



# THE NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF GREEK HOUSING NEWSLETTER

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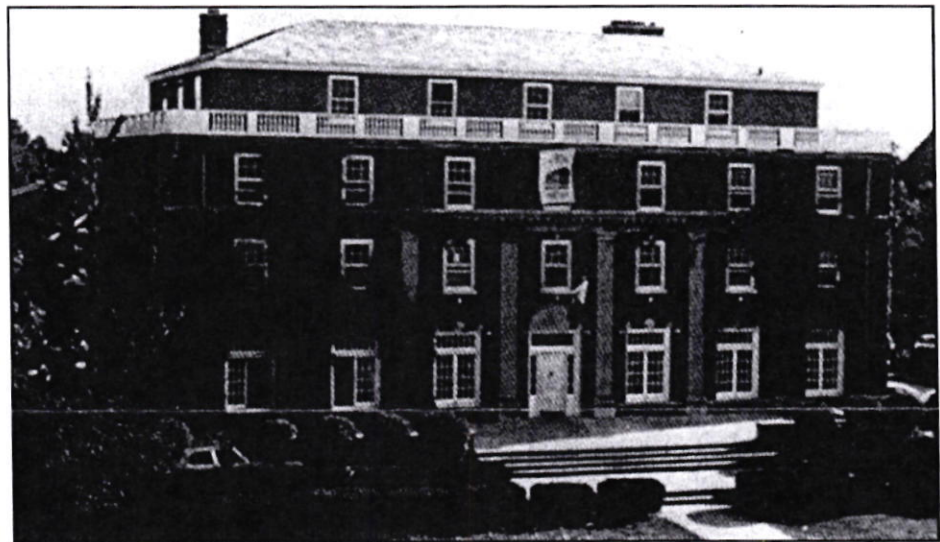
## Number of fraternal buildings down 20% at U of I

BY SCOTT BRACKNEY

*SPGH Intern*

In May, SPGH began a study to determine among other things the number of functional fraternity and sorority chapter houses at the University of Illinois throughout history. Not only is this data useful in exposing the very dire circumstances facing Greek organizations today, it provides valuable insight into how cultural trends and historic events have led to the success (or downfall) of fraternities and sororities over the years. The data shows a marked decline in the number of Greek houses on campus—especially among fraternities—since the historic peak in the late 1920’s.

A Greek housing inventory was compiled for every 20<sup>th</sup> year, beginning with the first fraternal organizations at U of I in the late 1880’s and continuing through 2009. Information was gathered through a number of sources, including the University Office for Greek Affairs, the *Guide to Fraternities and Sororities* available online from the University Archives, the 1989 National Register Group Nomination for fraternal buildings in Champaign and Urbana, and the *Illio* yearbook. In addition to a listing of every active Greek organization and its corresponding address by year, the study provides supplementary information including known dates of construction, vacant or rented status, and adaptive reuse of surviving



The 1927 Theta Xi building on the University of Illinois campus was demolished in 2008 to make room for a new chapter house.

fraternal buildings. The survey takes special note of all endemic fraternities and sororities—organizations that were the original inhabitants or owners of the property they now occupy.

According to the study, fraternal organizations at the University of Illinois flourished in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with 76 fraternities and 33 sororities on campus in 1929. Since that time, the number of active chapter houses has been steadily decreasing, with major drops following World War

II and the enforcement of new building codes for life safety starting in 1993. Since 1989, the number of both fraternity and sorority houses has decreased by 20%. This equates to a total of 16 buildings being razed, vacated, or repurposed in a 20 year span.

Of the over 60 surviving buildings on campus, only 25 are occupied by their original inhabitants, a valuable attribute for determining eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Several of the houses



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are being rented to other fraternities or sororities by organizations that have for one reason or another lost the ability to maintain an active chapter house on campus. At least nine other former Greek houses have been repurposed and continue to exist as apartments or University buildings.

The data shows that fraternities have proven more volatile over the years than their female counterparts. A net of 13

sorority houses were lost from 1929 to 2009, compared to 35 fraternities. This trend suggests differences in recruitment processes, organization, and traditions make fraternities much more vulnerable to closure.

Despite the rapid decrease in the number of active organizations, the total number of Greek students at the university has remained relatively consistent. While *Illio* group photographs from 1929 are typically populated by 15-30 stern-looking faces, the number of

students at today's largest Greek houses has ballooned to over 100 members. This change reflects both a "survival of the fittest" environment in Greek affairs as well as a change in the level of involvement of individual students in the running of their organizations. In any case, statements that the Greek system at the University of Illinois is as healthy as ever belie a very serious problem surrounding the loss of fraternal buildings and the accompanying destruction of irreplaceable pieces of university history.

# ΑΓΔ earns National Register status

BY KAREN KUMMER

*SPGH Board Member*

Located at 1004 South Lincoln Avenue, on the eastern edge of the University of Illinois campus, the Alpha Gamma Delta women's fraternity house was constructed in 1928. The three-story French Eclectic-style chapter house was designed by local Champaign architect George Ramey, who collaborated with the designers of the Kappa Kappa Gamma house (Ralph E. Milman, Howard Shaw Associates, Chicago) to the north, to create a shared landscaped area between the two houses.

