

HISTORY

In the early years of the 20th century, debating clubs and literary societies played a central role in acquainting students with the prevailing standards of social interaction. Student intellectual and social life centered around these organizations. One of the early women's organizations was the Philomathean Society, founded in 1902 with the assistance of Minnie Alger, music instructor at Cortland Normal School, later to become Cortland College. The purpose of the organization was to improve the social life and general culture of the students. Just four years later, the Women of Philomathean became the Alpha Chapter of Theta Phi Sorority. Theta Phi and other social organizations of the 1920s had large clubrooms on the third floor of the Normal School, each outfitted by its members, and their activities had similar patterns.

Housing needs contributed to the transformation of social clubs to living units. Theta Phi was the first of the sororities to acquire a house, establishing itself at 15 Lincoln Avenue in 1926. The sorority had no difficulty keeping the house full and meeting its financial obligations. The cost of the house (\$30,000) was paid in full by 1939.

In 1948, after an unfortunate, but luckily not tragic, fire at the Lincoln Avenue house, the sorority moved to 21 West Court Street, where the sorority continued to thrive with annual memberships of over 100 women. The house was occupied by sisters on a seniority basis; living there was a privilege reserved for upperclass women since the house could only harbor 28 people. A housemother, employed by the organization, resided in the house and supervised the students' activities. In early years, a cook was also employed and prepared dinner for all house residents. Dinners were fairly formal, served at a designated time, which was adhered to by all.

Theta Phi, as most Hellenics, functioned organizationally through an elected panel of officers, typically including a President, Vice President, Secretary, Corresponding Secretary, Treasurer, Historian, Sergeant-at-Arms, and Social Chairman. Formal meetings were held to establish the goals and plan of activities of the organization each semester. Much of sorority life centered on campus-wide Hellenic and Rush activities, which were gatherings designed to provide students with the opportunity to become acquainted with sorority life and to consider the possibility of joining the organization. Rush parties were large, highly planned affairs, generally with themes and skits performed by the sisters. For example, Theta Phi had a Disneyland theme party, with costumes and skits that were passed down from one year to the next.

In the 1970s interest in the Hellenics began to wane, and membership in Theta Phi started to decline. In 1971 the cook was let go, and sisters were on their own to prepare meals and to care for the kitchen. By the late 1970s it had become impossible to keep the house filled with sisters, and boarders began to occupy some of the rooms in the house.

In 1985, Theta Phi closed its doors for good, with the membership reduced to only six. The house was sold, and the money from the sale of the house was placed in investment accounts that are now controlled and monitored by Theta Phi Sorority, Inc. (TPSI), an organization made up of alumni of Theta Phi Sorority, as well as new members who have joined the organization by application to the TPSI Board of Directors and a vote by the active membership. As an alumni organization, TPSI continues to meet for social functions, providing the opportunity for old friends to reunite and reacquaint. TPSI has also become a not-for-profit organization and uses the interest from the sale of the house on West Court Street to support SUNY Cortland's Outdoor Education Center at Raquette Lake (Camp Huntington), The American Cancer Society (Cortland Chapter), and Aid to Women Victims of Violence (Cortland YWCA). Most recently TPSI has supported the creation of the Marjorie Dey Carter Scholarship for women pursuing studies at Cortland in education, recreation, or related areas.

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