

**Pioneers of the Black Student Community at Columbia:**  
**The Ambitious Omicron Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia University**

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**22nd December 2023**

**Introduction**

Early efforts to create black community-based organizations on Columbia University's campus were not only met with hostility, but with outright rejection and threats of violence. Despite these circumstances, the members of Kappa Alpha Psi — the first black fraternity established at Columbia — were able to create a successfully functioning organization that stood out on a national level in the early twentieth century. Members of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia spearheaded early efforts to create a community that encouraged social connection, professional excellence, and academic support for black students on campus.

Though Kappa Alpha Psi is now de-recognized by Columbia University, the founding story remains significant and resonates with campus culture today. The establishment of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia in 1921 serves to remind current University affiliates of the inherent barriers that have always existed within the school to prevent black students from achieving the same level of community building, professional opportunities and academic success as white students on campus. Even though the founding of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia ultimately is remembered as a tale of success and triumph amidst the greater, hostile and white fraternity scene, the legacy

of struggle and pushback that the fraternity had to go through still lives on in the school today.

The paper proceeds as follows. I first explore the dynamics of campus life, especially related to the fraternity scene prior to the founding of Kappa Alpha Psi to establish the cultural landscape that the fraternity was entering into. Then, I detail the founding story of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia and demonstrate the socio-spatial tactics the fraternity members utilized to achieve success. I go on to discuss the remaining racist hostility on campus that lived on after the establishment of the fraternity and how it likely affected the organization. Finally, I present the post-collegiate successes of several founding members of Kappa Alpha Psi to exhibit how the alumni embodied their fraternity's ideals of excellence.

To aid in my research, I utilized archival materials from the Columbia Spectator, Kappa Journal, The Crisis Magazine, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books, along with a few local newspapers. Additionally, I utilized several sociological studies regarding fraternity life in the 1920s to guide my understanding of twentieth-century fraternity life. This paper ultimately demonstrates that the determination and great efforts of the founding members of the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity at Columbia enabled the organization to thrive internally and on a national level despite existing within a larger landscape of a racist, white fraternity scene.

## **Campus Life and the Fraternity Scene Prior to the 1921 Chartering**

The early twentieth century saw a rise in the prominence of fraternity life on Columbia's campus. In the 1910s, there was a boost in the campus presence of white fraternities at Columbia, in regards to both their population and the regularity of their extracurricular events. Events such as inter-fraternity relay races and dances became popular options for campus activities. In 1917, it was announced in the *Spectator* that all fraternities could respectively enter ten participants to compete in the annual inter-fraternity relay race — an increase from the typical cap of five participants per organization (*Spectator* LX 79 1917). Additionally, in 1919 the *Spectator* alerted the student body that each fraternity would be allowed to take up four pages in the yearbook instead of two pages, the previous limit (*Spectator* XLIV 22 1919). These changes indicate that fraternity membership increased across campus during this time-period, as well as the overall desirability of joining such an organization or attending their events.

The prominence of Greek life on campus during the 1910s was also echoed by the presence of an interfraternity council, which still exists at Columbia today. The presence of an interfraternity council — which was evidently introduced in the early twentieth century (*Spectator* LVII 120 1914) — demonstrates that the fraternity scene was populous and well-functioning enough that it required a governing board. As of 1915, there were seventeen fraternities at Columbia, which is more than exists today (InterGreek Council Columbia). The most common jurisdictional issue that fraternities would encounter was giving out bids of membership to people who did not actually attend Columbia to increase membership (*Spectator* LVII 181 1914). Seeing as the

minimum grade average to enter a fraternity was in the C-D range (Spectator LVII 181 1914), it is likely that neither the interfraternity council nor the University sanctioned fraternities often during this period. Additionally, it is likely that President Nicholas Murray Butler viewed campus fraternities in a favorable light, as he had funded fraternity events such as dances (Spectator XLIV 119 1920).

Though University officials did not seem to discipline fraternities often during the early twentieth century, students did not shy away from publicly criticizing the faults of the Greek life system. In an op-ed in the Spectator, a member of an unnamed fraternity acknowledged that many students find Greek life to be “exclusive and narrowing” (Spectator LIV 126 1911), in addition to expressing that most Columbia fraternity members find this assessment justified. Elitism and group culture (Nurik 2017) greatly contributed to the exclusive culture of fraternities at Columbia and other elite universities in the Northeast in the early twentieth century.