With its listing on the National Register in August 2009, the Alpha Gamma Delta house joins fifteen other U of I Greek Chapter Houses to be listed under the multiple property nomination form, "Fraternity and Sorority Houses at the Urbana-Champaign Campus of the University of Illinois." The chapter houses are listed for their architectural significance, as most were designed by prominent local or national architectural firms in period revival styles, and for the chapters' contributions to the broad pattern of higher education at the University of Illinois.

A benefit of membership in the Society for the Preservation of Greek Housing is to help in designating your



The Alpha Gamma Delta house at the University of Illinois was added to the National Register of Historic Places in August 2009.

chapter house as either a local landmark or for listing in the National Register. Although official listing is not required for SPGH membership, it is strongly encouraged as an important tool in the preservation of architecturally significant chapter houses. In addition, only historic chapter houses (over fifty years old) are considered for grants and nomination documentation helps support a grant application.

To date, sixteen individual chapter

houses at the University of Illinois have been listed on the National Register. In addition, the majority of the houses at SPGH member campuses at MIT, University of Nebraska, University of Georgia, Penn State University and Depauw University are either listed individually or as part of historic districts. If your chapter house is interested in learning more about being listed on the National Register, please contact SPGH.

# Society hires new intern from University of Illinois

Let me begin by offering my warmest greetings to all those involved in fraternal organizations and architectural preservation. My name is Scott Brackney and I was hired in May by SPGH as a summer intern.

I am currently a Master of Architecture candidate at the University of Cincinnati, having completed my undergraduate program at the University of Illinois in 2009. While at Illinois I was a



Scott Brackney

member of Alpha Rho Chi fraternity, serving as Worthy Architect (President) in my final semester at the university.

My experience as a leader within my own fraternal organization has made me sensitive to the bevy of challenges facing fraternities and sororities across the country today. Despite our house's outward signs of success—larger pledge classes, improved relations with the university, more money for house upgrades, furniture, and big screen TV's—the majority of my effort as president was spent just trying to keep the doors open. From issues of risk management involving drugs and alcohol to compliance with ever-changing life-safety code requirements, Greek organizations, whether they know it or not, are tiptoeing through a veritable minefield of potential "game over" scenarios.

Perhaps the greatest threat to the traditional fraternal spirit is the changing cultural perception of what it means to be Greek at today's universities. While fraternities and sororities continue to make great strides in philanthropy, community involvement, and scholarship, increasing chapter sizes, fewer students living in-house, and a fundamental shift

in the way young people communicate inevitably suggest a departure from the brotherly bond of 10 or so close friends that went on to found the nation's first Greek houses.

Seeing these issues as I do, I greatly admire the ideals set out by SPGH and find its mission of preservation to be of the utmost relevance today. With most Greek individuals holding a smaller and smaller stake in their chapter's future, the availability of outside assistance of the kind SPGH can provide is a critical resource in the struggle to maintain a healthy fraternal spirit and the magnificent pieces of architecture it imbues.

This summer, I was tasked with research and archival responsibilities in support of an educational A/V presentation being developed by Greg Hargus. In addition to explaining the mission of SPGH and galvanizing support for our crucial cause of preservation, the video will also provide step by step instructions on how interested fraternal organizations can join the society, begin cataloguing their chapter history, and apply for National Register recognition.

In addition to research and education activities, I have initiated the lengthy process of digitizing all of SPGH's photographs and files. While this measure provides for the security of many of our organization's historic documents, it also makes the photographs, slides, and other interesting materials we have accumulated readily available in a format appropriate for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

I am thrilled to be involved in an organization built around the very pressing need for preserving a unique cultural and architectural chapter in American history. After this summer, I look forward to future involvement with SPGH and their continuing objective to preserve the legacy of fraternities and sororities at universities across the country.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Membership Meeting January 19 in Champaign

Tuesday, January 19, 2010

5:30 - 7:30 p.m.

Humanitarian Room

I Hotel & Conference Center

1900 S. First Street

Champaign, Illinois

Dinner is complementary to one representative from each member organization. Additional dinners are \$20. The SPGH Board of Directors will update you on the Society's activities and ongoing efforts to preserve historic fraternity and sorority houses. Your input and suggestions for future activities will be solicited.

Please RSVP to the National Society for the Preservation of Greek Housing with your group's name and the name(s) of your representative(s). RSVP to: 217-353-5252 or email [SPGH1989@Hotmail.com](mailto:SPGH1989@Hotmail.com) by January 10, 2010.

### New Archival System for SPGH Documents

In an effort to better preserve and make accessible SPGH's collection of historic documents and images, the organization has begun a digitalization process of all of its files. This endeavor will allow copies of original documents to be used in modern presentation media and provides a secure back-up in the event that the hard copy is damaged or destroyed.



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