

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**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 PropertyHistoric name: Alpha HouseOther names/site number: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity House; Rosenthal, Herman and Lena, House

Name of related multiple property listing:


The Civil Rights Movement and the African American Experience in 20th Century Detroit
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)**2. Location**Street & number: 293 Eliot StreetCity or town: Detroit State: MI County: WayneNot For Publication: ☐ Vicinity: ☐**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this X 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 X 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 X local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

X A ___ B ___ C ___ D

	SHPO	July 14, 2021
Signature of certifying official/Title:		Date
<u>Michigan State Historic Preservation Office</u>		
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government		

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

Signature of commenting official:

Date

Title :

State or Federal agency/bureau
or Tribal Government

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:) _____

James Gabbert
Signature of the Keeper

8/26/2021
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 ☐

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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 N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Domestic: Single Dwelling

Social: Meeting Hall

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Social: Meeting Hall

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: Brick, Asphalt

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

The Alpha House is located at 293 Eliot Street, Detroit, Wayne County, Michigan, in the Brush Park neighborhood. It is situated on the north side of Eliot Street between John R and Brush Streets and faces southeast toward Eliot Street. Alpha House was built around 1912 as a single-family residence. It is a two story, brick building with a hip roof and an asymmetrical façade. A single front door is nearly centered in the south elevation (façade) and accessed by a raised and covered porch. A two-story bay window projects from the western half of the façade and a box bay window projects from the east half of the second story. Hipped dormers project from the middle of the roofs of the south and west elevations. A brick chimney extends through the roof of the west elevation approximately sixty courses, and a second, two story brick bay projects from the west elevation near the northwest corner of the building. A two-story wooden porch extends from the north elevation. The east elevation is characterized by irregular fenestration and a box bay window that is situated immediately above a secondary entry door and extends through most of the first and all of the section story to the roofline. The interior includes a waiting room, two large conference and sitting rooms, three executive offices, the third-floor attic that now serves as a museum, a finished basement with a bar, and a full-service commercial kitchen. The primary spaces of the interior remain in their original configuration and retain their

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original finishes. Except for the addition of first and second floor rear porches, and kitchen and basement upgrades, the interior and exterior of the building have been carefully maintained to retain the architecture and original decorative features. The building retains historic integrity and is able to convey its significance as the home of the Gamma Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated, the role it has served since 1939.

Narrative Description

Environment & Setting

The Alpha House is located in the Brush Park neighborhood, a residential neighborhood in the city of Detroit, Michigan. It is located on the north side of Eliot Street between John R and Brush Streets. The neighborhood is arranged in a typical city grid pattern (in this area of the city, the grid is angled off true north, such that north-south streets actually angle slightly northwest-southeast, while east-west blocks angle slightly northeast-southwest. For simplicity of description, cardinal directions are used throughout this nomination). The east-west streets often jog at Brush Street, due to the areas east and west of Brush having been separately subdivided. Woodward Avenue, a primary thoroughfare that extends from Jefferson Avenue to the city's northern suburbs, has always been a strong neighborhood boundary to the west. The Fisher Freeway (Interstate 75, formerly Napoleon Street), which opened in Detroit in 1970, created another strong separation to the south, and left a group of houses facing the freeway on the south side divorced from the neighborhood they once were a part of. On the east, Beaubien Boulevard separates Brush Park from public housing to the east, and the character difference is strong. The clearance of the area north of Mack Avenue (formerly Rowena Street) for the Detroit Medical Center complex provides a strong northern boundary. The topography of the neighborhood is generally flat, and foliage is limited and sparse, though mature deciduous trees and smaller street trees are located throughout the neighborhood. Most of the historic buildings, including Alpha House, are fronted by shallow lawns. The core of the neighborhood, bounded by John R and Brush Streets contains most, though not all, of the remaining historical residential buildings. Through a long period of decline, many of the neighborhood's original three hundred buildings were demolished. As of 2021 approximately eighty of these buildings remain, with a number of them on Eliot Street. The rehabilitation of the 1876 Ransom Gillis House in 2015, long a symbol of neighborhood decline, was a forerunner of renewed interest in the Brush Park neighborhood. In recent years, construction of several multi-family residential buildings throughout the neighborhood has taken the place of demolished buildings.

There are notable sites listed in the National Register in close proximity of the Alpha House, including the Albert Kahn House at 208 Mack Avenue, long the home of the Detroit Urban League, and the Hudson-Evans House at 79 Alfred Street, among others. Brush Park was declared a local historic district by the City of Detroit in 1980, largely following the boundaries noted above.

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Exterior

The Alpha House is a two story, rectangular building with its short side toward Eliot Street. It is constructed of brick with stone trim in a vernacular interpretation of the Craftsman style. The roof is hipped and covered with tan asphalt shingles, and wide hanging roof eaves feature decorative exposed brackets on all sides. The front yard is landscaped and includes a Michigan Historical Marker for the house first erected in 1977 and replaced and rededicated in 2015. Adjacent to the east property line is a small private paved parking lot. Behind the house to the north is the landscaped backyard, known as the "Jewel Garden." There is a black metal fence between the back yard and the parking lot, with large arborvitae providing privacy screening on the north and west property lines. The west side of the house faces a thin strip of manicured lawn with a chain link fence adjacent to a large parking lot also owned by Alpha Phi Alpha.

The south-facing façade is dominated by a partial-width elevated front porch. Five concrete steps lead up to the front porch, flanked by brick cheek walls topped with stone coping. The porch has a concrete slab floor. Three Tuscan columns on stone bases range across a low brick wall with stone coping at the front of the porch. These columns support the hipped porch roof. The porch ceiling is comprised of stained and finished wood. As on the upper eaves above, exposed rafter tail brackets are present on the porch roof. Upon entering the porch, at the top of the stairs is a large one-over-one double-hung window with a stone sill that looks into the front sitting room. To the west of the window are two concrete steps that lead up to the upper end of the porch and main entry. The front entry has a wood frame surround enclosing a wooden panel door with a three-quarter light composed of frosted leaded glass panes, protected by a single-pane storm door. The porch was reconstructed in 2003 due to excessive deterioration and closely matches the original design.

The western half of the façade contains a two-story bay window of brick construction. The first-floor bay window incorporates three one-over-one double-hung windows, in which the upper light of each is about half the height of the lower, and the center window is wider than the canted to each side. A stone string course forms the sill beneath the first-floor windows, wrapping around the southwest corner to the porch.

The second story has a similar arrangement in the west half. The second-floor bay window is composed of three double-hung windows, with elongated hexagonal lights in the upper sash and single lights in each lower. In the eastern half, centered over the porch is a boxed bay window, containing a pair of double-hung windows, with five elongated hexagonal lights in each upper sash and a single light in each lower. All the second story double-hung windows have upper and lower panes of equal height. There are stone string courses below the second-floor windows across the length of the facade. Centered on the south-facing roof is a hipped roof dormer with three symmetrical windows decorated with diamond-shaped panes. The dormer gable, as with the main roof eaves, contains decorative roof brackets.

The east side of the house immediately faces a narrow, paved parking lot. This elevation is roughly divided into four equal bays. At the foundation level, the south-most, north-central and

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north-most bays each include a window opening infilled with five-by-four glass block. The south-central bay contains a steel entrance door that leads down to the basement and up to the first floor.

On the first story, at the southeast corner is a large one-over-one double-hung window with a stone sill. The top pane is half the height of the bottom pane, matching the façade first story windows. The south-central bay contains a stairway landing leading from the first story up to the second, and features a slightly projecting boxed bay window clad in painted aluminum. At the landing level, two single light windows look into the main staircase landing from the first floor to the second floor. Above those windows is a semi-circular window with colorful leaded glass. The north-central bay contains a small one-over-one double-hung window with a stone sill that looks into the rear staircase landing. The north-most bay contains a narrower double-hung window with a stone sill.

On the second floor, above the semi-circular window in the south-central bay are two small four-over-four double-hung windows that look into the staircase landing from the second floor to the attic. The north-most bay on the second floor includes a single one-over-one double-hung window with a stone sill. There is a stone string course on the second floor that wraps from the façade around to the east-facing boxed bay. A square brick chimney rises from the lower part of the roof near the northeast corner.

The north elevation faces the back yard and is dominated by a nearly full-width, two-story porch. In 2003, a deteriorating second story enclosed porch was replaced with this two-story covered wood porch, accessed by a pair of matching wood staircases leading from the back yard to the second story. Each staircase is symmetrically L-shaped with a low landing set atop a cement and brick foundation. The porch spans nearly the full width of the house and is surrounded by wood deck rails. The north facade brick is painted a dull yellow on both the first and second stories and meets the unpainted brick in a faux quoin pattern at each corner.

Near the northeast corner of the foundation level, a low brick wall with stone coping projects north to protect an exterior staircase leading down to the basement. Directly above the staircase at the first story is a one-over-one double-hung window with a stone sill and shallow arched header. To the west of the staircase is a small ground floor storage area set behind a low brick wall with stone coping to the east and north sides. Sections of wood deck railing are set atop the low brick wall.

An elevated brick porch projects north from the western half of the first story. Wood stairs lead up to the porch, which matches the height of the low brick wall in the eastern half. This first floor porch has a concrete slab floor. The porch is surrounded with wood deck railing. The porch leads to a steel rear entry door near the northwest corner with a small diamond-shaped window and a glass and aluminum storm door. Four Tuscan columns support the second story porch above. The first story porch ceiling is constructed of stained and finished wood with two built-in lights.

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On the second story, there is a one-over-one double-hung window with a stone sill near the northeastern corner, beyond the eastern end of the porch. A one-over-one double-hung window with a stone sill near the center of the porch looks out from the second-floor bathroom. The western half of the second-floor porch contains an entry door leading to the rear sitting room. Above the porch is a shallow roof addition supported by two square posts, with a ceiling of finished wood with two built-in lights.

The west elevation faces a narrow lawn and is roughly divided into north and south halves, with the north half containing a foundation-to-eave brick bay window and the south half featuring a slightly projecting centered brick chimney. The foundation level of the west elevation includes three equally spaced large windows infilled with five-by-four glass block leading to the basement. On the first floor, the bay window is comprised of three one-over-one double-hung windows with stone sills. The windows are of equal height; the canted windows are narrower than the wider center window. In the south half, a rectangular leaded glass window brackets the chimney to each side. Directly above the first story bay window, the second story bay window mimics the first story design, however the centered window is just a single light aligned with the upper sash of the two canted windows. The south half of the second floor has no fenestration, but the stone string course on the first and second floor from the façade wraps around from the southwest corner to the chimney.

Centered on the west-facing hipped roof is hipped dormer with three symmetrical windows decorated with diamond-shaped panes. Adjacent to the dormer to its immediate south is a tall rectangular brick chimney with a decorative course pattern near the top and a stone cap. This dormer matches that on the façade with decorative roof brackets.

Interior

The interior of the Alpha House largely retains the original residential floorplan, but new and appropriate uses for the fraternity now occupy the rooms within. The Alpha House is typically entered through the front entrance via the elevated porch, which leads to an entry foyer. Stepping through a wood and beveled glass door from the foyer one enters the main circulation space of the first story. To the east is a small sitting room known as the "Presidents' Corner," and the lower section of the open half-turn stairway up to the second story. To the west is a decorative entrance leading to the large living room. The entrance is framed by matching carved Ionic columns set atop shallow half walls. The living room contains the front facing canted bay window. In the center of the west-facing wall is the original tile fireplace with a carved wood mantel. The fireplace is flanked by leaded glass windows similar in design, of slightly different sizes. This room has original, glass-paneled French doors leading north to a rear meeting room in the northwest corner.

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A composite photograph of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity House, depicting the Living Room and Basement. *The Sphinx* 39, no. 4 (December 1953), 11.



The same composite view in 2020.

The rear meeting room contains a three-sided bay window with double-hung windows on the west-facing wall. The north wall includes a steel door leading to the back porch. The room's east-facing door leads to a commercial kitchen. As was the typical design when the house was built, the south-facing door out of the kitchen leads a rear stairway to the second floor. A smaller stairway leads down to the east entrance and the basement. Southward, past the rear and side staircases, is a small landing area that leads back to the foyer.

