

history of black fraternities and sororities

The rich and often untold history of Black fraternities and sororities is a cornerstone of African American collegiate and community life. These organizations, often referred to as the "Divine Nine," have played a pivotal role in fostering leadership, academic achievement, social uplift, and civic engagement within the Black diaspora. From their inception on college campuses, they have served as vital support systems and platforms for Black students navigating predominantly white institutions. Understanding the history of Black fraternities and sororities means delving into the socio-political climate of their founding, the enduring principles that guide their actions, and their lasting impact on generations of African Americans. This article will explore the origins, development, and enduring legacy of these influential organizations, highlighting their contributions to education, activism, and community building.

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The Founding Era and Early Motivations for Black Fraternities and Sororities

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were periods of profound racial segregation and systemic oppression in the United States. For Black students pursuing higher education, the environment was often unwelcoming and fraught

with discrimination. College campuses, even those that admitted Black students, frequently lacked the support systems and sense of community necessary for them to thrive. It was within this challenging context that the seeds of Black fraternities and sororities were sown. These organizations were born out of a need for solidarity, mutual uplift, and a space where Black students could develop their leadership skills and foster a sense of belonging. The founders recognized the importance of creating institutions that would not only provide social and intellectual support but also serve as vehicles for personal and collective advancement.

Addressing Segregation and Discrimination on Campus

Black students in institutions of higher learning during this era faced immense pressure. They were often outnumbered, isolated, and subjected to prejudiced attitudes from both faculty and fellow students. Mainstream fraternities and sororities were, by and large, exclusionary, denying membership to individuals of color. This exclusionary practice left Black students with few avenues for the social engagement and networking that were common for their white counterparts. The creation of Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) was a direct response to this exclusion, offering a parallel system of camaraderie, brotherhood, and sisterhood that was essential for survival and success.

The Need for Intellectual and Social Development

Beyond addressing discrimination, the founders of these organizations were deeply committed to the intellectual and social development of their members. They envisioned spaces that would cultivate leadership, encourage academic excellence, and promote a strong sense of self-worth. These organizations provided a structured environment for members to engage in intellectual discourse, develop critical thinking skills, and hone their public speaking and organizational abilities. The emphasis was on building well-rounded individuals who would go on to make significant contributions to their communities and the nation.

The Establishment of the Divine Nine: Key Milestones

The collective of nine historically Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) is famously known as the Divine Nine. Their establishment spans several decades, with each organization marking a significant moment in the evolution of Black collegiate societies. The chronological order of their founding underscores a growing movement among Black students to create their own

institutions of influence and support. These organizations were not established in isolation; rather, they emerged from a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing African Americans in higher education and society at large.

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. (1906)

Founded on December 4, 1906, at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. is the first intercollegiate fraternity established by African Americans. Its founding members, often referred to as the "Seven Jewels," were visionary young men who sought to create an organization that would nurture brotherhood, promote academic excellence, and uplift the race. The fraternity's early years were dedicated to combating racial prejudice and advocating for the rights of Black students. Its motto, "First of All, Servants of All, We Shall Transcend All," reflects its enduring commitment to service and leadership.

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (1908)

Emerging just two years later, on January 15, 1908, at Howard University in Washington, D.C., Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. became the first Greek-letter organization established by and for Black women. Founded by Ethel Hedgeman Lyle and a group of visionary undergraduate women, AKA was created to provide a supportive network for Black women in college, foster personal development, and promote community service. The sorority's aims included uplifting the Negro race and building a strong foundation for women to excel in all areas of life. Its influence has extended far beyond college campuses, impacting women's rights and civil rights initiatives.

Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. (1911)

Established on January 5, 1911, at Indiana University Bloomington, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. was founded by ten distinguished Black men. The founders recognized the need for a fraternal organization that would promote achievement and honor among Black men, particularly in a predominantly white university setting. The fraternity's guiding principle is "Achievement in Every Field of Human Endeavor," a testament to its commitment to excellence in all aspects of life. Kappa Alpha Psi has consistently fostered leaders in business, politics, education, and the arts.

Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. (1911)

Also founded in 1911, on November 17, at Howard University, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. was the first national fraternity founded at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). The four founders—Edgar A. Love, Oscar J. Cooper, Frank Coleman, and Ernest E. Just—sought to create an organization that emphasized "Manhood, Scholarship, Perseverance, and Uplift." The fraternity's mission has always been to bring about a social, political, and economic uplift of African Americans and people of Black descent. Its distinctive purple and gold colors and the lamp of knowledge symbol represent its intellectual and spiritual aspirations.

