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The History Of Alpha Phi Alpha

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Introduction: The Legacy of the First Intercollegiate Greek-Letter Fraternity for African American Men

On a cool December evening in 1906, on the campus of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, a group of seven visionary black students gathered to lay the foundation for what would become one of the most influential organizations in American history. **Alpha Phi Alpha**, the first intercollegiate Greek-letter fraternity established for African American men, was born out of necessity, courage, and an unyielding commitment to brotherhood and social uplift. The history of Alpha Phi Alpha is not merely the story of a fraternity; it is a chronicle of resilience, academic excellence, and a relentless fight for justice that has shaped generations of leaders. Understanding **the history of Alpha Phi Alpha**provides a window into the broader struggle for civil rights, education, and community empowerment in the United States.

From its humble beginnings in a small room at Cornell, the fraternity has grown into a global organization with hundreds of thousands of members, including some of the most prominent figures in politics, science, arts, and sports. The history of Alpha Phi Alpha is a testament to the power of collective action and the enduring spirit of its founders, known as the **Seven Jewels**. This article explores the fraternity's origins, its guiding principles, key milestones, and lasting impact on society.

The Founding: The Seven Jewels and the Birth of an Idea

At the turn of the 20th century, African American students at predominantly white institutions faced immense isolation, discrimination, and limited social support networks. Cornell University was no exception. While white students had access to established fraternities and social organizations, black students were systematically excluded. This exclusion created a pressing need for a support system that would foster academic achievement, mutual aid, and a sense of belonging.

In 1905, a small study group began meeting informally to discuss literature, current events, and the challenges facing African Americans. This group, initially known as the **Alpha Phi Alpha Society**, evolved into something much larger. The formal founding occurred on December 4, 1906, when seven undergraduate students came together to establish the fraternity. These men—Henry Arthur Callis, Charles Henry Chapman, Eugene Kinckle Jones, George Biddle Kelley, Nathaniel Allison Murray, Robert Harold Ogle, and Vertner Woodson Tandy—are revered as the **Seven Jewels** of Alpha Phi Alpha.

The Seven Jewels and Their Contributions

Each of the Seven Jewels brought unique talents and vision to the founding of the fraternity:

- Henry Arthur Callis served as the fraternity's first president and later became a prominent physician. He is often regarded as the "philosopher" of the group and helped articulate the fraternity's core values.
- Charles Henry Chapman was instrumental in developing the fraternity's ritual and constitution. He

contributed to the organizational structure that still guides Alpha Phi Alpha today.

- Eugene Kinckle Jones played a key role in expanding the fraternity beyond Cornell. He later became a leader in the National Urban League, advancing economic and social justice.
- George Biddle Kelley helped draft the fraternity's early bylaws and was a strong advocate for academic excellence among members.
- Nathaniel Allison Murray contributed to the fraternity's educational programming and later worked as an educator in Washington, D.C.
- Robert Harold Ogle was responsible for much of the fraternity's early public relations and recruitment efforts.
- Vertner Woodson Tandy became the first African American registered architect in New York State. He designed the fraternity's official symbol and was instrumental in its early aesthetic identity.

Together, these seven men established an organization that would transcend its original purpose of social support to become a force for positive change in the world.

The Principles: Manly Deeds, Scholarship, and Love for All Mankind

From its inception, Alpha Phi Alpha was built on a foundation of core principles that continue to guide its members. The fraternity's motto, **"First of All, Servants of All, We Shall Transcend All,"** reflects its commitment to leadership, service, and excellence. The three primary pillars of the fraternity are **manly deeds, scholarship, and love for all mankind**.

These principles are not merely abstract ideals; they have been translated into tangible actions throughout the fraternity's history. Alpha Phi Alpha has always placed a premium on academic achievement, encouraging members to excel in their studies and pursue higher education. The emphasis on "manly deeds" calls for ethical conduct, courage, and integrity in all endeavors. The phrase "love for all mankind" underscores the fraternity's dedication to social justice, community service, and the uplift of humanity regardless of race, creed, or background.

Early Expansion and the Great Migration

Following its founding at Cornell, Alpha Phi Alpha began to expand rapidly. In 1907, the fraternity established its first graduate chapter, and by 1909, chapters had been formed at several other universities, including Howard University, the University of Michigan, and Yale University. This expansion was fueled by the **Great Migration**, during which millions of African Americans moved from the rural South to urban centers in the North and Midwest, seeking better economic opportunities and escaping Jim Crow segregation.

The fraternity provided a critical network for these migrating populations, offering social support, professional connections, and a sense of community in unfamiliar environments. As Alpha Phi Alpha grew, it became a hub for black intellectual and cultural life on college campuses across the country. The fraternity's early members were often among the first African Americans to graduate from their respective institutions, paving the way for future generations.

The Role of Alpha Phi Alpha in the Civil Rights Movement

Perhaps the most celebrated chapter in **the history of Alpha Phi Alpha** is its integral role in the Civil Rights Movement. The fraternity's commitment to social justice and its network of influential leaders positioned it at the forefront of the struggle for racial equality. One of the fraternity's most illustrious members, **Martin Luther King Jr.**, remains the most iconic figure of the movement. King joined Alpha Phi Alpha as a member of Sigma Chapter while studying at Boston University. He often credited the fraternity with helping to shape his leadership philosophy and providing a supportive community of like-minded activists.

