

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

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“Help the Girls Win Out:” Kappa Alpha Theta Fraternity and College Women in Indiana Prior to 1920

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In the early 1870s, a seventeen year old female college student at Indiana Asbury College (now DePauw University) concluded in her essay on the importance of an education titled “Choosing an Occupation”

“When women have the courage to choose congenial occupations in which by proper application they may achieve honor and success, then will they attain their greatest influence and whether in the law office, at the merchants counter, in the school room, with sculptor's chisel or painter's brush, or engaged in the daily routine of home duties we shall everywhere find them cheerful and contented, and accomplishing the great work of life.”

On January 27, 1870, Hannah Fitch Shaw, the author of the essay, along with three other young women, Bettie Locke Hamilton, Alice Allen Brant, and Bettie Tipton Lindsey, initiated themselves into their newly founded fraternity for women, Kappa Alpha Theta. Of the four, two had been among the first five women to enter Indiana Asbury in 1867. The environment they found on campus was not always welcoming. They recognized the need to prove themselves and sought a group in which they would be supported and welcomed on equal terms.

For women who were breaking ground in attending the state's institutions of higher learning, the spread of the organization in Indiana's colleges such as Indiana University, Hanover, Butler and Purdue and even smaller institutions such as Moore's Hill College, provided a support system for these women who were among the few attending Indiana colleges.

The paper will explore the lives of the four women who established the fraternity, Hamilton, Brant, Lindsey, and Shaw both as college students and as college-educated women. I will also look at some of the early Indiana members of the fraternity including Mary Ritter Beard, Martha Evans Martin, Frances Cleveland Axtell, and Kate Milner Rabb, who made names for themselves in their respective fields and will reflect on their involvement in the fraternity and what it meant for them as they moved into their adult lives.

In later years, when asked why, the lead founder, Bettie Locke Hamilton stated “You know the fraternity was always second in my mind to coeducation. It was organized to help the girls win out in their fight to stay in college on a man's campus. We had to make a place for women in a man's world, and the fraternity was one means to that bigger end.” By exploring the role of social organizations like Kappa Alpha Theta Fraternity in helping these women stay in college and create a network for them in their later lives provides an often ignored view of these early female college students.

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