 11 Syracuse University athletes have worn it. The three most famous Jim Brown, Ernie Davis, and Floyd Little—earned All-American awards and rank among Syracuse’s finest players. The legendary 44 holds meaning not just for athletics but the University community as a whole. It has become so iconic, the University’s telephone numbers all begin with “44” and its zip code ends with “44.” On November 12, 2005, Syracuse University officially retired the number for athletic use.

The legacy of 44 began with Jim Brown ’57, who wore the jersey starting in his sophomore year in 1954. By his senior year, Brown was an All-American and topped Syracuse’s all-time rushing list. He went on to become one of the greatest running backs in NFL history.

Ernie Davis ’62 helped lead Syracuse University’s football team to its only national championship in 1960. A year later he became the first African American and Orangeman to win the Heisman Trophy. Tragically, Davis died from leukemia in 1963, just as he was preparing for a professional career with the Cleveland Browns.

When Floyd Little ’67 heard of Ernie Davis’ death, he called football coach Ben Schwartzwalder to tell him he wanted to play football at Syracuse. Just as Davis surpassed Brown’s record marks, so Little did of Davis’. As a three-time first-team All-American, Little gave added meaning to the number made famous by those before him.

Reconnecting and Reminiscing

Alumni reunions are a longtime tradition at Syracuse University, where alumni have been welcomed back to campus since the 1870s. For almost a century, reunions took place as part of Commencement week, with the 50th reunion class participating in the procession at the Commencement ceremony. In 2007 the University began a new tradition of bringing students and alumni together by merging homecoming and reunion time into one set of events in the fall, now known as Orange Central.

Alumni reunions have always been bursting with activities, including breakfasts and cookouts on the Quad as well as parades, athletic events, and lectures. Until 1990, alumni staged a Kum Bak show, which included dramatic and musical performances. In recent decades that event has evolved into an alumni awards ceremony, where accolades such as the George Arents Award, the highest alumni honor, are conferred.

Historically, these larger reunions did not attract alumni of color. In recognition of this and in an effort to reconnect African American and Latino alumni with Syracuse University, Coming Back Together was established in 1983. The event has given alumni of color a way to celebrate their achievements, interact with students, give back, and reaffirm their bond with their alma mater on their own terms. Today the triennial reunion has become one of the largest and most well-known of its kind in the nation.
Let’s Go ORANGE!
First-Year Student Traditions

In the fall of 1871 Syracuse University admitted its first students: 34 men and 7 women. Today first-year students number in the thousands. Regardless of class size, their experience has always been one of acclimation and excitement. This time has long been steeped in tradition, helping new students to feel part of campus life.

Starting in the 1890s, first-year students were required to wear green or orange caps known as a beanies or lids during their first semester to distinguish themselves from their upper-class peers. When told by an upper-class student to “Tip it, Frosh,” a first-year student was expected to tip his or her beanie in respect. While at times demeaning, beanies did help build class camaraderie. A group of upper-class students known as the Goon Squad enforced the wearing of beanies. Transgressors repeatedly caught without their lids were punished through public humiliation at the Penn State Pep Rally. By the end of the 1960s though, the tradition of the beanie began to fade out.

Established in the 1940s, the Goon Squad has historically served as more than just beanie enforcers. They were also known for helping bewildered first-year students adjust to college life and spreading school spirit throughout campus. Today the Goon Squad helps first-year students move into their dorms.

Orientation and convocation are among the more enduring traditions that first-year students experience today. They also participate in Home to the Dome, where Otto’s Army teaches the newest members of the campus community cheers and other spirit traditions.

Celebrating the University Community

Many traditions celebrate the Syracuse University community, its stories, and its values. Whether these celebrations focus on individual groups on campus or the University as a whole, traditions bring the community together and honor a shared past. In addition to the events displayed here, there are innumerable other ways the University has celebrated its community, including National Orange Day, Moving Up Day, and homecoming. Altogether these traditions exalt in a strong sense of community, diversity, solidarity, and sharing.

In all good faith, and in the absence of the usual Freshman Handbook, the Class of 1923 offers this means to acquaint you with the Rules and Traditions of your University. We have at heart the welfare of Syracuse University and every individual therein. Your observance of these Traditions will show that you, too, are loyal to your Alma Mater.

Realize that you are now in college, but only Freshmen.