From just inside the main foyer the main staircase leads up to the second story. The half-turned staircase features hardwood banisters and turned balusters, and is open overlooking the sitting room in the southeast corner. A large two-light window topped by decorative, colorful leaded

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glass occupies the stairway landing. At the base of the window is a built-in, upholstered bench seat which sits in the east-facing boxed bay.

The stairs lead to second floor offices and a sitting room. Original bedrooms now serve as fraternity chapter offices. In the southeast corner, the office shared by the chapter vice president and chapter secretary contains desks and a closet. A pair of double-hung windows in this room look south above the front porch. The president's office occupies the southwest corner bedroom and includes an executive desk and a closet. This office contains the three-sided bay window on the facade.

To the rear, the northwest corner bedroom is now the second story sitting room. This room includes a three-sided bay window that faces west, and a door to access the second-floor rear porch on the north wall. Centered on the north wall is the second story restroom, which includes the original fixtures and equipment, and has a double-hung window with a northern view over the backyard. The northeast corner room is the office for the chapter's financial officers. This office includes a large desk and two double-hung windows – one facing east and one facing north. Between the northeast office and the main stairway is the rear staircase which leads back down to the first floor.

To the immediate south of the top of the main stairway, a smaller staircase leads up to the attic. The third-floor attic has been converted into a museum to display Gamma Lambda Chapter historical artifacts, including photographs, trophies and chapter composites dating back to the 1920s. There is a closet on the north-facing wall that contains the furnace and room for storage. This attic is illuminated by the south- and west-facing dormer windows. A portion of an earlier linoleum floor displaying the "ΑΦΑ" insignia has been preserved under a plexiglass floor covering in the attic.

The basement has been finished and remodeled to support social gatherings and special events. It includes an open space for gathering, a long bar, and separate restroom facilities.

Integrity

The building retains historic integrity as the long-time home of the Gamma Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity. The building has been carefully maintained and continuously occupied for the eighty-two years since its purchase by the fraternity. The setting of the Alpha House remains essentially the same as it was during the period of significance. The Gamma Lambda Chapter continues to serve as a location for fraternal business meetings, community events, and social gatherings. The house is located on a block with other homes constructed during the same period. Meanwhile, while the neighborhood has undergone a long period of disinvestment, nearby historical homes are being carefully rehabilitated and new construction designs are being guided by the local historic district commission, helping to ensure that the historic character of Brush Park is honored.

The location of the is unchanged from the period of significance. Significant design features of the Alpha House have been intentionally retained, both on the interior and exterior. Over the past

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several decades, the chapter has worked closely with the Detroit Historic District Commission to address any changes needed, honoring and preserving the materials and workmanship of the house. During the period of significance, the house served as host to both the 1953 and 1968 Alpha Phi Alpha National Conventions, with significant renovations in support of each. The remodeling of the third-floor attic was first completed during administration of Brother Boynton A. Milton in 1943. The remodeling of the basement was completed during the administration of Brother Walter V. Harmon around 1946. These investments completed during the period of significance have preserved the room layout, decorative leaded glass windows, wood trim and detail, and other character-defining features.

Alpha House continues to demonstrate the building's association with the historic role of African American civic and community support in the Brush Park neighborhood and the city at-large. The sitting room on the first floor, known as "Presidents' Corner," includes photographs of each of the forty-nine presidents who have led the chapter. Awards and citations earned by chapter over the decades are prominently displayed throughout the house. Fraternity brothers, guests, and visitors who walk through the house today are imbued with the feeling of fraternal spirit in every room. The walls are decorated with chapter photographs from decades past, including framed panoramic photographs from the 1923 and 1953 national conventions, chapter composites from 1922 and 1926, Black & Gold Ball photos from the 1950s, and casual photos from decades ago held in the basement. A fraternity brother from the period of significance who walked into Alpha House today would be warmed by the welcoming atmosphere of the carefully preserved house and the continued community-centered activity found within.

Subsequent Changes

Since Alpha Phi Alpha purchased the house in 1939, the fraternity has paid careful attention to the preservation of their home. Any changes proposed over the past several decades were done in coordination with the City of Detroit Historic District Commission, taking care to maintain and preserve historic features of the house using similar materials and workmanship when possible. Prior to the 2003 Alpha Phi Alpha General Convention held in Detroit, more than two hundred thousand dollars was spent renovating the house using funds from federal grants and donations. Mechanical systems were modernized, including new plumbing, heating, electric and the addition of air conditioning.

At this time, the original front porch was pulling down the front of the house and needed to be stabilized. Always a popular location for chapter group photos, historical photographs of the porch guided the rehabilitation work. The porch was rebuilt, including replacement of the columns which were severely deteriorated. The cement stairs and brick cheek walls were replaced to match the original design. The first-floor windows were replaced with new windows that matched the style of the originals. The second-floor front office windows and all attic windows were not replaced and are original to the house.

A rear enclosed second floor porch was replaced with a two-story wood deck with dual staircases leading to the backyard. The backyard, which had been neglected for years, received updated landscaping, an outdoor seating area, and walkways with commemorative bricks that pay

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homage to past and present chapter members. The brick walkways are a most cherished aspect of the property. The outdoor sitting area, known as the "Jewel Garden," is surrounded by seven bushes to commemorate the seven "Jewel" founders of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated.

The building interior has been carefully updated over the decades to maintain both function and form. Historical appointments such as woodwork and windows have been carefully maintained. An updated commercial kitchen with all modern appliances was installed in the original first story kitchen space, which allows the chapter to provide adequate food service at hosted events. The floor in the third-floor attic was replaced. In the basement, structural pillars were rearranged, the foundation was lifted and reinforced, and asbestos was removed, all to improve the safety and stability of the main entertainment space. A new bar and separate ladies' and men's restrooms were installed along the north wall of the basement, along with secure storage areas beneath the stairs and along the east wall.

Section F, page 1 of *The Civil Rights Movement and the African American Experience in 20th Century Detroit*, Multiple Property Document Form (MPDF), notes the following with regard to historic integrity:

When evaluating Detroit's African American 20th Century Civil Rights resources, considerations such as the effect of discriminatory federal, state, and local policies; disparity in mortgage and lending programs; and unfair housing practices must be taken into account. During the period of significance, African Americans found it difficult to undertake new construction and instead adapted existing buildings for a new use. The activities and associations of the Civil Rights Movement will generally be more important than a building's architectural or design integrity. In addition, unfair employment practices contributed to economic hardship in the African American community often made upkeep and maintenance of properties difficult. It is expected that common alterations, such as replacement windows and doors and the removal of or damage to architectural and ornamental elements, will not automatically disqualify a property for listing if the essential spaces and characteristics related to its civil rights significance remain intact. Any alterations, interior or exterior, must be evaluated within the context of the building's overall ability to convey the association and feeling related to its significance within the historic contexts established in Section E before deeming the building eligible or not due to material or design changes.¹

Furthermore, on page F-12 the Civil Rights Movement MPDF states:

Special consideration should be given to understanding the ongoing impacts of segregation and discrimination when evaluating the integrity of buildings. Alterations that happened both during and after the period of significance reflect strategies necessary for survival under these circumstances. Historically African American properties were also highly susceptible to charges of blight and were

¹ Little and Mills, "The Civil Rights Movement in 20th Century Detroit," sec. F-1.

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disproportionately targeted for demolition of buildings.²

The Alpha House possesses integrity of design, materials, and workmanship as well as association, feeling, and location. The property retains its spatial arrangement and a significant number of its materials, finishes, and fixtures, which all convey a feeling of the property during its period of significance. The setting of Alpha House has been affected as the neighborhood has changed since 1939. However, Eliot Street retains a number of early twentieth century residential buildings and recent infill construction complements the historical buildings in form, massing, and scale. Therefore, the Alpha House possesses historic integrity and its overall ability to convey its significance as an important center of African American social history and ethnic heritage in the city of Detroit between 1939 and 1971.

² Little and Mills, "The Civil Rights Movement in 20th Century Detroit," sec. F-12.

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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.

Criteria Considerations

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

- ☐ 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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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Ethnic Heritage: Black

Social History

Period of Significance

1939-1971

Significant Dates

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Alpha House is significant under National Register Criterion A in the areas of Ethnic Heritage: Black and Social History at the local level of significance as the longstanding home and headquarters of the Gamma Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated. Alpha Phi Alpha, the first intercollegiate Greek-letter fraternity established for African American men, was formed at Cornell University in 1906. Chapters were established at universities across the nation over the ensuing years, with the first chapter in Michigan (Epsilon Chapter) at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Alpha Phi Alpha first established alumni chapters in 1911. The Gamma Lambda Chapter was established in Detroit in 1919. Since the time of its founding, the Gamma Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha has, through both national and local programs, and through the general uplift of the African American community in Detroit, played a significant role in the twentieth century Civil Rights Movement in Detroit. Alpha House also became a focal point for the formulation of plans and programs and the mobilization of the community to systematically attack the inequities in employment, housing and education that had long plagued and disadvantaged the black community. Through the *A Voteless People is a Hopeless People* program the fraternity addressed voting rights and through the *Go-To-High-School, Go-To-College* program they addressed educational access and disparities. Alpha House embodies the experiences of Black men and women in Detroit through the decades of the twentieth century. The property illustrates both the challenges faced by African Americans and the ways in which they overcame the burdens and barriers of discrimination, racism, and segregation, particularly through efforts in voting and education. The period of significance for Alpha House is 1939 to 1971, beginning with the date the fraternity purchased the house and continuing through the fifty-year period due to the ongoing work and programs of the fraternity that address continued disparities in voting and education. The Alpha House meets the registration requirements for buildings found in the Multiple Property Documentation Form, *The Civil Rights Movement and the African American Experience in 20th Century Detroit* (National Register reference number MC100006099, listed 2021). The property is a social building used by a fraternal organization “associated with significant events, people, or institutions important to the history of the African American Civil Rights Movement in Detroit, Michigan.” Alpha Phi Alpha, through Alpha House was the location of patterns of events in the fight for equality and reflect the provision of social services that addressed these equalities.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Introduction

In 2002, the National Park Service released *Civil Rights in America: A Framework for Identifying Significant Sites*, which “identifies broad themes within the civil rights story, as well

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as the events, persons, and places that represent those themes, and assesses the degree to which related sites are represented and recognized.”³ The framework identified several time periods and a number of themes important to understanding the Civil Rights Movement. The Michigan State Historic Preservation Office and its partners prepared the Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF), *The Civil Rights Movement and the African American Experience in 20th Century Detroit* in 2019 and 2020, that applied the NPS framework to the Civil Rights Movement in Detroit, Michigan. The themes of equal education and voting were two of several significant themes. These themes are illustrated in Alpha House through the century of work undertaken by the Gamma Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha.

The African American Experience in Detroit, 1900-1970

As the twentieth century dawned, Detroit’s Black population was still relatively small. Despite the achievements of the Black community in promoting the abolition of slavery and equal rights for Black citizens, it still struggled against discrimination and segregation, which had been upheld by the United States Supreme Court in its 1896 Plessy versus Ferguson decision.⁴ According to the *Civil Rights Movement and the African American Experience in 20th Century Detroit* MPDF:

The early decades of the twentieth century saw the beginning of the Great Migration, the movement of African Americans from the agricultural south to the industrial north... Blacks fled the southern United States to escape the oppressive atmosphere of the Jim Crow racial caste system, which was frequently enforced by violence and lynching, and to seek better economic opportunities in the rapidly industrializing north.

The Great Migration from the rural South began around 1915 due to the mass production of autos, opportunities for work, repressive Jim Crow laws and lynchings in the south. These conditions and opportunities drove thousands of African American to northern cities like Detroit. The African American population in Detroit would soar from five thousand in 1910 to almost one-hundred fifty thousand by 1940.⁵

Yet, Detroit, like other northern cities, was not the land that had been promised. Racism, discrimination, and segregation existed in the north too. In some cases, this took similar forms as in the south. Organized racist and supremacist groups terrorized Blacks as well as Catholics, Jews, and others, and provoked or conducted violence towards these groups for years between the 1920s and 1940s.

Through the 1940s and beyond, African Americans were often treated as second class citizens. They suffered disproportionately from wartime rationing and the overall strains on the city.

³ National Park Service, *Civil Rights in America: A Framework for Identifying Significant Sites*, 1.

⁴ Little and Mills, "The Civil Rights Movement in 20th Century Detroit," sec. E-3.

