

The History of Holt House

Ada Bruen and Libbie Brook were close friends since they had been neighbors in Henderson County, Illinois. Ada, who was four years older than Libbie, was 21 at the time of the founding of I. C. Sorosis, and Libbie was the youngest founder. Ada had already taught in the little stone Brook school that stood on the land where the Brook and Bruen farms adjoined. Libbie would teach there later. While they attended Monmouth College, Ada and Libbie rented the southwest bedroom of a home at 402 East First Avenue. The home was owned by Jacob H. Holt, a transplanted easterner, who had acquired the honorary title, "Major".

"Major" Holt bought the house in 1855 after moving to Monmouth with his wife Sarah Hollenback Holt and their six children. "Major" Holt's wife died in 1859 sometime after giving birth to their seventh child. The Holts had six daughters and one son.

Fraternity Involvement

It was in Ada and Libbie's bedroom at Holt House that a group of Monmouth College women met and organized I.C. Sorosis. In that room, with Emma Brownlee as president, they decided to "always conceal and never reveal" the secrets of their new society. They also decided on the grip, which was to be accompanied by the Greek words, Pi, Beta and Phi. There the founders chose the arrow as the badge of their new society. Within those walls, they wrote a constitution and formulated goals for the society — "to cultivate sincere friendship, establish the real objects of life and promote the happiness of humanity."

After Ada and Libbie left college, little was heard of Holt House. The "Major" owned a store and farm and served three terms as mayor of Monmouth. He died in 1880. In the end, his youngest and last surviving daughter, Susan, was the sole occupant of the house. She grew impoverished. Room after room was closed and never entered. Weeds overgrew the once thriving garden. The roof began to leak and the house fell into serious disrepair.

The purchase of the property by the Fraternity was first proposed at the 1938 Asheville Convention, but those who had seen the house felt it was in such an advanced state of decay that restoring it would be highly impractical. During the interim of convention, it became known that the property was for sale. Through the efforts of a Pi Phi father, Hugh Moffet of the Monmouth Daily Review, it was purchased for the Fraternity at a delinquent tax auction for the sum of \$1,100. Mr. Moffet's own lot adjoined the Holt property on the east.

The November 1939 issue of *The Arrow* told of acquiring Holt House, "At last we can announce that the old house in which Pi Beta Phi was founded has come into the possession of the Fraternity. Long the property of the family of "Major" Holt, it could not be sold until this year, although long unoccupied and allowed to go to rack and ruin. This summer we were able to purchase the house, and at once had it inspected, with a view of possible future use. Interesting indeed it was to hear that Illinois Alpha held its Founders' Day celebration in the old house, in the very room of the founding, a most historic occasion, one to be long remembered by those fortunate enough to be present."

Preservation and Restoration

"The 1940 Convention of Pi Beta Phi voted with great enthusiasm to preserve Holt House in Monmouth, Illinois, as a memorial to the Fraternity's founders. ... It is a great thrill for the Pi Phis to watch the transformation of a long-unused house into a national shrine," announced the January 1941 issue of *Banta's Greek Exchange*.

Harry Glen Aldrich, a Galesburg architect and Pi Phi husband, was engaged to submit plans for restoration.

These included a new roof, windows, siding and hardwood flooring as well as the removal of several downstairs walls to create a room for entertaining. The two-story twin columns on the porch and balcony, the great oak beams supporting the floors and wide foundation stayed exactly as they were originally. The March 1941 issue of *The Arrow* proclaimed, “The successful placing of the house in as nearly as possible its original condition, is proof that its apparent ruin was an external matter only, that the builders of that early day really built for many generations, and also that a splendid piece of work has been done by the committee, the architect and the builders.”

Decorating

The major responsibility for the interior decoration of Holt House fell to the first chairman of the Holt House Committee, Kansas Alpha Lorette Chapman Terrell, of the Kansas City Alumnae Club. She spent considerable time consulting decorators and visiting museums and antique shops. Great care was exercised in selecting only those items, which were both historically accurate and suitable for group entertaining. What’s more, the committee had a limited budget as noted in the December 1941 issue of *The Arrow*, “If you have ever tried to stretch \$800 over a multitude of needs in an old house of your own, you know what your committee was up against in bringing Holt House back to life — grooming it, dressing it, correcting its faults and giving it the beauty of sincerity.” Grand President Amy Burnham Onken served as Grand Council adviser to the committee.

The 1940 Pasadena Convention decreed that the cost of Holt House’s restoration would come from the Contingent Fund. Furnishings and maintenance were to always be funded through annual voluntary contributions from alumnae clubs, collegiate chapters and individuals.

The Opening

On April 26, 1941, Holt House officially opened. The Fraternity’s triumph in acquiring and renovating Holt House was announced to the Greek world. As the July 1941 issue of *Banta’s Greek Exchange* reported, “On April 26 [1941], the restored Holt House was opened officially for the first time when the Illinois Alpha chapter and the Monmouth Alumnae Club entertained at a tea, honoring the Pi Beta Phis who had attended the Eta Province Conference which was held in Galesburg, April 25 and 26. . . . Those of you who have seen cherished dreams of your own come true will know the thrill and the sense of satisfaction and gratitude, which moved so deeply every member of the Fraternity privileged to be at Holt House that day! Because on May 21, the Fraternity lost its last remaining and greatly loved founder [Fannie Whitenack Libbey], Pi Beta Phi is especially conscious of the importance of holding fast each interest which ties the Fraternity of today to that of the first little group of 12 founders, and so it feels a special, great thankfulness for its opportunity to make the place of its founding truly ‘live again.’”

