

National Register Nomination

Stamp's Super Burgers,
1801 Dalton St.,
Jackson, RS100009009,
LISTED, 12/4/2023

MISSISSIPPI, MARSHALL COUNTY,
Newsom - Adams Family Farm House,
461 Adam Springs Road,
Waterford, SG100009585,
LISTED, 12/7/2023

NEW YORK, KINGS COUNTY,
MARY A. WHALEN (tanker) (Additional Documentation),
Pier 11, Atlantic Basin, Red Hook,
Red Hook, AD12000831,
ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION APPROVED, 12/8/2023

TENNESSEE, SHELBY COUNTY,
Omicron Sigma Chapter House of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated,
805 Saxon Avenue,
Memphis, SG100009581,
LISTED, 12/4/2023

VIRGINIA, LOUDOUN COUNTY,
Philomont Historic District,
Jct. of VA 630 (JEB Stuart Rd.) and VA734 (Snickersville Tpk.),
Philomont, RS100009206,
LISTED, 12/5/2023

WYOMING, LARAMIE COUNTY,
Capitol North Historic District (Boundary Increase),
Roughly bounded by E. 29th, and E. 25th St., Warren and Pioneer Aves.,
Cheyenne, BC100009596,
BOUNDARY INCREASE APPROVED, 12/7/2023

WYOMING, LARAMIE COUNTY,
Capitol North Historic District (Additional Documentation),
Roughly bounded by E. 29th, and E. 25th St., Warren and Pioneer Aves.,
Cheyenne, AD80004048,
ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION APPROVED, 12/7/2023

Attention Nominating Authorities: If you encounter problems uploading files to the Cultural Resources Submission Portal (CRSP), please check the National Register home page at <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister> for system status information.

Key to Prefix Codes:

AD - Additional documentation
BC - Boundary change (increase, decrease, or both)
FD - Federal DOE property under the Federal DOE project
FP - Federal DOE Project
MC - Multiple cover sheet
MP - Multiple nomination (a nomination under a multiple cover sheet)
MPS - Multiple Property Submission
MV - Move request
NL - NHL

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name Omicron Sigma Chapter House of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated
Other names/site number Fisher, John H., House; Top Hat & Tails Club
Name of related multiple property listing N/A
(Remove "N/A" if property is part of a multiple property listing and add name)

2. Location

Street & Number: 805 Saxon Avenue
City or town: Memphis State: Tennessee County: Shelby
Not For Publication: N/A Vicinity: N/A Zip: 38126

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,
I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

national statewide local

Applicable National Register Criteria: A B C D



10/19/2023

Signature of certifying official/Title:

Date

Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee Historical Commission

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting Official:

Date

Title:

State of Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:) _____

 Signature of the Keeper

 Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register _____ 0

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6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC: single dwelling

SOCIAL: clubhouse

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC: single dwelling

SOCIAL: clubhouse

RECREATION AND CULTURE: museum

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Folk Victorian

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: WOOD: weatherboard; BRICK; CONCRETE; ASPHALT

Narrative Description

The Omicron Sigma Chapter House of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated is located at 805 Saxon Avenue, in Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee. As of the 2020 census, the MSA had a population of 1,334,895. The Sorority House was constructed circa 1913. It is a gable and wing, wood-frame building standing one-story tall. A character defining feature of the property is the Folk Victorian full-length porch on the building’s façade (north elevation). The property’s exterior has changed very little since the date of its construction and exhibits a high degree of integrity in design, workmanship, and materials. The interior has experienced minimal alterations except for dropped ceilings and the removal of a wall in the meeting room by the sorority in 1957. The removal of the wall facilitated the adaptive reuse of the building as a community space.

Site Features and Setting

The roughly .3-acre lot of the Omicron Sigma Chapter Sorority House slopes down northward to meet a concrete sidewalk on the south side of Saxon Avenue. The lot is covered in manicured grass. A concrete pathway leads from the sidewalk to the front porch (north elevation) steps. The pathway is accessed from the sidewalk by two concrete steps flanked by wood handrails. A concrete driveway is located east of the

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walkway. This driveway runs parallel with the lot's east boundary line and the east elevation of the house before terminating at the kitchen/rear porch (east elevation). A medium sized tree is located a few feet from the façade's (north elevation) gable projection. This tree was planted by Soror Minnie Echols in 1957.¹ The east, south, and west boundaries of the lot are demarcated by a metal chain-link fence. Vegetation has grown up, around, and into the chain link fence. An empty lot is located directly west of the property, and a twentieth-century, single family home is located to the east of the property. Single and multiple-family homes are located to the south of the property, and LeMoyne-Owen College's campus is located directly across the street to the north.

Interstates 40 and 240 run east of the property, and Interstate 55 runs west. The residence is in the Rowley Subdivision. It is surrounded by single family residential units constructed in the early twentieth century to the south, east, and west. LeMoyne-Owen College (NR Listed 11/09/2005), a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), is located directly across the street north of the Omicron Sigma Chapter Sorority House. Other National Register listed properties near the house include the Elmwood Cemetery (NR Listed 03/20/2002) to the northeast, the Dr. Christopher M. Roulhac House (NR Listed 04/15/2004) to the south, and the Fountain Court Historic District (NR Listed 12/17/1998), also to the south. The Sorority House is also within the boundaries of the locally designated Soulsville USA Historic District.

Omicron Sigma Chapter House of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated, ca. 1913 – Contributing Building

The Omicron Sigma Chapter Sorority House is a one-story, gable and wing, Folk Victorian house with a visible painted brick basement/foundation. All elevations are clad in the original painted wood weatherboard siding. The multi-gable roof is covered in asphalt shingles.

Exterior

Façade (North Elevation)

The brick foundation is visible on the façade. Six concrete steps flanked by metal railing lead up to a front porch situated in the gable and wing of the façade. The porch landing and ceiling are made of wood. The porch is sheltered beneath a flat, asphalt shingled roof supported by five Italianate-influenced, original wood columns. A simple wood balustrade encloses the porch. Original, wood dentil work is visible in the eaves of the porch. The porch shelters an entryway filled with a decorative, cast-iron storm door and original wood door. The wood door features a decorative single-light window, wood scrollwork, and two wood bullseye embellishments. A painted, wood, single light transom is located above the entrance. Two, four-over-six, double-hung wood windows are located east of the entrance beneath the porch. A gable projection occupies the west side of the façade. Two evenly spaced, four-over-four, double-hung wood windows are located on the first-floor of the gable projection. A louvered wood attic vent is located directly beneath the gable peak, with seven original wood brackets supporting the wide-overhanging eaves.

East Elevation

¹ Maddie L. Anderson, "History of the Sigma House of the Omicron Sigma Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority: March, 1975," Omicron Sigma Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Archives. Note that Soror is the term used to define members of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority.

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A crawl-space is located in the northern portion of the foundation. It is covered with a wood panel when not in use. There are three, four-over-four, double-hung wood windows. A louvered wood attic vent is located directly beneath the gable peak. An interior brick chimney is visible on the elevation's roofline.

South Elevation

The brick foundation is visible on this elevation. A front-gable projection occupies the west end of the south elevation. An interior brick chimney pierces the roofline, and a louvered wood attic vent is located just beneath the gable peak. A centered four-over-four, double hung wood window is centered on the projection. The top portion of the window is hidden beneath a plywood sheet. The bottom portion of the window is missing half of its lights and muntin. A shed roof porch sat upon a concrete foundation and supported by a single wood column shelters a small porch. A single entrance filled with a decorative, wrought-iron storm door and wood door is centered beneath the porch.

A flat roof addition connects the west and east gable projections. It was a porch before it was enclosed to provide space for a kitchen prior to 1957. Two, one-over-one, double hung wood windows pierce the south wall of the addition. A shed roof porch supported by two wood posts and sat upon a poured concrete landing is located on the east wall of the addition. The porch is accessed by three concrete steps and shelters an entrance with a single light wood transom. The entrance is filled with a decorative wrought iron storm door and a four-paneled wood door.

The east front-gable projection features a two-over-two light, double hung wood window. This window is sheltered by the flat roof addition's shed roof porch. A single wood attic vent is located directly beneath the gable peak.

West Elevation

The west elevation is slightly obscured by the chain link fence and accompanying vegetation. A single front-gable projection is located towards the northern end of the elevation. A single four-over-four, double-hung wood window is centered on each of the projection's north, south, and west wall. The projection is flanked to the north by a single four-over-four, double hung wood window, and to the south by two, four-over-four, double hung wood windows and two, six-over-six, double hung wood windows.

Interior

Unless otherwise noted, all ceilings are covered in plaster. Original wood trim and the original wood doors with wood, painted two-light transoms are also located throughout the interior spaces. Doors are generally four-paneled and retain their original hardware. Walls are either covered in plaster or mid-twentieth century wood paneling. Floors are covered with carpet, linoleum, or VCT.

The façade entrance opens into the central hallway. The central hall floor is covered in VCT, and the walls are covered in plaster. The Living Room/Museum is located immediately to the east upon entering and is accessed by a large opening framed by a wooden surround. Original wood trim and baseboards are present throughout the Living Room/Museum. A metal fireplace is located on the south wall of the Living Room/Museum, though it is no longer functional.

Directly west of the Living Room/Museum is the Meeting/Training Room. The room can be accessed from the central hallway by two separate doors. The floor is covered in carpet, and the walls are covered in wood

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paneling. Baseboards, trim, and surrounds are wood and original throughout. Two modern ceiling light/fans are located at the north and south end of the Meeting/Training Room. A final door is located on the room's south wall and accesses a small hallway that leads to the Bathroom, Storage Room, and Tenet Bedroom

Two doorways are located in the main hallway. Directly east of the first door is the Dining Room/Storage Room. The floor is covered in carpet, and the walls are covered in plaster. Original base boards, wood trim, and door surrounds are located throughout.

The kitchen is accessed through the last hallway door and is south of the Dining Room/Storage Room. The kitchen floor is covered with linoleum, and the walls are clad in mid-twentieth century wood paneling. Wood wainscoting and the original door surrounds and wood trim are present throughout the kitchen.