⁵ Gibson, Campbell and Jung, Kay. "Table 23. Michigan - Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Large Cities and Other Places: Earliest Census to 1990" (February 2005), United States Census Bureau.

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Factories offered employment but not housing, and because Whites violently defended the borders of their segregated neighborhoods, Black residents had little choice but to suffer in substandard living conditions.

African Americans who needed hospitalization had few places to turn in Detroit. A limited number of facilities had served the small, pre-war Black population, and with migration and the subsequent spread of disease in the Black community, these facilities became insufficient to handle the number of African American patients brought to them. Administrators of all-White hospitals, however, remained reluctant to admit Black patients, asserting that White patients were “resentful” of African Americans and objected to “mixing.”⁶

Discrimination and segregation were not limited to places of residence, nor working class Blacks. African American lawyers were routinely denied rental office space in certain sections of the city due to racial discrimination,⁷ and physicians were limited in where they could practice. In 1917 there were only thirty African American physicians in the entire city who provided home care to the Black community. Overworked, they united and formed the Allied Medical Society, forerunner of the present Detroit Medical Society.

In other cases, racism and discrimination took different forms. One key example of this difference is in voting rights. Michigan had granted African Americans the right to vote in 1870, but came at a time when “this political freedom had no impact on Detroit or Michigan,” as Black citizens made up about one percent of the population of Detroit.⁸

However, as the Black population increased, so too did their electoral power. Eventually, African Americans were elected to state and national office. In 1892, William W. Ferguson was elected to the Michigan House of Representatives, but it took until 1930 to elect Michigan’s first Black state senator, Charles A Roxborough. Roxborough was followed in 1936 by Charles C. Diggs, Sr., the state’s first Black Democrat elected to the Michigan State Senate. Though the number of Black officeholders remained small throughout the early twentieth century they paved the way for others. Detroit city government, however, remained controlled by Whites for many years. According to the MPDF:

Voter suppression was not experienced in Detroit at the same magnitude it was in Southern states. African Americans could vote—they just weren’t able to gain representation... In 1919 the Detroit Common Council abolished the Ward system and adopted city-wide elections. As a result, no African American won an elected office in Detroit until 1957. Thus, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the city’s African American community had no formal representation in city government. The city’s first Black mayor, Coleman Young, wasn’t elected until 1974.

⁶ Martin, *Detroit and the Great Migration, 1916-1929*, 15.

⁷ Smith, *Emancipation: The Making of the Black Lawyer*, 458.

⁸ B. J. Widick, *Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 25.

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Educational disparities also figured prominently in the African American experience in Detroit in the twentieth Century. According to the MPDF:

African Americans in Detroit experienced discrimination and inequality in primary and secondary education facilities. School locations reflected the de facto segregation settlement patterns that were created by restrictive housing covenants. The segregation of educational resources was widespread.

In some instances, Black students were guided away from typical college preparatory courses, and toward courses that did not provide students with the educational background necessary to succeed in college, and were thus unprepared to go.⁹ In other cases, African American students were guided toward jobs and careers that did not require a college education.¹⁰ In still other cases, African American students were deprived of adequate facilities. One Detroit resident recalled that at one point a junior high school was converted to a senior high school, so that Black students would not be able to transfer to the nearby White high school. Yet, the converted school did not have the facilities of a typical high school.¹¹

Another Black Detroiter recalled the environment faced by many African American students and how it affected their education:

They really didn't want us. They treated us horribly. They treated us very, very bad. I can't remember how many black kids were there. They just didn't want us there. They let the children abuse us. They would call us [racial epithet]. They'd call us black, and the teachers wouldn't do anything about it, not a thing... my grades were terrible. At home and in the community I was so well-loved and respected; and at school, where I was spending so many hours a day, I was treated like dirt. At that time they marked with one, two, three, four, and five. I got nothing but red fives. I would just be devastated.

When that black school finally got up there, they brought in young black teachers who were college graduates.... I'm going to tell you the difference in my grades was remarkable. I remember they had some kind of a citywide intelligence test, and my intelligence score was one of the highest in the city.¹²

Another person recalled their experience at an integrated high school:

We were not permitted to participate in many sports; we were not permitted to come to school dances; we were not permitted to belong to many of the academic clubs; or were we permitted to be on the student council or participate in high

⁹ Elaine Latzman Moon, "Discussion on Education," *Untold Tales, Unsung Heroes: An Oral History of Detroit's African American Community, 1918-1967* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 101.

¹⁰ Moon, "Discussion on Education," 101.

¹¹ Moon, "Helen Nuttall Brown," 37.

¹² Moon, "Alice E. M. Cain Newman," 73.

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school plays. Other than the fact that we could go to school with whites, we were as rigidly segregated as were blacks in the south.¹³

Despite these challenges, many Black students went on to college, but faced similar challenges, as one individual recalled:

After I graduated from high school, I had a scholarship. Being a young black, there were not too many inducements to encourage you to do too much, but I did have the scholarship... and I could choose the school that I wanted to utilize this scholarship at... so I decided I wanted to go to the University of Nebraska. Most discouraging six months I ever spent in my life. I couldn't stay on campus or any of the student establishments. I had to find a black family to stay with. The teachers were very cold and indifferent, not all of them, but too many of them... Discouragement put a very sour note in my mental makeup, to the point where I decided I would just go get a job somewhere and forget it.¹⁴

Not all African Americans faced the same challenges in the same way. Some students excelled in high school and were well-prepared for the challenges and rigors of college. Yet the environments and attitudes described above were a fact of life in Detroit in the twentieth century. The weight of these circumstances often remained lurking in the background for far too many people, a sentiment echoed by Detroiters Kermit G. Bailer in a circa 1994 interview. Bailer, though an accomplished attorney, stated "I would have lived a very different existence if racism had not so dominated my life in Detroit for so many years."¹⁵ These factors "burdened [the] formative years with the disease of racism,"¹⁶ and conspired to depress educational attainment for many African Americans in the city. Yet, education was, and remains, one of the key means of economic and social advancement.

Despite persistent racism, segregation, and discrimination in many areas of life, African Americans found companionship, community, and opportunity in the Black Detroit neighborhoods of Paradise Valley, Black Bottom, and Brush Park. African American businesses were concentrated in this area and Black networks and institutions such as churches, the Detroit Urban League, and the Black branches of the YWCA and YMCA supported residents of these neighborhoods.

The concentration of so many people in the area also created great opportunities for forming economic institutions, community political networks, and social and cultural groups. Black entrepreneurs and professionals were able to launch careers in the area because of the concentration of so many clients. Black middle-class professionals and businesspeople who migrated to Detroit after World War I were able to open successful drugstores, medical practices,

¹³ Moon, "Kermit G. Bailer," 175-176.

¹⁴ Moon, "Shelton Tappes," 105.

¹⁵ Moon, "Kermit G. Bailer," 181.

¹⁶ Moon, "Kermit G. Bailer," 180.

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nightclubs, restaurants, law offices, and beauty parlors. Black Bottom was simultaneously home to many poor and working-class people and to a lot of Black-owned businesses because Black workers and professionals were interdependent and often created opportunities for each other.

Alpha Phi Alpha

Formation of Alpha Phi Alpha

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated, was founded on the campus of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, on December 4, 1906. It was the first intercollegiate Greek-letter fraternity established for African American men.¹⁷

Though Cornell University was “one of the greatest Fraternity centers in the country,”¹⁸ those organizations were effectively closed to African American students. By 1905 at least twenty-six White fraternities had been established at Cornell and were well integrated into the educational and social fabric of the university. African Americans were regularly overlooked in the selection of membership to these fraternities.¹⁹

Although African American students were admitted to the university, they were few in number, and endured in an unwelcoming, if not antagonistic, environment. Several Black students who had enrolled for the 1904-1905 school year did not return the following year, largely due to racial aggressions. Aware of this situation, the incoming students in 1905-1906 were determined to bind themselves together to ensure that each would survive in the racially hostile environment.

In the fall of 1905 about a dozen African American students formed a literary and social club.²⁰ The club initially included two women, but they did not remain long.²¹ During the course of the academic year, club members came in regular contact with White fraternity members and “could not but see the spirit of helpfulness and comradeship displayed by them toward each other.”²²

The members of that club, impressed by the “bonds of friendship” that developed out of a fraternal oath, considered the formation of a fraternity. Some club members were opposed, but, by winter 1906, the fraternity was formalized. The seven founding members of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.—Henry Arthur Callis, Charles Henry Chapman, Eugene Kinckle Jones, George Biddle Kelley, Nathaniel Allison Murray, Robert Harold Ogle, and Vertner Woodson Tandy—known affectionately as the “Founding Jewels” were no ordinary achievers. Given racial attitudes in 1906, their accomplishments were indeed monumental.

¹⁷ Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. “Our History.”

¹⁸ George B. Kelley, “The History and Purpose of Alpha Phi Alpha,” *Sphinx*, April 2017, 7.

¹⁹ Wesley, *The History of Alpha Phi Alpha*, xiii.

²⁰ Kelley, “The History and Purpose of Alpha Phi Alpha,” 6–7.

²¹ Kelley, “The History and Purpose of Alpha Phi Alpha,” 6.

²² Kelley, “The History and Purpose of Alpha Phi Alpha,” 7.

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Charles H. Wesley, who wrote one of the first histories of Alpha Phi Alpha, quoted Jewel Henry Arthur Callis, who said, "Society offered us narrowly circumscribed opportunity and no security. Out of our need, our fraternity brought social purpose and social action."²³

At first, Alpha Phi Alpha was meant to be a study and support group for African American students at Cornell, who faced both educational and social racial prejudice. However, it quickly became apparent to the founding members that Alpha Phi Alpha should not be limited to Cornell University.²⁴

In coming together with this simple act, they preceded by decades the emergence of such on-campus programs as Affirmative Action and Upward Bound.²⁵ The students set outstanding examples of scholarship, leadership, and tenacity—preceding the efforts even of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and similar civil rights organizations.

Expansion of the Fraternity

By 1909, the fraternity had established an international presence. The Fraternity had established chapters on the campuses of Howard University in Washington, D.C. (Beta Chapter) and Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia (Gamma Chapter) in 1907, and the University of Toronto in Toronto, Ontario, Canada (Delta Chapter) in 1908. A new chapter on the campus of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan (Epsilon Chapter) was established in March 1909. The Jewel founders and early leaders of the fraternity succeeded in laying a firm foundation for Alpha Phi Alpha's principles of scholarship, fellowship, good character, and the uplifting of humanity.

While continuing to stress academic excellence among its members, Alpha also recognized the need to help correct the educational, economic, political, and social injustices faced by African Americans. Brother Roscoe C. Giles,²⁶ writing in the June 1915 issue of the *Sphinx*, observed of the tenor of the times:

the race in fifty years has made more rapid progress than any other in history... the Negro... is now becoming a competitor, economically, socially and politically. With competition, jealousy has come, and today the peace of certain sections of our country is disturbed by the clash of arms in an attempt to enforce so-called white supremacy... But, not satisfied with their un-Godly work, these archenemies of our race come North and dictate what should be the policy here... No longer do the voices of our defenders reverberate in the halls of Congress... Day by day discriminations intended to insult and degrade us creep in. Under the

²³ Wesley, *The History of Alpha Phi Alpha*, xvi.

²⁴ Kelley, "The History and Purpose of Alpha Phi Alpha," 7.

²⁵ Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., "2013 Inauguration of Mark S. Tillman," Program Book, 3.

²⁶ According to BlackPast.org, Roscoe C. Giles "was the first African American to earn a medical degree from Cornell University," and "the first African American to become certified by the American Board of Surgery."

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dome of the capitol, for the preservation of which Negro men died, segregation stalks about... Would-be playwrights and authors are engaged in a nefarious work of incessant attempts to vilify, to degrade, and to mispresent our race before the public.²⁷

Giles did not despair, however. Rather, he called upon his fellow Alpha brothers to make "a general assault all along the lines against this demon."²⁸ According to Giles, there were within Alpha Phi Alpha, "no more representative, no more intelligent, no more capable men"²⁹ who could meet the challenges posed by those who sought "to undo all that has been done."³⁰

By 1916, Alpha Phi Alpha had grown "from one Chapter, local in scope, to nearly a score of Chapters," at universities as far west as Minnesota.³¹

The demands of the Great War strained some chapters, however. Several Chapters wrote of the challenges faced during the war years. Many chapters experienced between a twenty and forty percent decrease in membership.³² Members of Epsilon chapter at the University of Michigan, wrote in the December 1918 issue of *The Sphinx* expressing concern for the state of the chapter, as some brothers were off to fight, while others married. Despite the challenges, optimism remained that Alpha Phi Alpha would endure.

