Our Two Fraternity Houses: A History

The Old Fraternity House at 912 South Sixth Street

County records differ on when the house at 912 South Sixth Street was built, listing either 1934 or 1950, depending on the record reviewed. The property is currently listed at around 5,800 square feet and valued at approximately $400,000, while Zillow identifies it as having eight bedrooms and four bathrooms. Those statistics, however, do not fully capture the reality of fraternity life in the house. Little nooks and crannies seemed to be everywhere, and brothers slept wherever they could find space, from the basement to the attic. The attic served as the “cold dorm,” with no glass in the windows at either end, allowing cold air and snow to blow inside during the winter.

The Cook at the Old House

Aretta Debow was the cook at the old house, and fried food was her specialty. Almost everything seemed to be fried. The meals were filling, although probably not the healthiest diet. When Aretta wanted something, everyone knew it. Her voice would carry through the house. Aretta had a big heart and an even bigger voice, and she became an unforgettable part of life at 912 South Sixth Street.

Parking at the Old House

Parking at 912 South Sixth Street was either in the yard behind the house or wherever a space could be found along the surrounding streets. It was usually tight, and brothers sometimes had to park some distance away. With several nearby fraternity houses competing for street space and each chapter having plenty of cars, finding a spot was rarely simple. It was always an adventure.

The Discussion and Decision to Build a New House

By the early 1970s, Lambda Chi Alpha’s home at 912 South Sixth Street was already aging, with structural problems and limited capacity that made the fraternity’s housing future an important, and controversial, topic. The brothers valued the independence of living off campus, but they knew the Sixth Street house could not serve them indefinitely. A possible solution emerged on Hamilton Drive, where Rose professor Cal Dyer owned a newer house and rented rooms to several fraternity brothers. The chapter hoped to make that suburban property its new home, but neighborhood opposition to a fraternity house defeated the plan.

With the Hamilton Drive option gone, attention turned to building a new house on campus. High Alpha Rick Gollhoffer strongly supported the idea, and Fred Goetsch, as president of the Housing Corporation, supplied much of the vision and leadership behind it. Rose-Hulman’s administration also pressed for an on-campus solution. The active chapter resisted: the brothers appreciated the separation that came with living off campus, even though the old house was close to the other Rose fraternities. At the time, only Triangle and Alpha Tau Omega were on campus, and the campus then had no women students.

In the end, the combined influence of Gollhoffer, Goetsch, and the Rose-Hulman administration carried the day. The decision was painful because it meant giving up not only Sixth Street but also the chapter’s

sense of distance and independence from campus life. In retrospect, though, the move was inevitable and ultimately right. The Sixth Street house was already old, structurally troubled, and limited in capacity. Within several more years it would have become a serious problem.

The new on-campus fraternity house gave Lambda Chi Alpha a safer and more sustainable future, even if reaching that future required an emotional farewell to the old one. The house was built on land leased from Rose-Hulman under a 50-year long-term agreement that comes up for renewal in 2027.

Living in the New House on Campus

If memory serves correctly, the original design for the new house included about 38 rooms. Typically, two brothers shared each room. With Associate Member classes numbering about 35 – 45 new members each year, the chapter needed to make practical use of every available space, and many brothers slept either in lofted beds or in the cold dorm. In this way, the cold-dorm tradition from South Sixth Street continued in the new house.

The move also resolved the chapter's parking problems, as the large back lot provided space for all the brothers and Associate Members. When it was built, the house had only two shared telephone lines—one upstairs and one downstairs, each located at the end of a hallway—which was customary telephone service during the 1970s and 1980s.

When the chapter moved into the new house in the spring of 1977, Marie was the cook for some time. She was a wonderful cook, especially considering the large batches she had to prepare, and she seemed to love the job—with the notable exception of our food fights. Whenever food started flying, Marie was quick to scold us for wasting it. After she developed health problems, her husband, John, stepped in. We had always thought Marie was a great cook, and she was, but John may have been even better - a Navy man and quite the character. Marie and John were of Serbian heritage, and both became memorable parts of life at the new house.

The house was expanded further in the 1980s with the addition of the eastern hallway and rooms along the east side of the parking lot, creating the leg that completed the building's U-shaped layout.

The new house was finally air-conditioned in 2020. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students were sent home as Rose-Hulman shifted away from in-person campus life to reduce close contact and limit the spread of the virus. With the house largely empty, it was an ideal time to install HVAC throughout the main spaces—including the chapter room, kitchen, formal living room, and hallways—as well as the individual study rooms.