Another major factor that contributed to the exclusive nature of Columbia Greek life in the early twentieth century was rampant racism. Anecdotes from famed writer Langston Hughes regarding his experience as a student at Columbia School of Mines in 1921 shine light on both the exclusivity of the fraternity scene as well as the black student experience at Columbia. Hughes infamously recalled his time as a student at Columbia to be “miserable” (Hartley Hall). Additionally, when Hughes applied to be a literary writer at the Spectator, he was rejected and forced to cover fraternity events and news, which he described to be “impossible for a colored boy to fill, as [Spectator staff] knew” (Hartley Hall). These anecdotes showcase how the presence of black students was not tolerated by white fraternity members in the early twentieth century.

The time preceding Kappa Alpha Psi's establishment on Columbia's campus was defined by a prominent, white Greek life scene. Despite their explicit racism and exclusivity, fraternity members received not only forgiveness from University administrators, but also high praise— fraternity men were often the recipients of school prizes and scholarships (Spectator XLI 7 1917). This massive collection of white organizations on campus also dominated the school extracurricular scene, hosting events ranging from elaborate sports competitions, to parties, to performing arts showcases (which often involved minstrelsy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) (Spectator LI 176 1908). This, in conjunction with how important and persuasive the voices of fraternity men were considered to be regarding on-campus affairs, highlights how Greek life essentially served as its own private and influential form of student government. The chartering of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia came at a time when there truly was an absence of community support systems and venues to experience social normalcy for black students.

### **The Chartering of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia**

Kappa Alpha Psi was established at Columbia University in February of 1921, where it served as the first black fraternity on campus. The Columbia chapter — or the Omicron chapter — was the nineteenth branch of the larger national fraternity (Spectator LII 89), the first chapter of the fraternity to be established at an Ivy League school, and the first chapter to be established in New York. C.U. Turpin, a graduate student in the Columbia Business School and an alum of the University of Illinois Beta chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi (Crump 1983) was the first founding member. Nationally,

the Omicron chapter is referred to as the “Harlem Renaissance Chapter” (Murray et al. 2021).

Spectator reporting implies that the founders faced very little pushback from the University when chartering the chapter at Columbia, however, this is not the case. An article announcing the establishment of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia in the Spectator explained that C. U. Turpin wanted to charter a chapter and that he likely would be able to do so “within the week” (Spectator LII 89), suggesting that it was a quick process with no evidence of pushback. The Spectator fails to mention that there had been two previously rejected attempts to establish a chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia since 1914 (Murray et al. 2021). This dissonance between the tremendous effort put in to form the chapter and the blunt reporting style offered in the Spectator showcases a lack of care on behalf of the general student population regarding the establishment of the fraternity.

The first attempt at establishing a Kappa Alpha Psi chapter at Columbia occurred in 1914— an effort spearheaded by member Byron K. Armstrong. Ultimately, Armstrong’s requests were rejected by University administrators (Murray et al. 2021). In 1917, member Paul Waymond Caine attempted to resurrect the efforts to create the chapter, but these efforts were once again rejected by University administrators as the “idea was not supported” (Murray et al. 2021). When the efforts to establish a chapter finally succeeded, members of the chapter were met with statements of support from University officials that contradicted their previous sentiments. In a letter to Turpin, President Nicholas Murray Butler states:

“I am much interested in the uplift of the Negro youth, and it is with pleasure that I welcome Kappa Alpha Psi to Columbia University . . . The University has long looked for such an organization as you represent, and it is with pleasure that we welcome your Fraternity” (Crump 1983).

Echoing Butler’s sentiments, Secretary of the University Frank D.

Fackenthal states in a letter that:

“C.U. has long looked for such an organization as you represent, and it is with pleasure that we welcome your fraternity to the University campus” (Murray et al. 2021).

It should be noted that, despite their supposed long-held desire to aid in the establishment of a campus organization for black students, both President Butler and Secretary Fackenthal began their roles as University administrators prior to 1914. Thus, it can be ascertained that both figures either assisted in the rejection of Kappa Alpha Psi’s initial attempts at chartering, or they were neutral players in the decision-making process.

Despite years of administrative pushback against attempts to establish a chapter, Kappa Alpha Psi was able to gain a sizeable membership population at Columbia relatively quickly. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, almost every Kappa Alpha Psi pledge class was comprised of around ten men according to reporting in the *Spectator*. This number of new members in each pledge class was on par with the membership status of other Columbia fraternities (*Spectator* LVII 181 1914). This information is

substantial, as Kappa Alpha Psi evidently was able to establish a similar membership ratio to the rest of the white fraternities on campus despite the extreme surplus of white students on campus.