Directly west of the last hallway door is a small hallway accessed through a doorless opening. The hallway floor is covered in linoleum, and the walls are covered in mid-twentieth century wood paneling and wood wainscoting. Original wood trim and wood door surrounds are located throughout the hallway. The north hallway door accesses the Meeting/Training Room.

A door on the west wall of the hallway accesses the bathroom. The bathroom floor is covered in linoleum, and the walls are covered in mid-twentieth century wood paneling and wood wainscoting. Original wood trim and wood door surrounds are located throughout. A small closet accessed by a five-panel door with molded wood surrounded is located on the north wall directly upon entering the bathroom.

A doorway on the south wall of the hallway accesses the Storage Room. The storage room floor is covered in carpet, and the walls are clad in mid-twentieth century wood paneling. Original wood trim and wood door surrounds are located throughout. A door in the south wall of the Storage Room accesses the Tenant Bedroom, which matches the Storage Room in materials, with the exception of a wood door on the east wall that leads to the outside shed roof porch on the south elevation.

Integrity

The Omicron Sigma Chapter Sorority House retains a high level of integrity. The property remains in its original location on Saxon Avenue. The setting has changed very little since the Period of Significance, as it is primarily surrounded by single family homes. Its relationship to LeMoyne-Owen College also speaks to its significance as a sorority for undergraduate and graduate students in the area. The Sorority House also retains its integrity of materials, design, and workmanship. It retains character defining features, including its original weatherboard siding, Folk Victorian porch, windows, doors with transom, and wood trim and door surrounds. Changes to the overall layout of the building and interior materials facilitated the use of the property as a Sorority House and occurred in large part before or during the property's Period of Significance. Due to the retention of location, setting, design, materials, and workmanship, the property also retains integrity of association and feeling.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions.)

ETHNIC HERITAGE: Black
SOCIAL HISTORY
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance
ca. 1913, 1957-1973

Significant Dates
N/A

Significant Person
(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation
N/A

Architect/Builder
UNKNOWN

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

N/A

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

The Omicron Sigma Chapter House of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A and Criterion C at the local level of significance. The Areas of Significance include Ethnic Heritage: Black, Social History, and Architecture. In 1957, the Omicron Sigma Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated purchased the nominated property to serve as the chapter house. Part of the “Divine Nine,” Sigma Gamma Rho is an international African American sorority dedicated to community service and the advancement of their member’s personal and professional lives. The Omicron Sigma Chapter House served as both the headquarters and event space for the chapter’s locally significant programs, such as Teen-Town and “Rhomania.” The Chapter House is also significant for its Architecture. Constructed in 1913, the house retains its important character defining features, including wide overhanging eaves, Folk Victorian porch, original wood windows, doors, wood trim, and door surrounds. The Periods of Significance are 1913, which reflects the year that the house was constructed and attained its significance in Architecture, and 1957-1973, which corresponds with the years the Omicron Sigma Chapter acquired the house and enacted its locally significant community programs, ending with the default 50-year cutoff.

Narrative Statement of Significance

Criterion A: Ethnic Heritage: Black & Social History

Memphis Context

The Omicron Sigma Chapter House of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated is located in Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee. The original settlers of Memphis were Native Americans who founded a large prehistoric Mississippian village along the Mississippi River. Memphis received its name from white settlers in 1819 when Andrew Jackson, John Overton, and James Winchester founded the city in Spring the same year. Jackson and Overton owned the initial five-thousand acres along the Chickasaw Bluffs. Jackson later traded his land to John C. McClemore, the “fourth founding father” of Memphis. The initial settlement of Memphis was slow, but the rise of cotton as an important economic driver throughout the South brought an increase in settlers and wealth.²

The completion of the Memphis and Charleston Railway in 1857 linked the city to the Atlantic Coast, further fueling the city’s explosive growth. This connection to the eastern seaboard opened new markets for selling and trading goods. Wealth flowed into the city, and areas such as Vance, Pontotoc, Beale, and Linden quickly became associated with ornate buildings occupied by the rich white elite who profited from the cotton industry.³ By 1859, Memphis was the largest city in Tennessee.⁴

However, not everyone benefited from Memphis’ explosive growth in the nineteenth century. The city’s economy relied heavily on enslaved labor. In 1791, the Tennessee territory had a population of 35,691

² Carroll Van West, *Tennessee’s Historic Landscapes: A Traveler’s Guide* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), p. 109. Union Street was the original border between Memphis and South Memphis.

³ John Linn Hopkins, “Universal Life Insurance Company,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, June 12, 2007, p. 13.

⁴ West, *Tennessee’s Historic Landscapes*, p. 111.

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persons, which included 3,417 people of African descent. As white settlers moved west, they brought their enslaved with them. Though slavery touched all parts of Tennessee, the largest concentration of slaves in the state lied in West Tennessee. Memphis itself was second only to Louisville as the largest slave trade market in the Upper South.⁵

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Memphis had strong Confederate sympathies due to this reliance on enslaved labor. The Union invaded Tennessee in February of 1862 and quickly captured Forts Henry and Donelson. Memphis' economic wealth, large slave trade market, and strategic location made the city a prime target for Union forces. By June of 1862 the city was firmly under Union control and would remain so throughout the Civil War. Under Union occupation, Memphis became the site of the largest headquarters for African American Union soldiers. A large "contraband" camp, the term used to describe the formerly enslaved freed under Union occupation, was also located nearby on President's Island.⁶ The Civil War ended in April of 1865 with Confederate defeat, and United States Congress ratified the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery, that same year.

The ratification of the 13th Amendment and beginning of Reconstruction was a time of change and opportunity for African Americans in Memphis and across Tennessee. However, Black Memphians faced immediate, violent opposition from white citizens. African Americans made up sixty percent of the city's population in 1866 and lived primarily in and around South Memphis.⁷ Race relations worsened in Memphis because whites resented Black Memphian's newfound freedom and the defeat of the Confederacy, which they attributed in part to the African American population. As a result, when a minor altercation took place between a former African American soldier and white Memphian in May of 1866, South Memphis became the epicenter for an episode of white violence against African Americans. White Memphians, including police officers and firefighters, invaded South Memphis. For two days the white mob looted, killed, and burned the freedmen's settlement. By the time order was restored, the mobs had killed forty-six African Americans, raped five Black women, and destroyed four African American churches and eight schools.⁸

Even in the face of such violence and destruction, Black Memphians founded educational institutions and served in elected positions in the city. By the early 1900s, Memphis' African American community boasted eleven elementary schools, one high school, two post-secondary institutions, and the University of West Tennessee. Two African American men were elected to the Board of Common Council in 1872. This number increased to four in 1873, and six in 1874. Lymus Wallace was elected to the Board of Public works in 1882

⁵ Linda T. Wynn, *Journey to Our Past: A Guide to African-American Markers in Tennessee* (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Commission, 1999), p. vii.

⁶ "Living Contraband – Former Slaves in the Nation's Capital During the Civil War," National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/living-contraband-former-slaves-in-the-nation-s-capital-during-the-civil-war.htm>.

⁷ West, *Tennessee's Historic Landscapes*, p. 111.

⁸ Bobby L. Lovett, "Memphis Race Riot of 1866," *Tennessee Encyclopedia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press), October 8, 2017; MacKenzie Lanum, "Memphis Riot, 1866," *Black Past*, November 20, 2011, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/memphis-riot-1866/>, accessed 7/17/2023; West, *Tennessee's Historic Landscapes*, p. 111.

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and served until 1886. Five of the fourteen African Americans elected to the Tennessee General Assembly in the 1880s and 1890s represented Shelby County, and most resided in Memphis.⁹

In response, white Tennessee lawmakers introduced new laws and legislation to curtail African American opportunities and preserve the racial hierarchy that existed prior to the Civil War. These laws collectively became known as Jim Crow laws. Though Jim Crow laws began at different times in different places, the 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case is seen as the landmark case that established the constitutionality of “separate but equal.” These laws not only mandated segregation, but they also controlled the everyday facets of African American life. Jim Crow laws were enforced through both legal systems and the extralegal system of lynching. Lynchings often took place in public areas and were attended by crowds of people. They were also frequently endorsed by, or received tacit approval, from the local authorities.

In contrast to other cities in the South, Black Memphians were not denied the right to vote in Memphis. However, they did have to contend with Edward Hull Crump and the “Crump Machine.” Crump, known as the “Boss of Memphis,” built a political career that spanned over fifty years. Though he was a staunch segregationist, Crump worked with the sizeable African American political leadership cadre in Memphis. These negotiations ensured that African American communities received improved city services, parks and playgrounds, and new schools in exchange for their continue support of Crump. As the Civil Rights Movement evolved, African American leaders, who gained experience in political machinations by negotiating with Crump, challenged his absolute authority and his support for segregationist practices.¹⁰

The first National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in Tennessee was founded in Memphis following the lynching of Ell Persons. By 1919 it was the largest branch in the South.¹¹ During the late-1940s and early-1950s, the Memphis NAACP was tentative about challenging Crump’s machine. This changed with the arrival of returning World War II veterans and the activism of college aged youth in the mid-1950s. The historic ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the death of Crump in 1954 generated new opportunities for the advancement of equal rights and Black political achievement in Memphis.¹² The Memphis NAACP branch capitalized on the opportunities and claimed two major victories over segregation in 1960. The court case *Northcross v. Board of Education of the Memphis City Schools* resulted in city officials voluntarily desegregating schools starting in the first grade. Sit-ins at local libraries led by students from LeMoyne College and Owen College kickstarted a movement that resulted in the desegregation of lunch counters, parks, movie theaters, the local zoo, and the Memphis Library by the end of the same year.¹³

⁹ “Civil War and Reconstruction,” The Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change, The University of Memphis, <https://www.memphis.edu/benhooks/mapping-civil-rights/civil-war-reconstruction.php>, accessed 7/17/2023; Wynn, *Journey to Our Past*, p. xvii.

