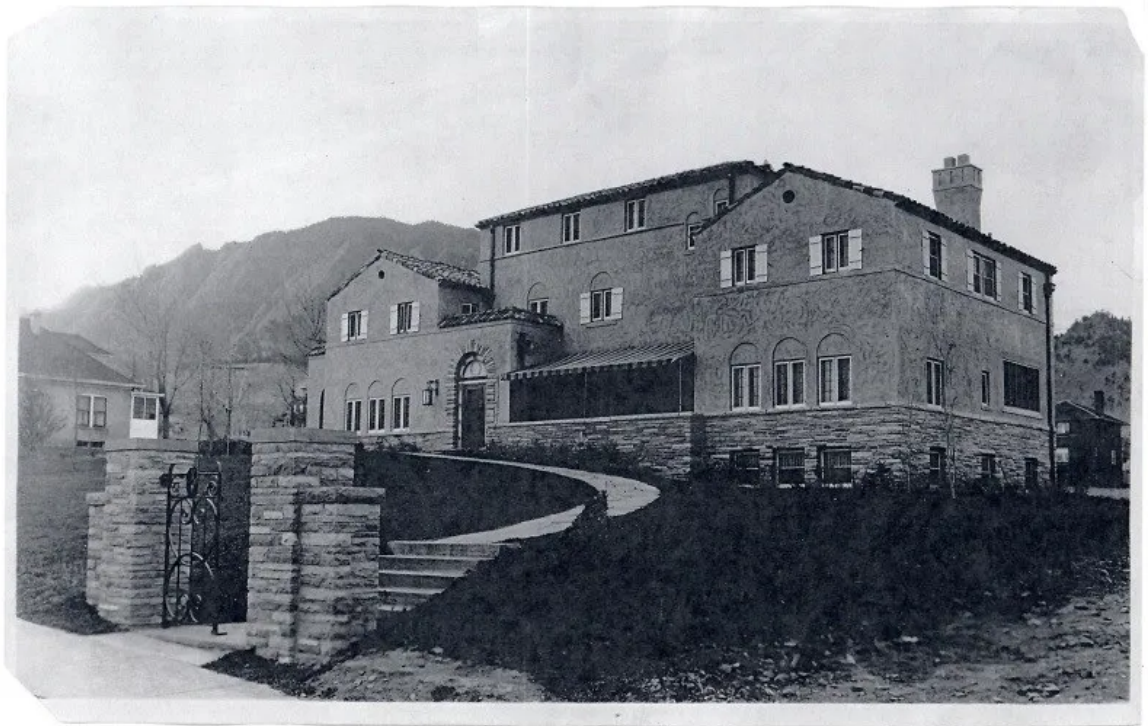


NEWS

Boulder History: Marpa House holds storied history on University Hill

Repurposed fraternity holds architectural and diverse social past



The Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity house, circa 1924, has been an important part of the development and diverse social history on University Hill. (Carnegie Library for Local History)



By **CAROL TAYLOR**

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The former Sigma Alpha Epsilon house has been an important part of the development and diverse social history on University Hill. When ground was broken at SAE's new home in the 1920s, the fraternity brothers probably wouldn't have imagined that some 50 years later, their house would become living quarters for practicing Buddhists.

The original building at 891 12th Street was constructed in 1923 as the new home of the SAE fraternity, the second oldest fraternity chapter at the University of Colorado, founded in 1891. Its house was built in a Mediterranean and Italian architectural style and the SAEs wrote proudly about their new house in their newsletter, noting the flagstone porches, cut-stone base and pink stuccoed exterior walls, "silhouetted against the Boulder foothills, our new home stands, like a villa in the mountains of Italy."

The 1920s saw many new Greek houses built on University Hill, as CU was growing rapidly and student housing became a pressing need. In 1920, CU reported that student enrollment had doubled in two years.

National Greek letter society officials approved the building of a number of chapter houses in Boulder, providing a long-term solution to CU's housing shortage. The societies commissioned quality architects to design the houses, which contributed greatly to the architectural diversity on University Hill. Styles represented were Spanish, Tudor Revival, Colonial Revival, Dutch Colonial Revival, Elizabethan, French chateau, French eclectic and Mission.

In 1956, the SAE house, originally with sleeping quarters for 28 men, had an addition built to accommodate 32 more students. A hall connected the new and old buildings, while a kitchen, a larger dining room and a girls' powder room were added.

In 1968, SAE switched fraternity houses with Zeta Beta Tau, the nation's oldest Jewish fraternity. (Many of the Greek houses on the Hill have a history of changing fraternities or sororities between buildings.) ZBT occupied the building at 891 12th until around 1977.

During the counterculture movement, student membership in sororities and fraternities declined dramatically. Several Greek houses were sold and repurposed.

In 1977, the Zeta Beta Tau house was sold to Vajradhatu, the umbrella organization for Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche's groups. They created Marpa House, named for the spiritual teacher Marpa Lotsawa. Marpa House became boarding house-style living for people interested in Buddhism, meditation and Eastern spirituality.

Boulder's Tibetan Buddhist community began in the early 1970s when the University of Colorado was forming a new major in religious studies. At the same time, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader exiled from his native Tibet, was traveling around the United States speaking about Tibet and the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual practice. CU invited him to teach for the new program in 1970. Trungpa Rinpoche took to the Rocky Mountains, as they reminded him of the Himalayas. In Boulder, the leader founded the Karma Dzong center in 1970 and in 1974 Nalanda Foundation, the organization that directs Naropa, and later Marpa House.

In a short time, there were 1,000 Buddhists in Boulder, mostly new converts to the spiritual practice. Over time, Buddhism, along with other alternative spiritual practices, became an increasing part of Boulder's culture.

Marpa House residents earned the reputation as good neighbors on University Hill. A number of Buddhist dignitaries and spiritual leaders have lived in or stayed at Marpa House during its four decades on the Hill. Marpa House had an interior makeover, featured in the Daily Camera, as the community prepared for the visit of the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa in June of 1980. When the Dalai Lama came to Boulder in August of 1981, he gave a press conference at Marpa House. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche lived around the corner from Marpa House on 11th Street for many years.

Now, perhaps poised for a new chapter, the architectural and diverse social history at Marpa House remains a defining and remarkable piece of Boulder's University Hill neighborhood.