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## Hail, Colby, Hail turns 100: Karl Raymond Kennison won a contest— and gave the College its alma mater song

Kardelen Koldas

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# Hail, Colby, Hail

turns 100

Karl Raymond Kennison won a contest—  
and gave the College its alma mater song

By Kardelen Koldas '15

## Hail, Colby Hail!

words by Karl R. Kennison, Class of 1906

Music by C. Lavalee

Hail Col - by Hail! Thy people from far and near Stand at thy call, Our  
al - ma ma - ter dear. thy - shad ed paths re - call our steps, To - ga - ther at thy  
shrine Thy mem - ried hall re - claim our hearts, Till all our thoughts are - thine.  
Hail Col - by Hail Hail Col - by hail To thee we lift our hearts and  
hom - age pay Our al - ma ma - ter dear the Blue and Gray

It was one hundred years ago that Karl Raymond Kennison, Class of 1906, submitted an entry to a Colby song contest. Hail, Colby, hail! Thy sons from far and near. Stand at thy call, Our Alma Mater dear, the lyrics began, set to the melody of “O Canada.” Kennison’s song stood out, winning him the \$25 first prize.

But becoming the alma mater song? That was a rather prolonged, and somewhat unexpected, process.

It would take more than two decades for “Hail, Colby, Hail” to be sung at commencement. And almost 50 years to be listed as the “College song,” despite Kennison’s belief that he had chosen “the most stirring hymn for unison chorus, particularly for men’s voices, that I have any knowledge of.” The song familiar to—if not memorized by—generations of Colby students peaked early and then slowly worked its way into Colby lore.

The first public reveal was Sept. 11, 1919, when Kennison submitted “Hail, Colby, Hail” to the Hedman Memorial Song Contest, sponsored by the Class of 1895 in memory of much-loved Professor of Romance Languages John Hedman from the Class of 1895, who taught the first Spanish class at Colby.

The contest’s chairman, Rex W. Dodge, Class of 1906, wrote of “Hail, Colby, Hail,” “I wish to state that your song is probably the best that has thus far been submitted in any of the song contests, and I believe also that it will be used a great deal in the future.” He also asked Kennison to write a third verse, which he did and inserted between the two original verses.

This request wasn’t a problem for this prolific songwriter.

At the conclusion of the Hedman Contest—which ran from 1914 to 1919—some entries were collected in a centennial song book, *Colby College Songs*, published in 1920. There, “Hail, Colby, Hail” appeared as “Hail, Colby!” With that title, it was published once again in 1935 in the *Colby Alumnus*.

The song was not soon embraced by students, though. When, in 1943, President J. Seelye Bixler asked about 400 Colby students to sing the song, “a pitiful chorus of muttering and humming was the only response the student body could give,” said one critic in a letter to the *Echo*. In hopes of a better performance next time around, the *Echo* reprinted the letter, and also the first verse of the song, which was, for the first time, referred by its now-accepted name, “Hail, Colby, Hail.” Another first for Kennison’s tune happened in 1946, when it was officially sung during commencement; this time it was titled simply “Hymn.”

“Interestingly, only the second verse, with its reference to the war, is sung—perhaps in deference to the end of World War II,” said Colbiana Coordinator Jim Merrick ’75 in an email. “This is continued at each following commencement until 1955, when they switch over to the first verse of the song, which is how the song is sung up to the present.”

Merrick also added that Kennison’s song appears to have slowly replaced “Alma Mater,” a song by Steven Grant Bean, Class of 1905, written to the tune of “Heidelberg” and sung as the College song from the 1930s through the 1940s. “By 1969 ‘Hail, Colby, Hail’ was definitely the ‘College song’ and the other was almost completely forgotten,” noted Merrick. In the Colby Student Handbook of 1969-70, “Hail, Colby, Hail” was listed for the first time as the “College song.”

When Kennison was preparing for his 50th Reunion in 1956, he found Dodge’s 1920 letter asking for an additional verse and reminded Alumni Secretary Ellsworth Millett that the song didn’t end after just two verses. “Since the song was so favorably received and is now so widely used, you might like to file for the record all three verses, and possibly someday someone will want to make use of them,” Kennison wrote to Millett.

Later, in a 1961 letter to the editor of *Colby Alumnus*, Richard Dyer, Kennison clarified how he came across this tune. He wrote, “The reason why I happened to know this Canadian national anthem so well is that I had married a Canadian girl, who had it right on her tongue’s end.”

**A**lthough his lyrics are well-known among Colbians, Kennison isn't. Massachusetts residents should think of him every time they turn on their tap as he's the builder of the state's largest water reservoir.

Born in Marysville, N.B., Canada, in 1886, Kennison was raised in Waterville. In 1902 he graduated from Waterville High School and enrolled at Colby to become a teacher. Even by today's standards, he was an active Colby student: he played basketball and ran track; debated; sang with



career took off, but he never lost touch with Colby.