¹⁰ “The Crump Era,” The Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change, The University of Memphis, last updated 5/12/2023, <https://www.memphis.edu/benhooks/mapping-civil-rights/crump-era.php>, accessed 7/18/2023.

¹¹ “History,” NAACP Memphis, <https://naacpmemphis.org/history/>, accessed 7/18/2023.

¹² “The Civil Rights Era Begins in Memphis,” The Benjamin Hooks Institute for Social Change, The University of Memphis, last updated 5/12/2023, <https://www.memphis.edu/benhooks/mapping-civil-rights/civil-rights-begins.php>, accessed 7/18/2023.

¹³ “Desegregation of City Schools,” The Benjamin Hooks Institute for Social Change, the University of Memphis, last updated 5/12/2023, <https://www.memphis.edu/benhooks/mapping-civil-rights/desegregation-schools.php>, accessed 7/18/2023; Bobby L.

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The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a major victory for the Civil Rights Movement nationally. The act authorized federal measures to enforce any holdouts for school desegregation and provided measures to further dismantle the systems of Jim Crow. However, the passage of the act did not mean that the Civil Rights Movement was over, as African Americans continued to face challenges in employment and economic justice. On March 28, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in Memphis to support the city's sanitation workers as they went on strike. The peaceful protest quickly escalated into violence, leaving one marcher dead, sixty-four injured, and three hundred arrested. King returned to the city on April 3rd to deliver his famous "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech in preparation for a peaceful march in Memphis as part of his Poor People's Campaign. On April 4th, King was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel (NR Listed 09/02/1982). Riots erupted in Memphis and other cities nationally following the news of King's death. The sanitation workers continued their strike, which ended on April 16, 1968, with union recognition and higher wages.¹⁴

Even as Black Memphians participated in the Civil Rights Movement, they also had to contend with "white flight" and the destructive effects of urban renewal projects and the construction of the interstate system. Traditionally white areas, such as Vance, Pontotoc, Beale, and Linden, were occupied by African Americans in the twentieth century as whites moved eastward. African Americans brought new life and vitality to these areas and communities, which became centers of the African American middle class, culture, and commerce.¹⁵ Beginning in the mid-1950s, Memphis initiated a series of urban renewal and interstate construction projects that targeted African American neighborhoods. Between 1955-1978, the Memphis Housing Authority demolished 3,000 buildings in eleven projects. A particularly noteworthy case of this destruction occurred near Beale Street. All of the African American homes around Beale Street were razed until only Beale Street remained. An observer noted that one could "stand on Main Street now and see to where the city limits were 50 years ago and it's all vacant land."¹⁶

Whites in Memphis who were dissatisfied with desegregation left the city of Memphis for the suburbs in great numbers during this period. This exodus is referred to as "white flight." The results of white flight, paired with urban renewal projects and the interstate system, proved damaging for African American communities in Memphis. The city allocated funding towards these new white communities while disinvesting in the critical infrastructure for the inner-city.¹⁷ Over time this disinvestment caused a decay in the inner-city and rise in vacancies, poverty, and crime. By 1968, the value of houses and commercial businesses in Memphis had decreased dramatically.¹⁸ Though these forces represented challenges to be overcome, by the 1990s, Black Memphians held a majority of elected local offices and state positions that

Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), p. 280; Cynthia G. Fleming, "'We Shall Overcome': Tennessee and the Civil Rights Movement," p. 451 in Carroll Van West, ed. *Tennessee History: The Land, the People, and the Culture* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998).

¹⁴ "1968, the Sanitation Workers and Dr. King." The Benjamin Hooks Institute for Social Change, the University of Memphis, last updated 5/12/2023, <https://www.memphis.edu/benhooks/mapping-civil-rights/1968.php>, accessed 7/18/2023

¹⁵ Hopkins, "Universal Life Insurance Company," National Register Nomination, p. 13.

¹⁶ West, *Tennessee's Historic Landscapes*, p. 113.

¹⁷ Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee*, p. 81.

¹⁸ Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee*, p. 228.

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represented the city. A number of innovative approaches are being considered to address challenges in Memphis.¹⁹

Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLO) and Sigma Gamma Rho

It is within this broader continuum of African American history that the Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLO) were founded. Established at the beginning of the twentieth century, BGLOs played an important role in both solidifying the bonds of African American college students and their communities, and encouraging civic action, community service, philanthropy, and high scholasticism within its members. W.E.B. DuBois, who was a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, considered the Greek letter organizations and their members to be an important part of the “talented tenth,” that is the top ten percent of African Americans who would assist the remaining ninety-percent in achieving socioeconomic equality.²⁰ BGLOs were part of a larger number of institutions founded by African Americans to resist Jim Crow and care for the unique needs of their members and community in a segregated society.²¹

Sigma Gamma Rho was founded on November 12, 1922, at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana.²² Butler College founder David Butler was an attorney, newspaper publisher, abolitionist, and member of the Christian Church. Butler wanted to establish a Christian university “free from the taint of slavery, offering instruction in every branch of liberal and professional education.” On November 1st, 1855, Northwestern Christian University opened in Indianapolis. The university was the first in Indiana (and the third nationally) to admit women to the university. Northwestern was renamed Butler University in 1875 in honor of its founder. In 1896 it became part of the University of Indianapolis system and was renamed Butler College. That same year, the college moved to a twenty-five-acre campus in Irvington, a suburb of Indianapolis. This move marked a decided shift in the relationship between the university and its African American students in the coming years.²³

¹⁹ “Memphis Today,” The Benjamin Hooks Institute for Social Change, the University of Memphis, last updated 5/12/2023; “Desegregation of City Schools,” The Benjamin Hooks Institute for Social Change, the University of Memphis, last updated 5/12/2023, <https://www.memphis.edu/benhooks/mapping-civil-rights/memphis-today.php>, accessed 7/18/2023.

²⁰ Gregory S. Parks and Matthew W. Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose: Black Sororities and Fraternities and the Fight for Equality* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), pp. 2-3; Fred A. Bonner II, “The Historically Black Greek Letter Organization; Finding a Place and Making a Way,” *Black History Bulletin* Vol. 69, No. 1 (Spring, 2006): pp. 17-21.

²¹ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, p. 4. The first BGLO established was Alpha Phi Alpha in 1906 at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. As historians Gregory S. Parks and Matthew W. Hughey note, each fraternity and sorority approached the unique issues facing African Americans through the twentieth and twenty-first century differently, though all tended to focus on civil activism, civic education, public policy, philanthropy, community service, and community organizing. This nomination focuses on Sigma Gamma Rho and its contributions as a BGLO and member of the “Divine Nine.” For more information on other BGLO, see Parks and Hughey’s *A Pledge with Purpose*. Other important Black institutions included the church, cemetery organizations, secret societies/fraternal organizations, and collegiate literary societies

²² The founding dates for each BGLO were Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity in 1906; Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority in 1908; Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity in 1911; Omega Psi Phi Fraternity in 1911; Delta Sigma Theta Sorority in 1913; Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity in 1914; Zeta Phi Beta Sorority in 1920; Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority in 1922; and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity in 1963.

²³ L. Chanel Dickerson and Wanda LeFlore, “The Herstory of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.,” *The Aurora*, Summer 2022, p. 34.

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In 1927, the college instituted a quota allowing for the admission of only ten African Americans to the college annually. This shift was tied directly to the rise of white supremacy and Jim Crow in Indiana. Eva Hallman notes in “Sigma Gamma Rho: A Legacy to Remember” that nearly one-third of native-born white men in Indiana were members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in 1927, and that key members of the city and state government were also open Klan members. One member of the Butler University Board of Regents was known to support the KKK, and The Grand Dragon of the KKK, D.C. Stephenson, lived directly across the street from the house where Sigma Gamma Rho founded their campus headquarters.²⁴

It was in this environment that Mary Lou Allison Gardner Little founded the Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority. Little lost both of her parents at the age of three and was raised by a family friend. She graduated from Shortridge High School in 1915 and received a diploma from Indianapolis Normal School in 1918, the same year she began teaching.²⁵ A young educator, Mary believed that a society formed by, and composed of, Black women educators was needed. The purpose of the society would be to work together towards the common purposes of self-improvement, friendship, camaraderie, and to educate, uplift, and motivate youths to greater achievement, wholesome living, and exploring new horizons.

Mary found six like-minded educators that shared her vision and, with their help, Sigma Gamma Rho was founded on November 12, 1922.²⁶ Sigma Gamma Rho became an incorporated national collegiate sorority on December 30, 1929, with the Alpha Chapter located at Butler College. Though Sigma Gamma Rho was originally only open to educators, the organization expanded to include women of all educational backgrounds in 1929.²⁷ At the time of its founding, Sigma Gamma Rho was the only member of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) that started as professional organization, was the only sorority founded at a Predominately White Institution (PWI), the only sorority not founded at Howard University, and the only BGLO founded by university graduates. Their flower is the yellow tea rose, their mascot is the poodle, and their colors are royal blue and gold. The slogan is “Greater Service, Greater Progress.”²⁸

The sorority spent its first three years creating the organization’s structure and mapping the future of the sorority’s programming.²⁹ In this, Sigma Gamma Rho’s approach to community service was heavily influenced by the ideals and traditions of Mary Church Terrel and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Terrell and the NACW emphasized that Black women should be leaders in raising support

²⁴ Eva Hallman, “Sigma Gamma Rho: A Legacy to Remember,” *Uwire Text*, Gale Academic OneFile, February 8, 2023, accessed July 5, 2023. D.C. Stephenson’s address was 5432 University.

²⁵ “Our Story,” Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.,” <https://sgrho1922.org/>, accessed 7/5/2023. Mary moved with her husband to Los Angeles in 1928 and finished her undergraduate at the University of California in Los Angeles. She taught in the Los Angeles school system until 1967. The Mary Lou Allison Loving Cup award is presented at each Boule to the chapter with the most successful programming.

