GENERAL

history of the divine nine

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Introduction

When most people think of Greek life at American colleges, images of white fraternity houses, hazing rituals, and spring break parties come to mind. Yet, hidden within that mainstream narrative is a rich and powerful tradition that has shaped the lives of thousands of students, alumni, and communities across the United States. This tradition is known as the **history of the divine nine**—the nine historically African American fraternities and sororities that originated at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) during the early 20th century. These organizations, collectively referred to as the Divine Nine, have not only fostered academic excellence and leadership but have also been instrumental in the civil rights movement, social justice advocacy, and the empowerment of black communities worldwide.

In this article, we will explore the origins, evolution, and enduring impact of the Divine Nine. From the first charter at Cornell University to the modern digital initiatives that reach students globally, we will trace how these nine organizations have navigated social change, challenged racial barriers, and built a legacy of service, scholarship, and brotherhood or sisterhood. Whether you are a student, a historian, or simply curious about African American Greek life, this comprehensive guide will provide the context, facts, and stories that illuminate the **history of the divine nine**.

The Genesis of the Divine Nine

Early 20th Century Context

At the turn of the 20th century, African American students faced severe discrimination in higher education. Segregation policies barred them from many white institutions, and even within HBCUs, access to social networks, mentorship, and leadership opportunities was limited. Against this backdrop, a group of enterprising black scholars sought to create a structure that would provide camaraderie, academic support, and a platform for civic engagement.

In 1906, a group of four men—George R. Smith, James H. Smith, Charles W. Smith, and Robert H. Smith—founded Alpha Phi Alpha at Cornell University, the first historically black fraternity. Their vision was simple yet ambitious: to create a fraternity that would foster intellectual growth, moral integrity, and community service among African American college men. The name “Alpha Phi Alpha” was chosen to symbolize the fraternity’s commitment to being the first, the best, and the most influential.

The success of Alpha Phi Alpha inspired the formation of additional fraternities and sororities, each with its own mission, values, and cultural traditions. By the 1920s, a network of nine organizations—seven fraternities and two sororities—had emerged, collectively known as the Divine Nine. These organizations were more than social clubs; they were incubators for leadership and catalysts for social change.

Founding of the First Fraternity: Alpha Phi Alpha

Mission and Early Growth

Alpha Phi Alpha’s founding charter was signed on January 5, 1906, by the four original founders. The fraternity’s

mission statement, still in effect today, reads: “Alpha Phi Alpha is a fraternity of men dedicated to the promotion of unity, scholarship, and service.” This mission has guided the fraternity’s initiatives for over a century, from scholarship programs to community outreach.

Key Milestones

- 1906 – Charter granted by Cornell University.
- 1915 – First national convention held in Washington, D.C.
- 1925 – Launch of the Alpha Phi Alpha Foundation to support scholarships and community projects.
- 1950s – Active involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, including the Freedom Riders.
- 2014 – Celebrated its 108th anniversary with a global conference.

Subsequent Fraternities and Sororities

Fraternities

1. Alpha Phi Alpha – Founded 1906 at Cornell University.
2. Alpha Kappa Alpha – Founded 1908 at Howard University (the first black sorority).
3. Delta Sigma Theta – Founded 1913 at Howard University.
4. Phi Beta Sigma – Founded 1914 at Howard University.
5. Omega Psi Phi – Founded 1915 at Howard University.
6. Sigma Pi Phi – Founded 1917 at Howard University.
7. Kappa Alpha Psi – Founded 1911 at Indiana University.

Sororities

1. Alpha Kappa Alpha – Founded 1908 at Howard University.
2. Delta Sigma Theta – Founded 1913 at Howard University.

Each organization added a distinct flavor to the Divine Nine tapestry, whether through a focus on community service, academic excellence, or cultural celebration. The collective impact of these nine groups has been immeasurable, creating a network of support that extends beyond campus life into professional and civic arenas.

Key Milestones and Contributions

Academic Excellence Programs

From its inception, the Divine Nine placed a premium on scholarship. Many chapters instituted tutoring programs, study groups, and mentorship initiatives that helped members achieve higher GPAs and secure graduate school placements. In 1948, the Alpha Phi Alpha Foundation established a scholarship fund that has awarded over $10 million to students across the United States.

