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## **A Space of Their Own Color: Black Greek Letter Organizations at the University of New Orleans**

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A Space of Their Own Color: Black Greek Letter Organizations at the University of New Orleans

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
History  
Public History

by

August Darbonne

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Finally, this paper is dedicated to my Parents and Ancestors, who without their sacrifices and struggles, I would not be here today, celebrating this achievement.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations..... iv

List of Tables .....v

Abstract..... vi

Introduction..... 1

Historiography .....3

The Founding of UNO .....7

Dillard University: A Historically Black Campus .....12

The Origins of Social Greek Letter Fraternities and Sororities .....14

The Origins of Black Greek Letter Fraternities and Sororities.....17

Black Greek Letter Organizations at UNO.....20

Beginning of Black Sisterhood.....22

Growing Up in New Orleans .....24

Continuing Work .....26

Continuing a Legacy.....32

Black Brotherhood at UNO .....37

Continuation of Black Greek Life.....39

Service and Purpose.....39

Struggles of Black Greek Letter Organizations .....46

Conclusion .....56

Bibliography .....59

Vita.....63

## **List of Illustrations**

Illustration 1. Announcement of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority in LSUNO yearbook .....	23
Illustration 2. Sigma Gamma Rho Receives Official Charter.....	27
Illustration 3. Sigma Gamma Rho Meeting Room .....	29
Illustration 4. Gammetts, Sigma Gamma Rho Interest Group.....	31
Illustration 5. First Photo of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority at LSUNO.....	34
Illustration 6. Alpha Kappa Alpha Black History Poster.....	36
Illustration 7. Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Homecoming Poster .....	41
Illustration 8. Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Step Performance ..	42
Illustration 9. Zeta Phi Beta at Dillard University .....	50
Illustration 10. Sorority Members at Dillard University.....	54
Illustration 11. Sorority Members at the UNO .....	54
Illustration 12. Phi Beta Sigma and Zeta Phi Beta Plot at the UNO.....	57

## **List of Tables**

Table 1. National Pan-Hellenic Council Organizations and Founding Years .....	20
Table 2: Black Greek organizations at UNO and Charter Years .....	39

## **Abstract**

Every semester across the United States, countless students join Greek letter organizations. While some may recognize the Greek letters, many Americans do not know the racial divide within the Greek life system, and the difference of purpose those organizations hold. This study focuses on eight historically Black fraternities and sororities and more specifically, their chapters at the University of New Orleans, a university that throughout its history has had a predominantly White student body, and often fostered an environment overtly and subtly hostile to African-American students.

Using oral histories, university yearbooks, and university newspapers this study demonstrates how Black fraternities and sororities at UNO promoted and supported the academic success of African-American students by emphasizing community service work, communal bonds, and connections to campus activities. These organizations provided emotional and academic support for African-American students and actively resisted the racial divisiveness present on their university campus.

Keywords: Black Greek Letter Organizations, fraternities, sororities, University of New Orleans, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Inc, Iota Phi Theta Fraternity,

## Introduction

In August of 1990, two students at the University of New Orleans spray painted a racist message on the car of another student. It read: “WANTED, One Skanky Black Ho.”<sup>1</sup> The vandals who committed the act were members of the Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity chapter on campus and the car belonged to one of their fraternity brothers. The act was committed in response to the car owner’s relationship with an African-American woman. This incident not only displayed racism on the UNO campus, but also sexist beliefs among the student body. Soon after, a petition circulated around the campus called for the suspension of the two students responsible and a suspension of their fraternity chapter. The petition was spearheaded by both the Student Government Association and Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., a historically African-American fraternity. The petition gained 150 signatures in the first half hour.<sup>2</sup> Alpha Phi Alpha demanded an apology on behalf of all African-American students from Tau Kappa Epsilon and would continue to hold the fraternity and the University to their claims of the suspension of the chapter and the offending students.<sup>3</sup>

In this single incident, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity demonstrated the social activism Black Greek letter organizations perform on a predominantly White campus, and the support these organizations show towards the larger African-American community, even those outside of their membership. This incident and its repercussions are an illustration of some of the persistent racial dynamics on the campus of UNO. While the university prides itself on its progressive history as being the first public institution of higher learning in the South to open as integrated,

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Colin, “TKE’s Charter Suspended After Racial Incident,” *Driftwood*, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 2 (UNO), August 20, 1990, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Colin, “TKE’s Charter Suspended After Racial Incident,” *Driftwood*, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 2 (UNO), August 20, 1990, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>3</sup> N.a., “Alpha Phi Alpha Refutes Story’s Claim,” *UNO Driftwood*, September 27, 1990, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.



African-American students have had to navigate a campus environment that has been predominantly White and where African-American students have not always felt welcome or safe. At this predominantly White institution, African-American students have had few avenues for self-expression and safe spaces to express concerns and needs, and to grow creatively as students.

It is in this environment that Black Greek letter organizations like Alpha Phi Alpha played important roles in the lives of African-American students. Since 1964, four historically Black fraternities and four historically Black sororities, have existed on the campus of UNO. These organizations provided a space for African-American student participation on campus life and representation for the larger African-American population of UNO. Yet despite their largely important purpose and roles, the history of Black Greek organizations has been overlooked in historical accounts of UNO. Primary and secondary sources have treated Greek fraternities and sororities at UNO as one large group, without cultural distinctions. This erases the ethnic and cultural lines that divide Greek organizations and ignores the distinct roles they played on the campus of UNO. These distinctions are important, because despite racial barriers to Greek membership, obstacles placed by administration, and hostilities from other students, Black Greek letter organizations managed to serve and support the African-American community at UNO. Providing community service, fostering communal bonds between African-American students, and establishing a connection to the larger campus environment, Black Greek letter organizations contributed to the academic success of African-American students at UNO and continue to fulfill those roles today.

These activities not only provided support to African-American students at UNO, but these methods also ensured students' academic success and led to graduation from a campus

where they are the minority. While there are national Greek organizations that engage other cultural communities, such as Latino, Asian, and LGBTQ students, this study focuses solely on historically Black Greek organizations as no other cultural and racial oriented fraternities or sororities have chartered at UNO.<sup>4</sup>

## **Historiography**

The history of historically Black Greek letter organizations at the University of New Orleans falls at an intersection of the history of UNO, Black history, and the history of the city of New Orleans. While no scholarly effort has been made until this writing to study these organizations at UNO, much scholarship exists on the history of Black Greek letter organizations and their role within Black communities in the United States. The scholarship pertaining to historically Black Greek letter organizations is interdisciplinary, with elements of history, sociology, and education. Historian Lawrence C. Ross, Jr. wrote the first comprehensive study of the nine nationally chartered Black Greek letter organizations in his 2000 book, *The Divine Nine: The History of African-American Fraternities and Sororities*<sup>5</sup>. Ross provides a short history of the nine largest Black Greek organizations and transcriptions of interviews with a member from each organization to demonstrate the importance and impact membership had on their lives. Walter Kimbrough's 2003 publication *Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs, and Challenges of Black Fraternities and Sororities* include the history of national, regional, and local Black Greek organizations, offering insight into now defunct, locally organized, and nationally chartered Black Greek letter organizations.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the edited collection by Gregory S. Parks,

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<sup>4</sup> Fred McCall, "Experiences of Historically Black and Traditionally Latino Fraternity and Sorority Members at a Predominately White Institution" (master's thesis, University of Tennessee, 2007) 1-2,5.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence C. Ross Jr., *The Divine Nine: The History of African-American Fraternities and Sororities* (New York: Kensington Publishing: 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Walter M. Kimbrough, *Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs, and Challenges of Black Fraternities and Sororities* (Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003).

Tamara L. Brown, and Clarenda M. Phillips sheds light on Black Greek letter organizations, such as a history of traditions, the emphasis of community service and their focus on activism.<sup>7</sup>

Gregory S. Parks continued this scholarship with his 2008 edited publication, focusing Black Greek letter organizations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and exploring such issues as multi-racial membership, feminist perspectives of Black Greek life and participation with historically White Greek organizations.<sup>8</sup>

While the historiography of Black Greek letter organizations is prominent in this thesis, a study of the earliest Greek organizations in the United States is vital. An understanding of the earliest fraternities and sororities in the United States is needed to understand the environments in which Black Greek organizations formed. The work of Nicholas L. Syrett gives insight into the history of predominantly White Greek fraternities. This insight is essential as Syrett covers the origins of Greek fraternities in the United States, but also discusses historical issues surrounding race and gender in those organizations. It is due to racial discrimination in Greek membership that Black Greek letter organizations were later created as African-American enrollment into colleges and universities increased in the early twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

The University of New Orleans is relatively young, particularly compared to other major universities in the city. Despite this age gap, significant work has produced a historiography of the young university. A 1983 collection of essays from UNO faculty, administrators, and students gives an insight into the working of the university within its first twenty five years.

While the editor Jerah Johnson admits twenty five years is too short of a time frame to publish a

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<sup>7</sup> Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarenda M. Phillips, *African-American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and The Vision* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Gregory S. Parks ed., *Black Greek Letter Organizations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas L. Syrett, *The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

effective history of the universities, the collection of essays is essential to understanding the university's founding era.<sup>10</sup> UNO professor Robert Dupont built upon Johnson's work with the publication of a history of the University of New Orleans at fifty years. *On Higher Ground: The University of New Orleans at 50* provides an in depth history of the university and offers insight into the administration and student body of the university over time.<sup>11</sup> While these two books are essential to this study, neither discusses Black Greek letter organizations or their contributions to the university.

In order to understand the history of UNO and the racial dynamics surrounding Black Greek organizations, a study of the city of New Orleans is crucial to this study. An understanding of the racial and gendered dynamics of mid-twentieth century New Orleans gives insight into the challenges African-American students faced while off campus. The history of the nearby historically Black university, Dillard University, also contributed to this study. The status of Dillard as an HBCU and its proximity to UNO meant that Dillard served as a social hub for African-American students at UNO and exposed those students to Black Greek letter organizations before such organizations established chapters on their own university campus.<sup>12</sup> The work of James D. Anderson is used to detail the history of the education of African-Americans in the Southern United States and a brief history of historically Black universities, such as Dillard.<sup>13</sup>

In the earliest years, UNO functioned as a commuter campus, with its student body residing throughout the Greater New Orleans area. Most African-American students who

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<sup>10</sup> Jerah Johnson, *UNO Prisms: 1958-1983* (New Orleans: University of New Orleans, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Dupont, *On Higher Ground: The University of New Orleans at 50* (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Louise Bernard, *Within These Walls: A Short History of Dillard University* (New Orleans: Office of the President, Dillard University, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

attended UNO were raised in a segregated city. LaKisha Simmons' *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*, published 2015, explores the dynamic of young African-American women mapping out the city of New Orleans as they walked the streets of a segregated city. This gendered approach to segregated spaces is valuable here, as women made up a significant portion of African-American students at UNO. Thirty of the original fifty five African-American students at LSUNO were women.<sup>14</sup> This pattern would continue in subsequent years, as Marie, a student entering the university in 1967 stated, "There was not a lot of Black men there, there wasn't a lot of Black students period...many of them didn't stay long enough to join anything."<sup>15</sup> Simmons' study is vital as the methods of mapping public space she discusses would be useful to the African-American women at UNO as they navigated a hostile campus.<sup>16</sup>

The study of Black Greek organizations requires an interdisciplinary approach. Sociologists have explored Greek fraternities and sororities as social organizations with their own racial dynamics. Stephanie M. McClure's study on voluntary association membership, for instances, includes interviews with members of historically African-American fraternities who attend campuses with a predominantly White student body. These interviews demonstrate how membership in their fraternity contributes to their academic success as minority students.<sup>17</sup> The study of Mikyong Minsun Kim and Clifton F. Conrad contributes to the impact of enrollment in HBCUs for African-American students. Kim and Conrad's study demonstrates the advantages

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<sup>14</sup> "African-American Students Braved Harassment to Integrate LSUNO in 1958," *Times Picayune-Nola.com* (New Orleans), February 17, 2012, accessed February 7, 2019, [https://www.nola.com/175years/index.ssf/2012/02/black\\_students\\_braved\\_harassme.html](https://www.nola.com/175years/index.ssf/2012/02/black_students_braved_harassme.html).

<sup>15</sup> Marie, 1969 initiate of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne, phone interview, conducted Oct. 2018. Marie is a pseudonym used for interviewee per her request for privacy.

<sup>16</sup> LaKisha M Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Stephanie M. McClure, "Voluntary Association Membership: Black Greek Men on a Predominantly White Campus," *The Journal of Higher Education* 77, no. 6 (2006).