Blodwen Carey was the first Holt House receptionist. She assumed her duties in the fall of 1941. Her daughter Connie became an Illinois Alpha and was later married at Holt House. Mrs. Carey was an alumna initiate of Illinois Alpha. The first civic group to have regular meetings at Holt House was an American Red Cross knitting group during World War II. Maryalys Evans, Illinois Alpha, became the first Holt House bride when she married John Urey in April of 1944.

A Tour of Holt House

After ringing the front door chimes, a gift of Inez Smith Soule’s son, and walking past an antique umbrella stand containing one of “Major” Holt’s cane, a visitor to Holt House is ushered into the Pine Room, named for the antique pine bench under the east windows, to sign the guest book. On the east wall between the windows is a portrait of Founder Clara Brownlee at age 12. In the center of the room, a tiger maple drop-leaf table holds the guest register book and a scrapbook. Portraits of two founders, Emma Brownlee Kilgore and Fannie Thomson, flank the doorway to the Music Room in the back of the house. Oklahoma Alpha Alice

Hyde painted these. Frances Rosser Brown, former national historian, presented them to the Fraternity at the 1940 Pasadena Convention. The polished antique brass chandelier is genuine and has been wired for present-day use.

The large room extending across the back of the first floor is called the Music Room. This graciously appointed room is often used when the home is rented for meetings and social events. Local chapters, including Illinois Alpha, Illinois Beta-Delta and Illinois Theta use this room for initiations. Most of the items in the Music Room have special connections to Pi Beta Phi.

A walnut empire sofa owned by the Holt family in 1867 is still in the Music Room. "Major" Holt used the walnut tables flanking the sofa when he was a hotelkeeper for West Point. A silver tea service and silver condiment set sit on one of the Holt tables. A beautiful mahogany grandfather clock, on loan from Pi Beta Phi Foundation, occupies a corner of this room. This clock is from the estate of former Grand President Marianne Reid Wild, Kansas Alpha. On the north wall hang portraits, painted in 1839, in gold leaf frames of the family for whom the house is named. On the left, "Major" Jacob Holt, age 35, and on the right, his wife, Sarah Holt, age 19, with their son, Alexander. A granddaughter of the Holts, Fannie Bradford, a well-respected Monmouth teacher, presented these portraits to the Fraternity. The portraits were professionally restored in 1976. Miss Bradford can be credited, too, with typing "Major" Holt's "Statement," his account of his adventurous life that is now in the Fraternity archives. In 2017, two landscapes of the Holt estate in Plattsburgh, New York, were bequeathed to Holt House by the great-great-granddaughter of "Major" Holt.

On the west wall, is a Hepplewhite mahogany secretary filled with china. There is a small sterling silver candlestick that was given to Libbie Brook Gaddis as a wedding present. On the front shelf, rests a music box that was owned by Amy Burnham Onken, who was Grand President when the Fraternity acquired Holt House.

The Steinway piano, which was owned by a Pi Phi, was donated to the house by the Huff family. The gold-framed mirror behind the piano is an original Holt family heirloom. The three polished brass chandeliers are antiques, which have been restored and wired for electricity.

The small cabinet on the east wall is filled with silver Pi Phi spoons, given by Pennsylvania Beta. On the south wall, a walnut drop-leaf table and the set of six cane chairs belonged to Founder Inez Smith Soule.

The Parlor is in the front southwest corner. It is furnished in Victorian fashion, featuring a velvet covered sofa, burgundy velvet balloon back chairs in front of the fireplace, two smaller antique chairs in the corners on either side of the fireplace and two marble top tables. Between the two front windows stands an elegant Rosewood melodeon in working order topped by a sandwich glass lamp. Thanks to the generous contributions of 2015 Convention attendees through Pi Beta Phi Foundation, a portrait of our 12 founders was commissioned in honor of Holt House's 75th anniversary. It hangs over the sofa.

The picture over the fireplace is of a Holt relative, Aunt Add, and her only son at age 7. A past Holt House Committee gave the Staffordshire dogs.

The portrait of Lincoln is very appropriate for the room given that "Major" Holt donated horses and funds to equip a Union Regiment, and his son Alexander served as a Union soldier, rising to the rank of Colonel.

More of our history can be seen by heading up the lovely stairway rising upward and curving sharply at the top. The walnut newel post and handrail only 26" high, are original. Displayed in the hallway is a gift register listing the gifts given to Holt House; this wooden binder was presented by former Grand Vice President of Philanthropies Evelyn Peters Kyle, Illinois Alpha.

