

Surviving the 1927 Butler College quota
A History of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority
Founded November 12th, 1922 on the campus of Butler College

First Our Vision: Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority's aim is to enhance the quality of life within the community. Public service, leadership development and education of youth are the hallmark of the organization's programs and activities. Sigma Gamma Rho addresses concerns that impact society educationally, civically, and economically.

Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated was founded on the campus of Butler University in Indianapolis Indiana in Sunday November 12th, 1922, by seven School teachers - Mary Lou Allison Gardner Little, Nannie Mae Gahn Johnson, Vivian White Marbury, Hattie Mae Annette Dullin Redford, Bessie Mae Downie Rhodes Martin, Dorothy Hanley Whiteside and Cubena McClure. The sorority became an incorporated organization on December 30, 1929.

In postwar 1920s America, Blacks found themselves as targets of widespread racial bigotry. Only a few years earlier in 1918 did scholar-activist W.E.B. Du Bois as editor of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) Crisis Magazine urge Blacks to "close ranks" and, at least for the time being, support the Allied Forces in their effort to defeat the Central Powers of Europe. Making up 400,000 in uniform, almost one million in wartime factory personnel, and many more as loyal supporters of the war effort, Blacks did just that. Regrettably, African American patriotism did little to damper racial hatred. Met with random acts of violence, anti-Black labor union strife, unemployment, underemployment, housing discrimination, poor city services, educational inequities, scientific racism, and condescending employers, African Americans turned inward and relied on the principle of self-help to secure autonomy, hope, and constructive resistance.

In the city of Indianapolis seven African American educators masked their anxieties, put aside their individual needs, and formed a self-help organization that sought ways to promote intellectual distinction among female schoolteachers and education majors. Either Midwestern natives or Southern migrants, the women, all from working-class backgrounds, recognized the power of agency for people of color. The teachers founded Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority in 1922 on the campus of Butler College (renamed Butler University in 1923). Community builders and idealists at heart, the educators refined their goals over the course of the next few years. By 1925, they expanded their membership requirements to include Black women outside the realm of education. In an effort to strengthen their collegiate programs and commitment to community agency and racial autonomy, the sorority in 1929 formed alumnae chapters and established scholarships for undergraduate members. A decade later, the organization comprised sixteen undergraduate chapters and four alumnae chapters in thirteen states.

Interestingly, in the backdrop of the sorority's genesis stood the very powerful and dangerous Ku Klux Klan. Racism, no doubt, thrived in both Indiana and the country; racial injustice therefore sparked the

birth of the second the Ku Klux Klan. Established in 1915 in Stone Mountain, Georgia, the new Ku Klux Klan of the twentieth century evolved from two national events that year: the anti-Semitic lynching of engineer Leo Frank in Atlanta; and the release of D. W. Griffith's masterpiece, *Birth of a Nation*. Unlike the original Ku Klux Klan of Reconstruction, the second Klan targeted a variety of groups, including Jewish Americans, Catholics, recent European ethnic immigrants, Latinos, East Asians, and feminists. The secret society grew to record proportions in the 1920s, especially in the Midwest. Indiana particularly stood out as a major center of Klan activity. With 300,000 members in the early 1920s, the Indiana Klan comprised one third of the native-born White male population in the state. D. C. Stephenson, the Grand Dragon of the Indiana KKK, since 1924, resided at 5432 University, in Irvington, Indianapolis, literally right next to Butler University. Madge Oberholtzer, the educator Stephenson raped and kidnapped in 1926, also lived in Irvington.

The founders of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority also faced many aspects of racism on the campus of Butler College. Since its founding in 1855, Butler had been open to African American applicants. However, at least one Board of Regents member supported the KKK. The school itself practiced de facto segregation in numerous ways. The university in 1927 adopted a quota system that admitted only ten African American students annually. As a result, the university's Black enrollment declined from seventy-four in the 1926-1927 year to fifty-eight, and included nine entering freshmen. In 1925, the university yearbook, the *Drift*, placed photos of Black graduating seniors in the back of the book, away from the alphabetical listing and pictures highlighting other seniors. These realities suggest that African Americans on the campus were met with a degree of racial hostility.

Nevertheless, the sorority's founders pressed on. Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., founders Mary Lou Allison, Nannie Mae Gahn, Vivian White, Bessie Downey, Cubena McClure, Dorothy Hanley, and Hattie Mae Dulin quietly began their society for teachers and sought to make a difference. In doing so, they indirectly challenged perceived early twentieth-century notions about race and gender. They subtly defied the local KKK when they established their society for college-educated African American women. Ignoring the commonly held view that African American women were intellectually, culturally, and sexually inferior, the seven founders relied on racial autonomy, community building, and constructive activism in an effort to topple racism, poverty, and hopelessness.

The first three years were devoted to organizing. The first call for a national Boule (convention) was held in Indianapolis, December 27-29, 1925. The second was held in Louisville, Kentucky at which time Fannie O'Bannon became the Grand Basileus. In a time when education for African Americans was difficult to attain, the founders of Sigma Gamma Rho became educators. They believed that the self-respect, knowledge and discipline gained through study would help individuals to recognize their duty and responsibility for their society. Thus, Sigma Gamma Rho was founded on the precept of education and continues to promote and encourage high scholastic attainment.

From seven young educators, Sigma Gamma Rho has become an international service organization comprised of women from every profession. Sigma Gamma Rho offers its members opportunities to develop their unique talents through leadership training and involvement in sorority activities. Sorority activities provide an atmosphere where friendships and professional contacts are developed which often lead to bonds that last a lifetime. Sigma Gamma Rho's commitment to service is expressed in our slogan, "Greater Service, Greater Progress."

In keeping with the ideals of Sigma Gamma Rho, the sorority has supported the following organizations: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Council of Negro Women, National Pan Hellenic Council, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, National Urban League, March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation, National Mental Health Association, United Negro College Fund, Martin Luther King Center for Non-Violent Social Change, Black Women's Agenda and American Association of University Women. With over 500 chapters with more than 85,000 members in the United States, Bermuda, the Virgin Islands, Bahamas, Germany and Korea, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. is committed to improve the quality of life for its members and the society it serves.

History taken from the National Website with contributions by Sorors Bernadette Pruitt, Caryn E. Neumann, and Katrina Hamilton