African-American students at Dillard University would have over their counterparts at the University of New Orleans.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Founding of UNO**

When the University of New Orleans opened its doors on September 5, 1958 it was named the Louisiana State University in New Orleans (LSUNO), technically a branch of the Louisiana State University located in Baton Rouge. It was also an integrated campus. Yet just months before its opening, LSUNO had a Whites only admissions policy. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* sparked debates over the integration of higher education in Louisiana. While court orders allowed African-American students to attend graduate programs of LSU starting in 1950, LSUNO was designated for Whites only in the months before the campus opened to students.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the White-only admissions policy, LSUNO received applications from African-Americans in New Orleans during the Spring and Summer of 1958. Those students received the following in a letter from LSU,

This will acknowledge receipt of your application for admission to LSU in New Orleans.

The policy of the Board of Supervisors of Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College as administrators of Louisiana State University in New Orleans does not permit your admission.<sup>20</sup>

If the denied African-American applicants inquired about the reasoning of their denied admission, they received a letter, stating they were "... not accepted as Negroes are not admitted to said school [LSUNO] under the laws of the state of Louisiana and the policy of the Board of

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<sup>18</sup> Mikyong Minsun Kim and Clifton F. Conrad, "The Impact of Historically Black Colleges and Universities on the Academic Success of African-American Students," *Research in Higher Education* 47, no. 4 (June 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Robert Dupont, *On Higher Ground: The University of New Orleans at 50* (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2008), 55-56.

<sup>20</sup> A.P. Tureaud Papers Collection, Box 68, Folder 19, Sub-Series 34, Microfilm reel No. 51, Frame 473, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans.

Supervisors of Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College.<sup>21</sup>” At least forty one Black applicants received such letters according to archival records. Legal defense for those denied admission came from civil rights attorneys A.P. Tureaud and Ernest Morial.<sup>22</sup> On July 29, 1958, Tureaud and Morial filed suit in a federal court on behalf of African-American students denied admission to LSUNO. On September 8th of the same year, Judge J. Herbert Christenberry ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, thus forcing LSU by court order to accept those students and other African-American students who applied to LSUNO and who met admission requirements. This court decision was instrumental to the history of UNO and to the history of Black Greek Letter organizations (BGLOs) on that campus. UNO was a Southern institution of higher learning that broke the pattern of segregation in public universities.<sup>23</sup>

While LSUNO may have allowed African-American students to attend classes, the campus environment was not welcoming. Numerous incidents occurred on campus with the intent of intimidating African-American students. Someone burned a cross beneath a campus sign, another painted racist graffiti on a campus building, White students marched in picket lines, someone hurled a bottle into a crowd, and another struck an African-American student with a rock.<sup>24</sup> Josephine Eli Clements, one of the 55 African-American students to first attend LSUNO, had kerosene poured around her home, causing the family to sleep with the lights on for

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<sup>21</sup> A.P. Tureaud Papers Collection, Box 68, Folder 19, Sub-Series 34, Microfilm reel No. 51, Frame 477, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans.

<sup>22</sup> A.P. Tureaud Papers Collection, Box 68, Folder 19, Sub-Series 34, Microfilm reel No. 51, Frame 473-540, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Dupont, *On Higher Ground: The University of New Orleans at 50* (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2008), 57.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Dupont, *On Higher Ground: The University of New Orleans at 50* (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2008), 59.

“LSU Board ‘Taunts’ 53 Negro Students,” *Louisiana Weekly*, September 20, 1958, pg. 1, 7, Microfilm, Roll 9, Will W. Alexander Library, Dillard University, New Orleans.

subsequent nights.<sup>25</sup> Opposition to African-American students at LSUNO did not only come from the student body. The LSU Board of Supervisors released a statement expressing their dissatisfaction with the admittance African-American students to LSUNO. The Board stated African-American students were “unwanted,” their admission was “not willingly,” granted: “This Board wishes to point out that any Negro student whose enrollment is forced upon this university, enters as an unwanted matriculant.<sup>26</sup>” The White Citizens Council of Greater New Orleans petitioned the LSU Board of Supervisors to close the school rather than operate as an integrated university. Making its request, the Citizens Council declared, “... [the Council] was of the opinion that the question of education is one of the powers reserved to the states by the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution.”<sup>27</sup>

Racially motivated incidents gained such notoriety that the dean of the new university, Homer L. Hitt, issued a public statement in the *Times Picayune* on Thursday September 18, 1958. Citing a racially motivated bottle-throwing incident that occurred in a student lounge during lunch hour, Hitt released the following statement to the student body,

The unfortunate incidents of the last two days make it necessary for me to remind you that LSUNO expects and will demand orderly behavior of its students. We do not intend to permit our academic program to be disrupted by boisterousness and violence. Any student found to be guilty of disorderly conduct will be severely disciplined. I would remind you that such acts may be punished by suspension or expulsion, serious punishments which reflect permanently on the student’s record. Specifically, we expect a halt to the congregating and milling about, shouting and

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<sup>25</sup> Chelsea Brasted, “61 Years Later, For the African-Americans who integrated LSUNO, Memories Still Sting,” *Times Picayune*, New Orleans, January 19, 2019, accessed January 19, 2019, <https://www.nola.com/opinions/2019/01/61-years-later-for-the-african-americans-who-integrated-lsuno-memories-still-sting.html>.

<sup>26</sup> “LSU Board ‘Taunts’ 53 Negro Students,” *Louisiana Weekly*, September 20, 1958, pg. 1, 7, Microfilm, Roll 9, Will W. Alexander Library, Dillard University, New Orleans.

<sup>27</sup> “LSU Board ‘Taunts’ 53 Negro Students,” *Louisiana Weekly*, September 20, 1958, pg. 1, 7, Microfilm, Roll 9, Will W. Alexander Library, Dillard University, New Orleans.



name calling and all acts of physical violence... The activities of the last two days have reflected discredit on the university and its student body.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the decline of racially motivated incidents after the threats of expulsion, there were plenty spaces on campus where African-American students felt unwelcome. While restrooms were integrated, one early African-American student, Raphael Cassimere, stated there were often racial slurs scribbled on doors and walls. Josephine Eli Clements had spitballs launched at her neck while in class and teachers handed out insults and undeserved grades. In Clements words, "They did everything under the sun to force us out of that place."<sup>29</sup> Of the 55 African-American students who attended LSUNO in that first semester, only one, Louise Williams Arnolie, would graduate from the university.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, while bathrooms and classrooms were integrated, the cafeteria at LSUNO prior to Spring 1961 was not. African-American students were only allowed to order food from a standing only snack bar since Morrison's Cafeteria, the company that ran the university's cafeteria, refused to serve them in the dining room. After student protest of the snack bar and legal intervention from A.P. Tureaud, Morrison's Cafeteria terminated their lease in January of 1961 rather than operate an integrated cafeteria. The university at that time closed the cafeteria and continued to feed students through the various snack bars located on campus, open to all university students.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "LSUNO Disorder to Net Suspension or Expulsion: All Students to Get Warning Statement Today," *Times Picayune*, September 18, 1958, pg. 1, *Times Picayune* Microfilm, Reel 1093, Jefferson Parish East Bank Regional Library, Metairie, Louisiana.

<sup>29</sup> Chelsea Brasted, "61 Years Later, For the African-Americans who Integrated LSUNO, Memories Still Sting," *Times Picayune*, New Orleans, January 19, 2019, accessed January 19, 2019, <https://www.nola.com/opinions/2019/01/61-years-later-for-the-african-americans-who-integrated-lsuno-memories-still-sting.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Chelsea Brasted, "61 Years Later, For the African-Americans who Integrated LSUNO, Memories Still Sting," *Times Picayune*, New Orleans, January 19, 2019, accessed January 19, 2019, <https://www.nola.com/opinions/2019/01/61-years-later-for-the-african-americans-who-integrated-lsuno-memories-still-sting.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Raphael Cassimere, "Raphael Cassimere," in *UNO Prisms: 1958-1983*, ed. Jerah Johnson (New Orleans, 1983), 113. Citation continued on next page.

The plight of African-American students facing discrimination at LSUNO, would repeat itself with the integration of New Orleans public schools. Children integrating grade schools, such as Ruby Bridges at William Franz Elementary and Leona Tate, Tessie Prevost, and Gail Etienne at McDonogh No. 19, faced backlash similarly to that faced by African-American LSUNO students. Picket line protests of angry White adults reached such large levels in the city that local police and U.S. Marshalls were present for crowd control and protection of the young girls, forces that were not present for the African-American students of LSUNO. Gail Etienne knew the danger she was in, “I was scared. Crowds of people saying all kinds of things. If they could get to me, I thought they was going to kill me.”<sup>32</sup> As the days went on, parents pulled their children out of schools, until the young African-American girls were the only students left. The young girls desegregating schools were not allowed to play on playgrounds and cardboard was placed over classroom windows. Hate mail and death threats addressed to parents of the four girls became so numerous, mail had to be diverted to NAACP offices to be sifted through. A funeral hearse would drive on the street where Tessie Prevost lived every day for several months, driving her mother to such stresses that she developed eating disorders.<sup>33</sup> The discrimination and protest faced by African-American students at LSUNO foreshadowed the experiences of their young counterparts, and the affects were long lasting.

The discrimination and violence faced by African-American students at LSUNO would be a catalyst for the formation of Black Greek letter organizations on campus. Black Greek letter

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Letter to A.P Tureaud from the Law Offices of Taylor, Porter, Brooks, Fuller, and Phillips reveal the fate of Morrison’s Cafeteria at LSUNO. This letter written in response to an inquiry of A.P. Tureaud to Dean Homer Hitt after Tureaud received complaints that Morrison’s would not serve African-American students. A.P. Tureaud Papers Collection, Box 68, Folder 19, Sub-Series 34, Microfilm reel No. 51, Frame 473, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans

<sup>32</sup> Rachel Devlin, *A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America’s Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 211.

<sup>33</sup> Rachel Devlin, *A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America’s Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 210-212.

organizations would provide a safe space for African-American students, a medium of support to uplift each other in this hostile environment, and a method of resistance against systematic racism. While students and administration may have not wanted African-American students on campus, the support offered by members of Black Greek letter organizations would encourage academic success and the continuation of an education despite the hostile environment. Yet while LSUNO African-American students faced these challenges and created safe spaces to resist them, many African-American collegiates in New Orleans attended campuses where they were welcomed with open arms, at universities established specifically to educate African-Americans.

### **Dillard University: A Historically Black Campus**

While LSUNO was not welcoming of African-American students, there was a nearby institution that provided a haven for African-Americans seeking higher education. Dillard University, also located in the Gentilly neighborhood of New Orleans, is a historically Black university, founded in 1935 with the merger of Straight College and New Orleans University.<sup>34</sup> Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), such as Dillard University, have had a significant impact on the higher education of African-Americans in the United States.

HBCUs, such as Dillard University and nearby Xavier University of Louisiana, have their origins in the Reconstruction era. After the emancipation of African-Americans in the United States, abolitionist and philanthropist groups moved to assist in the education of formerly enslaved peoples. The earliest HBCUs were private, liberal arts colleges funded by Northern White philanthropists or religious organizations, Black religious organizations, or corporation funded foundations. Starting in the late 1890s, land grant and state universities began to emerge

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<sup>34</sup> Louise Bernard, *Within These Walls: A Short History of Dillard University*, (New Orleans: Office of the President, Dillard University, 2000), 3-4.

in Southern states with the purpose of educating African-American students.<sup>35</sup> HBCUs would go on to become cornerstones in the Black community, producing a disproportionate number of Black students who go on to professional degree programs and being key in producing Black scholars and leaders. W.E.B. DuBois referred to HBCUs as “social settlements” in his famed, *The Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>36</sup> During the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, HBCUs were agents for social change, and produced prominent leaders such as Thurgood Marshall, Nikki Giovanni, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On the campus of an HBCU, African-American collegiate students found support in their academic careers and a critical understanding of the racial dynamics of the United States. The students at Dillard University would have received these benefits, but the classrooms of Dillard were not available for all African-American students in New Orleans.<sup>37</sup>

Dillard educated many African-American students, but as a private institution, its classrooms became inaccessible to many due to high tuition cost. As a public institution of higher learning opening in New Orleans, LSUNO offered African-American students from lower-income families access to higher education. Some students even chose LSUNO and cheaper tuition if an older sibling was attending Dillard University.<sup>38</sup> Yet although Dillard’s tuition was significantly higher, it offered many benefits to African-American students that a state school like UNO could not. Today, African-American students who attend historically Black colleges and universities, such as Dillard University, have higher levels of support and aid

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<sup>35</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 238-239.

<sup>36</sup> W.E.B. Dubois, “Of the Training of Black Men,” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1994), 62. Originally published in 1903.

