

2019 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

Greek Housing at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

QUICK STATS

- **Location:** Multiple addresses in Champaign and Urbana
- **Built:** Early 20th-century
- **Architect:** Various, including nationally and locally known architects such as Howard Van Doren Shaw and Joseph Royer.
- **Current owner:** Multiple, mostly fraternity and sorority organizations.
- **Historic significance:** Fraternity and sorority housing has been a critical piece of student life at the University of Illinois for over 100 years. These beautiful revival-style homes near campus have influenced the experiences of thousands of students and have become an integral part of the architectural fabric of Champaign and Urbana.
- **Why it is endangered:** Deferred maintenance, declining occupancy rates and a rapid escalation of property tax assessments are placing increased pressure on demolition and replacement with high-rise apartment buildings.
- **Take Action:** Contact the Champaign City Council and the Urbana City Council to share your support for the preservation and reuse of these historic buildings.



BACKGROUND

Fraternity and sorority organizations first arrived at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign nearly 150 years ago. In the early 1900s, dozens of beautiful revival-style houses were built around the campus, becoming an integral part of the architectural and historic fabric of the community. Today, the University of Illinois campus boasts one of the largest concentrations of

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Greek Life in the country, with over 7,600 undergraduate members in 90 total fraternities and sororities. Despite the size and long history of Greek organizations at the university, however, fraternity and sorority houses are facing a wave of demolitions as they struggle with years of heavy use, deferred maintenance and a dramatic increase in property tax assessments.



*The Zeta Tau Alpha House has been saved from demolition.
Credit: Landmarks Illinois*

In the first half of the 20th century, the state provided few dormitories for students at the University of Illinois campus. To help ease this housing shortage, fraternity and sorority organizations began to build chapter houses in Champaign and Urbana, providing both living and meeting space for their members. Fraternity Row was first established in the early 1900s and migrated southward to center on Chalmers Street. Sorority housing was originally constructed around John Street, but many chapters eventually relocated to Urbana in the 1910s. By the mid-1920s, the University of Illinois campus was in the midst of a veritable Greek housing boom, with at least 27 chapters

building houses between 1926 and 1930.¹

These houses were typically set on large landscaped lots and were interspersed between university buildings, single family residences and apartment buildings. Most of the chapter houses were designed in the popular revival styles of the time, leading to a number of large, stunning examples of Neo-Classical, Colonial and Tudor Revival architecture. Nationally and locally well-known architects such as Howard Van Doren Shaw and Joseph Royer helped to design these new housing options.

In constructing the houses, fraternal and sororal organizations put high value on elegant design and high-quality interiors with the belief that exposing students to tasteful living would help encourage their growth, good behavior and education. Through well-designed accommodations,

¹ Karen Lang Kummer, Dana L. Pratt, Lachlan F. Blair, and Linda Bastyr, "Fraternity and Sorority Houses at the Urbana-Champaign Campus of the University of Illinois," (Multiple Property Documentation form, [MPD], May 1989), pg. E.13

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fraternities and sororities aimed to supplement the university education. Since then, these buildings have shaped the lives of thousands of University of Illinois students for over 100 years.

CURRENT THREAT

The historic and architectural value of these beautiful homes has long been recognized by members of Greek organizations, the University of Illinois and communities of Urbana and Champaign. Seventeen of these chapter houses are currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Today, however, these historic chapter houses face a host of issues. Deferred maintenance and years of heavy use have left many of the houses in a deteriorated condition.

Additionally, updated safety requirements in Champaign have left many fraternity and sorority organizations with the choice between significant renovations or demolition and reconstruction. Unfortunately, many chapters over the past several years have chosen the latter.

As a living option, Greek houses also face much more competition today than they did in the early 1900s. Students now have many more residential options, including luxury apartments and private dormitories that are often more enticing than the Greek houses' multi-bed sleeping rooms and often un-renovated facilities. Consequently, many chapters are facing declining in-house residents and are forced to vacate large homes that they can no longer fill.

In March 2019, the Beta Theta Pi fraternity announced it will sell its National Register-listed house at 202 E. Daniel Street in Champaign. It appears likely that the house will be sold to a local real estate development and management company for redevelopment. Citing the need for major repairs, the fraternity had previously explored a sale to the same company in 2016 to construct a new apartment complex adjacent to the fraternity house. With the recent closure of the fraternity, a sale is now imminent and the fate of the historic house is in jeopardy.



The former Alpha Delta Phi house was demolished.



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Compounding these issues is a recent spike in property tax assessments, particularly in Champaign. Beginning in 2016, fraternities and sororities started to see their land assessments triple or quadruple versus previous years. The City of Champaign Township Assessor cited years of higher land sales in the area as the reason for the increase. The added taxes places increase pressure on an area that has already seen historic fraternities and sororities demolished for high-rise apartment buildings.

Advocates for the preservation of these historic houses cite their nonprofit and university-approved housing status as reasons to provide tax relief to these historic structures. In 2018, State Rep. Robert Pritchard introduced legislation to exempt school-approved dormitories or residence halls occupied by nonprofit fraternities or sororities from property taxes. This legislation did not pass, and the increased taxes continue to threaten the closure of historic Greek housing in Champaign.

While chapter houses face increased closure and sale some, such as the former Zeta Tau Alpha Sorority House at 1404 S. Lincoln, have found successful second lives as apartment buildings or homes for fellow Greek organizations. Others, however, have been demolished and replaced with new construction—despite the fact that some, like the former Alpha Delta Phi Fraternity House at 310 E. John St., have been nationally recognized for their historic value.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Contact the [Champaign City Council](#) and the [Urbana City Council](#) to share your support for the preservation and reuse of these historic buildings. Zoning and property tax assessment policies should reflect the historic value of these buildings, their nonprofit status and role as affordable housing for students.
- Help spread the word with your fraternity, sorority or alumni organization! Share the Most Endangered listing via email and social media.
- Know of upcoming fraternity or sorority projects that could use assistance or successful projects for case studies? Contact the [Landmarks Illinois Springfield Office](#) to share information.



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FURTHER READING

- [National Society for the Preservation of Greek Housing](#)
- [The Preservation and Conservation Association \(PACA\)](#)
Champaign County
- [Soaring assessments irk Campustown property owners](#)
The News-Gazette, October 2, 2016