

History Of The Divine Nine

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THE ENDURING LEGACY: EXPLORING THE HISTORY OF THE DIVINE NINE

The landscape of American higher education and African American culture is indelibly marked by the presence of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), an organization commonly celebrated as the **Divine Nine**. These nine historically Black Greek-letter organizations (LBGLOs) have served as pillars of community service, academic excellence, social justice, and brotherhood and sisterhood for over a century. To understand the **history of the Divine Nine** is to understand a profound narrative of resilience, leadership, and the unyielding pursuit of upliftment during and after the era of Jim Crow. This article delves into the rich history of these venerable institutions, exploring their origins, their evolution, and their enduring impact on society.

The Genesis: A Need for Sanctuary and Strength

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a period of intense racial segregation and systemic oppression in the United States. While a small number of African American students were gaining admission to predominantly white universities, they often faced profound isolation, discrimination, and exclusion from campus life and social organizations. Simultaneously, the rise of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) created new hubs for intellectual and social development. It was within this crucible of challenge and opportunity that the foundations of the **history of the Divine Nine** were laid.

These students sought more than just social clubs; they needed support systems, networks for mutual advancement, and forums to discuss the pressing issues of race, politics, and community uplift. The Greek-letter model, already popular among white students, was adapted and transformed into something uniquely powerful and culturally relevant. The first of these organizations emerged not merely as fraternities and sororities, but as mission-driven entities committed to a higher purpose.

THE FOUNDING ERA: CORNERSTONES OF THE DIVINE NINE

The **history of the Divine Nine** unfolds in distinct waves, with the first seven organizations being founded between 1906 and 1922, and the final two joining the ranks in the 1960s. Each organization was born from a specific context and set of ideals.

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. (1906)

Founded on December 4, 1906, at Cornell University, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., is the first intercollegiate Greek-letter fraternity established for African American men. The founders, known as the "Seven Jewels," recognized the need for a strong bond of brotherhood among Black students navigating a hostile environment. **Alpha Phi Alpha** set a precedent for social advocacy and service, a legacy most famously embodied by its member, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The fraternity's motto, "First of All, Servants of All, We Shall Transcend All," perfectly captures its foundational spirit and its role in the **history of the Divine Nine**.

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (1908)

Just two years later, on January 15, 1908, at Howard University, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., was founded as the first Greek-letter sorority created by and for African American women. Founded by Ethel Hedgeman Lyle and her twenty illustrious college mates, **Alpha Kappa Alpha** was established to cultivate and encourage high scholastic and ethical standards and to promote unity among women of color. Its legacy is deeply intertwined with public service, with initiatives like the "AKA Ivy Leaf" symbolizing growth and strength. The sorority has a long history of political activism and community health programs.

Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. (1911)

Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., was founded on November 17, 1911, at Howard University. Its founders were three undergraduates and their faculty advisor, Ernest Everett Just. The fraternity's principles are Manhood, Scholarship, Perseverance, and Uplift. Known for its distinctive "Q Dog" identity and its cardinal principles, **Omega Psi Phi** has produced giants in the fields of science, sports, and civil rights, including famed scientist Ernest Everett Just himself, and athlete and activist Paul Robeson. The fraternity's founding added a powerful and distinct voice to the **history of the Divine Nine**.

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. (1913)

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., was founded on January 13, 1913, at Howard University by twenty-two collegiate women. It was born from a desire to expand upon the existing sorority model and to be more actively engaged in public service and social activism. Just a few months after its founding,

the Deltas made history by participating in the Woman Suffrage March in Washington, D.C., in March 1913. **Delta Sigma Theta** is famous for its Five-Point Programmatic Thrust and its global impact through partnerships like the one with Habitat for Humanity. This audacious commitment to social change was a pivotal moment in the **history of the Divine Nine**.

Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. (1914)

Founded on January 9, 1914, at Howard University, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., was established on the principles of Brotherhood, Scholarship, and Service. Its founders, known as the "Three Musketeers," envisioned a fraternity that was inclusive and not exclusive, one that would embrace all men regardless of their background. **Phi Beta Sigma** prides itself on its "Blue and White" family and its deep connection to the community, exemplified by its partnership with the March of Dimes. The fraternity's stance against pledging and its focus on genuine brotherhood were significant developments.

Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. (1920)

Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., was founded on January 16, 1920, at Howard University. Its five founders, known as the "Five Pearls," envisioned a sorority that would be "finely cultured" and dedicated to the highest ideals of womanhood and service. **Zeta Phi Beta** was the first organization to be constitutionally bound to a fraternity, Phi Beta Sigma, and its founding was marked by a strong emphasis on scholarship and community action. The sorority's international reach and its "Z-Hope" program demonstrate its sustained commitment to the founding principles that shape the **history of the Divine Nine**.

Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. (1911)

While founded after Omega Psi Phi, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., was chartered on January 5, 1911, at Indiana University Bloomington. Its ten founders, who included elders of the church and community leaders, established the fraternity on the principles of Achievement, a concept that would define its identity. **Kappa Alpha Psi** is known for its commitment to academic excellence and its "Guide Right" program, which mentors young men. The fraternity's history is rich with contributions to the arts, sports, and law, solidifying its essential place in the **history of the Divine Nine**.

THE EXPANSION ERA: COMPLETING THE COUNCIL

For over four decades, the NPHC consisted of seven organizations. The **history of the Divine Nine** was, for a time, the history of these seven. However, the social movements of the mid-20th century created a new landscape.

Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. (1922)

Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., was founded on November 12, 1922, at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana. It is unique among the Divine Nine for being founded by seven schoolteachers on a predominantly white campus. **Sigma Gamma Rho** was established to enhance the quality of life for women and their families through community service and education. The sorority's motto, "Greater Service, Greater Progress," reflects its pragmatic and impactful approach. Its founding added a perspective rooted in education and grassroots community building to the **history of the Divine Nine**.

Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. (1963)

The final piece of the Divine Nine, Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc., was founded on September 19, 1963, at Morgan State College (now Morgan State University) in Baltimore, Maryland. The twelve founders were students who were deeply influenced by the Civil Rights Movement and the changing social consciousness. **Iota Phi Theta** is built on the principles of Scholarship, Leadership, Citizenship, Fidelity, and Brotherhood. Its founding during the height of the struggle for racial equality makes it a distinctly modern organization within the **history of the Divine Nine**, focusing on the challenges of a new era.

THE NATIONAL PAN-HELLENIC COUNCIL: A UNIFIED FORCE

In 1930, the presidents of the original five fraternities and sororities (Alpha Phi Alpha, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Omega Psi Phi, Delta Sigma Theta, and Kappa Alpha Psi) met at Howard University to form what is now the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). This umbrella organization was created to foster cooperative actions and to be a unified voice for Black Greek life. The **history of the Divine Nine** is therefore also the history of the NPHC, which now serves as the governing body for all nine organizations.

The Council's mission is to promote the well-being of its member organizations and the communities they serve. It facilitates joint projects, educational initiatives, and networking opportunities. The NPHC's existence is a testament to the power of collaboration and the shared values that unite these nine distinct groups.

IMPACT AND LEGACY: BEYOND THE PADDLE

The influence of the **history of the Divine Nine** extends far beyond university campuses and social events. These organizations have been engines of social change, producing a disproportionate number of the nation's leaders in every field. From the civil rights movement, where members of Alpha Phi Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, and others were at the forefront, to the halls of Congress, the judiciary, medicine, science, and the arts, Divine Nine members have left an indelible mark.

- **Social Justice:** The organizations were instrumental in the fight for voting rights,

desegregation, and economic equality. Their archives are filled with records of protests, legal challenges, and community organizing.

- **Community Service:** Annual programs like "National Day of Service" bring thousands of members together to address issues from food insecurity to health disparities. Millions of dollars in scholarships are awarded each year.
- **Networking and Mentorship:** The bonds formed within the Divine Nine are lifelong. They provide a powerful professional and social network that spans generations and industries.
- **Cultural Identity:** Through their traditions, calls, steps, and "probate" shows, these organizations have created a rich cultural language that is celebrated and recognized throughout the African diaspora.

NAVIGATING CHALLENGES AND LOOKING FORWARD

The **history of the Divine Nine** is not without its complexities. Issues of hazing, elitism, and the cost of membership have been persistent challenges. The organizations have had to adapt to changing times, evolving their membership intake processes and enforcing stricter anti-hazing

policies. Furthermore, the role of Black Greek life in a post-racial (though not yet racially just) society continues to be debated. However, the core mission of service, scholarship, and uplift remains as relevant as ever. The Divine Nine are increasingly focusing on issues of mental health, economic empowerment, and digital equity, ensuring their continued relevance for a new generation of students.

CONCLUSION: A CONTINUING NARRATIVE

The **history of the Divine Nine** is a powerful, living story of aspiration, resilience, and community. From the courageous founding of Alpha Phi Alpha on a cold December night in 1906 to the activist creation of Iota Phi Theta during the apex of the Civil Rights Movement, these nine organizations have defined the contours of Black leadership and community service in America. They have provided sanctuary, instilled values, and mobilized millions for the common good. As the Divine Nine move further into the 21st century, their legacy is carried forward by over 1.5 million members worldwide. Their history is not merely a record of the past; it is a blueprint for the future, a testament to the enduring power of unity, scholarship, and service in the pursuit of a more just and equitable world. The story of these nine groups is, in many