
*Overview:* Nicholas Syrett first became interested in fraternities because he was disturbed by the news reports throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s about fraternity men’s behavior, specifically their involvement in sexual assaults and occasionally in acts of racial bigotry and homophobia. Syrett became interested in the origins of this behavior and wondered why it was that a number of fraternities had been involved in behavior like this and why other groups had not. Further, he wondered what it had to do with gender.

In his book, Syrett sets out to answer these questions. Syrett chronologically traces the history of all white college fraternities from the days of antebellum to the post-war period and into modern day. In doing so he examines how the notion of masculinity has changed throughout history and when in particular these changes occurred. In his thoroughly researched book based on studies from twelve different colleges and universities and over twenty different national fraternities, Syrett convincingly argues that different historical phenomena have shaped fraternal masculinity. Syrett makes three major claims that have shaped his argument and the history of masculinity. The first is that men have gained prestige from their male peers by being masculine, which at different times throughout history has meant different things, but nonetheless has resulted in some men being defined as more masculine than others. The second claim that Syrett makes is that men have been aware of these standards and consciously have striven to achieve them. Finally, Syrett claims these standards of masculinity have made some men anxious, resulting in men actively attempting to achieve these standards to gain respect and prestige form their peers.
In Syrett’s fascinating and easily read historical overview of fraternities, he explores the changes in fraternal masculinity from their origin to modern day. In their origins Syrett argues that fraternities were not only for men of means but fraternities were also highly intellectual. During the antebellum period, “manly men” were not only wealthy and intelligent, but also handsome. These “manly men” joined fraternities to challenge the overbearing faculty of the time and to distinguish themselves from their poorer classmates. In the postbellum period, Syrett argues, masculinity underwent a shift in how it was defined. During this period the importance of academic achievement declined, as the importance of athletic and extracurricular prowess replaced it. With the decline in the importance of academic achievement, fraternity men were spending more time partying and socializing. Syrett argues that this development led to fraternities continuing to attract students who were not as serious about their studies.

*How this work can be applied to American Studies:* As Syrett writes in his introduction, fraternities have been “one of the most influential forces on the college campus and are worthy of study for this reason alone.” However, if that is not reason enough to read this historical study on fraternities, *The Company He Keeps* explores issues of gender, race, class, and religion. I would recommend this book for any class interested in exploring the evolution of masculinity throughout history and how women, gay men, non-whites, and non-Protestants have been foils in the developing notion of fraternal masculinity.