<sup>37</sup> Walter R. Allen, Joseph O. Jewell, Kimberly A. Griffin, and De’Sha S. Wolf, “Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Honoring the Past, Engaging the Present, Touching the Future,” *Journal of Negro Education* 76, no. 3 (2007): 263-280, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uno.edu/stable/40034570>.

<sup>38</sup> Raphael Cassimere, “Raphael Cassimere,” in *UNO Prisms: 1958-1983*, ed. Jerah Johnson (New Orleans, 1983), 111.

Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

from college faculty and administration. This support leads to higher test scores, improved writing skills and training in the sciences, and greater likelihood that students will pursue graduate or professional education than their peers who attend predominantly White institutions.<sup>39</sup> In the 1960s, HBCUs also played a nurturing role for their student body than their predominantly White counterparts. According to a UNO student named Marie, this difference in approach to the student body directly affected the academic performance of African-American students at LSUNO.

Black universities were very nurturing, very motherly, and the school kept us on track, but White schools gave us a lot more liberties, a lot more freedoms, things many kids just coming from home were not used to. So they got distracted, and not a lot of them made it through.<sup>40</sup>

HBCUs provided a nurturing and comfortable learning environment for their students, while LSUNO provided the opposite for African-American students. Performing as a social haven, many African-American students at LSUNO would go to nearby Dillard for social interaction and activities among peers of their own race. For many Black students at LSUNO, the interactions at Dillard were their exposure to Black Greek fraternities and sororities.<sup>41</sup> While LSUNO did have fraternities and sororities, the earliest being founded as soon as the university opened in 1958, they were predominantly and historically White in membership. Following

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<sup>39</sup> Mikyong Minsun Kim and Clifton F. Conrad, "The Impact of Historically Black Colleges and Universities on the Academic Success of African-American Students," *Research in Higher Education* 47, no. 4 (June 2006): 402, doi:10.1007/s11162-005-9001-4.

<sup>40</sup> Marie, 1969 initiate of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne, phone interview, conducted Oct. 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

Marie, 1969 initiate of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne, phone interview, conducted Oct. 2018.

national trends, membership into predominantly White Greek organizations was denied for African-Americans.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Origins of Social Greek Letter Fraternities and Sororities**

Greek letter fraternities and sororities first originated on college campuses by undergraduate students in the late eighteenth century. The first Greek letter society that formed in the United States was Phi Beta Kappa. Phi Beta Kappa was founded at the College of William & Mary on December 5, 1776. Since then, over 200 social fraternal organizations formed in the United States, with some of them continuing to exist until this day.<sup>43</sup> Phi Beta Kappa, and other similar Greek letter societies founded in the late eighteenth century later developed into professional fraternities or honor societies. Yet, these organizations laid the groundwork for the social Greek organizations that would come in the following decades.<sup>44</sup>

The early nineteenth century saw the rise of the modern social Greek letter organizations. These organizations differed from previous Greek letter societies as they functioned as a social organization and were called fraternities. Fraternities offered a way to institutionalize friendships and form close bonds that would last beyond collegiate years, later forming business and economic ties in the professional world, contributing to the success of individual members. These organizations were highly exclusive, with membership being chosen by current members of an organization, outside of faculty or administrative influence. The first social Greek letter fraternity that would be recognized today is the Kappa Alpha Society, founded in 1825 at Union

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<sup>42</sup> The earliest yearbooks of LSUNO, beginning in 1962, dedicate pages to the Greek fraternities and sororities on campus and showcase their members. It is not known if African-Americans were systematically denied membership, or if they did not pursue membership, but no members featured in yearbooks appear to be African-American.

<sup>43</sup> Craig L. Torbenson, "The Origin and Evolution of College Fraternities and Sororities," in *African-American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and The Vision*, ed. Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarenda M. Phillips (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 37.

<sup>44</sup> Nicholas L. Syrett, *The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 13, 26.

College. Kappa Alpha started a new trend for student life at college campuses, and by the year 1861 and the outbreak of the Civil War, there were a total of 22 fraternities with 299 chapters across the United States. Along with the social bonds among members on a particular campus, these social Greek organizations provided extended familial support to other campuses through chartered chapters.<sup>45</sup>

While fraternal organizations provided camaraderie, close personal bonds and networking opportunities, those benefits were not afforded to all. Fraternities in the nineteenth century were exclusive, and membership was mainly comprised of White Protestant young men that came from families of a higher socio-economic status. While these fraternal bonds embraced likeminded men, they consistently excluded individuals they considered outsiders. This exclusion would lead many minority groups to form their own fraternal organizations. As women's enrollment in universities increased, so did gendered exclusion in social organizations. Women at various universities began to establish fraternities for women, later called sororities. The first of such organizations was Alpha Delta Pi, founded at Wesleyan University in 1851. Much like fraternities before them, these sororities provided a support system for female members on male dominated college campuses and provided a familial structure away from home.<sup>46</sup>

Yet while White male and female students enjoyed the benefits of membership in a social Greek organization, racial barriers denied these same benefits to African American students. As African-American enrollment increased in universities in the early twentieth century,

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<sup>45</sup> Nicholas L. Syrett, *The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 13, 26, 28, 29. tp

<sup>46</sup> Nicholas L. Syrett, *The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 123, 173.

"History," Alpha Delta Pi Sorority, accessed April 5, 2019, <https://www.alphadeltapi.org/page/history/>.

exclusionary attitudes from the student body rose, and existing Greek organizations began to codify membership requirements based on race into their constitutions. These bylaws would exclude African-American students from joining existing fraternities and sororities, denying them the benefits of membership. To resist these exclusionary practices, African-American students would go on to create their own fraternities and sororities.<sup>47</sup>

The exclusionary practices of the earliest Greek organizations would continue until the modern day. While codified exclusionary clauses in constitutions were mostly changed in the 1970s, *de facto* exclusions would continue.<sup>48</sup> This pattern of exclusivity among predominantly White Greek organizations also occurred at UNO. In order to resist these exclusionary practices, African-American students at UNO would charter their own chapters of historically Black Greek letter organizations.

### **The Origins of Black Greek Letter Fraternities and Sororities**

The ideals of fraternal bonds would have been no strangers to African-American students on college campuses in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Freemasons, Elks, and numerous other social societies and mutual aid societies existed in African-American communities across the United States. These organizations provided financial support for members in the forms of membership insurance and became the foundations of the Black

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<sup>47</sup> Michael H. Washington and Cheryl L. Nuñez, "Education, Racial Uplift, and the Rise of the Greek-Letter Tradition: The African-American Quest for Status in the Early Twentieth Century," in *African-American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and The Vision*, ed. Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarendia M. Phillips (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 138.

<sup>48</sup> Numerous modern day incidents reveal the racial discrimination and exclusionary ideals that are still present among predominantly White Greek organizations. Manny Fernandez and Richard Perez-Pena, "As Two Oklahoma Students are Expelled for Racist Chant, Sigma Alpha Epsilon Vows Wider Inquiry," *New York Times*, March 10, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/11/us/university-of-oklahoma-sigma-alpha-epsilon-racist-fraternity-video.html> Dylan Baddour, "Allegations of Racism at SMU go Viral," *Houston Chronicle*, November 2, 2015, <https://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/texas/article/southern-Methodist-university-BlackatSMU-racist-6605280.php>



communities of the United States as they advocated for social and political betterment of African-Americans. The bonds and support these organizations provided to the community became part of the foundation for Black Greek letter organizations.<sup>49</sup> Yet, while Black Greek letter organizations are most commonly associated with collegiate students, the very first such organization was not founded on a college campus, but rather in a metropolitan area.<sup>50</sup>

The first Black Greek letter organization was founded in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1904. Henry M. Minton saw the economic and social benefits that fraternities offered to his professional peers. Even after graduation from a university, many professional men continued to benefit from their membership. Membership provided connections throughout professional fields and a close personal bond that could benefit recent graduates. After observing these benefits and trying to gain membership, Minton was continually denied due his race. As a result, Minton set out to form his own fraternity. In 1904, Minton and five other professional men founded Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity. While Sigma Pi Phi was the first of its kind, the fraternity was founded to attract a membership of graduate and professional men. Sigma Pi Phi admitted very few undergraduates in its earliest years, and did not establish chapters on college campuses, but rather in major cities across the United States. Although majority of African-American collegiate did not have the opportunity of membership in Sigma Pi Phi, the fraternity did begin the Black Greek movement in the United States.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Anne S Butler, "Black Fraternal and Benevolent Societies in Nineteenth Century America," in *African-American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and the Vision*, ed. Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarenda M. Phillips (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 67-69.

Michael H. Washington and Cheryl L. Nuñez, "Education, Racial Uplift, and the Rise of the Greek-Letter Tradition," in *African-American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and The Vision*, ed. Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarenda M. Phillips (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 138.

<sup>50</sup> Walter M. Kimbrough, *Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs, and Challenges of Black Fraternities and Sororities* (Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 24.

<sup>51</sup> Walter M. Kimbrough, *Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs, and Challenges of Black Fraternities and Sororities* (Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 24-25.

Two years after the founding of Sigma Pi Phi, the movement of creating collegiate Black Greek letter organizations would begin.<sup>52</sup> The oldest, continuous collegiate Black Greek letter organization is Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. founded in 1906 at Cornell University. Following in quick succession was the first Black Greek letter sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. founded in 1908 at Howard University. Two organizations were later founded in 1911; Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. founded at Indiana State University, and Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. founded at Howard University. Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. arose in 1913, followed Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. in 1914, both at Howard University. After a short break, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. sprung into existence in 1920 at Howard University. Finally, in 1922, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. was founded at Butler University, the only historically Black sorority to be founded at a predominantly White institution. With five of the most well-known Black Greek letter organizations being founded on that campus, Howard University became known as the “Cradle of Black Greek Civilization.”<sup>53</sup> In 1930, as these organizations expanded and chartered chapters across the United States, they joined together to form the National Pan-Hellenic Council. This council would be an umbrella council to the eight historically Black Greek letter organizations and serve a purpose of working together for the greater good of the African-American community. The National Pan-Hellenic Council originally

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<sup>52</sup> Before 1906, two Black fraternities existed: Alpha Kappa Nu founded in 1903 at Indiana University and Gamma Phi, founded in 1905 at Wilberforce University. There is no record of the survival of Alpha Kappa Nu after 1903. While Gamma Phi survived past its founding, and even established chapters at other universities, it ceased to exist by the year 1947.

Michael H. Washington and Cheryl L. Nuñez, “Education, Racial Uplift, and the Rise of the Greek-Letter Tradition,” in *African-American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and The Vision*, ed. Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarendia M. Phillips (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 137.

Walter M. Kimbrough, *Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs, and Challenges of Black Fraternities and Sororities* (Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 29-30.

<sup>53</sup> Walter M. Kimbrough, *Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs, and Challenges of Black Fraternities and Sororities* (Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 93.

Each organization of the National Pan-Hellenic Council is an incorporated body, and Inc. is included as their official name. For simplicity, the Inc. ending will be omitted when an organization is referenced.

formed with five organizations, with two joining in 1931, and the eighth joining in 1937. A ninth organization would be added to this council in 1997. Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. founded at Morgan State University in 1963, would be added to the ranks of the National Pan-Hellenic Council. These nine Black Greek letter organizations are commonly referred to as the NPHC or informally as the “Divine Nine.”<sup>54</sup>

<b>Organization Name</b>	<b>Founding Place</b>	<b>Founding Year</b>
Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.	Cornell University	1906
Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.	Howard University	1908
Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.	Indiana University Bloomington	1911
Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.	Howard University	1911
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.	Howard University	1913
Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.	Howard University	1914
Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.	Howard University	1920
Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.	Butler University	1922
Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc.	Morgan State University	1963

*Table 1: Chart of Founding Location and Year of the nine National Pan-Hellenic Council organizations. Chart created by author with information from Lawrence Ross, *The Divine Nine: The History of African American Fraternities and Sororities*.*

Founded with the ideals of racial uplift, each Black Greek letter organization has a mission of service and social action from their founding. The founders of Black fraternities and sororities belonged to the small number of African-Americans in the early twentieth century that attended institutions of higher learning. These students participated in the ideology of racial uplift, the notion that the Black intellectual class can attain the education and resources usually only afforded to the White population, then use those resources to educate and train the entire

<sup>54</sup> André McKenzie, “In the Beginning: The Early History of the Divine Nine,” in *African-American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and The Vision*, ed. Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarendia M. Phillips (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005) 181-204.

