PROJECT SCROLL RESEARCH NOTE 2026-16

A cadets' lodge of E Clampus Vitus at Georgetown, Kentucky, in November 1847: the earliest record of the order in Kentucky, from William Preston Johnston's journal

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SUMMARY

The earliest record of E Clampus Vitus in Kentucky found until now was a standing notice for a lodge at Bardstown in the *Bardstown Herald* of October 1852; we have found no Kentucky lodge in the order's own histories. The journal that William Preston Johnston kept as a cadet at the Western Military Institute, Georgetown, Kentucky, and printed by the Filson Club in 1944, puts the order in Kentucky five years earlier. On 15 November 1847 the sixteen-year-old wrote: "Started a lodge of [the] Eclampsus Vitus. Took in about a dozen members." His own note explains it: "The E. V. a mock society, started by me to retaliate the attempts at practical jokings on me. I initiated 60 cadets in one week." When a professor asked its object, Johnston told him, "quizzically," that it was "charitable"; the professor "levelled a regulation against it." The entry spells the name as the Cassopolis, Michigan, lodge of 1846 did, and shows the order working as a student burlesque in the same years it was known in Indiana, Michigan and Pennsylvania.

THE RECORD

1. **William Preston Johnston, journal, 15 November 1847, in Arthur Marvin Shaw, ed., "Student Life at Western Military Institute: William Preston Johnston's Journal, 1847–1848," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 18 (1944), pp. 79–108, at p. 83**

   > *"Started a lodge of [the] Eclampsus Vitus. Took in about a dozen members."*

   The Filson Historical Society, Louisville · See the record (https://filsonhistorical.org/wp-content/uploads/publicationpdfs/18-2-3_Student-Life-at-Western-Military-Institute-William-Preston-Johnstons-Journal-1847-1848_Shaw-Arthur-Marvin.pdf)

2. **Johnston's own note to the same entry, ibid., p. 83**

   > *"The E. V. a mock society, started by me to retaliate the attempts at practical jokings on me. ... Prof. Hopkins wished to know the object of it. I told him quizzically "charitable.""; the initiation fee was "Nothing"; the professor "levelled a regulation against it; but in the meantime I had had my revenge on the jokers."*

   The Filson Historical Society, Louisville · See the record (https://filsonhistorical.org/wp-content/uploads/publicationpdfs/18-2-3_Student-Life-at-Western-Military-Institute-William-Preston-Johnstons-Journal-1847-1848_Shaw-Arthur-Marvin.pdf)

3. **The editor's note on the text, ibid., p. 81, n. 9**

   > *The text printed "is a version which the author made from the original one some years after it was written."*

   The Filson Historical Society, Louisville · See the record (https://filsonhistorical.org/wp-content/uploads/publicationpdfs/18-2-3_Student-Life-at-Western-Military-Institute-William-Preston-Johnstons-Journal-1847-1848_Shaw-Arthur-Marvin.pdf)

WHAT IT CHANGES

The order's earliest Kentucky record moves from Bardstown in October 1852 to Georgetown in November 1847, and the order is shown, for the first time, at a school: a

mock society founded by a cadet to turn the tables on the pranksters who had played on him, with sixty initiated in a week. Kentucky joins Indiana, Michigan and Pennsylvania as a state where the order is found by 1847, and here the entry is dated to the day.

LIMITS

The journal is known only as Johnston's own fair copy, made "some years after" it was written, as the editor notes; the date and the words of the entry are therefore his later copy of them, and his note on the society was added in that copy. The number of members ("about a dozen") and of initiates ("60 cadets in one week") are his. No other record of the cadets' lodge has been found, and the professor's regulation is known only from Johnston.

WHAT WE SEARCHED BEFORE CALLING IT NEW

Chronicling America, every spelling of the order's name state by state for 1830–1852 (about 1,400 pages read); the Internet Archive's full text; the Filson Historical Society's publications; the Kentucky newspapers we could reach; the order's histories (*Then and Now*, 1966; *Credo quia absurdum*, 1949; Wilson, 1995) and its websites; web searches for "Eclampsus" with Kentucky and Georgetown. None names a lodge in Kentucky before Bardstown in 1852.

Our standard for calling a finding new is set out in How we research (projectscroll.com/how-we-research/), and how we weigh each kind of record in Scrollsigns (projectscroll.com/scrollsigns/).

"New" means new to print as far as we can tell. If you know of an earlier publication, tell us and we will credit it here and raise the note's version.

WORKS CITED

Earlier work, catalogues and databases named in this note, besides the records quoted above.

1. E Clampus Vitus, *E Clampus Vitus: Then and Now, 1852–1966* (Stockton, 1966). https://ecv13.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Then_and_Now_1966.pdf

THE FULL STORY

The finding is set out in context, with the rest of its sources, in E Clampus Vitus: the complete record (projectscroll.com/news/e-clampus-vitus-the-complete-record/). In the discoveries register:

- `georgetown-ky-1847` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#georgetown-ky-1847)

HOW TO CITE THIS NOTE

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