The founding of the Phi Beta Kappa (PBK) Alpha Chapter of New York at Union College in 1817 marked a new era for the College by raising its academic reputation. The College’s initial request for a chapter was denied in 1803 by the Alpha Chapter of Connecticut at Yale because the academic standards of Union, then just eight years old, were considered insufficient. Later, at the urging of the College’s recently appointed president, Eliphalet Nott, students submitted a second request in which Nott described the students as “young gentlemen of unblemished moral character of respectable literary acquirements.” Union’s charter was granted in 1817.

Under the guidance of President Nott, Union College’s Phi Beta Kappa Society functioned as an honorary literary society, holding frequent meetings to debate controversial topics secretly and hosting lectures by distinguished orators. It was dubbed the Alpha Chapter of New York because it was the first one in the state. The Union chapter, which has maintained a continuous membership since its founding, kept complete records of meeting minutes dating to their first meeting in September of 1817. Many of these documents are displayed in this exhibit, which marks the 200th anniversary of the Alpha Chapter of New York at Union College.

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