He was a class agent and periodically wrote to his classmates and shared news, and, as a generous supporter of Colby himself, almost always ended letters by asking for contributions to the Class Alumni Fund. In 1941 Colby awarded him an honorary degree of science. At the time, he was the chief engineer of the Metropolitan Water District of Boston, where he built his life's work—the Quabbin Reservoir. This project won him the title of “builder of the largest domestic water supply reservoir in the world,” according to his honorary

## *Panama Canal, Quabbin Reservoir, and Hail, Colby, Hail— Kennison left a legacy*

the Glee Club; and belonged to the Mandolin-Guitar Club. Academically, he was accomplished, too. He graduated *cum laude* as a mathematics and drawing major and earned a Phi Beta Kappa key—something he carried long after graduation. His first cousin, two sisters, and his daughter Florence Kennison Fisher '35 followed his footsteps to Colby.

After receiving a mechanical engineering degree from M.I.T., Kennison returned to Colby to teach math and drawing for a year. He introduced new science courses to the curriculum. Then, he began working with John R. Freeman, a distinguished civil engineer who undertook many large-scale projects in the United States and abroad, including the Panama Canal. Kennison's



degree citation. Throughout his career, he led many engineering societies and published numerous articles in various engineering journals. His work was also picked up by the press.

In 1950, when he resigned from his post for political reasons, the *Boston Herald* ran an article titled “Engineer's Courageous Gesture will be the Nation's Loss,” in which journalist Robert Graham wrote: “His courageous gesture in protest against political interference in his important work of bringing water to 2,000,000 souls in metropolitan Boston, exposing the insidious effects of politics in the raw, was, however, typical of the man's character and his entire life.” The article also praised Kennison's work. “He started it 10 years ago when he tramped up and down the Swift

and Ware river valleys to survey the site for the vast Quabbin Reservoir. Time has proven the wisdom of his work then, for the reservoir—designed and largely supervised by Kennison—has defied every drought since it was built in 1937.”

The following year, in 1951, his success was reaffirmed when he won an award from the Engineering Societies of New England for his outstanding service. The society also noted the ingenuity of his work at the Quabbin Aqueduct and called it “a striking example of originality.”

In the *Boston Sunday Post* article “Karl R. Kennison Once Built the Largest Tunnel on Earth,” John Kelso revealed Kennison’s awareness of his ingenuity with the reservoir. “Most of my engineering colleagues thought I was very daring to attempt that,” he was quoted as saying. “It was fairly good originality, I think.”

Besides highlighting his work across the country and abroad, the piece also alluded to Kennison’s character: “a modest, unassuming and internationally known gentleman of what is known colloquially as ‘the old school,’” and an “old Maine farm boy.”

To Kennison, who was daring and adventurous with his own work, the moon seemed like the limit. An alumni newsletter from 1966 noted: “Our former club president, Karl Kennison, is concerned about the attempt to put a man on the moon, and Karl is a competent scientist whose opinion deserves a hearing. ... Says Karl: ‘I can’t imagine a more impractical, not to say useless, way of spending our money than to put a man on the moon, 1,300 times as far away as our latest satellite.’”

By 1952 Kennison’s short-lived retirement ended with a job offer from the New York Board of Water Supply, where he was its chief engineer until 1956. A quarter-century later, after leaving his mark on history, Kennison passed away in 1977 at 91. He is buried in Quabbin Park Cemetery in Ware, Mass.—a cemetery created for graves moved from the five towns flooded by the Quabbin Reservoir. To this day, he is remembered as the “builder of the Quabbin Reservoir,” but on Mayflower Hill, he is the writer of “Our Alma Mater, Hail the Blue and Gray!”

### 1. Hail, Colby, hail!

Thy people\* from far and near

Stand at thy call,

Our Alma Mater dear.

Thy shaded paths recall our steps,

To gather at thy shrine.

They mem’ried halls reclaim our hearts’

Till our all thoughts are thine.

*Chorus*

Hail, Colby, hail!

Hail, Colby, hail!

To thee we lift our hearts and homage pay;

Our Alma Mater, hail the Blue and Gray!

### 2. Hail, Colby, hail!

We gather, young and old,

Thy name to cheer,

Thy banner to unfold.

Beneath the Blue, beneath the Gray,

We meet in joyous throng. Thy campus green,  
from wall to wall,

Re-echoes with our song.

*Chorus*

### 3. Hail, Colby, hail!

We look to thee once more.

Light thou our path,

And guide us as part of yore.

In days of peace thy torch hath flared,

And led our steps aright.

At war’s grim call thy sons were true

And valiant in the fight.

*Chorus*

*(\*In 1979, President Cotter mentioned at his inauguration that the line “Thy sons from far and near” would change to “Thy people far and near.”)*