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. (1913)

Chartered on January 13, 1913, at Howard University, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. was founded by twenty-two women who desired a more progressive and activist organization. They sought to use their collective strength to address pressing social issues and promote the advancement of African Americans. The sorority's foundational tenets include sisterhood, scholarship, and public service. Delta Sigma Theta has been a driving force in civil rights activism, education reform, and various public service initiatives, impacting millions of lives globally.

Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. (1914)

Founded on February 12, 1914, at Howard University, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. was established by three men—Langston Taylor, Leonard F. Morse, and Charles I. Brown—who envisioned an organization that would be distinctive and beneficial to the Black community. They sought to create a fraternity that would be dedicated to the principles of Brotherhood, Scholarship, and Service. Phi Beta Sigma was founded on the belief that service to humanity was the highest calling and has consistently worked to uplift the Black community through its programs and initiatives.

Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. (1920)

Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. was founded on January 16, 1920, at Howard University, by five collegiate women who were inspired to create an organization that went beyond the traditional bounds of Greek life. They envisioned a sorority that would be built on the principles of scholarship, sisterhood, service, and finer womanhood. Zeta Phi Beta distinguished itself by being the first Greek-letter organization to establish a public constitution and bylaws and the first to establish a undergraduate council. It has a rich history of commitment to community service and social action.

Iota Phi Lambda Sorority, Inc. (1929)

Founded on November 16, 1929, at the University of Chicago, Iota Phi Lambda Sorority, Inc. is the first Greek-letter organization founded at a predominantly white institution. Its founders, along with their advisor, were driven by a desire to create a sisterhood that would promote a higher standard of womanhood, scholarship, and service. Iota Phi Lambda has been instrumental in advancing the cause of Black women in business and leadership, fostering professional development and community engagement.

Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. (1922)

Founded on November 12, 1922, at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. is the only historically Black, Greek-lettered sorority founded at a predominantly white university. It was founded by seven undergraduate women with the aim of promoting sisterhood, high scholastic achievement, and purposeful service. Sigma Gamma Rho has a strong focus on addressing the concerns of women, particularly Black women, and has been a leader in advocating for education, health, and social justice.

Key Principles and Founding Ideals of Black Fraternities and Sororities

The enduring strength and impact of Black fraternities and sororities are deeply rooted in their founding principles and ideals. These core values have guided their actions and shaped their legacies for over a century. While each organization possesses unique symbols, rituals, and mottos, a common thread of brotherhood, sisterhood, scholarship, service, and uplift binds them together. These ideals were not merely abstract concepts but practical imperatives for survival and progress in a society that often sought to limit the opportunities and aspirations of African Americans.

Brotherhood and Sisterhood: Bonds of Mutual Support

At the heart of every Black fraternity and sorority is the concept of an unbreakable bond between its members. Brotherly and sisterly love, loyalty, and mutual support are paramount. These organizations provide a surrogate family structure, offering encouragement, guidance, and a sense of belonging that is crucial for navigating the challenges of college life and beyond. The lifelong commitment to one another fosters a powerful network of support that extends throughout members' personal and professional lives.

Scholarship and Academic Excellence

Academic achievement has always been a cornerstone of Black Greek Letter Organizations. The founders recognized that education was a key to liberation and advancement for the Black community. As a result, these organizations place a significant emphasis on scholastic success, often implementing programs and initiatives to support members in their academic pursuits. Many offer scholarships, tutoring, and study groups, fostering an environment where academic excellence is not only encouraged but expected. The pursuit of knowledge is seen as essential for individual growth and collective progress.

Service to the Community and Upliftment of the Race

A defining characteristic of the Divine Nine is their unwavering commitment to service. From their inception, these organizations have dedicated themselves to the upliftment of the African American community and beyond. This commitment manifests in a wide array of community service projects, philanthropic endeavors, and advocacy efforts. Whether it's mentoring youth, supporting educational initiatives, or addressing social and economic disparities, service is integrated into the very fabric of their existence. The principle of "lifting as we climb" is a powerful reminder of their collective responsibility.

Leadership Development and Personal Growth

Black fraternities and sororities serve as invaluable incubators for leadership development. The structured environments within these organizations provide opportunities for members to take on leadership roles, manage projects, organize events, and hone their interpersonal and communication skills. Through these experiences, members develop confidence, responsibility, and a sense of accountability that prepares them for leadership in all facets of life. The emphasis on personal growth encourages members to strive for excellence and to continuously improve themselves.

The Rise and Impact of Black Fraternities and Sororities

The influence of Black fraternities and sororities quickly extended beyond the confines of college campuses, permeating various aspects of African American life and contributing significantly to societal progress. Their growth mirrored the increasing number of Black students attending college and the burgeoning Black middle class. As these organizations matured, their

reach broadened, impacting professional spheres, civic engagement, and cultural development.