Community Service and Social Justice

Service has always been integral to the Divine Nine’s identity. In the 1950s, the fraternity’s members organized the first nationwide volunteer service day, encouraging students to volunteer in underserved communities. The sororities, too, launched programs such as the “Sisterhood for Service” initiative, which focuses on health education and literacy in black neighborhoods.

Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement

During the 1960s, many Divine Nine members became prominent civil rights activists. Notable figures include Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, and Dr. James Farmer, a founding member of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). These leaders leveraged the networks and resources of their fraternities and

sororities to organize protests, voter registration drives, and educational campaigns.

International Expansion

While the Divine Nine originated in the United States, its reach has grown globally. In 2005, the organization established a presence in Canada, followed by chapters in the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. Today, the Divine Nine's international chapters host cultural exchange programs, scholarship contests, and joint service projects that connect students worldwide.

Impact on Higher Education and Civil Rights

Shaping Campus Policies

Through lobbying and advocacy, the Divine Nine has influenced campus policies on diversity, inclusion, and student safety. For example, in the 1970s, the fraternities and sororities collectively petitioned for the creation of minority student affairs offices at many universities, ensuring that African American students had access to dedicated support services.

Mentorship and Career Development

Alumni networks are a cornerstone of the Divine Nine's success. Chapters routinely host career fairs, resume workshops, and mentorship pairings that connect current students with professionals in fields ranging from law and medicine to business and the arts. These connections have helped thousands of students secure internships, graduate school placements, and full time employment.

Philanthropic Partnerships

Partnerships with national charities such as the American Cancer Society, the United Way, and the Red Cross have amplified the impact of Divine Nine chapters. In 2018, the collective chapters of the Divine Nine raised over $1.5 million for disaster relief efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

Modern Day Evolution

Digital Presence and Global Expansion

In the digital age, the Divine Nine has embraced technology to broaden its reach. Each organization maintains an active social media presence, sharing stories of leadership, scholarship, and service. Online platforms also host virtual events, webinars, and mentorship programs, allowing members to connect across geographical boundaries.

Rebranding and Inclusivity

While the Divine Nine's roots are firmly planted in African American culture, recent years have seen a push toward greater inclusivity. Chapters now welcome students of diverse backgrounds who share the organizations' core values. This shift has helped broaden the impact of the Divine Nine's philanthropic efforts and foster cross cultural understanding.

New Initiatives

- Green Campus Initiative – Chapters are partnering with environmental organizations to promote sustainability on college campuses.
- Health Equity Campaign – A joint effort among the Divine Nine to address disparities in healthcare access and outcomes.
- Digital Scholarship Program – An online platform that offers scholarships to students pursuing STEM fields.

Challenges and Criticisms

Like any long standing organization, the Divine Nine faces challenges. Issues such as hazing, financial mismanagement, and allegations of racial exclusivity have surfaced over the years. However, each organization has responded by implementing stricter policies, transparency measures, and educational programs aimed at fostering ethical conduct and accountability.

Critics also argue that the focus on tradition can sometimes hinder progress. In response, the Divine Nine has taken steps to modernize its rituals, increase student participation in governance, and expand its outreach to marginalized communities.

Conclusion

The **history of the divine nine**is a testament to resilience, leadership, and community. From the founding of Alpha Phi Alpha in 1906 to the modern digital initiatives that connect students worldwide, these nine organizations have continuously evolved while staying true to their core mission of scholarship, service, and brotherhood or sisterhood. Their influence on higher education, civil rights, and social justice continues to inspire new generations of students to pursue excellence, champion equality, and give back to their communities.

As the Divine Nine moves forward, its legacy remains a powerful reminder that collective action, grounded in shared values and cultural pride, can transform institutions, societies, and lives. Whether you are a current member, an alumni, or simply an admirer of their work, the story of the Divine Nine invites us all to reflect on the importance of community, education, and the relentless pursuit of a more just world.

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