²⁶ The founding members were Dorothy Hanley Whiteside, Vivian Irene White Marbury, Nannie Mae Gahn Johnson, Hattie Mae Annette Dulin Redford, Bessie Mae Downey Rhoades Martin, and Curbena McClure

²⁷ “Walking in the Footsteps of the Founders of Sigma Gamma Rho,” <https://www.irvingtonhistory.org/visit/exhibits/sigma-gamma-rho/>.

²⁸ “Our Story,” Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. More information about the other founders of the sorority can be found on at: “Our Founders,” Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., https://www.sgrho1922.org/SGR/sgr/About/Our_Founders.aspx?hkey=52574713-7016-4612-995e-a63bd5d54ff4.

²⁹ Dickerson and LeFlore, “The Herstory of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.,” p. 34.

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for childcare, assist with training and educating community members for gainful employment, and lobby for wage equity.³⁰ Sociologist Marcia D. Hernandez also noted that black sororities like Sigma Gamma Rho provided their members opportunities to engage in sisterhood, community service, philanthropy, and professional development. These influences shaped the sorority's programming historically and continue to be a part of the modern chapter's work in the form of the Women's Wellness Initiative, Project Cradle Care, and Operation Bigbookbag.³¹

The hardening of Jim Crow, spread of segregation and racial violence, and the Great Depression in the 1920s and 1930s shaped the programming decisions of BGLOs and Sigma Gamma Rho. By 1932 nearly fifty percent of all African Americans were out of work. In response, BGLOs took on the role of providing for the social welfare of their communities and as advocates for public reform, civic education, and civil rights.³² Sigma Gamma Rho unveiled several national programs during the 1930s that addressed these issues. At the 1935 10th Annual Boule (the sorority's national convention), Grand Basileus (the sorority's president) Bertha Black Rhoda introduced the Vocational Guidance Program. The program took members on tours of industrial plants to educate them about employment opportunities.³³ Though this program was initially restricted to sorority members, it was opened up to include members of the chapter's communities soon after.³⁴ Sigma Gamma Rho member Francis Moss Man also created the Employment Aid Bureau in 1935, which placed members in community positions and other forms of employment beneficial to the member and their community.³⁵ Each chapter was given lease to administer the programs as they saw fit or develop their own. The Omicron Sigma Chapter in Memphis was established during this period on May 1, 1937.

Sigma Gamma Rho also developed programming to advocate for civil rights. In 1930, the sorority launched a program encouraging each of their members to write letters to their representative supporting the Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynch Bill.³⁶ Drafted by New York Democratic Senator Robert F. Wagner and Senator Edward Costigan, the legislation proposed that those who participate in lynch mobs, including public officials and law enforcement officers who failed to protect victims in their custody, should be federally prosecuted.³⁷ Sigma Gamma Rho also sponsored programs that raised funds to assist legal teams in court cases that challenged Jim Crow, inequality, injustice. This program was overseen by the sorority's Education Commission, composed of members Edith Malone Ward, Ida Laws, and Ethel Garner.³⁸

³⁰ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, p. 48.

³¹ "Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated," Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., <https://sgrhoe1922.org/>, accessed 7/5/2023. The Women's Wellness Initiative focuses on bringing attention to health issues that impact women and women of color. Project Cradle Care seeks to improve pregnancy outcomes in high-risk communities by providing and distributing a dequate prenatal education and care. Finally, Operation Bigbookbag address the needs and challenges of school aged children who are educationally at risk. For more information about the programs, see the link in this footnote.

³² Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, p. 75.

³³ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, p. 77.

³⁴ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, p. 117.

³⁵ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, p. 78.

³⁶ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, p. 93.

³⁷ "Costigan-Wagner Bill," NAACP, 2023, <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/legislative-milestones/costigan-wagner-bill>, accessed 7/18/2023.

³⁸ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, p. 95.

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The 1930s also marked the establishment of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). Established on May 10, 1930, at Howard University, the NPHC charter members were Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, and Omega Psi Phi Fraternity. The purpose of the NPHC's founding was to provide "unanimity of thought and action as far as possible in the conduct of Greek letter collegiate fraternities and sororities, and to consider problems of mutual interest to its member organizations." The charter members were joined by Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity in 1931. Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority joined in 1937 and was the last BGLO to join the NPHC until Iota Phi Theta Fraternity in 1997, thus giving the group their nickname the "Divine Nine."³⁹

Despite the goal of creating unanimity of thought, the founders of the NPHC realized such a goal was impossible considering the sheer number of BGLO chapters and the differences in their cultures and members. Instead, the organization evolved into what historians Gregory Parks and Matthew Hughey referred to as a "clearinghouse" of ideas that examined issues facing African American BGLO members and their communities, including education, scholarship, economic development, Black employment, and issues pertaining to civil rights and social justice. The NPHC also provided a regular meeting ground where BGLOs could discuss these ideas and meet to organize and coordinate its members.⁴⁰

Sigma Gamma Rho's programming in the 1940s reflected the broader BGLO sorority focus on wage equity, employment, and education. In 1946, the Grand Basileus Ethel Ross Smith donated \$150 to the "Permanent Fair Employment" movement and pledged Sigma Gamma Rho's commitment to the "Fair Employment Practice Commission."⁴¹ This was in conjunction with existing vocational and job placement programs. In 1944, the sorority donated \$500 to the NAACP and the Negro College Fund. At the 33rd Boule, Sigma Gamma Rho distributed nearly twenty-five thousand dollars of scholarship awards to African American youth in communities across the country. The sorority also launched the "Teen Towns" program in 1944 to combat juvenile delinquency. Each local chapter was given the authority to craft the program to meet the individual needs of their community. The Omicron Sigma Chapter in Memphis adjusted the national project to serve crippled youths at the local Collins Chapel Hospital. They provided beds, crutches, and transportation for the youth who received treatment at the hospital free of cost.⁴² Omicron Sigma also hosted education workshops and their own pre-teen version of the program.

In 1948, Sigma Gamma Rho and the other BGLOs came together to establish the American Council on Human Rights (ACHR).⁴³ The mission of the ACHR was "to secure the basic human rights for all citizens, national and international, regardless of race, color, or creed; to urge passage of legislation for the good of mankind; and to oppose legislation detrimental to mankind."⁴⁴ The founding of this organization marked a

³⁹ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, p. 73; "About the NPHC," National Pan-Hellenic Council, 2023, <https://www.nphchq.com/about>, accessed 7/5/2023.

⁴⁰ Parks and Hughey, p. 73; "National Pan-Hellenic Council Celebrates 93 Years of Collaboration and Service to Communities Worldwide," News Release, May 10, 2023, <https://www.ncphchq.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/051023-News-Release-NPHC-Is-93.pdf>, accessed 7/5/2023.

⁴¹ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, p. 171.

⁴² Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, pp. 172-174.

⁴³ The other founding members were Alpha Kappa Alpha, Phi Delta Kappa, and Zeta Phi Beta.

⁴⁴ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, p. 235.

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turning point for BGLOs and their commitment to the Civil Rights Movement. Though all BGLOs were involved in civic activism, the ACHR represented a focused effort to organize member efforts. The ACHR raised funds for organizations like the NAACP and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), hosted voter registration campaigns, and helped mobilized public opinion through education, community service, and lobbying.⁴⁵

Sigma Gamma Rho formally adopted the ACHR agenda and participated in their “Workshop on Planning for Integration.”⁴⁶ Sigma Gamma Rho also pledged to support student sit-ins and asked local chapters to cancel formal dances and hold fundraisers to support the ACHR’s Student Emergency Fund, which paid the fines and other expenses of those arrested at peaceful demonstrations. Sigma Gamma Rho members attended the White House Conference on Children and Youth in 1960, where they represented the sorority and spoke to the challenges they and their communities faced.⁴⁷ The dissolution of the ACHR in 1963 shifted the focus from civil rights initiatives to more traditional programming that focused on education, wage equity, and employment.⁴⁸ As the twenty-first century progressed, BGLOs like Sigma Gamma Rho continued to engage in service and philanthropy while also supporting important contemporary movements that address issues relevant to African American and other minority communities.

The Omicron Sigma Chapter of Memphis

John H. Fisher was the original owner of the property at 805 Saxon Avenue. Fisher enlisted with the Bluff City Grays in Memphis in 1861. He was then placed under General Nathan Bedford Forrest’s command, who he continued to serve under during his military career with the Confederacy. After the war, he returned to Memphis and organized the cotton firm J.H. Fisher & Company. Fisher was an honorary member of the Memphis Cotton Exchange. His wife, Bettie A. Fisher, preceded him in death in February of 1912. Fisher passed away in the home from uremia on April 27, 1913.⁴⁹ The residence was later sold to Harold A. Jamison, who was the president of the Top Hat & Tails Club, a gentleman and card club that also hosted wedding venues.⁵⁰ On August 22, 1957, the property was sold to the Ladies of the Omicron Sigma Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated.⁵¹

The Omicron Sigma Chapter was an important part of the community prior to their arrival at 805 Saxon. Leslie P. Taylor was the driving force behind the founding of Omicron Sigma. She selected seven women from the community to serve alongside her as founding members: Ester Brown, Jim Ella Cotton, Evelyn Johnson, Virginia Johnson, Lytia Yarbrough McKinney, Velia J. Wiggins, and Helen O’Brion. The chapter was then initiated by Soror Rubye Peake Watts Hall, and officially became a member of the Sigma family on May 1, 1937. Leslie Taylor served as the first Basileus of the chapter. The Omicron Sigma Chapter was an

⁴⁵ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, pp. 257-258.

⁴⁶ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, pp. 235-236.

⁴⁷ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, pp. 248-250.

⁴⁸ Parks and Hughey, *A Pledge with Purpose*, p. 258.

⁴⁹ Obituary, *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, April 28, 1913.

⁵⁰ Omicron Sigma Chapter Sorority House, Sigma Gamma Rho Incorporated Information Packet, Tennessee Historical Commission, 2023.

⁵¹ Omicron Sigma Chapter Sorority House, Sigma Gamma Rho Incorporated Information Packet, Tennessee Historical Commission, 2023.