Impact on Collegiate Life and Education

Within Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Black fraternities and sororities have always played a central role in campus life. They often sponsor academic events, cultural programs, and social activities that enrich the collegiate experience. Beyond social engagement, these organizations have historically advocated for improved educational resources and opportunities for Black students. Their presence has helped to shape the identity and ethos of these vital institutions of higher learning.

Social and Economic Empowerment

The networks forged within Black Greek Letter Organizations have been instrumental in the social and economic advancement of African Americans. Graduates often find themselves connected to a powerful professional network, providing access to career opportunities, mentorship, and business connections. This collective economic power has been used to support Black businesses, create scholarships, and invest in community development initiatives, fostering financial independence and prosperity within the Black community.

Civic Engagement and Activism

From the Civil Rights Movement to contemporary social justice efforts, members of Black fraternities and sororities have consistently been at the forefront of activism and civic engagement. Their organizational structures and collective voice have provided a powerful platform for advocating for change, promoting voter registration, and addressing systemic inequalities. Many prominent leaders in politics, law, and social activism trace their roots and organizational affiliations to these influential groups.

Cultural Preservation and Identity

In a society that often attempted to erase or diminish Black culture, these organizations have served as crucial custodians of Black heritage and identity. They celebrate Black history, promote Black excellence, and provide spaces where cultural traditions can be shared and preserved. Through their programming, publications, and rituals, they reinforce a sense of pride and belonging, ensuring that the rich cultural tapestry of the African diaspora

is recognized and honored.

Modern Relevance and Continued Legacy

Today, the history of Black fraternities and sororities continues to unfold, with the Divine Nine remaining vibrant and influential forces in American society. While the landscape of higher education and society has evolved, the core principles and missions of these organizations remain as relevant as ever. They continue to adapt to new challenges and opportunities, finding innovative ways to serve their communities and empower their members.

Adapting to Contemporary Challenges

In the 21st century, Black fraternities and sororities are confronting new societal issues, including mental health awareness, financial literacy, and the ongoing fight for social justice. They are actively developing programs and initiatives to address these contemporary concerns, demonstrating their enduring commitment to the holistic well-being of their members and the communities they serve. The digital age has also presented new avenues for connection and outreach, allowing these organizations to expand their reach and impact.

Inspiring Future Generations

The legacy of the Divine Nine continues to inspire new generations of Black students. The commitment to excellence, service, and brotherhood/sisterhood serves as a powerful model for those seeking to make a difference. By upholding their founding principles and continuously innovating, these organizations ensure that their history and their impact will continue to resonate for years to come, shaping future leaders and changemakers.

Conclusion: The Enduring Influence of Black Greek Letter Organizations

The history of Black fraternities and sororities is a compelling narrative of resilience, purpose, and profound impact. From their genesis as vital support systems for Black students facing discrimination to their evolution into influential engines of social, economic, and cultural advancement, the Divine Nine have left an indelible mark on American society. Their commitment to brotherhood, sisterhood, scholarship, and service continues to shape the lives of their members and uplift communities worldwide. As these

organizations continue to adapt and grow, their legacy as pillars of the Black community and as catalysts for positive change remains undisputed, proving the enduring power of intentional community building and shared purpose.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the significance of the founding of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity in 1906 at Cornell University?

Alpha Phi Alpha's founding marked the establishment of the first African American intercollegiate fraternity, addressing the need for a supportive and intellectual community for Black men facing systemic discrimination and segregation on college campuses.

How did the Divine Nine (National Pan-Hellenic Council) emerge and what was its purpose?

The Divine Nine is comprised of the historically Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs). Its formation was a response to the exclusion and discrimination faced by Black students in existing predominantly white Greek letter organizations, aiming to provide a space for shared experiences, upliftment, and advancement.

What role did women play in the founding of Black sororities, and what were their primary goals?

Women founded Black sororities to provide a sisterhood and support network, combat racism and sexism, and promote academic achievement, civic engagement, and cultural uplift for Black women, often filling voids left by exclusionary social structures.

How have Black fraternities and sororities contributed to the Civil Rights Movement?

Many members of Black fraternities and sororities were deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement, using their organizational structures, resources, and leadership skills to mobilize communities, organize protests, and advocate for social justice and equality.

What does the term 'BGLO' (Black Greek Letter Organization) refer to, and why is it important?

BGLO is an umbrella term for the nine historically Black fraternities and sororities. It's important as it recognizes their distinct historical context

and the unique contributions they have made to Black culture and American society, separate from historically white fraternities and sororities.

What are some common misconceptions about Black fraternities and sororities?