Between 1920 and 1930 the fraternity was in a period of growth. By the end of the decade, the number of chapters had increased to eighty-five and counted more than three thousand members.³³ It was during this period that one of the primary service programs, *Go-To-High-School, Go-To-College*, was initiated.

During the next decade, the fraternity expanded their social action program by providing vocational guidance, establishing scholarships, an Educational Foundation, adopted the *Education for Citizenship* program,³⁴ and established its second major program, *A Voteless People is a Hopeless People*.

Over the following twenty years the fraternity continued to expand in chapters, membership, and program. By 1940 more than sixty college chapters had been established, including chapters at Oxford, Cambridge, and London,³⁵ and sixty graduate or alumni chapters had been founded.³⁶ The fraternity celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1956. At that time, the Alpha Phi Alpha had grown to more than 250 chapters and counted more than sixteen thousand men as brothers.³⁷

²⁷ Roscoe C. Giles, "Brothers in Alpha Phi Alpha, Greetings," *Sphinx*, June 1915, 2-4.

²⁸ Giles, "Brothers in Alpha Phi Alpha, Greetings," 4.

²⁹ Giles, "Brothers in Alpha Phi Alpha, Greetings," 3.

³⁰ Giles, "Brothers in Alpha Phi Alpha, Greetings," 3.

³¹ Charles H. Garvin, "A Brief History of Alpha Phi Alpha," *Sphinx*, April, 1916, 1.

³² Walter P. Palmer, "Fraternities During the War," *Sphinx*, December 1918, 6.

³³ Charles H. Wesley, "The Transmission of Our Heritage," *Sphinx*, May-June 1964, 12.

³⁴ Wesley, "The Transmission of Our Heritage," 12.

³⁵ William R. Pakeman, "Beta Psi Chapter," *Sphinx*, February 1940, 22.

³⁶ "Chapter Roster - Graduate Chapters," *Sphinx*, February 1940, 49.

³⁷ "Alpha Phi Alpha, 1905-1956: Fifty Years of Progress," *Sphinx*, August 1956.

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The fraternity began a program that encouraged cooperation and unity with people of color throughout the world.

The University of Michigan, the Epsilon Chapter, and the Foundation of the Gamma Lambda Chapter

African American students enrolled at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan, faced the same issues as their counterparts at Cornell University. Dormitories and fraternity houses were few and completely segregated. Total enrollment at Michigan was about five thousand, comparable to that of Harvard and Yale Universities, but twice that of Princeton University. African American students were few, and most had previous advanced education at other small colleges. The *Michigan Daily* reported that by 1911 the University of Michigan was third in the nation behind Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, and Kansas University in Lawrence, Kansas, for the number of African Americans enrolled.³⁸ That number was thirty-nine, less than one-half percent of the total student population.

African American students lived in the segregated part of Ann Arbor, near the railroad terminal and below the medical school. There were specific houses that rented to African American women and men. One of these houses was at 1017 Catherine Street near what is now the Old Fourth Ward Historic District in Ann Arbor. In segregated Ann Arbor, the small number of Black students had to find their own living quarters. This House of Alpha on Catherine Street was a stimulating environment for the growth of academic excellence, leadership and a haven for brotherhood for decades to come.³⁹

After graduation, the Epsilon men from the University of Michigan remained a close-knit group (including W.E.B. Dubois) throughout the first part of the twentieth century. Many of these men left Ann Arbor for Detroit, and other cities throughout the country where they established medical practices, law firms, and engaged in other professional endeavors. Cornelius Henderson, a 1911 graduate and one of only three African Americans at that point to graduate from the University of Michigan Engineering Department, initially worked in the engineering department for the city of Walkerville, Ontario, Canada.⁴⁰

Epsilon men had a profound impact in the city of Detroit as well. They started the first two African American Hospitals in Detroit, led the Detroit Branch of the NAACP, the largest in the nation, led the Detroit Urban League for fifty years, designed and built the Ambassador Bridge and the Windsor Tunnel connecting the United States to Canada, founded the first Alpha Alumni chapter (Alpha Lambda Chapter) in Louisville, Kentucky on April 11, 1911, led the legal defense of Dr. Ossian Sweet in the 1920s, led the desegregation of University of Michigan dormitories in the 1930s, and led the desegregation of all the Detroit hospitals in 1961. Scores of doctors, lawyers, and educators, a host of Phi Beta Kappa members, Olympians, All-Americans,

³⁸ *The Michigan Daily*, "Michigan Third in Negro Enrollment," 4.

³⁹ Smith, *The Origins of Epsilon Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity*.

⁴⁰ "Our Alumni-Epsilon," *Sphinx*, June 1915, 2.

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engineers, professors, and United States Ambassadors emerged from the Epsilon Chapter on the campus of the University of Michigan and set the foundation for the Gamma Lambda Chapter to be established in Detroit a decade later.

Formation of Alumni Chapters

The concept of Alumni Chapters began in the early 1910s. After leaving college, many Alpha Phi Alpha alumni members took very little active interest in the fraternity during this period.

As early as 1914 it was obvious to the General Organization that the connection to the fraternity after graduation was generally lost.⁴¹ A 1914 editorial in the first edition of *The Sphinx* called the situation, "the greatest problem" faced by the fraternity.⁴² One of the first measures taken in addressing that problem was the publication of *The Sphinx*, which was seen as one step in creating a more lasting bond.⁴³

Brother F. H. Miller, chairman of the Alumni Committee, addressed the lack of interest on the part of Alpha Phi Alpha alumni in the April 1916 issue of *The Sphinx*. That these men demonstrated a lack of interest in the fraternity was both surprising and "very lamentable, indeed."⁴⁴ Miller recognized that for some the love of the fraternity still burned, but lay dormant.⁴⁵ Others, however, seemed to consider Alpha Phi Alpha "good enough" for their college years, but the same organization "ill becomes their dignity" upon graduation.⁴⁶ To Miller, these individuals were either "duty shirkers," or they "missed the spirit and aim" of Alpha Phi Alpha.⁴⁷

As the years went by, alumni chapters grew in number, and were seen as "destined to play a role of increasing prominence in the furtherance of Alpha Phi Alpha ideals and aims."⁴⁸

Until 1953, Gamma Lambda was the only alumni chapter in Michigan. Several alumni chapters have been established in cities throughout Michigan since that time, including Flint, Grand Rapids, Ann Arbor, Pontiac, Saginaw, East Lansing, Kalamazoo, and Southfield.

Gamma Lambda Chapter

By the 1910s a number of successful Alpha Phi Alpha brothers had established themselves in Detroit. Many of these men had matriculated through the University of Michigan, the Detroit College of Law, and other universities, where they had earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in medicine and law. On account of the close proximity of Detroit and Epsilon Chapter

⁴¹ "A Word from the Founders," *Sphinx*, March 1914, 5.

⁴² "A Word from the Founders," 5.

⁴³ "A Word from the Founders," 5.

⁴⁴ R. H. Miller, "To the Alumni," *Sphinx*, April 1916, 6.

⁴⁵ Miller, "To the Alumni," 6.

⁴⁶ Miller, "To the Alumni," 6.

⁴⁷ Miller, "To the Alumni," 6.

⁴⁸ "Graduate Chapters," *Sphinx*, April 1925, 9.

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at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, many brothers set up their practices and settled down with families in Detroit. The spirit of brotherhood remained with many of these men, and, as a result, Detroit could boast of an unofficial alumni chapter prior to its formal installation.⁴⁹

The Gamma Lambda Chapter was chartered on March 22, 1919, by thirteen men who were influential in the Detroit community. These men, along with some of the chapter's early initiates, led many of the organizations that supported the uplift of African Americans in the city over a number of years. As the city grew, so did the African American community, and Gamma Lambda Chapter with them.

After World War Two, Gamma Lambda entered a season of leaner years.⁵⁰ Membership declined somewhat, and "the good old Alpha spirit soon began to fall asleep."⁵¹ Yet, the fraternity was able to pay for "a very well appointed fraternity house and [build] up a substantial treasury."⁵² By 1953, however, new leadership reenergized the chapter, and within a short while, the number of brothers grew from forty-four to 234.⁵³

Alpha House

Brush Park

Brush Park had been developed in the latter nineteenth century as a neighborhood for prominent Detroiters. Among them were Dexter M. Ferry, Joseph L. Hudson, Albert Kahn, and David Whitney. It was "a region of comfort and repose for the venerable."⁵⁴ By the turn of the century, however, newer and grander neighborhoods had been developed to the north of Brush Park, and the "venerable" citizens decamped for greener pastures. Brush Park enter into a period of transition. The neighborhood "became a center of residence for the Jewish community," several apartment buildings were constructed, "formerly grand houses were added onto at the back, filling the rear yard and converting the property to apartment use," and "other houses were converted to apartment or rooming-house use."⁵⁵ By the mid-1940s, the once grand homes were "in bitter need of paint and repair," and the streets "a scene of poverty and chop-fallen gloom; possibly of worse things."⁵⁶ By 1960, Brush Park was almost completely abandoned. The African American residents who remained dealt with inequality and lack of services in their neighborhoods. The neighborhood remained in a state of decline until the 1990s.

⁴⁹ Wesley, *The History of Alpha Phi Alpha*, 130.

⁵⁰ Francis A. Kornegay, "About Ramon S. Scruggs Pres. Of Gamma Lambda," *Sphinx*, December 1953, 6.

⁵¹ Kornegay, "About Ramon S. Scruggs Pres. Of Gamma Lambda," 6.

⁵² Charles J. Wartman, "Gamma Lambda Chapter," *Sphinx*, May 1947, 33.

⁵³ Kornegay, "About Ramon S. Scruggs Pres. Of Gamma Lambda," 6.

⁵⁴ McLauchlin, *Alfred Street*, 31.

⁵⁵ Proposed Brush Park Historic District Final Report, 3.

⁵⁶ McLauchlin, *Alfred Street*, preface.

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The house at 293 Eliot Street appears to have been constructed circa 1912, which at that time was identified as 103 Eliot Street.⁵⁷ City directories do not have an entry in the 1912 edition, and 103 Eliot appears in the 1913 edition as “vacant.” The first occupants of the house were Herman and Lena Rosenthal and their daughters, Reva and Esther.⁵⁸ Herman Rosenthal was described in the 1914 and 1915 city directories as working in “dry goods” and “clothing,” respectively. Herman Rosenthal passed away in 1929.⁵⁹ Lena Rosenthal remained in this house until circa 1939, when she moved with her daughter, Reva, to a house on Calvert Street.

1939-1970

For the two decades that followed the chartering of the Gamma Lambda Chapter, the brothers did not have a permanent meeting location. The chapter met at locations operated by the organizations led by chapter brothers. The first initiation in 1920 was held at the Columbia Community Center at 553 East Columbia Street, near Saint Antoine, and meetings were held at the Chestnut Community Center at 1534 Chestnut Street, both owned by the Detroit Urban League. Meetings were also held at various locations in Paradise Valley, including the old Knights of Pythias Hall at 406 East Adams near Brush, and the Russell House Hotel at 615 East Adams.

Gamma Lambda, one of the larger and more established alumni chapters of Alpha Phi Alpha, and one of the influential Greek-letter organizations in Detroit, had the “tremendous” sum of thirty dollars in the treasury when a committee of brothers began working on the project to secure a house. Brother Henry S. Dunbar, manager of Detroit’s Brewster Housing Project, was president of the chapter in 1939 when the idea was born. Among those on the committee were Brothers Dr. Harold Johnson, Dr. Frank Raiford, Dr. Chester Ames, A.B. Chenault, Dr. Paul Alexander, and Dr. Robert Greenidge. The committee raised 450 dollars from the brothers without notice and the down payment of 1,500 dollars was raised within ten days. Each brother was assessed a house tax of twenty-five dollars.⁶⁰

On May 15, 1939, the Alpha Phi Alpha Gamma Lambda Chapter purchased the house at 293 Eliot Street.

