

# Elder Watson Diggs

(1883-1947)

Elder Watson Diggs is known to the many brothers of Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity as *The Dreamer*. On January 5, 1911, he cofounded, along with nine other men, the first black fraternity at Indiana University in Bloomington, Ind., and one of the earliest black national social fraternities.

Elder Diggs was born December 23, 1883, in Hopkinsville, Ky., the seat of Christian County. He later left his home state and graduated from college in 1908 from Indiana State Normal in Terre Haute, Ind., now Indiana State College. He entered Howard University in Washington D.C., in 1909, but transferred to IU a year later. In 1916, Diggs became the first African American graduate of the Indiana University School of Education.

Diggs believed he could establish an African American fraternity on the largely white IU campus. He envisioned this would help give black men support and sanctuary. He felt a strong, dignified, permanent body could change perceptions and enable future generations to attend the university. During this challenging time, African American students were not allowed to participate in social and other functions, they were denied use of school entertainment and recreational facilities, and the Ku Klux Klan, which was very active in Indiana, was headquartered just down the road from campus. Earlier attempts to form an African American fraternity were unsuccessful, but Diggs was determined. On the night of January 5, 1911, his dream of what was to become Kappa Alpha Psi became a reality. Originally chartered and incorporated as Kappa Alpha Nu, it officially became the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity in December 1914.

Kappa Alpha Psi is a collegiate Greek-letter fraternity with a predominantly African American membership. Since the fraternity's founding, however, Kappa Alpha Psi has never limited membership based on color, creed or national origin. The fraternity has over 150,000 members with 700 undergraduate and alumni chapters in every state of the US, and international chapters in England, Germany, Korea, Japan, the Caribbean, Saint Thomas, Saint Croix, the United States Virgin Islands and South Africa.

An educator by profession, Diggs taught in public schools in Indianapolis, Ind., where he became a principal. He left his job to serve in World War I and was made a lieutenant at the nation's first Officer's Training Camp at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. He served with the 368<sup>th</sup> Infantry in Europe. Later, he became a captain in the Reserve Officer's Training Corps. He was instrumental in having the Indiana Constitution amended to permit Negro enlistment in the Indiana National Guard. Diggs returned to his job as principal after the war and later earned his master's degree in education from Howard University in 1944. After his death on Nov. 8, 1947, the name of the school where he served as principal for 26 years was changed to Elder W. Diggs Elementary. The public school is still in operation.

The motto of Kappa Alpha Psi is *Achievement In Every Field Of Human Endeavor*. The president of the national organization is called the Grand Polemarch, and Diggs served in this position for the first six years of the fraternity's existence. In 1924, his Kappa Alpha Psi brothers awarded Elder Watson Diggs with its first Laurel Wreath, its highest honor, for his incessant efforts to improve and expand the fraternity and commitment to the fraternity's ideals. He is buried in Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis.



Elder W. Diggs Elementary School in Indianapolis, Ind.

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