Black community to bring racial equality forward. Entrepreneurs, teachers, and religious leaders became the self-appointed leaders of the Black community, as their education allowed them to be independent from the White elite and provided resources for the betterment of the Black community. As part of the educated minority, the founders of Black Greek organizations participated in this racial uplift, as they gained the education and resources from institutions of higher learning and established organizations that would provide service to the larger Black community.<sup>55</sup>

Service and activism are a central principle to Black Greek organizations, in addition to the benefits of social cohesion. Communal service among African-American communities has roots as early as the colonial period, in the form of mutual aid and benevolent societies. Black fraternities and sororities continue this service through various outlets such as educational scholarship, support of minority owned business, health awareness, and political activism.<sup>56</sup>

### **Black Greek Letter Organizations at UNO**

Eventually, eight of the nine organizations that comprise the National Pan-Hellenic Council would charter chapters at UNO. Yet, Black Greek letter organizations at UNO arose on a campus with an established Greek life system for White students. While created as a commuter campus, student organizations quickly formed at LSUNO. Many of these earliest organizations were fraternities and sororities, some of which started as local organizations, then later received legal charters from national organizations. The first Greek letter organization at LSUNO was

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<sup>55</sup> Michael H. Washington and Cheryl L. Nunez, "Racial Uplift and the Rise of the Greek-Letter Tradition: The African-American Quest for Status in the Early Twentieth Century," in *African-American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and the Vision*, ed. Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarenda M. Phillips (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005) 141-145.

Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>56</sup> Marybeth Gasman, Patricia Louison, and Mark Barnes, "Giving and Getting: Philanthropic Activity among Black Greek Letter Organizations," in *Black Greek Letter Organizations in the Twenty First Century: Our Fight Has Just Begun*, ed. Gregory S. Parks (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008) 187-205.

Sigma Alpha Phi Fraternity, founded in October 1958. A quick succession of other locally formed Greek letter organizations followed.<sup>57</sup> Beginning in the early 1960s, the local fraternities and sororities began to receive charters from nationally incorporated Greek letter organizations. Becoming chapters of a national body, these organizations now had access to wider resources and the ability to establish fraternal bonds with other chapters of that organization.<sup>58</sup> While some of these organizations faded out from the LSUNO campus, the majority remain active today.

Judging from the earliest yearbooks at LSUNO, between 1962 and 1964, all members of Greek life, both male and female, were White or White passing. Since the only membership records are photographs from yearbooks, it is possible that some individuals were of African-American descent but are phenotypically light skinned. The only exception to this rule is the membership of Davis Lee, an Asian or Asian American man, who held membership in Delta Gamma Chi Fraternity in 1962.<sup>59</sup> While there were African-American students on campus during this time period, their exclusion from membership rosters can suggest a discriminatory practice of denying membership to African-Americans, a common pattern across all American universities at that time.<sup>60</sup> Denying membership for the Greek letter organizations to African-Americans also denies them the benefits of holding membership. Although LSUNO operated as an integrated campus, many social aspects were still segregated. Administration and faculty

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<sup>57</sup> Following Sigma Alpha Phi in 1958, the following organizations were founded at LSUNO. Alpha Gamma Mu Sorority (1958), Delta Chi Omega Fraternity (1959), Delta Gamma Chi Fraternity (1959), Delta Epsilon Beta Sorority (1959), Delta Sigma Xi Fraternity (1960), Kappa Chi Sorority (1961), Upsilon Sigma Sorority, and Beta Sigma Chi Sorority.

*LSUNO Trident*, Vol. 1, 1962, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, New Orleans, 130-140.

<sup>58</sup> The following national Greek letter organizations arose at LSUNO: Lambda Chi Alpha Fraternity (1960), Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity (1961), Theta Xi Fraternity (1961), Phi Kappa Theta Fraternity (1961), Zeta Tau Alpha Sorority (1961), Alpha Xi Delta Sorority (1962), Sigma Kappa Sorority (1962), Delta Zeta Sorority (1963), Phi Chi Theta Sorority (1963), and Alpha Epsilon Phi Sorority (1964).

<sup>59</sup> *LSUNO Trident*, 1962-1964, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>60</sup> Nicholas L. Syrett, *The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) 123-127.

viewed academic clubs, such as science and history clubs, as extensions of the classroom, and therefore were integrated. Fraternities and sororities, considered social societies, were personal associations, and some faculty argued the university should not interject in the personal affairs of such organizations.<sup>61</sup>

Though, there was this exclusion, in 1964 African-American students had the opportunity to pursue membership in White Greek letter organizations. Yet, unlike LSUNO, membership would not come through integration, but through the creation of an organization of their own.

### **Beginning of Black Sisterhood**

The 1965 *LSUNO Trident* included a new sorority to its roster. A local sorority named Alpha Beta Kappa was granted permission in May 1964 to petition the national sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority for a colony status, with the hope to establish a chapter of that sorority at LSUNO.

## **Sigma Gamma Rho**

Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority was founded in November, 1922, in Indianapolis, Indiana. It became an incorporated National Collegiate sorority in December of 1929. The purpose of Sigma Gamma Rho is expressed in this motto, "Greater Service, Greater Progress." The pin is an open book, representing knowledge; its foundation is a torch, whose beacon signifies that "knowledge brings light." The sorority has grown from a nucleus of seven young women to 135 chapters in 30 states and the District of Columbia.

In May, 1964, Alpha Beta Kappa local

sorority was granted permission to petition Sigma Gamma Rho for colony status. Since that time, the sorority has participated in all of the Panhellenic activities. Sigmas enthusiastically participated in the Greek sponsored United Fund campaign, and in inter-sorority sports. Representatives on the Driftwood and the Morale Commission have been very active.

During Thanksgiving and Christmas, Sigma Gamma Rho took great pleasure in cheering the sick and the aged and helping orphans and needy families.

*Illustration 2: First mention of Sigma Gamma Rho at LSUNO. 1964 LSUNO Trident, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.*

<sup>61</sup> Joseph G Tregle, Jr, in *UNO Prisms 1958-1983*, ed. Jerah Johnson (New Orleans: University of New Orleans, 1983), 12-14.

Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority. was different from the other established sororities at LSUNO at that time.<sup>62</sup> Sigma Gamma Rho was a historically African-American sorority, founded by seven African-American educators on November 12, 1922 at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana.<sup>63</sup> In 1965, Sigma Gamma Rho at LSUNO had twenty nine members, all African-American women. Sigma Gamma Rho participated in all Greek activities, including the United Fund campaign and inter-sorority sports. The sorority also aided the sick, elderly, orphans, and needy families during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. These community service activities fulfilled the service-based mission that characterizes Black Greek organizations and connected the African-American students at LSUNO to the wider African-American community of the city of New Orleans. The sorority had representatives in other campus organizations such as the *Driftwood* newspaper and the Morale Commission. As a sorority at LSUNO, Sigma Gamma Rho fell under the governance of the Panhellenic Council. Due to this, Sigma Gamma Rho would have interactions with the other, all-White sororities, but those interactions would be limited to official proceedings and recruitment events.<sup>64</sup>

### **Growing Up in New Orleans**

Due to LSUNO being a commuter's campus at that time, it is highly likely the earliest members of Sigma Gamma Rho at LSUNO were from the New Orleans area. Being African-American women, they faced specific dangers and challenges growing up in a large, but segregated city. As young girls, these women would have created mental maps of New Orleans to navigate the city as African-American and female in New Orleans. According to LaKeisha

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<sup>62</sup> *LSUNO Trident*, Vol. 4, 1965, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, 72, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>63</sup> Bernadette Pruit, Caryn E. Neumann, and Katrina Hamilton, "Seven Schoolteachers Challenge the Klan: The Founders of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority," *Black Greek-Letter Organizations in the Twenty First Century: Our Fight Has Just Begun*, ed. Gregory S. Parks (Lexington, Ky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 125.

<sup>64</sup> *LSUNO Trident*, Vol. 4, 1965, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, 72, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

Simmons, mental maps are, "...multiple, conceptual scales of the city and its buildings, streets, ecology, play areas, and people imperfectly meshed together... During Jim Crow, mental maps provided imaginative order to black girls' worlds and helped them form a growing awareness of racialized space.<sup>65</sup>" While out in the streets of New Orleans, African-American girls faced varying dangers, from verbal insults and refusal of service in retail shops, to physical assault and sexual violence. While most of these threats would have come from White residents of New Orleans, African-American girls also faced the internal conflicts among the African-American community. According to Simmons, the Black community of New Orleans remained culturally split, even in the twentieth century, between the "American Blacks," those descended from Anglo African-Americans that moved into New Orleans and "Black Creoles," those descended from some of the earliest residents of New Orleans and often a mixture of African, French, and Spanish roots.<sup>66</sup> Although most American Blacks lived in the Uptown area of New Orleans, and Black Creoles resided Downtown, some families crossed these cultural divisions, which could bring on harassment to young women, viewed as outsiders of the community.<sup>67</sup>

Creating mental maps of New Orleans and making notes of areas where insults and attacks were likely to occur helped African-American girls navigate the city. This skill would have been carried onto the campus of LSUNO, and employed by the women who established Sigma Gamma Rho. Although LSUNO was an integrated space, it was primarily White, and African-American women were still in the minority. According to Marie, a 1969 initiate of Sigma Gamma Rho at LSUNO, African-American students were a minority on campus, stating,

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<sup>65</sup> LaKisha M. Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 25.

<sup>66</sup> LaKisha M Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 31.

<sup>67</sup> LaKisha M. Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 27, 31-33, 57,62, 81, 85.



“You could fit all of us in one room.<sup>68</sup>” As evident of the protest in its earliest days and exclusion of African-Americans from Greek fraternal organizations, racist attitudes against African-Americans were present on campus when Sigma Gamma Rho first appeared.

Gendered hostilities, along with racial ones, would have also plagued the organizers of Sigma Gamma Rho. In the 1960s, women at United States colleges and universities were barred from many campus resources and were limited to a select few disciplines, such as education and the humanities. The academic work of a woman was considered second to her obligations as a wife and mother, and only eleven percent of doctorate degrees were awarded to women in 1963.<sup>69</sup> While women were admitted to LSUNO, they still faced restrictions. Marie stated “...when I first went to LSUNO, I could not even wear pants.<sup>70</sup>”

Due to these racialized and gendered hostilities, the organizers of Sigma Gamma Rho would have noted physical spaces on campus where they faced these obstacles, performing mental mapping as defined by Simmons. Just as the girls Simmons discuss, the ladies of Sigma Gamma Rho would create specific notations on the incidents and harassments they faced on campus in order to safely navigate those physical spaces. Marie states how she made mental notes being the only Black student in her classes, and social functions on campus that Black students would not be welcomed.<sup>71</sup> Yet as we have seen, aggressions were still unavoidable, such as slurs painted on bathrooms or cars, as was the case in the incident described in the introduction to this essay.

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<sup>68</sup> Marie, 1969 initiate of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne, phone interview, conducted Oct. 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Carl Degler, “Revolution Without Ideology: The Changing Place of Women in America,” in *The Women in America*, ed. Robert Jay Lifton (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) 193-210.

<sup>70</sup> Marie, 1969 initiate of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne, phone interview, conducted Oct. 2018.

<sup>71</sup> Marie, 1969 initiate of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne, phone interview, conducted Oct. 2018.

## Continuing Work

Sigma Gamma Rho continued to appear in the LSUNO yearbooks until 1973. In May 1966 Sigma Gamma Rho received an official charter as the Gamma Pi chapter. Receiving a charter had been a goal since Sigma Gamma Rho first organized as a colony at LSUNO in 1964. At the time the chapter consisted of 17 members, led by seven officers, and had representatives in numerous other campus organizations such as Student Government Association, Student National Education Association, Spanish Club, French Club, and Accounting Club. Membership in other campus organizations suggests the connection to campus life that Black Greek organizations foster. Sigma Gamma Rho was also shown to perform service by giving books to pre-school children and helping needy families, continuing the community service activities that distinguish Black Greek organizations.<sup>72</sup>



Laura Hambrick, president, receives the charter for Sigma Gamma Rho.

*Illustration 3: Laura Hambrick, President of Sigma Gamma Rho, Gamma Pi Chapter receives charter certificate in ceremony. 1966 LSUNO Trident, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.*

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<sup>72</sup> *LSUNO Trident*, Vol. 6, 1967, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, 86-87, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

Sigma Gamma Rho not only provided social networks and organizational opportunities for its members, it also provided a strong support system, a support system that many African-American students needed at LSUNO. According to Marie that support system saved her academic career. Many African-American students did not make it past their first semester or year, having the major adjustment of attending a university, and in addition a university that is predominantly White.

I first got to UNO in 1967. It was very, very hard, because they really didn't want Black students out there... Many of the Black students that first got there, didn't last long, because UNO made it hard for us. There was so much extra stuff to do, so many freedoms that students got into that distracted from studies... So they got distracted, and not a lot of them made it through. UNO had even made the registration hard for us, there was a lot of in and outs just to get in.<sup>73</sup>

For Marie, Sigma Gamma Rho kept her on track with her academics, since their major focus was scholarship. Each member of the sorority had to maintain study hours at the library in order to remain active in the organization, "Every member of Sigma Gamma Rho that joined through the Gamma Pi chapter at LSUNO either graduated from there, or transferred and graduated from another university, but everyone graduated."<sup>74</sup> Marie recounts one incident in particular when her sorority sisters attributed to her academic success.