Prior to the purchase of 293 Eliot Street, not one chapter in the national fraternity had bought a house and paid for it in full, with the property free of any encumbrances. Chapters had solicited the General Organization for loans, and others secured financing from local graduates and other brothers. Many of these chapters lost their houses due to shortages and taxes that had not been

⁵⁷ Many of the streets in Detroit were readdressed in 1920.

⁵⁸ Directories list only Herman Rosenthal until the 1930 edition (the 1929 edition was unavailable), and then list Lena Rosenthal with a notation that she was Herman’s widow. Genealogical data identified the Rosenthal daughters.

⁵⁹ Herman Rosenthal is listed as Heiman Rosenthal in his Michigan Department of Health Certificate of Death.

⁶⁰ Wartman, “The Alpha House in Detroit,” 19.

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paid. The fraternity recommended that each chapter take care of their own financing and not rely on the financing from the General Organization.⁶¹

Brother Aaron Brown of the Gamma Iota Lambda Chapter reflected on the development of Alpha Phi Alpha in the fiftieth anniversary issue of *The Sphinx*, published in August 1956. Brother Brown identified twelve points on which he thought the whole of the fraternity could improve. One of his observations was that the fraternity had “not been as diligent as we should have been during the last fifty years in acquiring property for fraternity houses.”⁶²

In August 2003, Gamma Lambda Chapter hosted the Alpha Phi Alpha National Convention in Detroit. The chapter spent a good amount of time, energy, and money rehabilitating and renovating the house – all while maintaining its key, character-defining features. The project was another of Gamma Lambda’s commitments to the community.

The Alpha House is sacred ground for the hundreds of current members of Gamma Lambda Chapter, and for the thousands more who came before them. For these Alpha men, the fraternity house has always been more than a just a place for bonding and socializing. At a time when very few public, and no private, dining and entertainment facilities in Detroit admitted African Americans,⁶³ the house provided an important cultural and social outlet for Black college students and the community-at-large.⁶⁴ The Alpha House has been identified by local historians for its link to important people and events in African American history in Detroit.⁶⁵ Alpha House was a safe haven for both Alpha men and the larger community in times of crisis such as the riots of 1943 and 1967.⁶⁶ The Alpha House also became a focal point for the formulation of plans and programs and the mobilization of the community to systematically attack the inequities in employment, housing and education that had long plagued and disadvantaged the black community.

Social Significance

Since the Alpha House was purchased in 1939 through the present day, Gamma Lambda has made significant contributions the social history and ethnic heritage of African Americans in Detroit. The Alpha brothers of Gamma Lambda engaged and supported the community through several national programs, local initiatives, and collaborative partnerships with like-minded organizations. Two of the prominent and long-standing programs are *A Voteless People is a Hopeless People* and *Go-to-High-School, Go-to-College*.

⁶¹ Piper, “Chapter House Financing,” 3.

⁶² Aaron Brown, “Alpha Phi Alpha—After 50 Years,” *Sphinx*, August 1956, 30.

⁶³ Crittendon, “Markers and Memories: A Guide to Black History in Detroit,” 23.

⁶⁴ Detroit Historical Museum, *Detroit's Black Historic Sites*, 18.

⁶⁵ Detroit Historical Museum, *Detroit's Black Historic Sites*, 18; Bally, Malitz, and Colby, “Black Historic Sites in Detroit,” 12A.

⁶⁶ “A Launch Pad for Civil Rights and Refuge from Civil Unrest, Detroit's Alpha House Has a Storied History.” *Fox 2 Detroit*.

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A Voteless People is a Hopeless People

The Alpha Phi Alpha national program *A Voteless People is a Hopeless People* (VPHP) was started in 1932 at a time when African Americans experienced widespread cases of voter suppression and intimidation.

The accomplishments of Gamma Lambda, and the long term work taking place at 293 Eliot Street drew attention from outside Detroit. Internationally known Alpha men, such as Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King Jr. frequently came to Detroit and the Alpha House to lend their support and assistance.⁶⁷ Brothers Damon Keith, Dennis Archer and many other Gamma Lambda brothers worked to elect Detroit's first Black mayor, Coleman A. Young in 1974. They also helped to elect numerous judges and local officials. Many of the brothers who helped elect Mayor Young went on to serve as city commissioners and appointed department heads. Brother Archer was later elected mayor himself.

Since 1932 the men of Gamma Lambda have carried out a variety of programs and initiatives designed to increase voter education and political awareness, but voter registration has remained the focus of the VPHP program.

Go-to-High-School, Go-to-College

The Alpha Phi Alpha *Go-to-High-School, Go-to-College* program, established as a national program in 1922, concentrates on the importance of completing secondary and collegiate education as a road to advancement. Statistics prove the value of this extra impetus in making the difference in the success of young African American men, given that school completion is the single best predictor of future economic success. Through this Alpha initiative, young men receive information and learn strategies that facilitate success. Alpha men provide youth participants with strong role models.

As Alpha Phi Alpha prepared for the 1925 *Go-to-High-School, Go-to-College* campaign, Brother James A. Scott considered the current state of higher education and the cause to which the program and the fraternity were bound:

For to be a Negro and to attempt to seriously contribute to the life of the community requires moral courage of no mean degree. Too many of our brightest and most sensitive succumb to the inferiority complex resulting from the suggestions of press and experience that surround us. Thus the exercise of their finest powers is inhibited. Could these people but be able to see themselves as worth forerunners in a just and triumphant cause, they would attack their problems with more hopeful spirit and greater zeal. To prepare these people manually, mentally, and cultural is no small part of our task, but to light in their souls the fire of manhood and womanhood is the most important task of all.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ The Westsiders, *Remembering Detroit's Old Westside*, 138.

⁶⁸ James A. Scott, "The Modern Philosophy of Education," *Sphinx*, April 1925, 8.

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Brother Sidney P. Brown observed in 1925 an important obstacle faced at that time by African American men after graduation:

When the white man finished college, the various civic, social, business, political, and scientific clubs awaited him. Here he could find his peers engaged in activities that attracted him. Competent organizations were already in existence handling the white man's burden. The Negro college graduate had no such fortune.⁶⁹

That sentiment was shared by another prominent Detroit lawyer, who observed:

If you ask a white lawyer my age what he did as he matured into adulthood, he'd say he went on to the University of Michigan Law School, graduated, and went and got an office in the National Bank Building and prospered thereafter. From my point of view, race required that I spend most of my formative years struggling to survive and succeed in a very hostile and confusing environment in which I was forced almost daily to do battle with the white establishment.⁷⁰

Out of such realizations came the call for graduate or alumni chapters. Considering further the diversity of thought and interest among the members of such chapters, the fraternity sought to bind "the varied natures" of its alumni brothers in a common goal.⁷¹ Thus, the *Go-To-High-School, Go-To-College Movement* was formed.⁷² As the program developed, it included public meetings, special speakers, the production of literature, and partnerships with various organizations.⁷³

Documents in the Gamma Lambda archives show that the chapter worked on and promoted the *Go-to-High-School, Go-to-College* program for the "betterment of colored folk" in the community every year since the program began in 1922.⁷⁴ At that time, the General Organization had insisted on the adoption of an objective for the fraternity, and education was deemed the most important consideration.⁷⁵ The General Organization reported in the May 1922 issue of *The Sphinx* that forty-two participating chapters reached two million school-age children with the program's message.⁷⁶ The following year, the program reached three million people, and was joined in promoting the program by the press and religious leaders.⁷⁷

⁶⁹ Sidney P. Brown, "The New Idea," *Sphinx*, April 1925, 3.

⁷⁰ Moon, "Kermit G. Bailer," 181.

⁷¹ Brown, "The New Idea," 4.

⁷² Brown, "The New Idea," 4.

⁷³ Raymond W. Cannon, "The 'Go-to-High-School, Go-to-College' Campaign," *Sphinx*, April 1925, 1.

⁷⁴ "Seventh Annual Go-to-High-School, Go-to-College Program Mass Meeting," Invitation.

⁷⁵ Wesley, *The History of Alpha Phi Alpha*, 135.

⁷⁶ "Go to College Movement a Success," *Sphinx*, May 1922, 9.

⁷⁷ "Go-To-High-School, Go-To College," *Sphinx*, June 1923, 42.

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Even with the success of the program in its first few years, the General Organization encouraged the chapters to “go to the masses” in 1925.⁷⁸ This meant the chapters should make plans to go to small towns and rural communities, to the congested districts and industrial centers, and to speak directly to the illiterate parents to impress upon all the importance of education.⁷⁹ This effort coincided with Gamma Lambda hosting the Alpha Phi Alpha annual convention in Detroit that year, which brought thousands of Alpha brothers and their guests to the city.

In 1926, Gamma Lambda joined forces with the Detroit Urban League to further propel the program. Local children were encouraged to participate, and parents were invited to attend community meetings. After the acquisition of Alpha House, Alpha brothers regularly mentored young Black men to prepare them for the rigors of college.

To advocacy and mentoring, Gamma Lambda eventually added financial support in the form of scholarships. The first scholarship in the amount of two hundred fifty dollars was presented to a local high school graduate in the front room of the Alpha House in 1949.⁸⁰

Civil Unrest and the Calming Influence of Alpha Phi Alpha

Although there were plenty of good times at the Alpha House, there were periods of civil unrest in the City of Detroit that allowed the chapter to demonstrate their commitment to the fraternity’s social mission.

An important moment in the history of the city and the chapter was the Detroit Race Riot of 1943. The riot was deeply rooted in racism, poor living conditions, and unequal access to goods and services. The apparent industrial prosperity that made Detroit the “Arsenal of Democracy” during World War II masked deep racism and social inequities that resulted in an eruption of unrest during the summer of 1943.

On June 20, 1943, more than two hundred Black and White citizens engaged in racially motivated fighting on Belle Isle. Though police quelled the violence by midnight, tensions soared and later that night, rumors led to incendiary action on both sides. African Americans at the Forest Social Club in Paradise Valley were told that Whites had thrown a Black woman and her baby off the Belle Isle Bridge. An equally false rumor that Blacks had raped and murdered a White woman on the Belle Isle Bridge swept through White neighborhoods. Violence and destruction spread over three days. It was not until six thousand United States Army troops entered the city that some semblance of peace was restored. In the end, nearly seven hundred people were injured, thirty-four people had been killed, and some two million dollars in property damage had occurred. The two sides blamed each other.

At the time of the riot, the Detroit Alpha House had been established for five years and, through the various programs of Alpha Phi Alpha, served as a calming influence in the downtown area

⁷⁸ Cannon, “The ‘Go-to-High-School, Go-to-College’ Campaign,” 1.

⁷⁹ Cannon, “The ‘Go-to-High-School, Go-to-College’ Campaign,” 1.

⁸⁰ *The Sphinx*, “\$250 Scholarship Award by Gamma Lambda,” 20.

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that encompassed the site of the hostilities.⁸¹ For many neighborhood residents, 293 Eliot became a refuge from the violence that followed the Belle Isle incident. The riots did not improve the condition of Black residents, and Alpha Phi Alpha continued to take an active role in leading community improvement efforts.

One outcome of the 1943 riot was the beginning of Whites leaving the city, and the movement of many African Americans to other parts of the city and to the suburbs. The Alpha House ultimately served as a think tank and staging area for many initiatives of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, a movement aimed at correcting the institutional inequities that led to the riots.

The battle to have African American patients treated with dignity in area hospitals, and for Black doctors to have the same training and job opportunities as their White counterparts was long and arduous during this period. One Gamma Lambda brother who helped to advance this effort was past chapter president Dr. Remus G. Robinson. In 1960, Brother Robinson led the Hospital Liaison Committee of the Detroit Medical Society to mobilize against four area hospitals that were planning to consolidate resources to condemn urban property for the purpose of erecting a large medical center north of Mack Avenue, about one block north from the Alpha House. One of these hospitals had a rigid pattern of segregation. The Detroit Medical Society mobilized civic and religious organizations and took their fight to the Detroit Common Council. Permission to go forward with the project was denied by the Council until these hospitals had all signed non-discriminatory pledges.⁸² The 1960s saw the completion of this Detroit Medical Center project.