### **Proximity to and Use of Campus**

Kappa Alpha Psi established itself as an important aspect of black student life through their utilization of and proximity to campus space. Within one year of its chartering, Kappa Alpha Psi was allowed to receive mail at the Spectator office as other fraternities did (Spectator LII 89 1922), which highlights how the chapter successfully managed to garner a reputation of legitimacy as an organization on Columbia's campus. Additionally, chapter initiations were held at fancy hotels near campus, such as the Kings Crown Hotel, near where Wien Hall exists today (Spectator LIX 120 1936). Furthermore, at an unspecified date in the mid-1920s, the fraternity held the first ever Kappa Moonlight Boat Ride near campus, which would go on to become a larger tradition for the fraternity nationally (Kappa Journal 1956). In 1930, the chapter hosted the first Kappa Karnival on campus, which involved fun festivities and games for members (Kappa Journal 1956).

In 1926, only five years after the founding of the Omicron chapter, the annual Kappa Alpha Psi national convention was hosted at Columbia, at International House on Riverside Drive. This gathering served as a testament to how quickly and firmly the chapter established itself not only on campus, but also amongst the greater scene of Kappa Alpha Psi chapters nationally. It was considered a great honor to host this convention (Crump 1983) and the event was noted by a member to be "such a success



that not even the most sanguine could imagine an improvement” (Murray et al. 2021). At this convention, a national scholarship fund and a housing fund were created to support fraternity brothers across the nation (The Crisis 1926) — these feats demonstrate how the chapter not only had the capacity to exist as a campus organization, but to thrive.

Along with other founding members, C.U. Turpin created a space for members to congregate near campus. Turpin and other members of the organization lived at “The Den” at 133 West 140th Street, which would serve as the official meeting space for brothers during the early years of the Omicron chapter (Murray et al. 2021); the space was about a 35-minute walk from the campus. It was at The Den that Turpin created the Kappa Alpha Psi debating club in 1923, which would go on to be renowned as one of the greatest inter-fraternal debating clubs in the East (Murray et al. 2021).

Sometime prior to 1936, a new meeting space was created for Kappa Alpha Psi members at 125 West 135th Street — the “Kappa Clubrooms” (Chisholm 1937). This new location was slightly closer to campus, as it was about a 28-minute walk from Columbia. Despite both the locations of The Den and the Kappa Clubrooms being mildly distant from the main campus, writers in the Kappa Journal, which is the national journal of Kappa Alpha Psi, considered the acquisition of these spaces to be a major success (Murray et al. 2021). Information regarding events at these chapter spaces was released via typed letters; members would be given access to bridge, chess, checkers and soft drinks at The Den and the Kappa Clubrooms (Chisholm 1937) and if members were behind on dues they were not allowed to enter (Chisholm 1937).

Nine years after the initial success of the Omicron chapter’s hosting of the Kappa Alpha Psi national convention, the event was held at Columbia again in 1934. Spirits

were reported to be very high at this event due to excitement over the trip being many members' first time in New York City (Crump 1983). Though it is unclear where exactly the convention was held in proximity to Columbia's campus, the event was reported to be a notable success (Crump 1983).

Proximity to campus was essential to the success of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia. White fraternities were able to establish their presence firmly on campus because it was the body that offered students parties, performances, sports games and general celebrations *closest* to campus. So, the fact that Kappa Alpha Psi was able to host their events on campus and close to campus highlights that they too were able to establish their presence as an important facet of campus life for black students. It was through their utilization of Columbia's cosmopolitan campus that the fraternity also proved itself to be innovative against the larger backdrop of the larger national organization as well.

### **Columbia's Mistreatment of Black Students and Black Organizations**

Early members of the Omicron chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi served as campus pioneers for their efforts to increase community building and extracurricular bonding for black students at Columbia. A few years after Kappa Alpha Psi was chartered at Columbia, another national black fraternity was established on campus — the Eta chapter of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity (Parks 2017). Thanks to the groundwork that had been laid by the members of the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity achieved much success as an organization in their founding years at Columbia. The Eta chapter was known for spearheading the national

Go-to-High-School, Go-to-College campaign, for which the motto was “The Future of Our Race is Dependent Upon the Education of Our Boys and Girls” (Parks 2017).

Though there is no documentation of members of Kappa Alpha Psi being on the receiving end of racist actions during their founding years at Columbia, the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity had indeed recorded incidents of racism that their members were the targets of. In 1924, members of Alpha Phi Alpha at Columbia expressed that members of their chapter had been repeatedly threatened by members of the Klu Klux Klan in a letter to their national organization (Taylor 2018). Being that Kappa Alpha Psi was the only other black fraternity on campus at the time, it is very likely that members of the organization also could have received similar racist threats.