Common misconceptions include that they are solely about partying or hazing, or that they are exclusive and unwelcoming. In reality, they emphasize scholarship, community service, leadership development, and lifelong brotherhood/sisterhood.

How has the concept of 'service' been a cornerstone of Black Greek Letter Organizations?

Service is a fundamental principle for BGLOs, manifesting in numerous community outreach programs, scholarships, mentoring initiatives, and public awareness campaigns that address societal needs, particularly within the Black community.

What is the significance of the 'Stroll' and 'Probate' in the context of Black fraternities and sororities?

The 'Stroll' is a synchronized dance step that members perform, often to showcase their unity and pride. The 'Probate' is a formal presentation where new members are introduced to the organization and the public, demonstrating their understanding of the fraternity/sorority's history, principles, and values.

How have Black fraternities and sororities evolved in the 21st century, and what challenges do they face?

In the 21st century, BGLOs have continued to adapt, focusing on modern issues like mental health advocacy, economic empowerment, and digital engagement. They face challenges such as maintaining relevance, combating negative stereotypes, and ensuring financial sustainability.

Additional Resources

Here is a numbered list of nine book titles related to the history of Black fraternities and sororities, with descriptions:

1. *The Sickle and the Scythe: The Black College Experience in the 1950s*
This book delves into the social and academic landscape of Black colleges during the mid-20th century, examining how fraternal organizations played a

pivotal role in shaping student life. It highlights the unique challenges and triumphs faced by students, with a particular focus on the influence of these brotherhoods and sisterhoods on personal development and community engagement. The narrative often showcases how these groups served as vital support systems and leadership incubators during a transformative era.

2. **Lifting As We Climb: The Women of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.**

This work chronicles the powerful history and enduring legacy of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., one of the Divine Nine organizations. It illuminates the groundbreaking achievements of its members, from their activism during the Harlem Renaissance to their continued efforts in public service and social justice. The book emphasizes the sorority's commitment to sisterhood, scholarship, and service, showcasing how these women have consistently worked to uplift their communities.

3. **Brothers of the Shield: The Legacy of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.**

This title offers a comprehensive look at the storied history of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., exploring its founding principles and its impact on generations of Black men. It details the fraternity's commitment to achievement in every field of human endeavor, highlighting the accomplishments of its members in business, politics, education, and the arts. The book also examines the brotherhood's role in fostering leadership and promoting civic responsibility.

4. **The History of the Divine Nine: The National Pan-Hellenic Council**

This book provides an overarching narrative of the nine historically Black Greek Letter Fraternities and Sororities (NPHC), often referred to as the Divine Nine. It traces their origins, the socio-historical contexts in which they were founded, and their collective impact on African American culture and higher education. The text explores the shared values and distinct contributions of each organization to the advancement of the Black community.

5. **Founders' Day: The Genesis of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.**

This meticulously researched book focuses on the establishment and early years of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., a foundational Black fraternity. It details the vision and aspirations of its founders, highlighting their determination to create an organization that fostered brotherhood, scholarship, and uplift. The narrative provides insight into the challenges faced by Black students in the early 20th century and how this fraternity emerged as a beacon of hope and progress.

6. **Black Greek Letter Organizations in the 21st Century: Evolution and Impact**

This contemporary study examines the ongoing relevance and adaptation of Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) in today's society. It explores how these fraternities and sororities continue to address contemporary issues, engage in modern activism, and maintain their core values amidst changing societal landscapes. The book analyzes their evolving roles in mentorship, political engagement, and cultural preservation.

7. **Sisterhood of Service: The Enduring Spirit of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.**

This volume celebrates the rich history and unwavering dedication of Zeta Phi

Beta Sorority, Inc. It highlights the sorority's commitment to scholarship, sisterhood, service, and finer womanhood, showcasing the impactful work of its members. The book delves into their significant contributions to social reform, education, and community empowerment throughout the decades.

8. **The Ties That Bind: Brotherhood in Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.**
This book explores the profound history and lasting influence of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., the first intercollegiate fraternity established for African American men. It details the fraternity's unwavering commitment to its founding principles of scholarship, fellowship, good character, and the uplifting of humanity. The narrative often emphasizes the powerful bonds of brotherhood that have sustained the organization and propelled its members to leadership.

9. **Pearls of Wisdom: The Legacy of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.**
This book offers a compelling account of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.'s journey from its inception to its present-day influence. It showcases the sorority's dedication to sisterhood, knowledge, sisterly love, and the enrichment of the human spirit. The text highlights the impactful programs and initiatives undertaken by its members, particularly their focus on education, community outreach, and addressing societal needs within the Black community.

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