During the 1960s the Gamma Lambda Chapter continued to play an active role in the cultural and social life of the Detroit community. In the first few years of the decade, the fraternity organized a series of public information programs that featured experts on various topics, such as historian William L. Hansberry of Howard University and economist Leo Ginsberg of Columbia University. This program was chaired by John Simmons of the Michigan Employment Security Commission.⁸³

In February 1963 the brothers of Gamma Lambda endorsed a program of cultural and educational activities for a select group of academically underachieving boys. This project was conducted in partnership with Detroit Public Schools Department of Instructional Research and Central High School administrative and counseling staff. The purpose of the project was to "raise the social, cultural and vocational horizons of a selected group of underachieving boys and to the end that their higher horizons might be reflected in a higher quality of aspiration and academic performance."⁸⁴

The education committee, under the chairmanship of Brother William Ruben started the Youth Leadership Training Program.⁸⁵ This program was developed to address the needs of youth

⁸¹ *Fox 2 Detroit*, "A Launch Pad for Civil Rights."

⁸² Lackey and Swan, "The Detroit Medical Society in Civic and Community Activities," 486.

⁸³ "Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity House," Property Nomination Form Draft, 1977.

⁸⁴ "Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity House," Property Nomination Form Draft, 1977.

⁸⁵ Goodwin, "A Model Youth Program," 15.

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between the ages of fourteen and eighteen who had been denied opportunities because of their social and economic status. The Alpha House is located within a few blocks of Brewster-Douglass Projects, at the time one of Detroit's largest public housing projects for low-income families. The first group consisted of ten youths, who were each encouraged to engage five other youths. Group counseling was provided to help the youth identify existing talents and ambitions. Each enrollee was assigned a fraternity brother who served as a mentor. During the year, most of the youth aided younger boys in the Brewster-Douglass community. All the youth leaders in the program were gainfully employed during the summer that followed, and success stories were documented about those who went on to college or joined the world of work after high school graduation.⁸⁶

During 1965 and the years following, the fraternity sponsored Christmas parties for youngsters living in the surround Brush Park neighborhood. These parties were hosted by the Alpha Housemother, Mrs. Anna Gross, and members of the fraternity. Several gifts, including toys, fruits and candies, were donated by members of the fraternity for this occasion. Most of the children attending these parties were from the Brewster Projects. In addition, the fraternity established a close working liaison with the Peter Claver Community House, an agency located near the Brewster-Douglass Project and devoted towards skill development and community development.

By the time the summer of 1967 arrived, the city was again embroiled in a period of civil unrest. The uprising that occurred in Detroit in the summer that year was the result of decades of pent-up frustration, resentment, and anger that had been created by poverty, racism, and lack of social, economic and educational opportunity. The police raid of an unlicensed after-hours bar early in the morning of July 23 and the heavy-handed tactics that the White police officers used against the Black patrons was the impetus for the start of a rebellion. Five days of rioting by Black and White citizens in the city resulted in forty-three people dead, one thousand seven hundred stores looted and one thousand four hundred buildings burned.⁸⁷

As the anger subsided, the city saw massive growth in activism, community engagement, and rebuilding.⁸⁸ In one example of these efforts, three blocks to the east of the Alpha House, Edward Tolan Playfield, at I-75 and Mack Avenue, was dedicated on September 13, 1967, in honor of the late Brother Thomas Edward Tolan, a University of Michigan graduate, Olympic sprinter, and member of the Epsilon and Gamma Lambda Chapters. Tolan came to Detroit as a teenager and spent the rest of his life in the city. He became known as the "Midnight Express" during his record-setting career as a sprinter. He won gold in the 100- and 200-meters events at the 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles and became the first person of color to be called the "fastest man alive."⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Goodwin, "A Model Youth Program," 16.

⁸⁷ Walsh, "50 Years After Race Riots, Issues Remain the Same."

⁸⁸ *Detroit Historical Society*, "Uprising of 1967."

⁸⁹ *Detroit Historical Society*, "Midnight Express." In his sprinting career, Tolan won three hundred races and lost seven. Tolan has been inducted into the Michigan Sports Hall of Fame, the National Track and Field Hall of Fame, and the University of Michigan Athletic Hall of Honor.

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Past Gamma Lambda Chapter President Ramon S. Scruggs stated at the 1968 General Convention, "now, what is Alpha Phi Alpha's role and responsibility? Simply stated, it is this. To make certain that there are no Black spectators in this struggle to make Black Americans free."⁹⁰

Chapter members were actively involved in the uplift of the surrounding community before and after the 1967 uprising. One such incident was shared by Brother William Herbert, a 1955 initiate of the Eta Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and member of Gamma Lambda:

I started spending time in Detroit immediately after the riot, when racial tensions were very high. White flight was emptying many neighborhoods and the Detroit Police was running a reign of terror on Black citizens. Detroit Police Commissioner John Nichols, who would run against Coleman Young in 1973, promoted the brutal STRESS Program (Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets). STRESS was responsible for the death of many Black Detroiters. On a winter evening in 1968, as I walked along a deserted Larned Street, a "big four" unit appeared out of nowhere, screeched to a stop next to me. Three of the goons jumped me and threw me up against a brick wall, searched me, demanding to know what I was doing in the neighborhood. After a tense few minutes, and some rough treatment, they let me go. But it wasn't the last time it would happen. Most Black men were experiencing the same kinds of life-threatening provocations. I remember discussing the incidents and the whole police situation with other fraternity brothers, and we provided a support system for each other. The experience prompted me to go on and work to elect Mayor Young and join his staff when he got elected. He ran on a promise to eliminate STRESS, and he delivered on that promise. During that period, I felt as though the fraternity and the Alpha House provided a safe haven and an incubator for ideas to fight the abuses that were so prevalent at the time.

Throughout its history, Gamma Lambda has partnered with important Detroit institutions to address the needs of the community. These organizations were often led by Alpha brothers, and remained key allies throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

One of these partners was the Detroit Urban League (DUL), which worked for better racial conditions and equal opportunities. The DUL was first organized by Brother Forrester Washington in 1916, was later led by Brothers John C. Dancy and Francis A. Kornegay from 1920 until 1977. The DUL helped new arrivals find jobs and places to live, operated a clinic to provide health services for babies, founded the Pen and Palette club to help young Black artists, and opened the Green Pastures camp for Black children, who were barred from White youth camps.⁹¹ The DUL opened a community center building at 553 East Columbia (demolished) in 1918 to provide temporary shelter for migrants. They created a list of landlords that rented to African Americans, kept information on potential job opportunities, and provided legal assistance when needed.⁹² Gamma Lambda, in general, provided financial and material support

⁹⁰ Scruggs, "Address by Ramon S. Scruggs."

⁹¹ Mills and Little, *The Civil Rights Movement*.

⁹² Elizabeth Anne Martin. *Detroit and the Great Migration*. (Ann Arbor, MI: The Bentley

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to the DUL, and both organizations partnered to further the goals of the Alpha Phi Alpha *Go-to-High-School, Go-to-College* program.

The Saint Antoine Street Branch YMCA was the heart of Detroit's African American community, providing recreational activities and hosting speakers and events related to civil rights before it was demolished. This branch was led by Brother Henry S. Dunbar, and Gamma Lambda Chapter hosted many social and community events at this location.

Reaching beyond the fraternity's community programs, a few members chose to run for public office to help shape public policy from the inside. Charter member Brother Charles A. Roxborough III was the first African American elected to the Michigan State Senate in 1930. Other Alpha brothers were elected to offices at the state level, and to offices in other municipalities. In 1955, Brother Remus G. Robinson was elected to the Detroit School Board, the first African American to do so. He held the seat until his death in 1970, serving much of that time as president of the school board. Brother William T. Patrick Jr. was the first African American elected to the Detroit Common Council in 1958.⁹³ Federal Judge Damon Keith and Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer not only worked on Alpha initiatives such as *Go-to-High-School, Go-to-College* and *A Voteless People is a Hopeless People*, but also helped to identify and elevate other Black leaders whether or not they were affiliated with Alpha Phi Alpha.

The Alpha House was also the location of regular chapter and planning meetings and hosted numerous significant events in the history of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity. In 1949, the chapter hosted a conference for regional directors where over six hundred Alpha men and their guests gathered in the Alpha House to welcome fraternity officers, including General President Bedford V. Lawson and Midwestern Vice-President Maceo Hill.⁹⁴ During the 1953 Alpha Phi Alpha General Convention, the house was open to visitors and guests. Brother Thurgood Marshall delivered the keynote address at this convention. As described in Winter 1953 *Sphinx* magazine, the house offered to its guests "facilities for complete relaxation and enjoyment. The bar at all times is well stocked with a beverage of your choice. Visiting brothers will have no need to spend any time between convention programs unpleasantly."⁹⁵ In 1968, the Gamma Lambda Chapter hosted the Sixty-Second Anniversary Alpha Phi Alpha General Convention. There were one thousand four hundred fifty registered attendees.⁹⁶ The house was again open to visitors during the convention.

Throughout the history of the chapter, the men of Gamma Lambda have had a profound impact on their community either individually, through the fraternity, or in partnership with others. Men of Gamma Lambda Chapter have included educators, physicians, attorneys and community workers, many of whom broke color barriers in their respective fields and opened doors for those who followed. Through their accomplishments and service, these men played a significant role in the uplift of the African American community of Detroit. National and local programs

Historical Library), 1993.

⁹³ *The Sphinx*, "Chapter Charts 1958 Course," 29.

⁹⁴ Lewis, "Regional Directors Hold Conference in Detroit, MI," 5.

⁹⁵ *The Sphinx*, "For Your Comfort at the Convention," 11.

⁹⁶ Young, "Alpha Workshop," 46.

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provided opportunities and mechanisms to lead and inspire others to greater achievement. Their work and contributions created a richer and more just city.

Subsequent History and Prominent Chapter Members

Subsequent History

In 1971, Gamma Lambda Chapter formed a non-profit corporation under Act 327 of Michigan Public Acts of 1931 known as Alpha Phi Alpha Non-Profit Housing, Incorporated.⁹⁷ The non-profit was formed to "To provide housing for low- and moderate-income families and for elderly persons," as defined in the National Housing Act.⁹⁸

In 1971 the Corporation bought Parkside Village in the Detroit suburb of Inkster, Michigan, from the Michigan Consolidated Gas Company following a court ruling that prohibited public utilities from owning public housing. The Parkside Village complex consists of 134 units with an estimated value of nearly 2.5 million dollars. Parkside Village had an interest supplement mortgage held by the federal government, which sets limits on the income level of the families who were allowed to live at Parkside and regulated the actual amount of rent charged. This restriction, along with inflationary trends of the time, placed a heavy burden on the future operation of this project.

On August 31, 1977, the Alpha House was rewarded for years of habitation by the Michigan Historical Commission, citing the house as significant for its role as a focal point for Black social, cultural, educational, and community service. On April 23, 1978, Chapter President Ivan Cotman dedicated the state historical marker. At the dedication, Brother Cotman stated:

It gives me great pleasure today to represent Gamma Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha in this historic dedication. This event also recognizes the commitment we have made to the molders which chronicle the history of Detroit. However, of equal importance is ourselves in the commitment to participate in its rebirth. Just as the Alpha men whose vision and toil have brought us to this great day, we hereby commemorate this House and Plaque for our posterity.⁹⁹

The original marker, which had been affixed to the Alpha House, was replaced with a new freestanding historical marker in 2015.

In 1980 the Board of Directors of the Gamma Lambda Chapter charged the scholarship committee with the responsibility of raising funds for and awarding a scholarship to a high school graduate. In June 1981, in an effort to increase its scholarship fundraising efforts, the

⁹⁷ President of the non-profit corporation was Harvey T. Procter, Vice-President Barton W. Morris, Secretary Jesse F. Goodwin, and Treasurer Leven C. Weiss. Directors were William Ezell, Nathaniel Holloway, Ivan Cotman and Gus Ogletree.

⁹⁸ The corporation was formed to specifically provide housing for the purpose provided in Section 221 (d) 3 236 and 231. respectively of Title 11 of the National Housing Act, as amended

⁹⁹ Kuykendall, "Alpha House."

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Gamma Lambda Chapter authorized the establishment of a Michigan non-profit corporation. The organization applied for and was granted federal tax-exempt status on April 27, 1982. This was the inception of the Alpha Phi Alpha, Inc. Gamma Lambda Education Foundation. Since that time, the Gamma Lambda Chapter has continued to support this mission. Over five hundred thousand dollars in college scholarships have been awarded to deserving young men through the Gamma Lambda Education Foundation.

