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The 1960's decade could be described as a tumultuous yet momentous time period for Taylor University. The institution underwent transitions in administrative leaders, vital decisions were made regarding long-term future planning, and Taylor was navigating the changes and challenges facing higher education in America. A formative experience that shaped the future of the institution was the unexpected and devastating burning of the H. Maria Wright Hall. Often described as the "nerve center" of Taylor's campus in Upland, Indiana, the building housed faculty and administrative offices, classrooms, the library, the chapel, and other vital spaces for the successful operation of the institution (Cleveland; Ringenberg, 2003). No one could have been prepared for the loss the fire brought, yet looking back in the aftermath, it can be seen as a catalyst for immense growth and change for the university. In this paper, I will summarize the events of the H. Maria Wright Hall fire of 1960 and analyze the event's lasting effects on Taylor University.

Taylor University moved to Upland, Indiana in 1893 after being originally founded in Fort Wayne. Upland, "a growing and prosperous town," was expected to become a booming city because of the natural gas resources (Ringenberg, 2003). Though the institution was undergoing financial instability, the Board of Trustees was able to purchase ten acres of land for \$10,000 and development of Taylor's new campus began (Ringenberg, 2003). Later in 1893, the H. Maria Wright Hall, the first building on the new campus, was built. Thaddeus C. Reade, Taylor's president at the time, helped fund the construction through lecturing across the country and the sale of books he authored (Administrative Building Burns, Press Release, 1960; TU Echo, February 1, 1960). The bricks that built the hall were made from clay mined on Taylor's campus by Mr. Henry Kline (TU Echo, January 21, 1960). Wright Hall housed nine classrooms, the library, the chapel, the switchboard, faculty offices, administrative offices for the president and

dean, a supply room, a museum, the printing and mailing department, and a chemistry lab in the basement (Cleveland; Ringenberg, 2003). Affectionately called “The Ad” by students, the University could not function without this space which was the setting for much of the Taylor student and faculty experience during that time (TU Echo, January 21, 1960). With “its towers seen far distant,” Wright Hall was a Taylor University campus icon and distinguished landmark (TU Echo, February 1, 1960).

The building was named in honor of H. Maria Wright, the wife of the President of the Board of Trustees for many years, dating back to when Taylor was still in Fort Wayne and through the move to Upland (TU Echo, March 30, 1932). Dr. Wright provided the necessary funds to complete the fourth floor of the H. Maria Wright building in 1900 and it was used as the chapel (Uses of Wright Hall, Campus Publications). Dr. and Mrs. Wright made regular contributions to Taylor, especially when repairs or building additions were needed (TU Echo, March 30, 1932). Campus improvements followed the completion of Wright Hall including a telephone system in 1902 and a water system in 1906. Water fountains, restrooms across campus, and a sewage system were all installed before the start of WWI (Uses of Wright Hall, Campus Publications).

Dr. B. Joseph Martin was inaugurated as Taylor University’s eighth president on January 1, 1960 (Cleveland). He had previously served as president of Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia and came to Taylor with extensive experience in ministry and higher education. Dr. Martin received degrees from Pasadena College, the University of Southern California, and Houghton College. He also served as a professor at Pasadena College and Vice President at both Asbury Theological Seminary and Oklahoma City University, as well as Executive Director of the Methodist College Foundation of North Carolina. Dr. Milo Rediger served as the interim

president the year before Dr. Martin assumed responsibility and Taylor had experienced great growth during that time (Board of Trustees Names B. Joseph Martin President, Press Release, 1959).

Dr. Martin's robust resume prepared him well for his appointment at Taylor University and the campus community was ready for him to lead the University on toward their mission (Board of Trustees Names B. Joseph Martin President, Press Release, 1959). Taylor was thriving in 1960 and campus was buzzing with the recent news of the addition of Dr. Martin to the administration. Dr. Martin was a president who wanted to support students and communicated that his purpose for coming was to serve the Taylor family, including individual students. He wanted students to know that everyone was important at Taylor and it was his job to ensure Taylor remained a sound place to receive a solid, Christian education (TU Echo, January 21, 1960). Though it was winter in Upland, students could still be found worshipping together in chapel, committing bible verses to memory for their theology courses, and living life with one another in genuine Christian community, a Taylor core value. Nobody, no matter their leadership experience, could have prepared the Taylor community for what they would face just a few weeks into the new decade.

In the pre-dawn hours of Saturday, January 16, 1960, just two weeks after Dr. Martin's inauguration, the 67-year-old administration building, H. Maria Wright Hall, caught fire (Ringenberg, 2003). The student night watchman, Al Kundenreich, discovered the fire between 4:30 and 5:30 a.m. during his routine tour of the campus buildings. He called the Upland Volunteer Fire Department and maintenance chief Ralph Boyd (TU Echo, January 21, 1960). Wilbur Cleveland, the university publicist at the time, was called and arrived at the scene with his Argus camera and color film in order to document the event (Cleveland).

The local fire department, along with eight other fire crews, arrived soon after the fire began (Administration Building Burns, Press Release, 1960; Operation Emergency). The main goal was to contain the fire and prevent further damage to offices and areas holding important documents and records (Cleveland). Ironically, first responders thought they had the flames under control but then there was an explosion near the top floor. Windows broke and when oxygen that entered fueled the fire, there was not much more firefighters could do (TU Echo, February 1, 1960). The building was large and even after a short time of burning, the flames proved difficult to control (TU Echo, January 21, 1960). Unfortunately, with only two nearby fire hydrants and 750 gallons of water per minute, sheets of flames took over the building and the brick structure tumbled to the ground (TU Echo, February 1, 1960; Cleveland).