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integrated chapter at the very beginning, as founder Helen O’Brion was white.⁵² Her husband, Dr. Robert O’Brion, was the head of the Sociology Department at LeMoyne College. Members of the sorority immediately set to work establishing an undergraduate chapter. Their first undergraduate chapter established was the Alpha Omicron chapter at LeMoyne-Owen College on December 23, 1937. Omicron Sigma founded two additional undergraduate chapters. Gamma Chi was founded on the Memphis State University (later University of Memphis) campus in 1967, and the Omicron Xi chapter was founded at Rhodes College on October 3, 1998.⁵³ Omicron Sigma was the mother chapter of all its undergraduate chapters and was responsible for mentoring and guiding them. The sorority house is also where the chapters met to organize and carry out the sorority’s programming.

The chapter’s programming from 1937-1957 aligned with the sorority’s national focus on philanthropy, education, community uplift, and civil rights advocacy while also reflecting the unique needs of Omicron Sigma’s local communities and members. Only three years after their founding, the Omicron Sigma Chapter donated money to aid victims of the Natchez dance hall fire. The chapter also paid for the wiring expenses to provide electricity to the WPA Nursery School formerly located at 546 Beale.⁵⁴ Other philanthropic activities included a full tuition scholarship to LeMoyne for Corine Johnson, paid for the sorority.⁵⁵ Sigma Gamma Rho also presented local David Norris a \$25 bond for saving a white boy from drowning, and sponsored a concert for the local community that featured Lynne Thompson, a young African American ballerina recognized as a star in her field on Broadway and in Hollywood.⁵⁶

The sorority’s financial contributions to their community were matched by an early commitment to the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement and the push for equality. In August of 1954, the Omicron Sigma Chapter hosted Sigma Gamma Rho’s 23rd Annual Boule at LeMoyne College. The theme of the annual meeting was “Human Rights for the Preservation of Democracy,” and sessions lasted from August 17-22nd. Roughly 350 college-aged African American women arrived from all over the country for the meeting.⁵⁷ The

⁵² Helen O’Brien was dedicated to the idea of economic justice and involved with the Memphis Socialist party. In the 1930s, Helen traveled to California to learn more about then Democratic nominee for governor Upton Sinclair and the EPIC movement. Upon her return, she described him as a “direct blow at Socialism and a menace to the movement.” “Socialists Reported Divided on Sinclair,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, September 24, 1934; “Upton Sinclair Topic: Socialists Will Meet at Arbeiter Ring Institute Sunday,” *Memphis, Tennessee*, September 21, 1934.

⁵³ Pearl Schwartz White and Lillie Wilkes, *Behind these Doors, a Legacy: The History of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority* (Chicago: Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, 1994), p. 341; “Omicron Sigma Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.,” Omicron Sigma Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho, 2022, <https://omicronsigma1922.org/about-omicron-sigma>. A second chapter, Iota Lambda Sigma, was chartered in Germantown, Shelby County on June 29, 2002, by Doris Holt, Stephanie Sumlar, Rochelle Pearson, Barbara Hampton-Franseen, Anna Wilson, Johnnie Donald, Denean Carr, Kimberly Sumlar Saddler, and Sophia Atkins. It is the only other chapter besides Omicron Sigma in Shelby County. For more information on their chapter, see: “Iota Lambda Sigma Alumnae Chapter,” Iota Lambda Sigma, <https://www.ilssgrho1922.org/ils-chapter-history>.

⁵⁴ “Give Aid to Fire Victims,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, April 27, 1940; “WPA School Gets Lights,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, December 31, 1940.

⁵⁵ “82 Melrose Seniors Given Diplomas,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, June 4, 1950.

⁵⁶ “For Heroism,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, Memphis, Tennessee, April 21, 1955; “Young Ballerina Dances Tomorrow,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, March 26, 1952.

⁵⁷ “Sorority Council to Meet,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, August 1, 1954; “Annual Meeting of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, Memphis, Tennessee, August 16, 1954. Marnie L. Adams was the Basileus of the

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keynote speaker was Rosa Page Welch, who spoke on August 19th at 8:00 pm at the Metropolitan Baptist Church in Memphis. Welch, a native Mississippian, was the vice-president of the National Council of Churches and a former soprano concert singer. She was also named the good will ambassador by the Federal Council of Church Women, a position which saw her travel abroad to seventeen countries in seventeen months. In her speech, Welch noted that the Supreme Court's decision to end segregation was "the greatest blow world Communism has yet received." She spoke about her experiences abroad and emphasized that the world was watching, and worrying about, America's race relations. Fifteen-year-old Memphian Laura Pulliam also received a \$50 award that night for her essay titled "My Share in America's Future," which won the sorority's national essay contest.⁵⁸

The success of the Boule and growth of the chapter prompted a search for a sorority house that could serve as the headquarters for the sorority in Memphis. A member of the sorority saw a "for sale" sign in the yard of 805 Saxon Avenue. Its proximity to LeMoyne College and the size of the house and lot were attractive to the sorority. Then Basileus Rita Hawkins Porter Smith hired Attorney B.F. Jones to purchase the home from the Top Hat and Tails Club, thus earning the sorority the honor of being the only BGLO that owned a sorority house in Memphis.⁵⁹ The chapter held a dedication ceremony on November 8, 1957, at 8:00 pm. The sorority paid \$7,000 for the property and spent an additional \$1,500 improving the building. Funds for improvements came from members of the sorority and others in the community. The newspaper article announcing the dedication stated that it would be used "as a meeting place for the sorority's seventy Memphis members and for recreation of Memphis Negro youth." The dean of LeMoyne College, Dr. W.W. Gibson, Judge Elizabeth McCain, and Blair T. Hunt, principal of Booker T. Washington High School, attended the dedication ceremony.⁶⁰

The sorority house quickly became a home to sorority members, a place for the sorority to meet and organize for their public programming, and a place to host community events sponsored by the sorority. The building was immediately put to use as the center for Omicron Sigma's "Teen-Town" program and the site for summer workshops geared towards local African American youth.⁶¹ The Teen-Town program was the national program designed by Sigma Gamma Rho to address youth delinquency. The sorority allowed each individual chapter to determine how it wanted to administer the program, and what the focus of the program would be. Omicron Sigma's answer to the program in the 1950s was establishing the sorority house as a meeting place for local youth (aged 13-16) and using their members' background as educators to teach the youth who attended. The inaugural group numbered fifty total youth. As part of the program, the group

Omicron Sigma Chapter and worked alongside Sally N. Edwards, the Grand Basileus of Sigma Gamma Rho, to host the meeting. Marine was an educator and taught at the Carnes Avenue School in Memphis.

⁵⁸ "Sorority in Convention," *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, August 19, 1954; "NEGRO MUST STRIVE TO ACHIEVE EQUALITY": Church Leader Calls Decision 'Greatest Blow' to Reds," *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, August 21, 1954; "Supreme Court Racial Decision Hit Communism Hard, Sorority Told," *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, Memphis, Tennessee, August 20, 1954.

⁵⁹ White and Wilkes, *Behind these Doors*, p. 341.

⁶⁰ "HOME TO BE DEDICATED: National Negro Sorority Will Hold Ceremony Sunday," *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, November 8, 1957; Maddie L. Anderson, "History of the Sigma House of Omicron Sigma Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority: March 1975," Omicron Sigma Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Archives.

⁶¹ White and Wilkes, *Behind these Doors*, p. 341.

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electd a “mayor” and “commission” for the Teen-Town program. Commissioners were in charge of different aspects of Teen-Town, including Achievement, Recreation, Public Relations, and Finance.⁶²

Sorority members also set up activities in music, dramatics, painting, handicrafts, interpretive dancing, and book clubs at the sorority house. Jeannette S. Carr, the project chairman, emphasized that these activities were possible because of their members’ background as educators and as college educated women. These activities and more were held from 4:30 to 6:30 each weekday and were supervised by Sigma Gamma Rho volunteers. The importance of the program was explained by Rita Smith, the sorority’s president. In the newspaper article announcing the program, she said that “Organizing this project has been a national goal of the sorority for years. We bought the Sigma house last June and renovated it for use as both a meeting place for the chapter and a place for Teen-Town members to gather. All the fixtures were donated—the curtains, sofas, even the gas heaters.”⁶³ The Teen-Town program continued to be a focus for Sigma Gamma Rho well into the 1960s and was hosted at the sorority house throughout the program’s tenure.

Teen-Town gatherings were supplemented with other workshops on the property. Even while Teen-Town was gaining momentum, Smith expressed plans to start a pre-teen program for local youths.⁶⁴ This took the form of the “Sigma’s Summer Garden” six-week workshop. Advertised as open to local African American youth aged 9-12, the goal of the workshop was to prepare its participants for schoolwork. Free courses were offered in reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, music, creative dancing, art, and swimming. Like the Teen-Town program, classes were taught by members of Sigma Gamma Rho who were also faculty members in the Memphis Public School system and LeMoyne College.⁶⁵

Sorority members also used the sorority house as a meeting place to plan one of the sorority’s most well-known annual programs, “Rhomania.” Rhomania was a ticketed show or other event sponsored by the sorority and made available to the local community to fund scholarships for African American students to attend LeMoyne College. Community members would buy tickets from either LeMoyne’s central ticket office, local business sponsors, or from sorority members directly at the house on 805 Saxon Avenue. The types of events hosted varied from year to year, their selection directed by the sorority members. Some examples include hosting a spelling bee champion, talent shows, the Atlanta Orchestra, Mexican folksingers and dancers, harpists, gospel singers, and plays. These events were well attended and popular with the public and continue to be a major part of the sorority’s programming to this day.⁶⁶

⁶² “Teen-Town Elects Mayor, Commission” Education Sorority Sponsors Better Citizen Project, Sigma House is Center,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, January 19, 1958.

⁶³ “Teen-Town Elects Mayor, Commission” Education Sorority Sponsors Better Citizen Project, Sigma House is Center,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, January 19, 1958.