In 1988 the Alpha Development Corporation was established for the purpose of purchasing and rehabilitating investment property. The corporation intended to make its initial real estate investments in Southeast Michigan, primarily in the Counties of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb, with specific emphasis on the City of Detroit. The principal office of the corporation was established and maintained at the Alpha House at 293 Eliot Street in the northeast room on the second story. The company was incorporated on March 9, 1988, by Richard Brown, Gerald Basden, Stanley Fields, James Murray, and George Wayne Watkins. During these initial days, projections called for acquisition of Eliot Street properties, both vacant and existing. A later stage goal was the development of a senior citizen complex. A project called Alpha Land was proposed by Stanley Fields, and Alpha Row was later proposed by John Kates III.

In addition to the on-going preservation of Alpha House, the brothers of Gamma Lambda Chapter have also been active in the preservation of the greater Brush Park neighborhood. In 1993, Gamma Lambda Chapter acquired the William Livingstone House, an 1894 French Renaissance house designed by Albert Kahn,¹⁰⁰ and described as "one of the premier buildings" in Brush Park.¹⁰¹ The house, which was first located at 76 Eliot Street, had been vacant for at least ten years, and was planned to be demolished to make way for a new laboratory.¹⁰² The house was located a block away from the Alpha House, but the historically minded Brothers of Gamma Lambda Chapter sought to preserve the house. With a bid of one dollar Gamma Lambda was able to purchase the home.¹⁰³ With the purchase came more than 300,000 dollars in federal money for restoration of the house. Fortieth Chapter President Larry E. Boatwright was one of the main persons responsible for the moving of this landmark. The house was moved to a vacant parcel at 284 Eliot Street, across the street from the Alpha House. The fraternity joined with the Historic Brush Homeowners Association in an effort to restore the house. At the time, the work of the Alphas was seen by some as "a happy exception to Detroit's sorry record of historic preservation."¹⁰⁴ Unfortunately, the building languished for many years in its final resting place before partially collapsing. It was demolished on September 15, 2007.

Another project that the Alpha Development Corporation partially supported was the purchase of the lot to the west of the Alpha House. Wayne Diagnostic Hospital, later renamed Burton Mercy, was founded in 1934 at 271 Eliot Street. It was one of the larger and more successful Black hospitals in the city. The hospital was founded by Gamma Lambda Brother Dr. Chester C. Ames

¹⁰⁰ "Heavy House Work," *Detroit Free Press*, March 10, 1993.

¹⁰¹ Vivian S. Toy, "Red Cross Plans Anger Brush Park Homeowners," *Detroit Free Press*, May 25, 1992.

¹⁰² "House Rescue: Historic Brush Park House Joins a Rare Fraternity," *Detroit Free Press*, March 14, 1993.

¹⁰³ *The Sphinx*, "Chapter News," 19.

¹⁰⁴ "House Rescue," *Detroit Free Press*, March 14, 1993.

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and Dr. DeWitt T. Burton to care for African American patients and train young Black doctors. The hospital was renamed Burton Mercy Hospital in 1949 to honor DeWitt's wife, Alice Burton. The facility was expanded in 1952 to become a one hundred fifty bed hospital. During the 1950s and 1960s, the couple ran the hospital and were active in local politics. They often hosted parties and meetings in their Detroit home attended by business and civic leaders. After her husband died in 1970, Mrs. Burton ran the hospital until it merged with Boulevard General, Delray General, and Trumbull General to form Southwest Hospital in 1974.¹⁰⁵ The hospital was later demolished and the lot was purchased by the Gamma Lambda Chapter in the 1990s.

As the 1990s progressed, a revival began to take hold in Brush Park. New condominiums were built in the southern part of the district, near the Fisher Freeway, and a few of the older mansions were restored. Several other properties were stabilized or restored during the buildup to Super Bowl XL, which was hosted in Detroit at the nearby Ford Field in 2006. During the last decade, development around the Alpha House has accelerated. Million-dollar developments have sprung up on Eliot Street and in the surrounding blocks.

In the mid-1990s, Gamma Lambda worked with the Sankofa Project, which provides support, resources, and guidance to children and teenagers. Gamma Lambda was recognized as having supported "some of the city's most alienated youths." One of the youths the Alpha brothers work with said, "it makes me feel good. It makes me feel like I count and somebody cares."¹⁰⁶

To this day, the Gamma Lambda Chapter continues to have a strong social mission, and the Alpha House is central to supporting that mission. For almost three decades the Alpha House has been one of the distribution centers for Detroit-area Meals on Wheels. Hundreds of meals are delivered each Easter, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day to the local community. The Gamma Lambda Chapter has been one of the top fundraisers for March of Dimes, and continues to raise more than ten thousand dollars each year. The chapter hosts a day of service on Martin Luther King Jr. Day each year, where brothers and friends of the chapter complete a local service project and hold a public program to honor Brother King and his legacy.

Continuing their legacy of service to education, Gamma Lambda Chapter established an education partnership with Martin Luther King, Jr. High School, Detroit Alpha Impact, in 2018. This project supports the class of 2022 throughout their high school career as they prepare for college.¹⁰⁷ Each year, Gamma Lambda members also "provide a back-to-school fair with free clothing vouchers, back pack giveaways, school supplies, and educational programming for parents and students."¹⁰⁸

The year 2019 marked an important milestone for the Gamma Lambda Chapter. The chapter celebrated one hundred years of service and advocacy to the Detroit Community. A Centennial

¹⁰⁵ Hunter, "Obituaries: Alice Burton," 2D.

¹⁰⁶ Trevor W. Coleman, "Even Small Shows of Concern Can Turn Young Lives Around," *Detroit Free Press*, February 10, 1998.

¹⁰⁷ Patrice A. Massey, "The Detroit Alphas Launch Mentorship Program with MLK, Jr. High School," *Michigan Chronicle*, October 9, 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Charles K. Dodson, Jr., "Learning from The Past, Building on the Future: A Century of Service and Impact," *Michigan Chronicle*, October 2, 2019.

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Celebration Gala was held on October 19, 2019, at the Detroit Marriott in the Renaissance Center. More than eight hundred brothers and guests were in attendance. The formal conversion of the Alpha House attic into the Gamma Lambda Chapter Museum was unveiled during the centennial weekend. The attic was repainted, and display cases were added to showcase awards, artifacts, documents, photos, and memorabilia acquired over the first one hundred years of the chapter.

Prominent Chapter Members

The Gamma Lambda Chapter included numerous members who rose to local and national prominence through their work on Alpha Phi Alpha initiatives and other community service efforts. The accomplishments of several of these early individuals are included in Appendix A. More information about other members of the chapter and Gamma Lambda history may be found in the Alpha Phi Alpha Gamma Lambda Chapter Centennial Celebration Gala souvenir journal, produced in book form in October, 2019.

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Name of Property

Wayne County, MI

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Wayne County, MI

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Alpha House
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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☒ University
☒ Other

Name of repositories:

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated
2313 St. Paul Street
Baltimore, MD 21218
<https://issuu.com/apa1906network>
Relevant collections: The Sphinx Magazine

Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History 315 E Warren Ave, Detroit, MI 48201
Relevant collections: Detroit Urban League, African American Professionals, Ambassador Bridge/Cornelius L. Henderson

Detroit Public Library - Burton Historical Collection 5201 Woodward Ave., Detroit, MI 48220
Relevant collections: Roxborough family papers, 1909-1992

University of Michigan - Bentley Historical Library 1150 Beal Avenue, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-2113
Relevant collections: John C. Dancy papers, 1920-1960; Detroit Urban League, 1916-ongoing; Francis A Kornegay papers, 1936-1977, Alpha Phi Alpha, Epsilon Chapter (University of Michigan) records, 1909-1996

Alpha House

Name of Property

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Wayne State University - Walter P. Reuther Library 5401 Cass Ave., Detroit, MI 48202

Relevant collections: Remus Robinson papers, 1928-1970; James J. McClendon Papers, 1932-1969; Wayne State University Fraternities and Sororities Records, 1932-2000; Ramon S. Scruggs, Sr. Papers, 1935 - 1985 (Majority of material found within 1960 - 1974); Damon J. Keith Papers, 1938-2007

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): SHPO17-56

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property Less than one (0.14 acres)

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 42.348233 | Longitude: -83.055966 |
| 2. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 3. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 4. Latitude: | Longitude: |

Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

☐ NAD 1927 or ☐ NAD 1983

- | | | |
|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 2. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 3. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 4. Zone: | Easting : | Northing: |

Alpha House
Name of Property

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County and State

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The easterly forty-five (45) feet of Lot numbered four (4) in Block Twelve (12) of Brush's Subdivision of part of Park Lots 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 and part of the Brush Farm adjoining, according to the plat thereof recorded in Liber 8 of Plats on page 12, Wayne County Records, commonly known as 293 Eliot Street, Detroit, Michigan

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

This is the description of the property listed on the original deed for the home, which was transferred to the Gamma Lambda Chapter at the time of final payment (\$1.00 and other good and valuable consideration) on May 13, 1944.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Brian D. Williams / Chapter Historian
organization: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Gamma Lambda Chapter
street & number: 293 Eliot Street
city or town: Detroit state: MI zip code: 48201
e-mail: bwilliams@detroitalphas.org
telephone: 313-330-0277
date: March 1, 2021

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Alpha House
Name of Property

Wayne County, MI
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Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity House

City or Vicinity: Detroit

State: Michigan

Name of Photographer: Kyles O. Hamilton, Sr.

Date of Photographs: June 6, 2017

Location of Original Digital Files: 293 Eliot St., Detroit, MI 48206

Number of Photographs: 2

Photo #1: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0001

South façade, front porch and Michigan historic marker; camera facing northeast

Photo #2: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0002

South façade and front porch; camera facing north

Name of Photographer: Elsa Rolle

Date of Photographs: July 18, 2016

Location of Original Digital Files:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=57532314>

Number of Photographs: 1

Photo #3: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0003

Side (right) façade; camera facing northwest

Name of Photographer: Brian D. Williams

Date of Photographs: June 6, 2020

Location of Original Digital Files: 25877 Arrowhead St., Southfield, MI 48075

Number of Photographs: 2

Photo #4: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0004

Side (left) façade; camera facing east

Photo #5: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0005

Side (right) and rear façade, back deck; camera facing southwest

Alpha House

Name of Property

Wayne County, MI

County and State

Name of Photographer: Kyles O. Hamilton, Sr.

Date of Photographs: June 6, 2017

Location of Original Digital Files: 293 Eliot St., Detroit, MI 48206

Number of Photographs: 7

Photo #6: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0006

Rear façade, back deck; camera facing south

Photo #7: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0007

Backyard, Jewel Garden, commemorative bricks, deck stairs; camera facing north

Photo #8 MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0008

Front sitting room (President's Corner), staircase to second floor, front door with leaded glass; camera facing southeast

Photo #9: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0009

First floor, staircase to second floor, stained glass above window; camera facing east

Photo #10 MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0010

First floor, back meeting room; camera facing north

Photo #11: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0011

First floor, front living room, leaded glass, tile fireplace; camera facing southwest

Photo #12: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0012

Basement, south wall, bar; camera facing south

Name of Photographer: Brian D. Williams

Date of Photographs: June 6, 2020

Location of Original Digital Files: 25877 Arrowhead St., Southfield, MI 48075

Number of Photographs: 6

Photo #13: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0013

First floor, kitchen, northeast corner; camera facing east

Photo #14: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0014

Front staircase and landing between first and second floor, stained glass window; camera facing east

Photo #15: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0015

First floor, foyer near front living room, right column; camera facing northwest

Photo #16: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0016

First floor, front living room, left leaded glass window; camera facing southwest

Alpha House

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Wayne County, MI

County and State

Photo #17: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0017

First floor, foyer, left leaded glass inner front door; camera facing southeast

Photo #18: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0018

Second floor, southwest corner, office of the Chapter President; camera facing southwest

Name of Photographer: Will Rogers

Date of Photographs: October 18, 2019

Location of Original Digital Files: 293 Eliot St., Detroit, MI 48206

Number of Photographs: 3

Photo #19: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0019

Attic (Museum), 3rd floor, photographs, trophies, miscellaneous artifacts; camera facing northeast

Photo #20: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0020

Attic (Museum), 3rd floor, photographs, trophies, plaques, miscellaneous artifacts; camera facing east

Photo #21: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0021

Attic (Museum), 3rd floor, photographs, trophies, miscellaneous artifacts; camera facing southeast

Photo #22: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0022

First floor, front living room; camera facing south.