I was taking 12 hours of French. Everybody was talking in French, my lectures were in French, I had to write in French, I mean I didn't have an English, nothing I was taking was in English. Everything was in French. I was so discouraged, I just felt so overwhelmed, like I just can't do this, I, I, I'm not going make it through this. You know, I just, I was in tears. And I was on my way to drop out of school. I was just giving up, because, the courses were hard, I think I had one graduate French course, I wasn't a graduate student, but I was taking one graduate French course. It was just French, ok, everything was in French. And I was on my way to drop out of school. I was in tears, because I had just turned in a paper, and the professor was chopping it up and I was, I was devastated, so I was, I'm crying walking across to the UC. Because at first, we

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<sup>73</sup> Marie, 1969 initiate of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne, phone interview, conducted Oct. 2018.

<sup>74</sup> Marie, 1969 initiate of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne, phone interview, conducted Oct. 2018.

didn't have all the buildings that they have now. But they did have the UC. And I remember, a couple of my Sorors (sorority sisters) saw me, and they pulled me on the side. We looked out after each other, they looked out after you, we looked out after each other, they pulled me on the side you know, what's the matter, why you crying. They talk, they literally kept me from dropping out of school. Because I was determined I would quit. They would not let me quit. They took me on the side, we talked. You know I forgot exactly what they said, I don't know, but they calmed me down, you know, we, they were there for me. They literally kept me from dropping out of school. Because I was ready to just give up. That's the kind of bond that we had.<sup>75</sup>

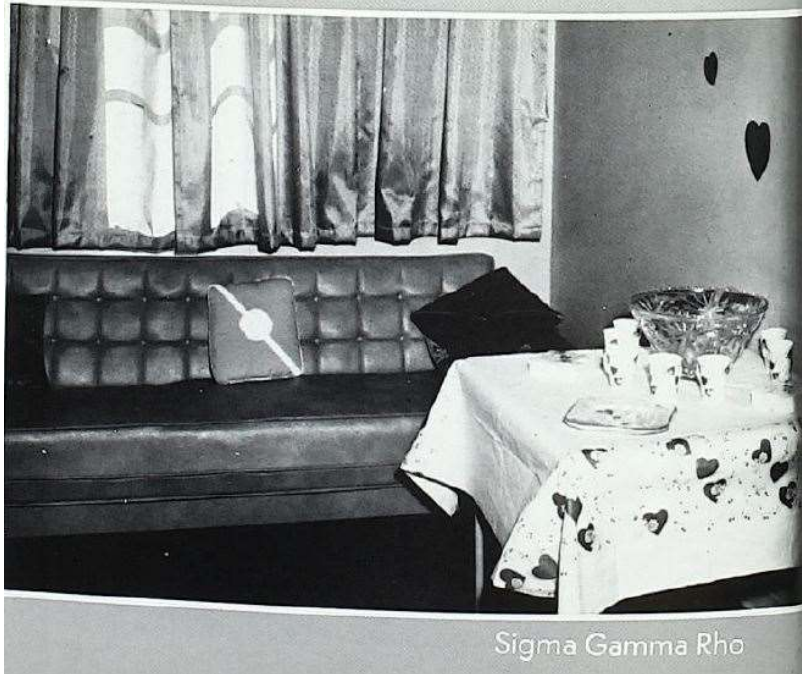
This single incident demonstrates both the pressures on African-American students at LSUNO and the way a historically Black Greek letter sorority provided a support system for those students. This support system was crucial to many for academic success and for Marie, she credits this encounter to her completion of her undergraduate studies.<sup>76</sup>

As presented through Marie's story and activities of the sorority, members of Sigma Gamma Rho maintain strong connections to their sisters and to the African-American community at large. But these strong bonds usually did not extend outside of that community. There were very few instances in which historically Black and predominantly White sororities interacted with each other, yet by being on the same campus, some interaction was inevitable. One space for interactions between Black and White sororities was the "Greek Rooms."

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<sup>75</sup> Marie, 1969 initiate of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne, phone interview, conducted Oct. 2018.

<sup>76</sup> Marie, 1969 initiate of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne, phone interview, conducted Oct. 2018.



*Illustration 4: Sigma Gamma Rho Room. 1967 LSUNO Trident, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.*

The “Greek Rooms” at LSUNO were housed in a former barracks that remained on the campus after it was transformed from a naval base to a university. The university used this building to provide meeting spaces and offices for Greek organizations. In June 1967, the university demolished the building and Greek organizations lost those rooms. These rooms had been used for various functions such as open houses, meeting spaces, a place to eat lunch, and as a game room. A picture of Sigma Gamma Rho’s room is included on a farewell page to the Greek rooms in the 1967 yearbooks. The inclusion of Sigma Gamma Rho’s room shows that although they were the only Black Greek letter organization, they were still provided a space to meet like all other Greek organizations, indicating a level of inclusion of Sigma Gamma Rho by faculty and student organization administrators at LSUNO.<sup>77</sup> Yet, according to Marie, social

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<sup>77</sup> *LSUNO Trident*, Vol. 6, 1967, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, 100, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

“Greeks Present Proposal for On Campus Housing” *Driftwood* (Louisiana State University in New Orleans), Oct. 25, 1979, pg. 1, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

interaction was minimal. Sigma Gamma Rho had representatives on the Panhellenic Council, as required by the university, and attended meetings along with members of majority White sororities. Besides these meetings, Black Greek letter organizations and their White counterparts rarely interacted. Interracial membership was an unspoken taboo, “[Everyone] mostly kind of stuck to their own kind. I don’t think there were many that crossed the lines,<sup>78</sup>” according to Deirdre Brown-James, a student of UNO and member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority. Besides the racial makeup of the various sororities, the service and educational oriented purpose of Sigma Gamma Rho and other Black Greek organizations and the socially oriented purpose of predominantly White sororities created a separation on campus and limited interactions between such organizations.<sup>79</sup>

Sigma Gamma Rho continued to appear in the *LSUNO Trident* throughout the subsequent years. In 1968, the Gamma Pi Chapter was the recipient of the Southwestern Regional Chapter of the Year Award. For the 1968-1969 school year, members of Sigma Gamma Rho held many executive board positions in other student organizations such as Vice President of the Panhellenic Council, First Vice President of the LSUNO NAACP, and a member of the Homecoming Court. The 1969 yearbook also featured photos of the Gammetts, the interest group for individuals interested in membership of the Gamma Pi chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Deirdre Brown-James, 1985 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La. July 16, 2018.

<sup>79</sup> Marie, 1969 initiate of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne, phone interview, conducted Oct. 2018.

<sup>80</sup> *LSUNO Trident*, Vol. 8, 1969, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, pg. 172-173, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.



GAMMETTS (Interest Group): (standing) Cynthia Freeman, Shelia Bland, Wanda Brooks, Antoinette Anderson, Geraldine Pitford, Aline Williams (seated) Cynthia Rich, Marcia McGary, Stephanie Logan, Barbara Clark. Missing from picture—Cheryl Steward, Velva Price.

*Illustration 5: Gammetts, interest group of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Gamma Pi Chapter. 1969 LSUNO Trident, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans*

Sigma Gamma Rho ceased to appear after 1973. The 1973 entry for Sigma Gamma Rho only listed three photos of members. The President and Vice President are listed with photos, and a third member who is listed with no official title that also has a photo. A list of 18 names appears on the same page, presumably a list of members who are not photographed. The only two pictures that feature the chapter in action are pictures of a new member, called a “probate” and a picture of a chapter meeting. These photos were recycled from the previous 1972 yearbook. Along with the Sigma Gamma Rho entry of this yearbook, three other photos also appear, but these photos are not of Sigma Gamma Rho. Photos showing activities of White members of Zeta Tau Alpha, Delta Zeta, and Alpha Xi Delta sororities appear alongside the photos of Sigma Gamma Rho. It is not known why these photos appear on the Sigma Gamma

Rho entry pages, why photos of all members are not shown, or what happens to Sigma Gamma Rho after this year.<sup>81</sup>

### **Continuing a Legacy**

While the 1973 yearbook is the last to feature Sigma Gamma Rho, it also announced the birth of a new Black Greek letter organization. That year, the Essence Club is listed along with other student organizations outside of Greek fraternities and sororities. This club was comprised of eight African-American women. Their entry in this yearbook announced that while working as the Essence Club “for quite awhile” the organization has become officially chartered as a legal Panhellenic sorority as Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, the very first Black sorority founded in 1908. The 1970s was a politically active decade for the international sorority. In 1972, Alpha Kappa Alpha purchased the childhood home of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to house the MLK Center for Social Change. In 1976 the sorority donated half a million USD to the United Negro College Fund and in 1979, Alpha Kappa Alpha was the only sorority to be named an inaugural member of Operation Big Vote.<sup>82</sup>

The chapter at LSUNO would continue this political activism, with the mission to “strive to help Black girls meet one another in an effort to create lasting friendships for the young women.<sup>83</sup>” According to this entry, Alpha Kappa Alpha would operate under the Panhellenic Council.<sup>84</sup> The time period in which Alpha Kappa Alpha chartered at LSUNO is also significant, as the 1970s was an active decade in the Black Power Movement. According to her sociological

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<sup>81</sup> *LSUNO Trident*, Vol. 12, 1973, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, 246-247, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>82</sup> “History,” Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Accessed February 18, 2019, <http://aka1908.com/about/history>.

<sup>83</sup> *LSUNO Trident*, Vol. 12, 1973, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, 200, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>84</sup> *LSUNO Trident*, Vol. 12, 1973, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, 200, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.



study on the Movement and its affects, Joyce M. Bell states, "...the creation of a network of separate Black professional, educational, cultural, and political caucuses and organizations is a central outcome of the Black Power movement.<sup>85</sup>" The organizers of Alpha Kappa Alpha, likely inspired by the Black Power Movement, set out to form their own organization on a predominantly White campus, and celebrate their racial pride.<sup>86</sup> This pride can be seen in a yearbook photo of the sorority, where multiple members display their hair in the Afro style.<sup>87</sup>



*Illustration 6: First Photo of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority at LSUNO. 1973 LSUNO Trident, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.*

Along with the addition of a new Black sorority on campus, many major changes continued to come to LSUNO. On February 2, 1974, the university was officially renamed the "University of New Orleans" establishing its own identity independent from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Construction occurred around campus, as the fine arts, education,

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<sup>85</sup> Joyce M. Bell, *The Black Power Movement and American Social Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 25.

<sup>86</sup> Joyce M. Bell, *The Black Power Movement and American Social Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 25.

<sup>87</sup> *LSUNO Trident*, Vol. 12, 1973, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, 200, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

and administrative buildings were erected. Also new to the campus was student housing, with Bienville Hall and married student dorms constructed to provide housing for students, shifting UNO away from the status of a commuter's school.<sup>88</sup>

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority would continue to be active amongst all the changes at the university. The sorority is featured in the 1974 UNO yearbook. The Alpha Kappa Alpha chapter, named Eta Eta, was chartered on November 25, 1973. The chapter operated with the motto, "Personal Action, Now." Activities for the chapter included voter registration, elderly assistance, and hosting Sickle Cell Anemia drives. These activities stand in stark contrast to the activities of predominantly White sororities. In the same yearbook, programming of White sororities is highly focused on socializing, including language such as, "specializes in campus awareness,<sup>89</sup>" "unite its members in sincere and lasting friendships,<sup>90</sup>" and "fosters the need to possess lasting friendships.<sup>91</sup>"

Activism was present in the early activities of Alpha Kappa Alpha at UNO. The yearbook entry includes a banner created by Alpha Kappa Alpha with the title, "The Eta Eta Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Salutes It's Black Women." The poster features portraits of influential and notable African-American women and demonstrates the Black pride that swept the 1970s and promotes Black history awareness at UNO.<sup>92</sup>