Alpha Phi Alpha was deeply involved in organizing and supporting key civil rights initiatives, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the March on Washington, and the Selma to Montgomery marches. Members of the fraternity served as strategists, fundraisers, and foot soldiers in the fight against segregation and discrimination. The fraternity also used its national platform to advocate for legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Beyond the Civil Rights Movement, Alpha Phi Alpha has consistently championed **social justice causes**, including economic empowerment, educational equity, and political representation. The fraternity's national programs, such as the "Go to High School, Go to College" initiative and "Project Alpha," focus on youth development and educational attainment in underserved communities.

The Symbols and Traditions of Alpha Phi Alpha

Like all enduring organizations, Alpha Phi Alpha maintains a rich tapestry of symbols, traditions, and rituals that bind its members across generations. The fraternity's colors are **black and old gold**, representing strength and excellence. Its symbol, the Sphinx, was chosen to embody wisdom, courage, and mystery—qualities that the fraternity seeks to cultivate in its members.

The fraternity's call, known as the **"Ice Cream" call**, and its handshake are among the many traditions that create a sense of belonging and shared identity. The rituals of Alpha Phi Alpha are steeped in symbolism and teach lessons about leadership, service, and brotherhood. Initiation ceremonies, while private, are designed to instill the fraternity's values and prepare new members for a lifetime of commitment.

Alpha Phi Alpha also has a series of official hymns and songs, including the fraternity anthem, which is sung at chapter meetings, conventions, and special events. These songs celebrate the fraternity's history, its heroes, and its enduring mission. The preservation of these traditions is a priority for the fraternity, as they serve as a link between the founders of 1906 and today's members.

Notable Members and Their Impact

The roster of Alpha Phi Alpha reads like a who's who of African American achievement. Beyond Martin Luther King Jr., the fraternity counts among its members a remarkable array of leaders in every field imaginable:

- W.E.B. Du Bois, the pioneering sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist, was an honorary member of Alpha Phi Alpha. His intellectual contributions to the study of race and society remain foundational.
- Thurgood Marshall, the first African American Supreme Court Justice, was a member of Alpha Phi Alpha. His legal work, including the landmark case Brown v. Board of Education, ended legal segregation in schools.
- Paul Robeson, the renowned actor, singer, and political activist, was a member. He used his global platform to advocate for civil rights and anti-colonial movements.
- Duke Ellington, the legendary jazz composer and bandleader, was a member. His musical genius left an indelible mark on American culture.
- Jesse Owens, the Olympic gold medalist who defied Nazi ideology at the 1936 Berlin Games, was a member. His athletic achievements inspired millions worldwide.
- Cornel West, the prominent philosopher, scholar, and activist, is a member. His work on race, class, and justice continues to influence contemporary discourse.

These individuals, along with countless other members in fields such as medicine, law, education, business, and the arts, exemplify the fraternity's commitment to excellence and service. The history of Alpha Phi Alpha is, in many ways, the history of African American leadership in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Alpha Phi Alpha in the Modern Era

Today, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated, remains a vibrant and influential organization. With more than 290,000 members and over 700 chapters worldwide, the fraternity continues to uphold its founding principles

while adapting to the needs of a changing world. Its national programs address contemporary issues such as educational disparities, economic inequality, health disparities, and social injustice.

The fraternity's **Alpha Phi Alpha Education Foundation**provides scholarships and grants to students and community organizations. The fraternity also partners with other organizations, including the NAACP and the Urban League, to advance shared goals. In recent years, Alpha Phi Alpha has been active in voter registration drives, mentorship programs, and advocacy for criminal justice reform.

Technology and social media have allowed the fraternity to connect its global membership like never before. Virtual chapter meetings, online mentoring, and digital archives ensure that the history of Alpha Phi Alpha is preserved and accessible to new generations. The fraternity also holds biennial national conventions that draw thousands of members for networking, professional development, and strategic planning.

The Enduring Significance of Alpha Phi Alpha

The history of Alpha Phi Alpha is a powerful reminder that organizations born from exclusion can become instruments of inclusion and empowerment. What began as a study group for isolated black students at a predominantly white university has grown into a global force for good. The fraternity's commitment to **scholarship, brotherhood, and service** has produced leaders who have changed the world.

Alpha Phi Alpha's legacy is visible in every aspect of American life—from the courtroom to the classroom, from the concert hall to the playing field, from the pulpit to the halls of government. The fraternity's members continue to embody the ideals of the Seven Jewels, proving that collective action, guided by principle, can overcome even the most daunting obstacles.

Conclusion: A Living Legacy

In reflecting on **the history of Alpha Phi Alpha**, one recognizes that this is not merely a story of the past but a living, breathing legacy that continues to unfold. The fraternity remains as relevant today as it was in 1906, addressing the persistent challenges of inequality and injustice with the same determination that inspired its founders. For every young man who joins Alpha Phi Alpha, he becomes part of a lineage of excellence, a brotherhood of leaders, and a mission of service that transcends time. The history of

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