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 graphs of his Law School class, campus events like the Senior Smoker, and the freshman-sophomore spring.

His photos provide a remarkable lens into the early days of the first African American fraternity on campus. Hill 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.

T he 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. 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, 1910, as the fifth chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha. The house at 1017 Catherine Street 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 typewritten list detailing the convention delegates standing on the steps of the chapter house sent an inquiry to Cornell University about establishing a chapter at the University of Michigan. Hill's photos offer a significantly different glimpse of informal African American life off-campus, particularly life at 1017 Catherine Street. 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 banquest photos depict 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 confuse 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 30 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).