The southeast second floor bedroom is now the Historical Room. On the west wall hangs a picture of Jennie Nicol in an antique frame. A rare Hitchcock mammy's bench is in a corner. Displayed on the bench is an I. C. Banner, a replica of the one that begins the Convention Banner Parade of Chapters.

The walnut glass front case on the north wall was donated by the Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, Alumnae Club. This cabinet houses 12 wax figurines of each of the Pi Phi Founders. These figurines, a gift of the Jacksonville, Illinois, Alumnae Club, were made in the 1940s. The artist studied a great deal of personal information so the figurines could be as lifelike as possible. Great care was taken to dress them in the colors and styles of 1867.

There is an oval framed picture of Fannie Whitenack, dated 1867, on the north wall and another picture of her at the Pasadena Convention.

On the east wall is a blue velvet settee between the windows. This settee sits under a picture of Holt House as it looked when Pi Phi acquired it.

The Illinois Alpha Charter, given to the chapter in 1928 when it was reinstalled on the Monmouth campus, hangs on the south wall.

A secretary belonging to Amy Burnham Onken stands against the west wall and holds some of her books, along with 12 china figurines of the Founders.

Across the hall is the southwest bedroom, where, on April 28, 1867, 12 young students set in motion the women's fraternity movement. It is called the Founders' Room. Once shared by Libbie Brook and Ada Bruen, the room houses an antique spool bed. A handmade quilt, made by Inez Smith Soule, covers the quaint and rare walnut spool bed. At the foot of the bed, folded up, is a quilt made in the 1920s by members of Washington Alpha and dedicated to the Founders and to First Lady Grace Goodhue Coolidge, a charter member of Vermont Beta.

On a quilt rack, a crazy quilt made by founder Margaret Campbell is displayed. There is a Lincoln rocker, once owned by the family of founder Fannie Thomson. Legend has it that the founders who attended the first convention in Oquawka, Illinois, rocked in it.

Between the front windows hangs Jennie Horne's diploma from Monmouth College, with an original I.C. pin directly over it.

The stove in the corner holds a pair of wooden ice skates, which might have been worn by either Ada Bruen or Libbie Brook when skating on the creek that once ran across the back of the yard.

The walnut wishbone dresser with hand-carved hand pulls is from the 1880s and holds collections of Pi Phi jewelry and hat pins. On the left, is a picture of Libbie Brook, and on the right, one of Ada Bruen.

A picture on the east wall shows each of the 12 founders within the letters I.C. The oval picture hanging to the left of the door, dated 1867, is of Ada Bruen and Libbie Brook with Frances Holt, the "Major's" daughter. The antique lighting fixture in this room is genuine and has also been wired for electricity.

The northwest bedroom at the back of the house is now known as the Illinois Alpha Room. It houses memorabilia and historical items pertaining to Illinois Alpha. In 2017, Holt House acquired Jeannie

Turnbull's bed and it now displayed in the Illinois Alpha room.

Across the hallway from the Illinois Alpha room is the Library, with bookshelves containing books by Pi Beta Phi authors, along with other historical memorabilia. In 2015, the Holt House Committee designed a composite-like photo of the 12 founders that hangs over the sofa.

Gift to Holt House

Throughout the years, many gifts have been given to Holt House. The March 1947 issue of *The Arrow* noted, "When it became known at convention that the Holt House Committee longed for a silver tea service, which seemed forever out of its small budget, Alice Weber Mansfield [Johnson], president of the St. Louis Alumnae Club, conceived of the idea of raising a fund among the 11 clubs of her province, for the eventual purchase of such a gift. ... The Holt House Committee chairman wishes that it were possible for her to do more than merely say: "Thank you, St. Louis — and Alice!" In 1965, Oklahoma Alpha Frances Rosser Brown presented a hand-painted Pi Beta Phi luncheon set to Holt House. It was made by Arkansas Alpha Martha Moore Gibson.

In the 1970s, wood-grain vinyl siding and new shutters were added. Holt House was required to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. An entrance at the rear of the house and a bathroom were made accessible to disabled visitors.

In 2008, two original sets of Holt family china were purchased from Virginia Bradford, the great-granddaughter of "Major" Jacob H. Holt. The Haviland China is now displayed in the music room.

Holt House Today

Today, Holt House is a vital part of the community. The house has been restored and is available for use by groups for gatherings. It is an intimate setting for weddings, receptions, parties and meetings. Ample seating and the recently renovated kitchen make it perfect for private dinners or luncheons.

A committee appointed by Grand Council manages Holt House. The Holt House Curator, the Holt House Committee Chairman and the Fraternity's Office manager make day-to-day operational decisions.

During the fall of 2009, the kitchen and powder room on the main floor of Holt House were renovated to provide 21st-century amenities for guests. The gravel parking lot was re-graded, and parking lot lights were installed for convenience at evening events. The Foundation issued grants for new parking lot lighting, a new furnace and new air conditioning units. A historic monument from the Illinois State Historical Society was dedicated October 8, 2009, amid a gathering of Pi Phis and interested community members.

A library renovation was completed, thanks to the generous donations of our members. The Holt House Committee is excited to share that a remodel of the curator's office and adjoining powder room is now complete as well.