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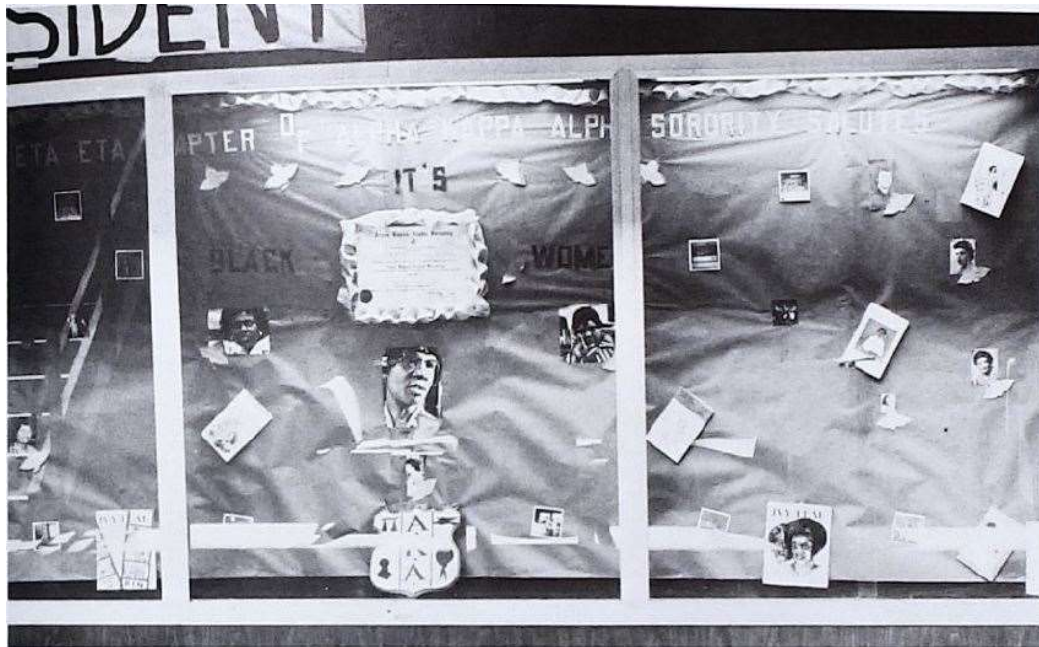
<sup>88</sup> *UNO Trident*, Vol. 13, 1974, University of New Orleans, 1, 71, 73, 90, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>89</sup> *UNO Trident*, Vol. 13, 1974, University of New Orleans, 238, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>90</sup> *UNO Trident*, Vol. 13, 1974, University of New Orleans, 240, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>91</sup> *UNO Trident*, Vol. 13, 1974, University of New Orleans, 256, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>92</sup> *UNO Trident*, Vol. 14, 1975, University of New Orleans, 188, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.



*Illustration 7: Poster by Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority saluting influential Black women. 1974 LSUNO Trident, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.*

The presence of Alpha Kappa Alpha at UNO insured the opportunity for participation among African-American women in sorority life on campus. Alpha Kappa Alpha offered African-American women a space of communal bonds and support on a predominantly White campus, similar to Sigma Gamma Rho's function in the past. At this point, participation in Greek life remained unavailable to African American men at UNO.<sup>93</sup> The 1975 yearbook, as all previous editions, makes this clear. There continues to be no African-American or African-American appearing pictured in a fraternity at LSUNO/UNO.<sup>94</sup>

Much like their female peers, membership in fraternal organizations provide many benefits for African-American men, especially those who attend a predominantly White learning institution. A 2006 study conducted by sociologist Stephanie M. McClure produced findings that

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<sup>93</sup> *UNO Trident*, Vol. 13, 1974, University of New Orleans, 237, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>94</sup> *UNO Trident*, Vol. 14, 1975, University of New Orleans, 188-196, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

suggests membership in Black Greek letter organizations contributes to the academic success of African-American men attending predominantly White schools. Her study concluded that membership in such organizations provided members with a closeness to the campus and campus activities, a social and professional network that expanded past an academic career, and a connection to Black history. Historically Black organizations also provided a space for African-American males to socially integrate on a predominantly White campus, an environment that would be new and strange to them.<sup>95</sup>

### **Black Brotherhood at UNO**

While Black sororities at UNO thrived, Black fraternities were not chartered until nine years after the first sorority. Black men at UNO faced racial issues much like their female counterparts, yet also had their own particular challenges to face. In the earliest years of UNO, Black women outnumbered Black men. While Marie maintained women outnumbered men in the 1960s, this pattern is also present in the 1991 *Privateer* yearbook. There are 90 Black female undergraduate and graduate students photographed in the yearbook, compared to the 51 Black undergraduate and graduate male students.<sup>96</sup> Black women had the numbers for sustainable membership to operate sororities and a support network, while Black men with smaller numbers would have had more difficulties.

Along with smaller numbers, Black men also had to combat the perceptions the predominantly White student body. A 2009 study by Shaun R. Harper states Black men at predominant White institutions like UNO are subjected to a continuation of racial stereotypes present in the larger society. Black men are often viewed as students enrolled due to an athletic

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<sup>95</sup> Stephanie M. McClure, "Voluntary Association Membership: Black Greek Men on a Predominantly White Campus," *The Journal of Higher Education* 77, no. 6 (2006): 1036-1057, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4122366>.

<sup>96</sup> *Privateer*, 1991, University of New Orleans, p. 187-240, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

scholarship, attending university by way of affirmative action, or at risk students who come from low income homes and neighborhoods.<sup>97</sup> A 2017 study by Ray Von Robertson and Cassandra Chaney build on Harper's argument stating those perceived stereotypes activate mental stressors in Black male students, which leads to poor academic performance, resulting in the lowest success rate of any collegiate demographic. Outside of campus, Black male students of UNO still faced racism in the city of New Orleans.

The earliest Black male students at UNO would have lived in a city that was relatively calmer than most other cities during the 1960s, but socio-economic conditions were largely worse than those of African-American communities in other cities. Unemployment in New Orleans as a whole in the 1960s was between three and seven percent, but for African-Americans it averaged from ten to thirty-five percent. Many African-American families were displaced with the building of the interstate system through the city and the construction of the Superdome. This displacement forced families into sub-standard public housing. A 1967 study conducted by the Urban League found that African-Americans paid a larger proportion of their income on housing and lived in overcrowded conditions more than other racial groups. Even as the years passed, economic conditions for the Black community did not greatly improve by the 1980s. These conditions at home and the racism they faced at UNO would shape the experiences of the Black male students that would go on to charter historically Black fraternities at UNO.<sup>98</sup>

The first Black fraternity organized at UNO organized in 1973, immediately succeeding Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.<sup>99</sup> Alpha Phi Alpha did not appear in any editions of the *UNO*

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<sup>97</sup> Shaun R. Harper, "Niggers No More: A Critical Race Counternarrative on Black Male Achievement at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 22, no. 6 (2009): 697-712.

<sup>98</sup> Daphne Spain, "Race Relations and Residential Segregation in New Orleans: Two Centuries of Paradox," *The Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 441, (1979): 90-93.

<sup>99</sup> UNO Greek Life, *National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC)*, <http://www.uno.edu/greek-life/nphc/index.aspx> (accessed November 12, 2018).

*Trident*. It is not known why they have not appeared in the yearbook. There is also a notable absence of the organization in the *Driftwood*, the campus newspaper.

### **Continuation of Black Greek Life**

Following Alpha Phi Alpha, the organizations that comprised of the National Pan Hellenic Council chartered chapters at UNO in quick succession. Delta Sigma Theta Sorority chartered its Mu Tau chapter in 1976, followed by Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity (Iota Lambda) in 1978, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority (Upsilon Iota) in 1980, and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity (Lambda Omicron) in 1983. Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority re-chartered at UNO in 2006, with the new chapter name of Rho Delta. It is not known when Omega Psi Phi Fraternity (Theta Mu) chartered and a chapter of Iota Phi Theta Fraternity has not organized at UNO as of this writing.<sup>100</sup>

<b>Organization Name</b>	<b>Chapter Name</b>	<b>Charter Year</b>
Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority	Gamma Pi	1966
Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority	Eta Eta	1973
Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity	Theta Phi	1973
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority	Mu Tau	1976
Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity	Iota Lambda	1978
Zeta Phi Beta Sorority	Upsilon Iota	1980
Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity	Lambda Omicron	1983
Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority	Rho Delta (re-chartered)	2006
Omega Psi Phi Fraternity	Theta Mu	Unknown

*Table 2: Chapter names and charter years of Black Greek organizations at UNO. Table created by author with information from UNO Greek Life NPHC page, <http://www.uno.edu/greek-life/nphc/index.aspx>*

<sup>100</sup> UNO Greek Life, *National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC)*, <http://www.uno.edu/greek-life/nphc/index.aspx> (accessed November 12, 2018).

## Service and Purpose

Service and social action is integral to Black Greek letter organizations. Founded with the ideals of racial uplift, each Black Greek letter organization has a mission of service and social action from their founding. The chapters of these organizations at UNO fulfilled these roles through community service and participation in campus events.<sup>101</sup>

From their first mentions in university yearbooks, Sigma Gamma Rho and Alpha Kappa Alpha participated in community service events such as Thanksgiving food drives and visits to the sick and elderly. These events connected African-American sorority members to the larger African-American in the city of New Orleans. As the years progressed, Black fraternities and sororities continued this community service. A “Black Orientation” hosted by the UNO NAACP chapter for incoming African-American freshman featured a step show by Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and a presentation about fraternity history.<sup>102</sup> Members of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity participated in African-American Student Cultural Awareness Day to promote and educate Black culture at UNO.<sup>103</sup> Delta Sigma Theta Sorority hosted a Sickle Cell Anemia testing drive to increase awareness of the trait that primarily affects the African-American community.<sup>104</sup> Members of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority also held membership in the (LS)UNO chapter of the NAACP and the sorority offered congratulations to the organization for winning multiple awards from the national body of the NAACP and for hosting the largest collegiate chapter in the United

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<sup>101</sup> Jessica Harris and Vernon C. Mitchell Jr., “A Narrative Critique of Black Greek Letter Organizations and Social Action” in *Black Greek Letter Organizations in the Twenty First Century: Our Fight Has Just Begun*, ed. Gregory Parks (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008) 143-145.

<sup>102</sup> John Vonerstenber, “First Black Orientation Very Successful,” *Driftwood* Vol. 22 no. 7 (UNO), October 5, 1979, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>103</sup> *UNO Privateer*, 1991, University of New Orleans, 153, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>104</sup> Laurence Alexander, “Sickle Cell Testing Available This Month,” *Driftwood* Vol. 22 No. 17 (UNO), February 7, 1980, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.

States.<sup>105</sup> Zeta Phi Beta Sorority frequently visited hospitals and participated in community church events.<sup>106</sup> Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity hosted a child mentoring program titled “Project S.T.I.C.K.” which tutored local school children in writing and mathematics.<sup>107</sup>

Black Greek letter organizations hosted events and activities that connect its members to the campus environment, following patterns described by Stephanie McClure in her study on African-American men in Black Greek letter organizations on predominantly White campuses.<sup>108</sup> A poster made by Delta Sigma Theta Sorority was hung on campus during 1989-1990 UNO Homecoming to show support for UNO.<sup>109</sup>



*Illustration 8: Homecoming Poster created by Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. 1990 Privateer, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.*

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<sup>105</sup> “A Black Perspective From LSUNO” NAACP Negro History Week Events Program, February 9-15, 1969, Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>106</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home in Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

<sup>107</sup> Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. Iota Lambda Chapter Constitution, Article III, Section 5, Iota Lambda Chapter Private Collection.

<sup>108</sup> Stephanie M. McClure, “Voluntary Association Membership: Black Greek Men on a Predominantly White Campus,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 77, no. 6 (2006): 1046-1049, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4122366>.

<sup>109</sup> *UNO Privateer*, 1990, University of New Orleans, 266, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.



Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority hosted a table with snacks for the 1991 April Fest.<sup>110</sup> A yearbook photo from 1991 shows a step show performed by Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, in which they won first place for the Greek Week Talent Show.<sup>111</sup> This photo is particularly important as it shows campus participation, yet it also shows a way Black Greek letter organizations provided an avenue for creative performance for African-American students on campus.



*Illustration 9: Step Performance by Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority. 1991 Privateer, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.*

Although Black Greek letter organizations were active in campus events, these specific organizations were seldom mentioned in UNO student publications. Very little news of their activities appeared in the campus newspaper, the *Driftwood*, when compared to other Greek organizations. In an article about the first Greek Week in 1979, the only Greek organizations

<sup>110</sup> *UNO Privateer*, 1991, University of New Orleans, 171, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>111</sup> *UNO Privateer*, 1991, University of New Orleans, 169, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.

mentioned are predominantly White member organizations of the Interfraternity Council and the Panhellenic Council.<sup>112</sup> An article detailing the 1980 Homecoming featured photos of various members of Greek organizations, but there are no members of Black Greek letter organizations featured, even though the article highlighted UNO's second African-American Homecoming Queen.<sup>113</sup> These exclusions suggests a subtle form of racial discrimination faced by Black Greek letter organizations. According to Joan Brown Staidum, a charter member of Zeta Phi Beta at UNO, *Driftwood* staff and photographers rarely came out to events hosted by Black Greek letter organizations, "It [*Driftwood*] didn't, nothing that we had on campus. None of the things we gave or did, nobody ever came to take pictures to put it in or what, you know, it wasn't for us."<sup>114</sup>

The *Driftwood* was not the only publication from which Black Greek letter organizations were excluded. The yearbooks of the University of New Orleans also had a notable absence of Black Greek letter organizations in its pages. While the publications of the first yearbook on campus, the *Trident*, started in 1962, Black Greek letter organizations did not start appearing until the 1965 edition, with the formation of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority. Sigma Gamma Rho appeared in each edition until 1974. The 1973-1975 editions featured Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority the second Black Greek letter organization chartered at UNO.