⁶⁴ “Teen-Town Elects Mayor, Commission” Education Sorority Sponsors Better Citizen Project, Sigma House is Center,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, January 19, 1958.

⁶⁵ “Summer Workshops to Be Staged by Sorority,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, June 13, 1958.

⁶⁶ “Spelling Champion Coming to LeMoyne,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, April 5, 1957; “Gloria to Star in Memphis,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, April 17, 1957; “Atlanta Orchestra to Play at LeMoyne Benefit,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, April 13, 1959; “MEXICANS TO SING,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, April 6, 1958; “Folk Group Will Appear on Campus,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, January 5, 1969; “LeMoyne Concert to be Thursday,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, April 1, 1962; “Saint Joan; By Bishop’s Players,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, February 9, 1964; “St. Jude Fund Given \$200 Sorority Check,” *The*

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Members of the Omicron Sigma Chapter were provided with unique opportunities for leadership roles and professional growth. The 1965 officer group of the National Pan-Hellenic Council of Memphis included chapter members Janice Lewis Henson as vice-chairman and Marie Adamas as Chaplain.⁶⁷ Those who served on the council worked with other BGLOs to discuss the issues facing their members and communities in Memphis.⁶⁸ Events sponsored by the sorority also contributed to a Soror's growth. In December of 1968, Omicron Sigma Chapter hosted an address by Helen Owens for all its members in Memphis. Owens, a member of the Nu Sigma chapter in Jackson, Tennessee, presented on "Black Power." Owens emphasized that though Black Power means different things to everyone, to those in Sigma Gamma Rho, it should mean that members were "reasonable and responsible" and that they should have pride and unity in what they do.⁶⁹ Owens would later go on to become the International Grand Basileus of Sigma Gamma Rho.

The Omicron Sigma Chapter also continued to be involved in the sorority's regional meetings. Members of the chapter traveled to Hattisburg, Mississippi for the southeastern regional conference in 1961. The theme of the conference was "Training Youth for Community Leadership" and was held from August 14-19th. Basileus Mary R. Brooks, Anti-Basileus Maridelle M. Reed, Rose Ford, Eldora Amos, Minnie Echols Reed, and Amanda Brown attended. While there, Omicron Sigma Chapter representatives discussed ways to improve the Teen Town program by adding activities such as handicrafts, music, dramatics, paintings, and drawings.⁷⁰ One of the chapter's own members, Cleo Mildred Surry Higgins, served as the 19th Grand Basileus of Sigma Gamma Sorority in 1962.⁷¹ The Omicron Sigma Chapter then hosted the regional meeting in the early 1970s. From March 31-April 1, 1972, the Omicron Sigma Chapter hosted the 32nd Regional Conference. One hundred and fifty attended, and six states (Tennessee, Mississippi, South Carolina, Florida, Alabama, and Georgia) were represented at the conference.⁷²

The Omicron Sigma Chapter currently has seventy-three financial members who serve Memphis and the surrounding communities. Sorority members feed the homeless at the sorority house, and they continue to host the annual Rhomania program to raise money for college scholarship funds. They present donations to the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital during their Rhomania program. The Chapter has also supported the following organizations: Habitat for Humanity, LeMoyne Owen College, the NAACP, UNCF, Africare, Homeless Project, March of Dimes, Sickle Cell, Girls & Boys Club, and Memphis Inter-Faith Association. They also administer Operation BigBookBag, Project Cradle Care, and RHOck the Vote!.

Commercial Appeal, Memphis, Tennessee, March 17, 1961; "Sigma Gamma Rho Plans Benefit Event for Saturday," *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, March 8, 1972; "Party to Benefit Sorority Project," *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, Memphis, Tennessee, March 28, 1973; "Meet Miss Rhomania," *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, May 23, 2008.⁶⁷ "Panhellenic Group Will Install," *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, January 20, 1965; "Negro Sororities," *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, October 26, 1968.

⁶⁸ "About the NPHC Memphis," NPHC of the Memphis Metropolitan Area, <https://www.nphcmemphis.org/about-4>. Other BGL) represented are Alpha Kappa Alpha, Alpha Phi Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta, Iota Phi Theta, Kappa Alpha Psi, and Phi Beta Sigma.

⁶⁹ "Sigmas Will Present the New Folk Singers," *The Tri-State Defender*, Memphis, Tennessee, December 7, 1968.

⁷⁰ "Sigma Gamma Rho Members Attend Regional Meeting," *The Tri-State Defender*, Memphis, Tennessee, April 1, 1961.

⁷¹ L. Chanel Dickerson and Wanda LeFlore, "The Herstory of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.," *The Aurora*, Summer 2022, p. 91.

⁷² "Sigma Gamma Rho Sets Convention," *The Memphis Press Scimitar*, Memphis, Tennessee, March 29, 1972; "Sorority Holds Two-Day Talks," *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, April 4, 1972.

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Criterion C: Architecture

Folk Victorian refers to an architectural style that was popular in the United States from roughly 1870-1915.⁷³ According to architectural historian Virginia McAlester, the spread of the Folk Victorian style, like other National Folk forms, was due in large part to the growth of the railroad system. This system made obtaining wood Victorian detailing much easier because it made heavy woodworking machinery accessible at local trade centers, and because lumber yards had access to a large supply of precut Victorian detailing. Homeowners would then purchase this detailing and add it to existing folk house forms, such as the gable front and wing (also known as the gable ell). Adding these details to existing forms allowed homeowners to update their older houses with new stylish architectural flourishes. These details were most often expressed on a porch, though they were often found in gable trim and brackets under the eaves. Because this was often a cheap way to build or update houses, the Folk Victorian came to be strongly associated with the working- and middle-class. This method of updating was so widespread that it became its own architectural style used for new construction.⁷⁴

The details of a Folk Victorian are generally either Italianate or Queen Anne in inspiration, with the occasional Gothic Revival influence. As mentioned earlier, the porch and cornice line are primary areas for the application of detailing. Porches are generally supported either by Queen Anne-influenced turned spindles or supported by posts with beveled corners. Lace-like spandrels are used in porch railings, and decorative vergeboard can be found beneath eaves on the façade.⁷⁵

In Memphis, small houses and cottages were the predominant form of residential architecture in the city's pre-1900 suburbs. The most popular designs were shotgun houses, L-plan cottages/houses, cubical cottages, and composite cottages. Architectural styling applied to these homes were usually Queen Anne or Colonial Revival in nature.⁷⁶ Residences constructed after the Civil War were often free-standing buildings and constructed using balloon-framing techniques. Upper income houses typically were four-room central hall plan; a three-bay townhouse plan; two story upright and wing plan; and the I-house plan. In contrast, middle- and lower-class houses were constructed in much the same way as rural areas. The one story upright and wing, center hall, hall and parlor, and piano box were all popular building styles. The introduction of cheap wood and milling saw exterior materials change dramatically to include varietal wood siding like shiplap, novelty, radius edged, and others.⁷⁷

The arrival of the twentieth century brought with it new housing types, and the refreshing of existing ones. While subdivision developers and architects continued to build, change, and refine popular types such as the Bungalow and the Four Square, traditional housing types popular in Memphis, such as the composite

⁷³ Ernest Burden, *Illustrated Dictionary of Architecture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012), p. 206.

⁷⁴ Virginia Savage McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018) p. 398

⁷⁵ McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, p. 398.

⁷⁶ John Linn Hopkins, "Historic Residential Resources of Memphis, Shelby County, TN," National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, listed 12/17/1998, p. 11.

⁷⁷ Hopkins, "Historic Residential Resources of Memphis," pp. 22-25.

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cottage, upright and wing, L-plan cottages, and the shotgun, continued to be popular with the middle- and working-class. Rather than change the form, builders modified the house with “variations in roof configurations, porch configurations, and the addition of new elements (such as bay windows) to offer a distinctly new look to a time-honored house plan.”⁷⁸ In this way the traditional building forms survived, while also allowing for an updated appearance.

The Omicron Sigma Chapter Sorority House meets the “Historic Residential Resources of Memphis, Shelby County, TN” Multiple Property Documentation Form registration requirements for individual historic residents as laid out in Section 4, pages 32-33. To be eligible for listing under the multiple, a property must be associated with residential development with Memphis’ corporate limits from 1865-1950; must be an outstanding local example of a specific house type as identified in the multiple’s context; retain a high degree of exterior and interior integrity; and retain integrity of setting.

The sorority house was constructed ca. 1913 in the then-city limits of Memphis, which satisfies the first registration requirement. The sorority house is also an important local example of the Folk Victorian style. It is located in a middle- and working-class neighborhood whose architecture is primarily defined by Minimal Traditional, Ranch, Four-Square, or Craftsman styles, making the house an important example within its local context. The wood-frame house also retains a high degree of integrity and the character defining characteristics of the Folk Victorian style. The overall form is one-story gable and wing, which was a popular form used in Memphis’ early subdivisions and residential construction. The porch and brackets feature Victorian detailing, which were popular areas on which the style was applied. These details and the exterior cladding are wood, thus aligning with the trend of Folk Victorian houses taking advantage of cheap lumber prices to update and build their house. The interior also retains integrity of material and design. The house retains its wood door surrounds, wood baseboards and trim, wood single light transoms, and wood flooring. The overall design and layout remain the same, the only major changes being additions that occurred more than fifty years ago and the removal of a wall in the meeting room. As such, the sorority house meets the third registration requirement. Finally, the sorority house retains its integrity of setting. Though the residential neighborhood has been impacted with the construction and expansion of LeMoyne College, it is still primarily surrounded by residential houses. The neighborhood has not been severely impacted by urban renewal or road projects, and houses retain appropriate spacing and location on their lots. The sorority house meets the fourth and final registration requirement, and thus qualifies for listing under the “Historic Residential Resources of Memphis, Shelby County, TN” Multiple Property Documentation Form.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Hopkins, “Historic Residential Resources of Memphis,” 26.

⁷⁹ Hopkins, “Historic Residential Resources of Memphis,” 35.