1. Say “Hello.” We all are glad to see you here.
2. Don’t be a dead-head. Get into University activities.
3. Wear your green lids (Freshman women your ’24 buttons) while on the campus between the hours of 8 a.m. and 6 p.m., Sundays excepted. Always tip your lid to professors; and upperclassmen. Do not wear your lids in buildings. Lids or buttons must be worn on the campus in the fall until an announcement to the contrary is made by the Senior Council, and must be resumed in the spring on St. Patrick’s Day and be worn until Moving-up Day.
4. Learn the Alma Mater, and other College songs. Stand and uncover when you hear the Alma Mater.
5. Attend all mass meetings and games—and cheer. Upperclassmen only may wear orange, except at athletic contests, when arm-bands should be worn by all classes.
6. Attend all classes.
7. Obey upperclassmen.
8. Be a live wire—Read the University publications.
9. The wearing of Pep School insignia of any description is not tolerated by the University.
10. Use the walk—keep off the grass.
11. Don’t smoke on the campus.

Remember that the Senior Council supervises all student affairs except organized athletics.

These customs have been observed by every Freshman Class in the history of the University. Keep up the tradition—it will not only lend spirit to the University, but to your class as well.

Our purpose is to replace rowdiness with gentlemanly conduct. We ask your co-operation.
Ceremony and Splendor

Commencement is one of Syracuse University’s most formal and jubilant traditions. For many students, this is the rite that ushers them into adulthood. The Commencement ceremony itself has always been full of ritual and customs: the procession of students, faculty, and administrators; academic attire; the conferring of degrees; and regalia such as banners and the Charter Mace.

Syracuse University held its first Commencement on June 27, 1872 in Wieting Opera House in downtown Syracuse. Having entered the fledgling University at upper grade levels, 19 graduates—including one woman—received their bachelor’s degrees that day. They would not have worn caps and gowns at the ceremony. Syracuse University graduates first wore this familiar graduation attire at the 1897 Commencement, but it was not fully adopted until 1901.

Along with academic attire, certain regalia reinforce the solemnity of the event. An ancient symbol of authority, the mace represents the University’s mission and integrity. Mace bearer and University Registrar Keith J. Kennedy first carried the original mace in the 1949 Commencement procession. The current Charter Mace was commissioned with funds donated by Gordon D. Hoople, an alumnus, professor, and Board of Trustees chair who also served as mace bearer. Replacing the original mace, it was first used in Commencement in 1959.

In addition to conferring degrees upon new graduates, Syracuse University has awarded honorary degrees since 1872. There have been a wide variety of recipients, each chosen for outstanding achievements in their field, innovative and creative achievements, humanitarian deeds, and the honor brought to Syracuse University.
Orange Spirit

Cheerleaders, bands, and mascots have long been embodiments of Orange spirit, encouraging us to holler enthusiastically for athletic teams, wear orange with pride, sing songs, and chant cheers. By creating collective memories for students and alumni, these traditions connect them with the past, present, and future.

The first cheerleaders at Syracuse University, documented around the turn of the 20th century, were male students. The first female cheerleader appeared in 1919. At football games in Archbold Stadium, seating as well as cheering was once gender-segregated, a tradition that lasted until after World War II.

Syracuse University’s earliest documented mascot was Vita the Goat, a live goat that made appearances at football games in Archbold Stadium in the 1920s. A Native American figure called the Saltine Warrior then became the athletic mascot for several decades. He first appeared in a 1931 student publication as a hoax about the supposed remains of an Onondagan chief found during excavations on campus. After a Native American student organization protested the use of the Saltine Warrior, Syracuse University removed it as the official mascot in 1978. A series of unofficial mascots appeared in the years following, among them an orange who became increasingly popular. The cheerleaders named him Otto in 1990. In 1995 a University committee appointed to choose an official mascot selected a wolf. However, in the face of student protests and popular opinion, Chancellor Shaw made Otto the official mascot.

Known as The Pride of the Orange, Syracuse University’s marching band is one of two athletic bands. It traces its roots to the first University Band, which was formed in 1901 with 23 members and made its first football game appearance that fall. In 1944, the first majorettes joined the band. Except to fill a shortage of male students during World War II, women were not allowed to play in the marching band until 1966.

Spectators at Syracuse University athletic games have also passed down traditions of spirit and enthusiasm. Throughout the University’s history, crowds of students have chanted cheers and sung fight songs. First-year students would coordinate raising colored placards to create large-scale words and designs from the stands. Today Otto’s Army represents student fans. Established in 2006, they carry on traditions of cheering and singing and have started their own traditions, such as camping outside the Carrier Dome and organizing viewing parties for away games.
Syracuse University Archives benefits from the generosity of the University community. Donations of documents, photographs, scrapbooks, and memorabilia that help tell the story of the University, its students, faculty, and staff are always welcome. If you have materials to donate, please contact the University Archives at 315.443.2697 or scrc@syr.edu.

We also welcome your financial support that will help us preserve the University’s history and provide access to these rare collections for future orange generations. All gifts are fully tax-deductible. To make a gift, visit Syracuse University’s secure, online giving site at GiveToSuLibraries.syr.edu, or contact Ron Thiele, Assistant Dean for Advancement, at 315.443.2537 or rlthiele@syr.edu.