Publication of the *Trident* ceased after 1975, due to conflicts with the yearbook publisher.<sup>115</sup> Yearbooks did not appear at UNO again until 1989, with the publication of the

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<sup>112</sup> Kirt Jensen, "Greek Week Debut at UNO," *Driftwood* Vol. 22 No. 6 (UNO), September 27, 1979, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>113</sup> Dennis Smith, "2<sup>nd</sup> UNO Black Homecoming Queen Jocelyn D. Williams," *Driftwood* Vol. 22 No. 18 (UNO), February 14, 1980, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>114</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

<sup>115</sup> Angie Smith, "Privateer Changes Promised," *Driftwood*, Vol. 33 No. 4 (UNO), September 20, 1990, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

newly named *Privateer*. Only four volumes of the *Privateer* would be published. With the return of the yearbooks to campus, there also came controversy. In the 1990 *Privateer*, there was a notable absence of Black Greek letter organizations, with only two organizations being photographed, although seven such organizations chartered on campus. There was also no biography or featured pages of Black Greek letter organizations in the yearbook, although there were such entries for predominantly White Greek letter organizations. This exclusion did not go unnoticed. Multiple African-American organizations on campus, including four Black Greek letter organizations, published a letter in the *Driftwood*, criticizing their exclusion from the 1990 *Privateer*.<sup>116</sup> The letter pointed out multiple problems the African-American student organizations found with the yearbook, such as,

2. All minority organizations appear in tiny black and white photos on adjacent pages while IFC and PHC organizations (predominantly White Greek letter organizations), including the suspended TKE (Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity), appear in either half or full page spreads.
4. Both Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority were completely omitted from this publication.
5. The NAACP Awards Ceremony, as well as other programs sponsored by other minority organizations, do not appear in the annual.<sup>117</sup>

The organization publishers of this article clearly expressed their dissatisfaction with the 1990 yearbook.

It does not represent the total student experience of the University of New Orleans... The annual is geared toward the endorsement of a Eurocentric mind frame... it does not appear that a fair and equitable effort will be put forth by this year's staff. We are requesting that individuals who are more willing to include aspects of all facets UNO student life be appointed... This letter is submitted to

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<sup>116</sup> "African-American Student Groups Blast 1990 *Privateer*," *Driftwood*, Vol. 33 No. 4 (UNO), September 20, 1990, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>117</sup> "African-American Student Groups Blast 1990 *Privateer*," *Driftwood*, Vol. 33 No. 4 (UNO), September 20, 1990, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.

remind you that we, the minority students, comprise a very fundamental portion of the student population and must be represented as such.<sup>118</sup>

This letter was undersigned by seven African-American student organizations, four of which were Black Greek letter organizations. Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority expressed their dissatisfaction with their misrepresentation and exclusion from the 1990 yearbook. By speaking against the yearbook in a published format, those organizations are acting up the social activism that drives historically Black Greek letter organizations.<sup>119</sup> This letter appeared after an anonymous piece was published in the *Driftwood* criticizing the 1990 *Privateer* for excluding African-American groups and students: “According to this book, Lafitte Village, and for that matter, black fraternities and sororities, don’t even exist... Which would have been fine if the book had been paid for by the Inter-Fraternity and Panhellenic councils.<sup>120</sup>”

At the same time the UNO *Privateer* received this criticism, a Black Greek letter fraternity advocated on behalf of African-American students in response to a racist incident on campus. In August of 1990, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity called out two members of Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity who spray painted racial slurs on a car. Juan Byrd, president of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity chapter at UNO, spoke out against this incident, and with support from the Student Government Association, took immediate action. According to coverage in the *Driftwood*:

The event occurred on a Friday and on Monday morning a petition against this type of activity was circulated by members of SGA (Student Government

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<sup>118</sup> “African-American Student Groups Blast 1990 *Privateer*,” *Driftwood*, Vol. 33 No. 4 (UNO), September 20, 1990, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>119</sup> “African-American Student Groups Blast 1990 *Privateer*,” *Driftwood*, Vol. 33 No. 4 (UNO), September 20, 1990, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>120</sup> “1990 Yearbook an Embarrassment,” *Driftwood*, Vol. 33 No. 3 (UNO), September 13, 1990, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.

Association) and APA (Alpha Phi Alpha). It got 150 signatures in the first half hour of circulation.

APA wrote a letter to administrative officials making “a rational expressions of concern that was not hysterical in tone,” which expected a formal letter of apology from the TKE fraternity.<sup>121</sup>

A month later, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity again published an article about the incident, stating that neither they, other African-American organizations, or the African-American student body, received an official apology from the Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity, refuting a claim that fraternity had made.<sup>122</sup>

### **Struggles of Black Greek Letter Organizations**

Although Black Greek letter organizations provided many benefits to its members and the African-American community on campus, they were not without their struggles or conflicts. Interviews with Joan Brown-Staidum reveal the complexities of chartering a Black Greek letter sorority at UNO. Brown-Staidum is a charter member of the Upsilon Iota chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority. This chapter was chartered in 1980 and became the fourth Black Greek letter sorority on campus.<sup>123</sup>

Although other Black Greek letter sororities already established on campus, Brown-Staidum reveals Zeta Phi Beta Sorority had their own unique challenges. Brown-Staidum first attended UNO in 1978. She had a twin sister who attended nearby Dillard University, and in order to not strain family finances, she attended the more financially affordable UNO. While at UNO, Brown-Staidum explained she adjusted well, since she had attended a predominantly

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<sup>121</sup> Michelle Colin, “TKE’s Charter Suspended After Racial Incident,” *Driftwood*, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 2 (UNO), August 20, 1990, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>122</sup> “Alpha Phi Alpha Refutes Story’s Claim,” *Driftwood*, Vol. 33 No. 5 (UNO), September 27, 1990, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans

<sup>123</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

White high school. Nonetheless, she still spent the majority of her free time on the campus. There were not many social functions that catered to African-American students at UNO, while Dillard, a historically Black college, offered welcoming social spaces and quality time with her sister. Traveling to a nearby HBCU was not a journey unique to Brown-Staidum, as many African-American students travelled to Dillard and other nearby HBCUs to attend social functions. While Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority were present at UNO, it was through her travels at nearby HBCUs that Brown-Staidum first learned about Zeta Phi Beta Sorority.<sup>124</sup>

Great first impressions are what garnered interest among Brown-Staidum in Zeta Phi Beta. Brown-Staidum was impressed by the way the ladies of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority carried themselves and felt there needed to be a chapter at UNO. She first saw members of the sorority at events at nearby HBCUs Dillard University and Xavier University of Louisiana, as UNO did not have a chapter of the sorority yet.

... The way they were, the way they came out, they were so like down to earth, you know, it was people, it was like you knew em, or you felt like you knew em, the way they carried themselves, the way they dressed. I will never forget, they wore the white tuxedos with the shorts, with the boots. I mean, you know, just, and I thought, man, I kept asking, who that is, who that is? She said, that them Zetas, you gonna see them a lot. They do a lot off campus but uh, I, and from then on, I just followed, wherever they went, I went.<sup>125</sup>

Although there were already two Black Greek letter sororities on campus, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, they did not seem a good fit for Brown-Staidum.

I had saw the AKA's and I had saw the Delta's because there was some at U.N.O... everybody knew the Deltas were fast, that was just the Deltas, they was loud and fast. That didn't mean they weren't good people, that just how they

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<sup>124</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

<sup>125</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

were... They [AKAs] were almost prissy, in a sense that, nobody fit it. They had a certain type of girls, they had long hair, light skin, like you know, really, really, really, back then, prissy.<sup>126</sup>

Stereotyping particular sororities is not unique to historically Black sororities, but these views of other Black sororities offer significant insight into why Brown-Staidum and other students felt the need for another Black sorority at UNO and a greater diversity of options for socializing and sisterhood. Many women, including Brown-Staidum, felt as if they would not fit into the sisterhood those organizations would offer, and therefore, could not attain the benefits of membership. To combat this, Brown-Staidum and seven other women started the work to charter a chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority. But it was no easy feat.<sup>127</sup>

Brown-Staidum and the women interested in Zeta Phi Beta Sorority received support from members of the New Orleans graduate chapter of the sorority and by undergraduate members from other local universities. The graduate chapter is comprised of alumni members of the sorority, while undergraduate members were currently enrolled in a four-year university. The first roadblock encountered was the UNO administration. According to Brown-Staidum, the administration sought to prevent Zeta Phi Beta Sorority from starting a chapter.

“The first road block was just trying to get papers on campus. They felt like they had two [sororities], that was enough, you know.<sup>128</sup>”

With two historically Black sororities already on campus, the administration felt there would be no room or interest for another one. There was also a lot of legal and official paperwork members of the graduate chapter had to file with the university. Had it not been for

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<sup>126</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

<sup>127</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

<sup>128</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

the persistence of members of the New Orleans area graduate chapter, according to Brown-Staidum, there would not have been a chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority at UNO. Brown-Staidum namely credits one unnamed graduate member of the sorority, “There was a professor that was there, that came every day. She just was determined to bring, to open that door. So she kept coming, and kept coming, and kept coming, and you know, kept talking with people.<sup>129</sup>”

After the official paperwork was processed, and the sorority had permission to begin member initiation, the young women that would become sisters of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority faced challenges of their own. Brown-Staidum expressed the unwelcoming atmosphere Zeta Phi Beta Sorority had on campus.

... then the AKAs and Deltas, well they didn't want another chapter on campus. You see, because they had control over who could be in and who couldn't. So you bringing another on here, that's going to open the doors for these people who have ran up behind y'all and wanted to be in, and now they have a different avenue.<sup>130</sup>

Some of the other sororities at UNO felt there was no room for an extra sorority, and with the number of female African-American students so low, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority would not obtain the numbers needed for the chapter to survive. Yet, Brown-Staidum and her sisters were persistent. Zeta Phi Beta Sorority provided a new sorority, and another option for women that may want to join a sorority, but did not feel sisterhood in Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority or Delta Sigma Theta Sorority was a good fit for them.<sup>131</sup>

Besides pressure from of other Black sororities, the newest members of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority also had the pressure of maintaining academic excellency and physical appearances

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<sup>129</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

<sup>130</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

<sup>131</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.



while chartering the sorority at UNO. When asked about her experience, Brown-Staidum had this to say,

Hard for young women, it was cold. I pledged in January, it was cold, but pledging under the grad chapter, they were old school, and when they pledged, they dressed. And so we dressed. So we wore dresses and stockings and shoes everyday. We got up in the morning... our DP [Dean of Pledges] would come with us and we sing all the way across to the UC every morning at 6 o'clock. I tell them all the time, my grades was best when I pledged. They [graduate members] were strict, they were really really, strict.<sup>132</sup>

The graduate members of the sorority wanted Zeta Phi Beta Sorority to have the best first impressions at UNO. Because of this, Brown-Staidum and her sisters would be dressed in professional attire during their pledge process. Each day, they wore a blouse, suit jacket, skirt, stockings, and heels. They had to be dressed in this attire in order to show that they were professional and upstanding women, and to counter the stereotype of sorority women as party girls.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

<sup>133</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.



*Illustration 10: Members of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority at Dillard University, dressed just as Brown-Staidum would have been. 1979 Le Diable Bleu, Library Archives and Special Collections, Will W. Alexander Library, Dillard University, New Orleans.*

Along with dressing professionally, the women of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority also had to keep their grades up to par. The university set strict academic guidelines for fraternal Greek organizations and the graduate members of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority wanted their new sisters to exceed those guidelines. Brown-Staidum and her seven sisters would all study together in study rooms at the residence hall on campus. They would walk each other to class and were not allowed to party on the weekends or face denied membership from the sorority. The extra time was spent on not only studying the history and structure of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority but also studying for their classes to maintain their high grades.<sup>134</sup>

Because of pressures from the university, other sororities, and graduate members of their own sorority, Joan Brown-Staidum and her seven sisters had a great amount of work to do in order to create a new Black Greek letter sorority at UNO, despite there being two Black Greek letter sororities already established. But according to Brown-Staidum, it was important. When

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<sup>134</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

asked if the presence of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority and other Black Greek letter organizations made a difference for African-American students at UNO and held importance to the entire African-American community on campus, she responded, “I really, really, believe that, ... because people saw a difference.”<sup>135</sup>”

As the number of Black Greek letter organizations and their membership increased, they were still outnumbered by predominantly White Greek letter organizations. A consideration of how spaces of the campus was divided among Greek organizations demonstrates that interaction between historically Black and predominantly White Greek letter organizations was rare at UNO.

