



A Matter of Pride

A collection of newly donated photos showcases the richness of African American fraternities at U-M and the social pride found in off-campus housing.

By Brian Williams

RICHARD HILL JR. WAS A U-M LAW STUDENT from 1908 to 1911. He excelled academically and was recognized for his oratory and debate skills. A proud alum, he kept a scrapbook from his years at U-M containing photographs of his Law School class, campus events like the Senior Smoker, and the freshman-sophomore spring games, along with candid photos of classmates and a few images of himself. Many of the candid images were taken in and around the off-campus boarding house where he resided at 1017 Catherine Street.

After graduating, Hill eventually moved to Chicago to practice law and remained in practice for more than 50 years. Throughout his life, he retained his Michigan photos.

Eighty years after Richard Hill Jr. graduated from the University of Michigan Law School, his granddaughter, Dr. Sharon F. Patton, arrived in Ann Arbor as an associate professor with a joint appointment in the History of Art Department and the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies. Prior to coming to Michigan, Dr. Patton was Chief Curator at the Studio

Museum of Harlem, a leading research center for Afroamerican art. Dr. Patton recalled that after she arrived in Ann Arbor in the fall of 1991, the first place she wanted to find was the fraternity house where her grandfather lived while he was a law student.

She had, after all, inherited his beloved scrapbook and photographs.

Dr. Patton found that the campus had changed greatly in the eight decades since her grandfather completed his law degree. The Law School building where his classes were held burned down in 1950. His boarding house at 1017 Catherine fell to the wrecking ball in 1963. And there had been some progress too: U-M established the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies in 1970, a direct result of student demands during the first Black Action Movement strike in 1970. Dr. Patton was named its director in 1996. In 2011, it became a department.

Dr. Patton left Michigan in 1998 to lead Oberlin College's Allen Memorial Art Museum. She kept her grandfather's photos through various moves, including relocating to Washington, D.C., to serve as Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art from 2003 to 2008.

As a historian, Dr. Patton knew that her grandfather's photographs were significant. She hired a restoration technician to make enhanced digital versions of some photos that were damaged.

Dr. Patton reached out to the Bentley in the spring of 2022 to explore the possibility of donating the photos. She began by sharing some examples of the digitized images. Bentley archivists were ecstatic when they saw the photos. They were the earliest photographs Bentley archivists had seen of African American students living off-campus.

"The Bentley holds earlier images of African American students, senior portraits, and some group photos,

While some of the faces in Richard Hill's photos are known to us, many are not. The captions here provide names when possible, and we welcome your help identifying more individuals. Please use the online form at: aasp.bentley.umich.edu

(Left to right) Richard Hill (front row, far right) at the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity banquet on April 10, 1910.

Unidentified women and Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity member.

Richard Hill (bottom left) with a group on steps of the house at 1017 Catherine Street.

Richard Hill (right) and an unidentified woman.

Julius Guy Bowley, a 1913 homeopathic M.D. graduate.

The "senior smoker" social event, 1911.

but they are usually formal, posed photos," says Bentley archivist Greg Kinney. "Hill's photos offer a significantly different glimpse of informal African American life off-campus, particularly life at 1017 Catherine Street, a prominent address in the story of African American students at Michigan."

A SHARED HISTORY OF A BOARDING HOUSE AND FRATERNITY

The two-story house at 1017 Catherine Street, located near the University Hospital, was owned by local African Americans who rented rooms to African American students. In 1908, six students living in the house sent an inquiry to the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity chapter at Cornell University about establishing a chapter at the University of Michigan. (Alpha Phi Alpha, the oldest historically African American fraternity, was established at Cornell two years earlier.)

The Michigan petitioners received a favorable response. The Epsilon Chapter at Michigan was chartered April 10, 1909, the fifth chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha. The house at 1017 Catherine was the focal point, operating as the chapter house in its nascent days. It was also the site of the Fourth Annual Convention of Alpha Phi Alpha in 1911. A photo of the convention delegates standing on the steps of the Catherine Street house was published in the February 1913 issue of *The Crisis* magazine.

Hill was part of the first class of members initiated into the Epsilon chapter on November 13, 1909. His photos provide a remarkable lens into the early days of the first African American fraternity on campus. (It would be the only African American fraternity on campus until 1921, when the Phi chapter of Omega Psi Phi was established, followed a year later by the Sigma chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi.)

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Included with the photos are Hill's initiation certificate or "shingle," a program for the first annual banquet in 1910, and a program for a 1911 house party. Among the photos are a formal image of the 1910 banquet that marked the first anniversary of the Epsilon chapter's founding, and the 1911 house party, both taken by Ann Arbor studio photographer Alford S. Lyndon.

The printed program for the April 1910 anniversary banquet details the menu (oyster patties, chicken *a la* Maryland, little gem peas, potato croquettes, plus Manhattan cocktails and cigars), and the various toasts and toastmasters. Hill's toast to the seniors was titled, "Survival of the Fittest." The back of the program contains

the words to a fraternity song specific to Michigan, including the phrase, "Three in one and one in three, Epsilon and Michigan and our fraternity." The banquet photos depict 18 serious looking men extremely proud of their young fraternity.

Since 1988, the Bentley has held a bound volume of Epsilon chapter minutes dating from 1908 to 1927. The minutes infuse the banquet photo and

program with behind-the-scenes planning details. The social committee reported that men were to "be in full dress" and convene in the banquet hall by 8:00 P.M. Additionally, the social committee was tasked with arranging for a photographer.

A HISTORIC DONATION

Thanks to the generosity of Dr. Patton's donation, the Bentley received 50 images relating to Hill and his Michigan years. Beyond giving the archive the earliest known images of Alpha Phi Alpha at Michigan, some of the other photos have helped identify new names for the Bentley African American Student Project database (aasp.bentley.umich.edu).

RICHARD HILL JR. COLLECTION