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9. Major Bibliographic References

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White, Pearl Schwartz and Lillie Wilkes. *Behind these Doors, A Legacy: The History of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority*. Chicago: Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, 1994.

Wynn, Linda T. *Journey to Our Past: A Guide to African-American Markers in Tennessee*. Nashville: Tennessee Historical Commission, 1999.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):		Primary location of additional data:	
preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)	X	State Historic Preservation Office	
previously listed in the National Register		Other State agency	
previously determined eligible by the National Register		Federal agency	
designated a National Historic Landmark		Local government	
recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #		University	
recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #	X	Other	
recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey #		Name of repository: Omicron Sigma Chapter of Sigma Gamm Rho Sorority, Incorporated Archives	
Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): SY-3576			

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10. Geographical Data

Acreege of Property	0.321 acres	USGS Quadrangle	Northwest Memphis, TN, AR, 2019
----------------------------	-------------	------------------------	------------------------------------

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: N/A

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 35.117543 | Longitude: -90.035457 |
| 2. Latitude: 35.117057 | Longitude: -90.035483 |
| 3. Latitude: 35.117056 | Longitude: -90.035216 |
| 4. Latitude: 35.117534 | Longitude: -90.035198 |

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundaries correspond with those laid out in Lot 7 of Robert P. Rowley Subdivision in Lot 88 of the Willie Williams Subdivision as recorded in Plat Book 1, page 115. The boundary is depicted on the enclosed boundary map.

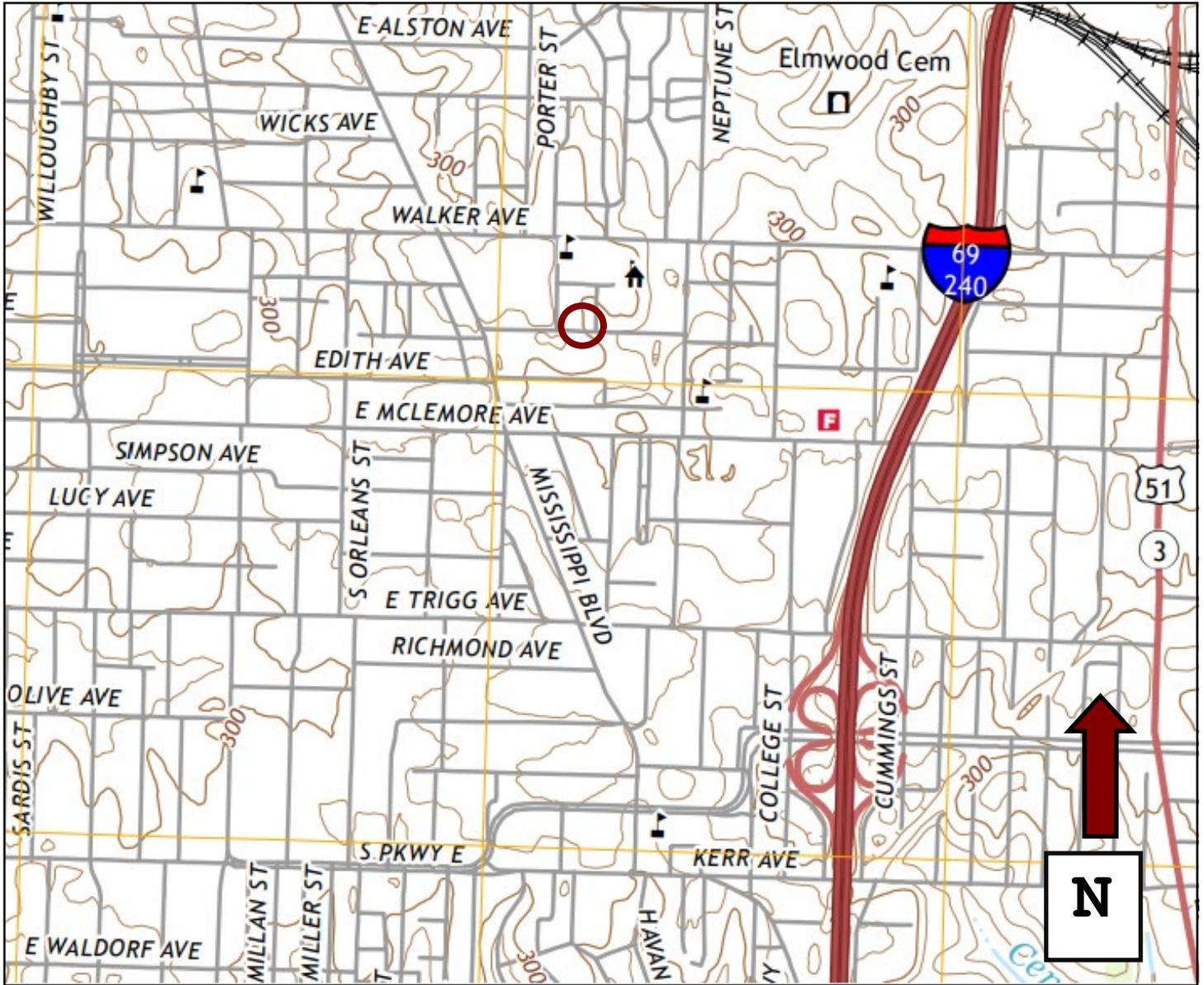
Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire nominated 0.321-acre parcel and contains all of the land and resources historically associated with the Omicron Sigma Chapter Sorority House during its Period of Significance.

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USGS Topographic Map (1:24,000 Scale)



Northwest Memphis, TN, AR, 2019. The location of the Omicron Sigma Chapter Sorority House is illustrated with a red circle.

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Boundary Map



Boundaries indicated by red line. Corresponding vertices are also labeled. Map courtesy of Shelby County Assessor of Property, 2023.

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11. Form Prepared By

Name Angel L. Crawford, Epistoleus (Historian) and J. Ethan Holden
Organization Omicron Sigma Memphis Alumnae Chapter Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated
Street & Number 805 Saxon Avenue Date 03/12/2023
City or Town Memphis Telephone 901-615-8315
E-mail glow94@gmail.com State TN Zip Code 38126

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Photographs** (refer to Tennessee Historical Commission National Register *Photo Policy* for submittal of digital images and prints. Photos should be submitted separately in a JPEG or TIFF format. Do not embed these photographs into the form)
- **Additional items:** (additional supporting documentation including historic photographs, historic maps, etc. can be included on a Continuation Sheet following the photographic log and sketch maps. They can also be embedded in the Section 7 or 8 narratives)

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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Photo Log

Name of Property: Omicron Sigma Chapter House of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated

City or Vicinity: Memphis

County: Shelby County

State: Tennessee

Photographer: Rebecca Schmitt

Date Photographed: May 23, 2023

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- 1 of 30. Façade (North Elevation). Photographer facing southwest.
- 2 of 30. Gable projection, Façade (North Elevation). Photographer facing southwest.
- 3 of 30. Porch detailing, Façade (North Elevation). Photographer facing southeast
- 4 of 30. East Elevation and Façade (North Elevation). Photographer facing southwest.
- 5 of 30. East Elevation. Photographer facing southwest.
- 6 of 30. Back Porch, East Elevation. Photographer facing west.
- 7 of 30. South Elevation (Rear). Photographer facing northwest.
- 8 of 30. West and South Elevation (Rear). Photographer facing northeast.
- 9 of 30. West Elevation. Photographer facing southeast.
- 10 of 30. Northwest oblique and Saxon Avenue. Photographer facing southeast.
- 11 of 30. Front Door. Photographer facing northeast.
- 12 of 30. Living Room/Museum. Photographer facing northeast.
- 13 of 30. Living Room/Museum. Photographer facing east. .
- 14 of 30. Entrances to Meeting/Training Room from Hallway. Photographer facing west.
- 15 of 30. Meeting and Training Room Entrance. Photographer facing northeast.
- 16 of 30. Meeting and Training Room Windows. Photographer facing north.
- 17 of 30. Southwest corner, Meeting and Training Room. Photographer facing southwest.
- 18 of 30. Southeast corner, Meeting and Training Room. Photographer facing southeast.