Beginning in the Fall of 1979, UNO debut its “Greek Week.” Greek Week is a week dedicated to Greek letter organizations on campus. It was created as a response to the increase in Greek life on campus, and aimed to promote academics, charity, and camaraderie among the various Greek letter organizations on campus. The *Driftwood* article that announcing the debut of Greek Week mentioned only the IntraFraternity Council (comprised of predominantly White fraternities) and the Panhellenic Council (comprised of predominantly White sororities.) There is no mention of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, the council that houses Black Greek letter organizations.<sup>136</sup> At the end of the Greek Week, another *Driftwood* article stated that the week was “hectic, but fun.” The week improved visibility of Greek organizations on campus and taught members that they were not just a part of their own organization, but part of a larger group. Three winners were announced for the week, each organization being a predominantly

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<sup>135</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

<sup>136</sup> Kirt Jensen, “Greek Week Debut at UNO,” *Driftwood*, Vol. 22, no. 6, (UNO), September 27, 1979, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

White Greek letter organization, and as the previous article, there was no mention of Black Greek letter organizations in this conclusion of the first Greek Week.<sup>137</sup>

Minimal interaction between historically Black Greek letter organizations and their predominantly White counterparts is a common theme in oral histories. When asked about her interactions with predominantly White sororities, Marie of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority stated, "... I mean we did our thing, they did theirs. We didn't do things together... we didn't really interact with them or do socializing with them."<sup>138</sup> While Marie speaks from her experiences as a student in the late Sixties, we see this pattern of separation continue into the Eighties. Joan Brown-Staidum of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority stated, "You never saw, I never, I don't know when they went over [joined the Greek organizations], how they did, never, never, only thing I would see was like, in the U.C... other than that, you didn't see them."<sup>139</sup>

While Brown-Staidum became a member of her sorority in 1979, her younger sister joined the sorority in 1985, and had very similar experiences. When asked was were interaction between Black and White Greeks organizations, Brown-James mentioned a council where members of Greek organizations can meet, but stated African-American student members would still not have that much of a voice,

There were officers on campus and they had a council that the blacks were invited to but it looked like to me there weren't that many black board members on the council itself so when things were going on you were invited to go to the meetings at the U.C. and they would let you know but it's like almost they have an agenda and when you get there uh, they made almost made up there mind on what they gonna do and they just letting you know.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Kirt Jensen, "Greek Week 'Hectic, Fun," *Driftwood*, Vol. 22, no. 8, (UNO), October 11, 1979, Louisiana Collection, Earl K Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>138</sup> Marie, 1969 initiate of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne, phone interview, conducted Oct. 2018.

<sup>139</sup> Joan Brown-Staidum, 1979 initiate of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

<sup>140</sup> Deidre Brown James, 1985 member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

In such meetings, members of Black Greek letter organizations would have been outnumbered and in the words of Brown-James,

if you had something to vote on if you disagreed with something it was almost everybody else, you know, it was already passed, if you had some disagreement about something they would let you express but that was the extent of it.<sup>141</sup>

So while there were interactions, cooperation between the two sets of Greek organizations was minimal, even as recently as the mid-1980s. The separation of predominantly White and Black Greeks at UNO was even documented in a city-wide newspaper. A September 1988 article in the *Times Picayune* discuss Greek sororities on campuses across the city of New Orleans. The article opens discussing UNO's predominantly White Greek fraternities and sororities, and the tables of the University Center they occupy when socializing. The article later goes on to say, "There are four national sororities in the Panhellenic system and three black sororities that operate separately from the UNO Panhellenic."<sup>142</sup> No members of Black Greek letter organizations from UNO were interviewed or mentioned in the article. This point, along with the mention of separate systems, and even socializing spaces, demonstrates the persistence of segregated spaces at UNO into the mid-1980s.

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<sup>141</sup> Deidre Brown James, 1985 member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

<sup>142</sup> Lily Jackson, "Greek Life: The Rush is On," *Times Picayune*, September 11, 1988, pg. D-1, New Orleans.



*Illustration 11: Sorority members from Dillard, all members of historically Black sororities. No members of Black sororities appeared in pictures from UNO. Times Picayune, September 1988, Microfilm Collection, East Bank Regional Library, Jefferson Parish Libraries.*

*Illustration 12: Sorority members from UNO featured in the Times Picayune. Note they are all members of predominantly White sororities. Times Picayune, September 1988, Microfilm Collection, East Bank Regional Library, Jefferson Parish Libraries*

On the same page, there is a separate article that discusses historically Black Greek letter sororities, and those interviewed for the article were Dillard students. While the page features a large photo of members of predominantly White sororities at UNO, there is a smaller picture in the corner of members of predominantly Black sororities at Dillard. This article shows the separation of predominantly Black and White Greek letter organizations was not only apparent to members of those organizations but also to the wider community.<sup>143</sup>

The purpose and missions of historically Black and White sororities is also noted in this article. The predominantly White sororities interviewed for UNO reveal the social-oriented role those sororities played. Interviewed members mention how joining a sorority is, "...really a good

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<sup>143</sup> Millie Ball, "Dillard Sororities Forge Close Ties," *Times Picayune*, September 11, 1988, pg. D-1, New Orleans.

way to meet people on the campus,” and how sorority members are required to participate in other campus activities.<sup>144</sup> On the contrary, sorority members at Dillard discuss how their sororities have a service-based purpose. A member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority states, “For one thing, we are a national public service sorority, geared toward the Black community.” and sorority programs include tutoring, visits to nursing homes, clean-ups and anti-drug programs.<sup>145</sup> This article inadvertently underscored the differences between Black and White sororities. At UNO, a predominantly White institution, the writer spotlighted only the voices of White sorority members, while calling upon students at nearby HBCU give the perspective for of Black sorority members.<sup>146</sup>

While the history of Black Greek letter organizations at the University of New Orleans may be short, their impact and presence on UNO’s campus is something that needs to be continually studied. For many African-American students at this predominantly White institutions of higher learning, Black Greek letter organizations gave them a socializing safe space, outlets for creativity, resources for academic success, and perhaps most importantly, a sense of belonging in an environment what was hostile and unwelcoming to them. When asked what she would like to add about her experience as a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority at UNO, Brown-James had this to say,

I think the unity, the strength, the love, the empowerment that you get from being a part of something that’s greater than you...When you were integrated into, Zeta is a family and as a family you have a bond of love, of expression, of ability to go to someone who is able to have gone through what you’re going through and then

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<sup>144</sup> Lily Jackson, “Greek Life: The Rush is On,” *Times Picayune*, September 11, 1988, pg. D-1, New Orleans.

<sup>145</sup> Millie Ball, “Dillard Sororities Forge Close Ties, Continued,” *Times Picayune*, September 11, 1988, pg. D-2, New Orleans.

<sup>146</sup> Lily Jackson, “Greek Life: The Rush is On, Continued,” *Times Picayune*, September 11, 1988, pg. D-2, New Orleans.

Millie Ball, “Dillard Sororities Forge Close Ties, Continued,” *Times Picayune*, September 11, 1988, pg. D-2, New Orleans.

say this is one way you can do it or you can do it this way. There are always helping hands, or listening ears.<sup>147</sup>

The support that Deirdre Brown-James, Joan Brown-Staidum, and Marie received from their sororities at UNO echoes across the country for many African-American college students. While UNO first opened its doors as an integrated university, the environment was hostile to African-American students, hostility that persisted for decades after. The support that Black Greek letter organizations extended to the African-American community at UNO mirrors the results concluded by Stephanie M. McClure in her own studies about historically Black fraternities at predominantly White campuses.

## Conclusion

A 2015 article written by UNO student Asia-Vinae Palmer published in the *Driftwood* discussed the presence of Black Greek letter organizations at UNO. Palmer interviewed Sydney Lockett, a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, on her experiences in a Black sorority at UNO. In 2015, African Americans were still in the minority at UNO, only making up about 15 percent of the student population.<sup>148</sup> In her story, Lockett displayed the ongoing racial tensions at UNO

... I'd rather be a part of something that I know was started for me. Take for example, the SAE [Sigma Alpha Epsilon] hate video, or even here at UNO, a white fraternity had a black doll with a noose around its neck hanging out of a car window as they rode around on Halloween.<sup>149</sup>

Lockett use this incident to emphasize the importance to Black Greek letter organizations had at UNO. "I don't feel like our ideas are outdated. We want to do more for OUR brothers and OUR

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<sup>147</sup> Deidre Brown James, 1985 member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, interviewed by August Darbonne at private home, Houma, La., July 16, 2018.

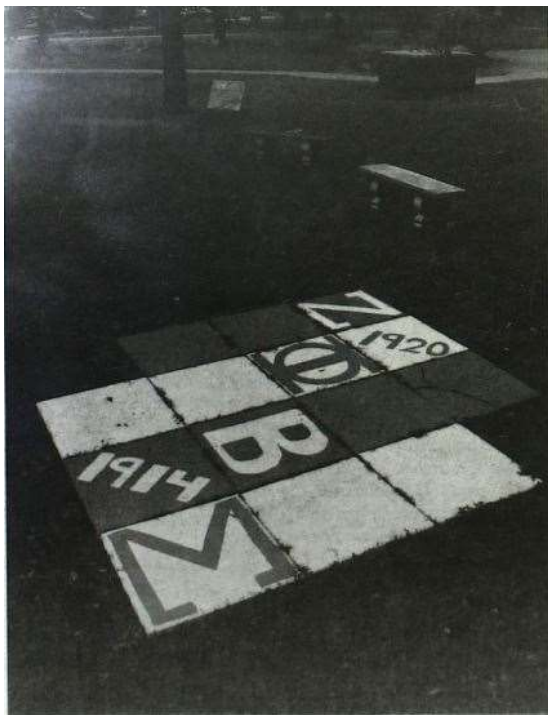
<sup>148</sup> State of Louisiana Board of Regents, SSPSRACLV Enrollment Report, Spring 2015, <https://regents.la.gov/data-publications/statewide-student-profile/>

<sup>149</sup> Asia-Vinae Palmer, "NPHC Organizations: The History and Future of Black Greek Life," *Driftwood*, Vol. 58, No. 25 (UNO), April 25, 2015, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.



sisters...<sup>150</sup>” Yet these incidents also demonstrate the continued racism that African-American students faced not just at UNO but at many predominantly White campuses. This demonstrates a continued need for Black Greek letter organizations, as the support system and the service they provided to the African-American community is needed today just as much as it was in the 1960s and 1970s.

A month earlier, another article published by the same author, featured the NPHC plots, stone benches and plaques that serve as artistic monuments to the strength and endurance of Black Greek letter organizations.



*Illustration 13: Plot of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority at UNO. Driftwood, March 25, 2015, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.*

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<sup>150</sup> Asia-Vinae Palmer, “NPHC Organizations: The History and Future of Black Greek Life,” *Driftwood*, Vol. 58, No. 25 (UNO), April 25, 2015, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans

The plots of UNO are featured and discussed as a sacred space for members to congregate and celebrate the strength of their organizations.<sup>151</sup> Much like the NPHC plots, this thesis is a testament to the survival of Black Greek letter organizations at UNO. From the chartering of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority in 1964 to present day, Black Greek letter organizations continue to thrive and prosper despite the struggles they have faced in the past and continue to face in the present.

While the 2015 article reveals racism still plagues the campus of UNO, Black Greek letter organizations continue to uplift and serve the African-American community on campus. By providing community service, fostering communal bonds, and establishing a connection to the larger campus environment, Black Greek letter organizations continue to foster academic success among its members and resist the hostile environment that has plagued their community for decades on the campus of UNO.

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<sup>151</sup> Asia-Vinae Palmer, "NPHC Benches Represent History, Sacrifice, Progress," *Driftwood*, Vol. 58, No. 21 (UNO), March 25, 2015, Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

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## **Vita**

August Joseph Darbonne was born and raised in South Louisiana. Raised in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural family, he loves to explore different cultures in his hometown of New Orleans and his ancestral homelands of Latin America and the Caribbean. He is a first generation collegiate, graduation from the University of New Orleans in 2016 with a B.A. in History. In his undergraduate career, he became a member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. He is currently pursuing a Master's of Arts in History. In his free time he paints, cooks, and studies foreign languages.