The hostile social environment for black students at Columbia during the early twentieth century was also reflected by the formation of the Touchstones Club. The Touchstones Club was created in the late 1920s at Columbia by black students who had felt socially, academically and professionally isolated so that they could build a community of support (Granville 1941). Student Granville Lee reported that up until the formation of the club, black students had “very few opportunities to meet socially and form friendships with students in the various schools of the University” (Granville 1941). Evidently, despite the existence of two black fraternities on campus, Columbia’s social and academic scenes remained greatly unwelcoming for black students, necessitating the formation of another club based on mutual support and community building for black students.

Despite their tremendous efforts as organizations, black student groups at Columbia such as Kappa Alpha Psi, Alpha Phi Alpha and the Touchstones Club

received minimal recognition in campus publications throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The Touchstone Club has never received any coverage in the Spectator, and Kappa Alpha Psi and Alpha Phi Alpha received minimal coverage during this time-period. In 1936, it was reported in the Spectator that a member commended Kappa Alpha Psi's "rise from mediocrity" (Spectator LIX 120 1936) within the past year at a chapter initiation ceremony. Though there was no elaboration regarding what rendered the chapter to be mediocre, this anecdote demonstrates a sharp sense of self-awareness on behalf of the chapter and a commitment to consistency for the sake of black campus life at Columbia. Furthermore, there was no mention of these organizations in the Columbia yearbooks for numerous years after their respective inceptions (Black Student Response 2017; Greenough 2021).

### **Kappa Alpha Psi Membership**

The founding members of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia went on to achieve great personal success after their time at the University, indicating that the fraternity likely served as a strong support system and provided foundations of excellence for members. Key founder C.U. Turpin had a particularly successful life after graduating from Columbia Business School. Turpin approached running the fraternity in the same way that Christian missionaries spread the spirit of Christianity (Crump 1983), an effective approach that speaks to the fervor that served him well as a Major in the United States Army (Burger 2019). The Pittsburgh Courier also implies that Turpin amassed a great amount of wealth during his life, praising the fact that he could afford "white lawyers" in a legal battle regarding his father's estate (Pittsburgh Courier 1939).

Another founding member of the Omicron chapter, Alfred W. Tucker, also achieved much professional success. Tucker, who served as First Vice Polemarch during his time in Kappa Alpha Psi, went on to start the first-ever certified black accounting firm in the state of New York, Major Wilmer Lucas, CPA (Farrar 2023). Additionally, Tucker was the second-ever black certified public accountant in the state of New York (Farrar 2023).

Arturo Schomburg, renowned historian and collector, also was a member of the Omicron chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi. A prominent figure during the Harlem Renaissance, Schomburg “spent his life collecting books, art pieces and other evidences from around the world to prove that ‘the Negro had a long and honorable past’” (Crump 1983). Though he did not attend Columbia, Schomburg was initiated into the Omicron chapter in 1922 (Crump 1983). Schomburg was reported to be profoundly impacted by his time in the fraternity and went on to establish the New York Alumni chapter (Crump 1983).

Member James E. Allen was a successful activist during his time in the Omicron chapter. During the 1925 convention at Columbia, Allen spoke extensively on the matter of Haitian liberation. While at the convention, Allen spearheaded a petition that was sent to the President of the United States regarding black representation in a proposed commission related to Haitian affairs.

## **Conclusion**

The Omicron chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi held their organization to high standards, both amongst the ranks of their membership and in regard to the

functionality of the organization as a whole. The later success of founding members such as C.U. Turpin, Alfred W. Tucker, Arturo Schomburg and James E. Allen — just to name a few — serves as a testament to the standard of excellence that members were taught to strive for, even in the early days of the fraternity. The perseverance and drive to succeed that was exhibited by the early members of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia are extremely commendable considering the organization existed in a larger landscape of an obviously hostile and racist University.

The lack of reports regarding racism during the founding years of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia is probably indicative of the efforts of the members to focus on their numerous triumphs that they worked so hard to achieve over stories of hostility. The Omicron chapter was ultimately renowned for its innovation at a national level; many events that were hosted by the chapter on and near campus would go on to become national traditions for the organization. Additionally, their use of space in and around campus enabled community building that contributed to the positive spirit of the fraternity.

Despite years of pushback, the ultimate founding story of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia is a testament to the commitment and perseverance of the founding members to create a thriving space for black men on campus. The organization was a trailblazer for the black community at Columbia, formed under the circumstances of being surrounded by a large, influential and favored white fraternity scene. The story of Kappa Alpha Psi at Columbia is ultimately that of a triumphant community dedicated to inward success and standards of excellence.

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