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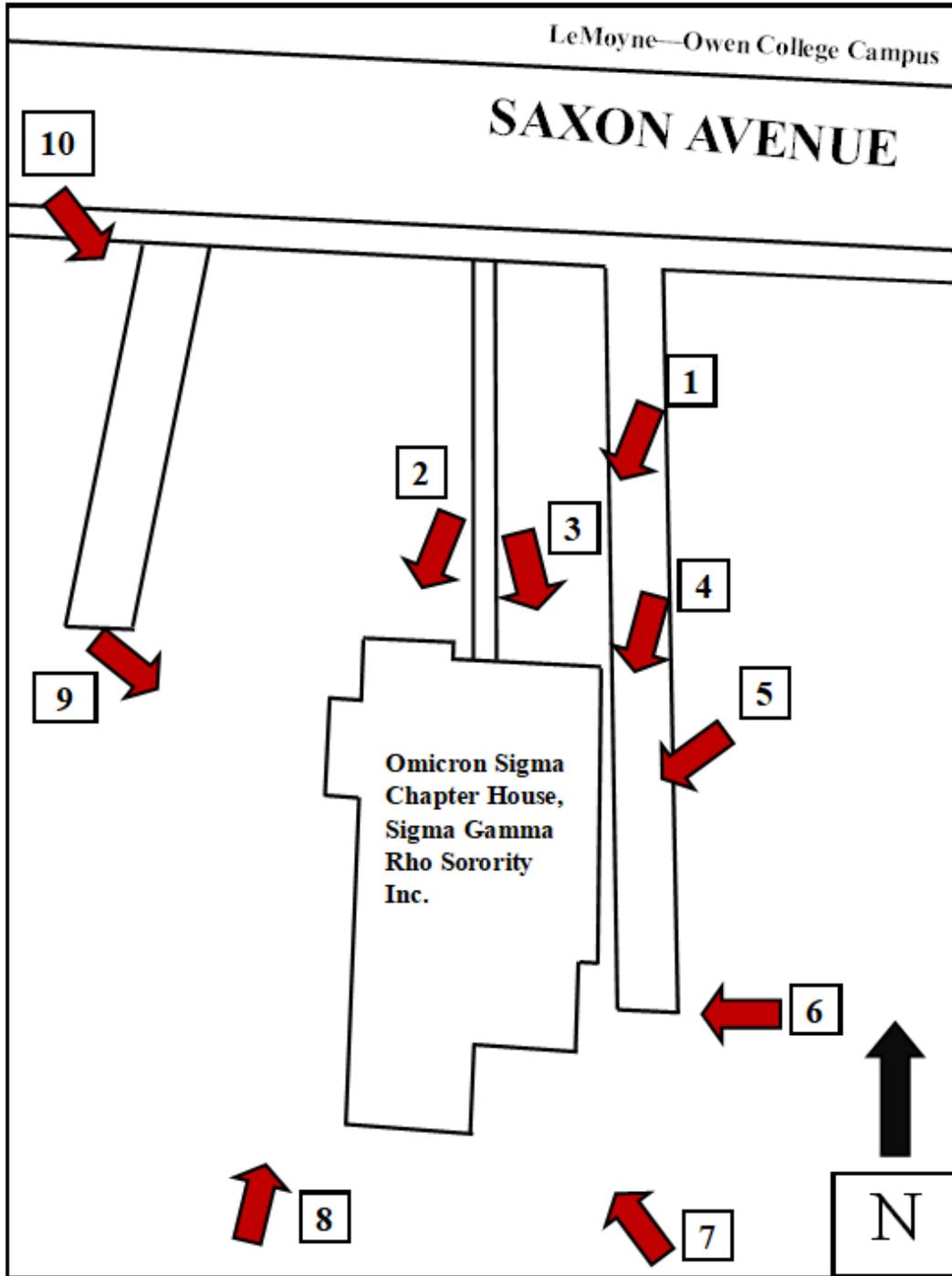
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-
- 19 of 30 Central Hallway, towards Front Door. Photographer facing north.
 - 20 of 30 Central Hallway, towards Kitchen. Photographer facing south.
 - 21 of 30 Southeast Corner, Storage/Dining Room. Photographer facing southeast.
 - 22 of 30 Northeast Corner, Storage/Dining Room. Photographer facing northeast.
 - 23 of 30 Storage/Dining Room windows. Photographer facing east.
 - 24 of 30 Entrance, Storage/Dining Room. Photographer facing west.
 - 25 of 30 Kitchen. Photographer facing southeast.
 - 26 of 30 Kitchen, towards Central Hallway. Photographer facing northwest.
 - 27 of 30 Adjoining Hallway, towards Meeting/Training Room. Photographer facing northwest.
 - 28 of 30 Bathroom and Storage Room doors. Photographer facing southwest.
 - 29 of 30 Bathroom. Photographer facing west.
 - 30 of 30 Storage Room. Photographer facing west.

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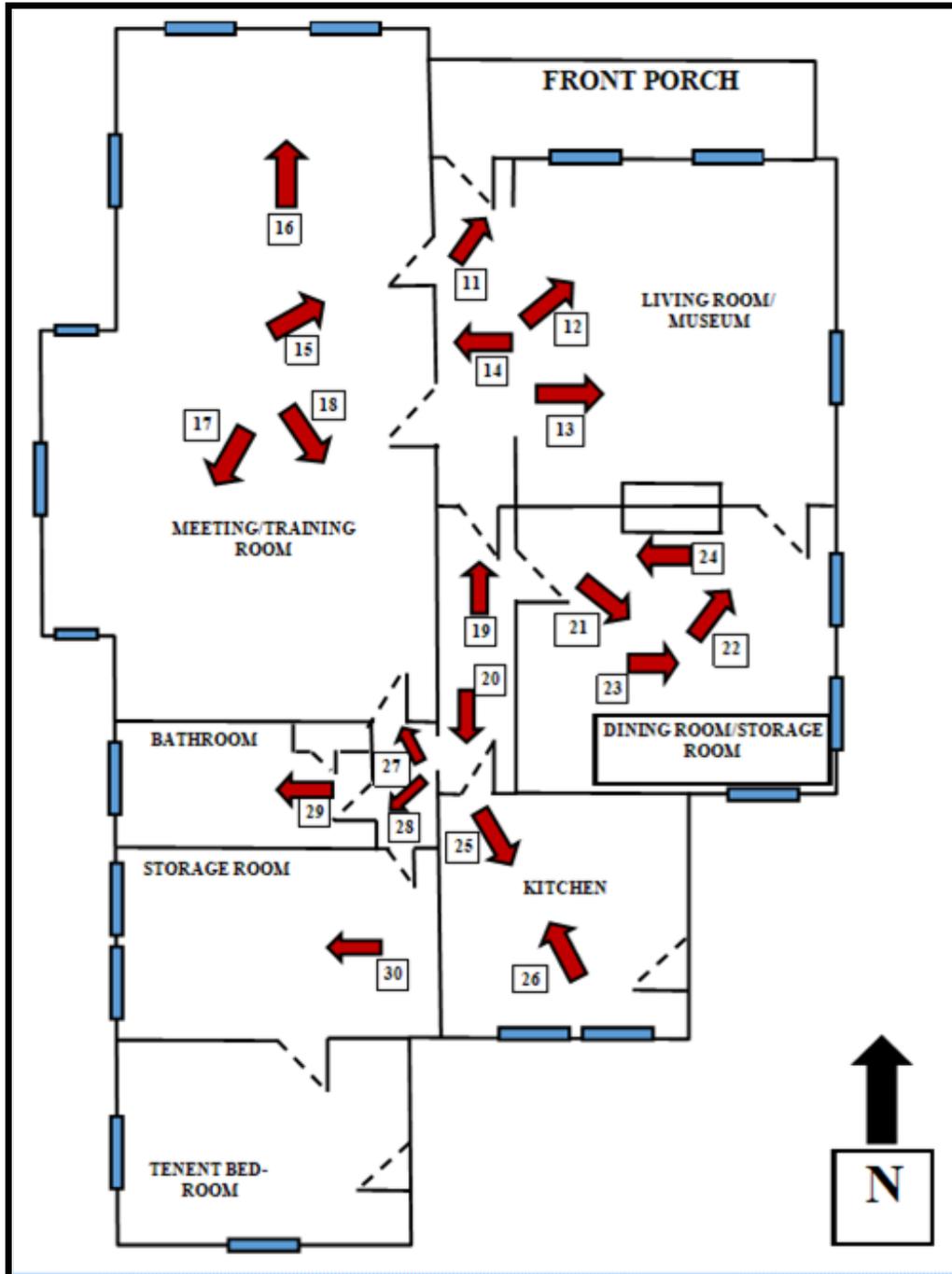
Site Plan (Not to Scale)



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Floor Plan (Not to Scale)



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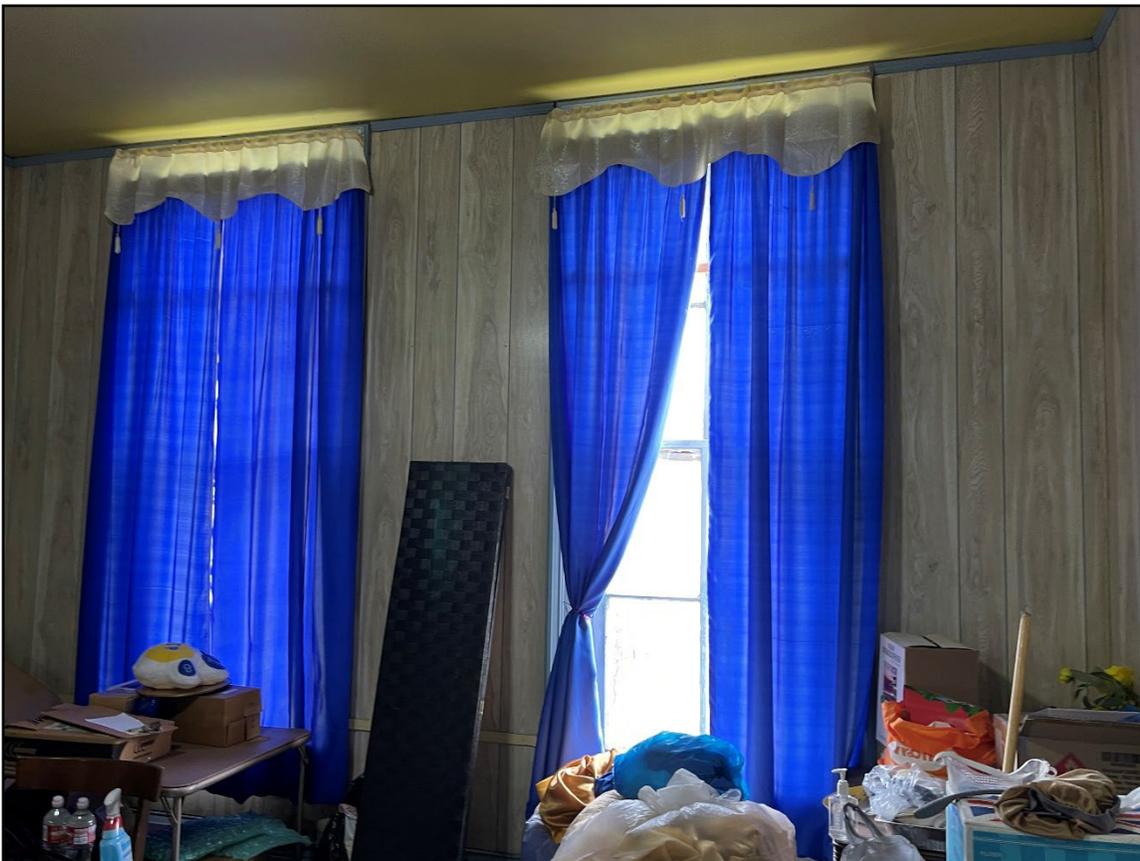


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