Photo #23: MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0023

Basement bar; camera facing northwest.

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations 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.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

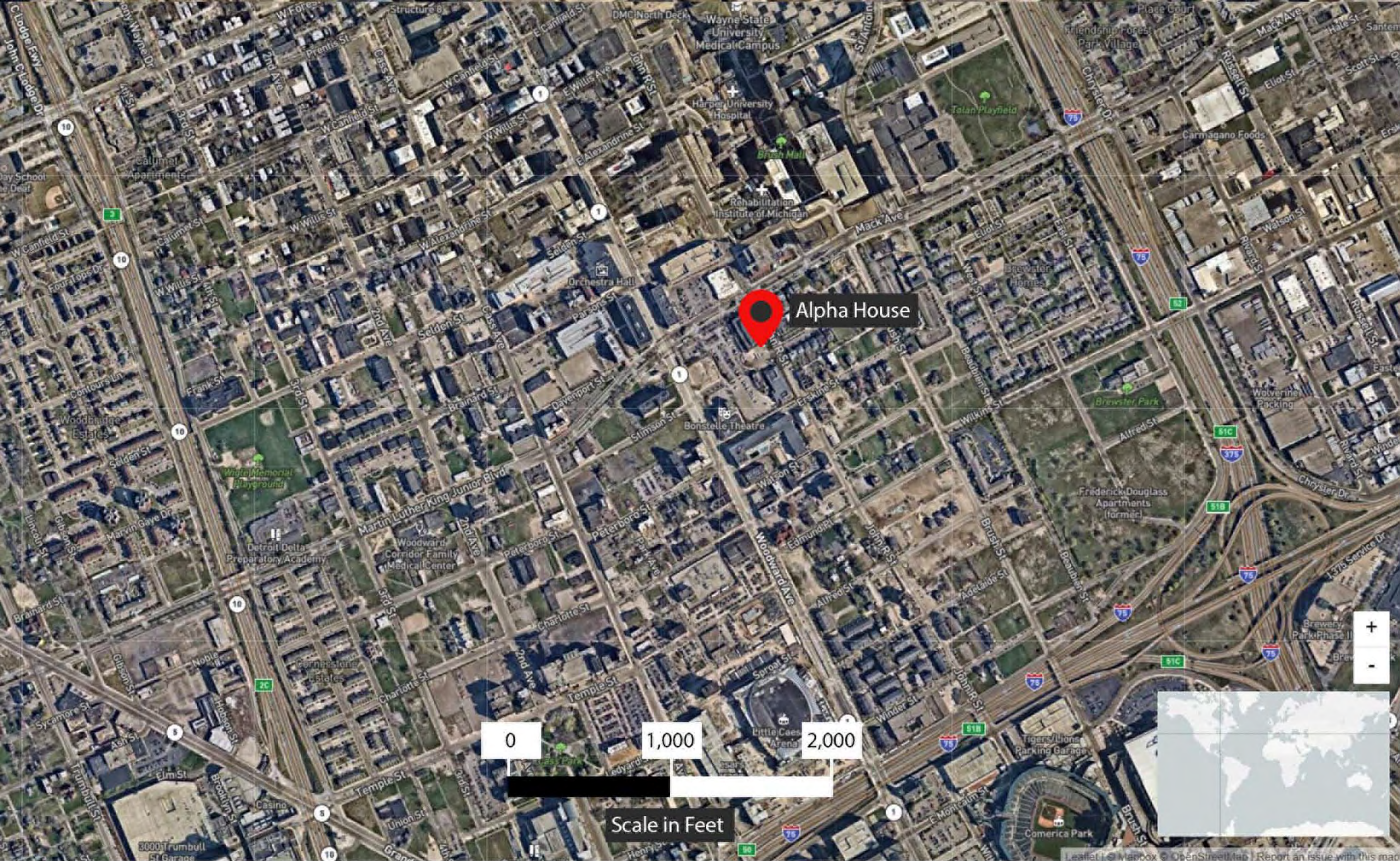
Tier 1 – 60-100 hours

Tier 2 – 120 hours

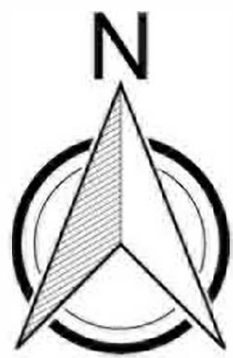
Tier 3 – 230 hours

Tier 4 – 280 hours

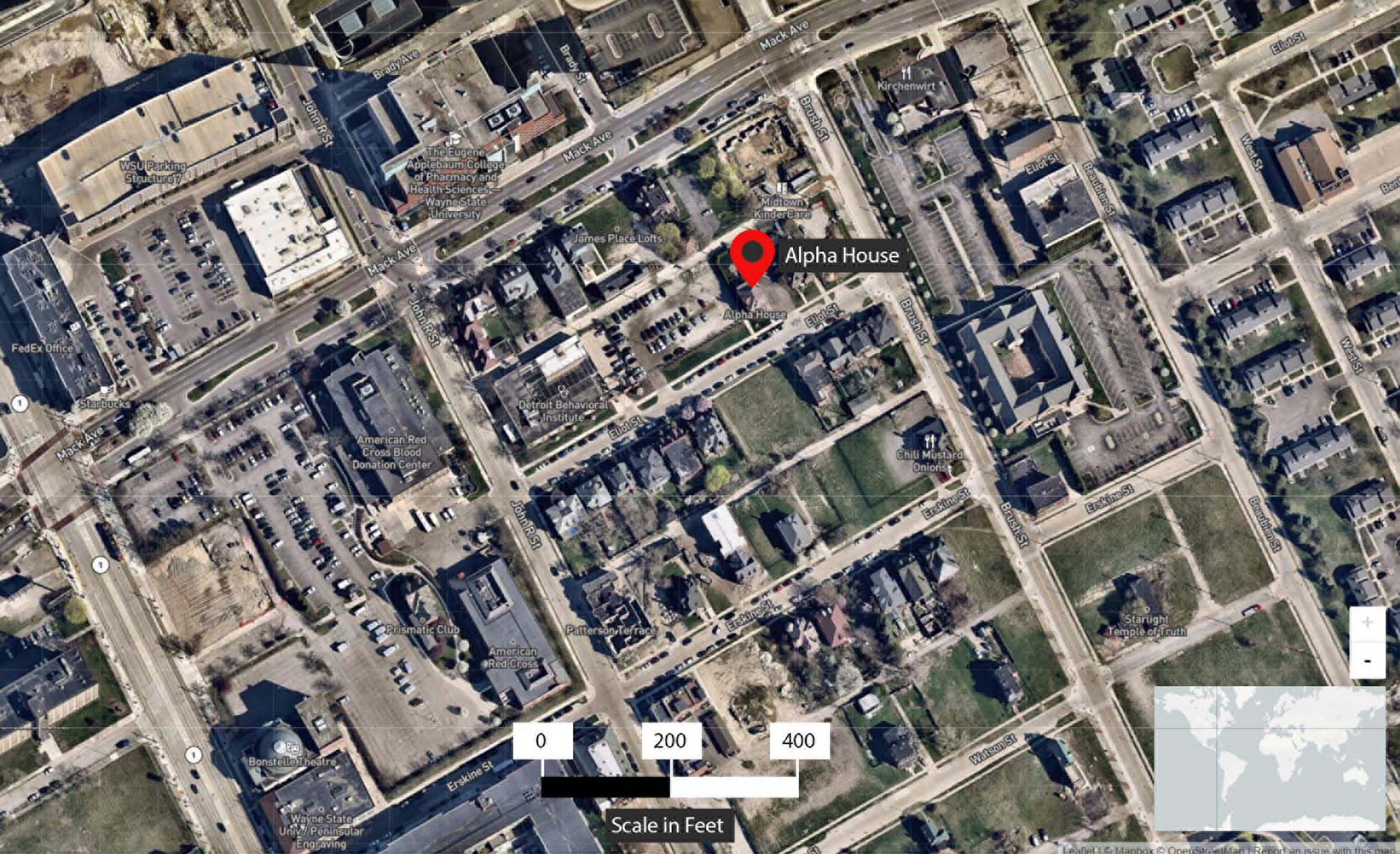
The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.



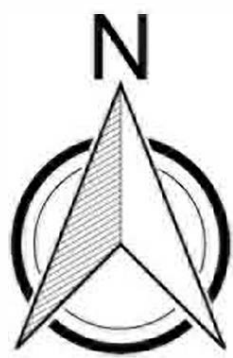
Alpha House
293 Eliot Street
Detroit, Wayne County, MI
Context Map



Latitude: 42.348233
Longitude: -83.055966



Alpha House
293 Eliot Street
Detroit, Wayne County, MI
Large Scale Map



Latitude: 42.348233
Longitude: -83.055966



ALPHA HOUSE
Built about 1916, this neoclassical style structure houses Gamma Lambda Chapter, third graduate chapter of the first black national Greek letter fraternity in the United States: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. Founded in 1906 at Cornell University, the fraternity's aims are many deeds, scholarship and love for all mankind. This local chapter, established in 1919, served as a focal point for black social, cultural, educational, and community service activities in an era when there were few other outlets. The chapter continues civic and cultural work and involvement in nonprofit business enterprises that benefit the metropolitan Detroit community. Martin Luther King, Jr., W. E. B. Du Bois and Edward Duke Ellington, among others, are national members who have achieved prominence.

MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0001



MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0002



MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0003



MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0004



MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0005



MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0009



MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0011



MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0014





MI_Wayne County_Alpha House_0021

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

Requested Action:	Nomination	
Property Name:	Alpha House	
Multiple Name:	The Civil Rights Movement and the African American Experience in 20th Century Detroit MPS	
State & County:	MICHIGAN, Wayne	

Date Received: 7/19/2021 Date of Pending List: 8/10/2021 Date of 16th Day: 8/25/2021 Date of 45th Day: 9/2/2021 Date of Weekly List:

Reference number:	MP100006860
Nominator:	SHPO
Reason For Review:	

 X Accept Return Reject 8/26/2021 Date

Abstract/Summary Comments:	Meets the registration requirements of the MPS. Home of a significant organization in the African American community, the Alpha House is an alumni chapter of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. Conceived as an organization to keep fraternity members connected after college, it serves as a headquarters for the chapter's many philanthropic endeavors. Eligible in Ethnic Heritage and Social History
Recommendation/ Criteria	Accept / A

Reviewer	<u>Jim Gabbert</u>	Discipline	<u>Historian</u>
Telephone	<u>(202)354-2275</u>	Date	<u></u>

DOCUMENTATION: see attached comments : No see attached SLR : No

If a nomination is returned to the nomination authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the National Park Service.



GRETCHEN WHITMER
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
MICHIGAN STRATEGIC FUND
STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

QUENTIN L. MESSER, JR.
PRESIDENT

Wednesday, July 14, 2021

Ms. Joy Beasley, Keeper
National Park Service
National Register of Historic Places
1849 C Street, NW, Mail Stop 7228
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Ms. Beasley:

The enclosed files contain the true and correct copy of the nomination for the **Alpha House, Detroit, Wayne County, Michigan**. This property is being nominated for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. This nomination is a X New Submission Resubmission Additional Documentation Removal.

- 1 Signed National Register of Historic Places Registration Form
 2 Locational maps (incl. with nomination file)
 0 Sketch map(s) / figures(s) / exhibits(s)
 1 Pieces of correspondence (incl. with nomination file)
 10 Digital photographs (incl. with nomination file)
 Other:

COMMENTS:

- Please ensure that this nomination is reviewed.
 This property has been approved under 36 CFR 67.
 The enclosed owner objections constitute a majority of property owners.
 This nomination has been funded by the following NPS grant:
 X Other: 4 letters of support received, to be submitted with full nomination

Questions concerning this nomination should be addressed to Todd A. Walsh, National Register Coordinator, at (517) 335-9854 or walsht@michigan.gov.

Sincerely yours,

Mark A. Rodman
State Historic Preservation Officer
State Historic Preservation Office



300 NORTH WASHINGTON SQUARE • LANSING, MICHIGAN 48913
michigan.gov/shpo • (517) 335-9840