Thankfully, nobody was in the building at the time of the fire, so all lives that could have been harmed were miraculously spared. Dr. Martin responded, “We’re only thankful it wasn’t the dormitory and that no one was hurt” as everyone recognized the outcome could have been much worse (TU Echo, February 1, 1960). When Al Kundenreich had done his routine rounds at 4 a.m., everything was fine. Around 5:30 a.m. though, Al could smell smoke and saw it pouring out underneath the doors of the basement chemistry lab (TU Echo, February 1, 1960; Administration Building Burns, Official Press Release, 1960). The evening before, the head of the chemistry department had been working in the lab, though he had checked to ensure all the equipment was in good working order before he left. The building had then been closed and locked at 10 p.m. Friday night (Administration Building Burns, Press Release, 1960). It was later discovered that the cause of the fire was a spark from defective wiring in the chemistry lab (Cleveland). The old wiring partnered with escaping gas that is often present in a chemistry lab made for a perfect opportunity for the fire to begin (TU Echo, January 21, 1960). The chemistry

lab, located in the basement of the old building, did not help as the severe lack of adequate ventilation caused the entire Wright Hall to be engulfed in flames.

The loss and devastation due to the fire seemed insurmountable. While difficult to quantify the value of items lost, some of them irreplaceable, officials estimated the fire destroyed about \$750,000 worth of property. Unfortunately, Taylor only received a \$202,000 settlement because of the natural depreciation of the building over its 67 years of existence (Cleveland). Dr. B. Joseph Martin lost the only copy of his book manuscript that, after ten years of writing, was nearly ready for publication (TU Echo, January 21, 1960; Cleveland). School records such as mailing lists, some student transcripts, and financial records were consumed by the flames (TU Echo, February 1, 1960). Most scholastic records were stored in a fireproof vault, but those from the Spring of 1958 and 1959 were not yet moved. The alumni office lost contact information for graduates and giving logs dated back to Taylor's founding (Cleveland). The Walker Museum which held Dr. John C. Wengatz's African collection preserved after his years as a missionary, was destroyed by the flames (TU Echo, January 21, 1960).

Providentially, some files were protected or able to be salvaged. Prospective student information was found charred but somewhat legible, as they had recently been moved to a fire-resistant cabinet, though it had dropped one story during the pinnacle of the fire. Documents in the business office were housed in wooden filing cabinets and were also protected (TU Echo, February 1, 1960). Often referred to as the "lifeline of the University," a 15,000-person mailing list recorded on 3x5 cards was lost somewhere in the rubble (Cleveland). During the worst minutes of the fire, the famous brick tower on the top of Wright hall had fallen straight down through the floors of the building. The layers of bricks fell onto the safe where the mailing list card collection was held. On Tuesday evening, eighty hours after the fire had begun, the safe

was discovered but firefighters assumed it was too late. They ended up spraying down the safe for hours and upon opening it Wednesday morning, the 3x5 notecards were found soiled but completely legible (Cleveland; TU Echo, February 1, 1960).

The fire lasted for five hours and both the smoke and heat lingered for days. A fire safety consultant contacted first responders encouraging them to refrain from entering the building until it was completely cooled. There was a risk of spontaneous combustion or more floors collapsing (Administration Building Burns, Press Release, 1960). Officials quickly realized it would take months to get a full picture of the depth of the damage. Thus began Taylor's long road to recovery and rebuilding; it was time to move forward from the ashes.

The following days and weeks were a true testament to the spirit of the Taylor community and the outstanding group of administrators who lead through the tragedy. By 8:30 a.m. Saturday morning after the fire, leaders of the University met to pray, grieve, and make plans for recovery so that it would be a minimal disruption to students (TU Echo, February 1, 1960). "A devoutly religious group, the men sought divine wisdom to cope with the emergency. Above all else, gratitude was expressed that there had been no casualties" (Cleveland). It was imperative to Dr. Martin that students did not miss any classes despite losing their classroom space, so the faculty worked together to come up with solutions to ensure students still received a quality education and had an excellent experience. Offices and classrooms were relocated to lounges in residence halls, basements, and storage rooms of other campus buildings (Cleveland). Though it felt like a member of the family was lost, it was time for the faculty and administrators to lead well on behalf of the students, despite their deep-seated grief (TU Echo, February 1, 1960).

As students awoke on Saturday morning, many were met with disbelief at the news of the fire. By 1 p.m., the entire Taylor community gathered in the Maytag gymnasium to pray and hear from Dr. Martin about how the campus would respond. He gave words of inspiration and, with conviction, exclaimed he was glad to be the president in order to share in the burden during this time (TU Echo, February 1, 1960). The president “spoke forcefully” and encouraged the students to stay hopeful about what was to come. When reflecting on the day, Wilbur Cleveland, university editor, writes, “Although the fire had destroyed a major building, the Taylor spirit was as strong as ever” (Cleveland). By 2 p.m., the Upland campus was active as members of the community were all doing their part in the recovery process (Cleveland). Dr. William Green, the Dean of Students, asked for student volunteers to move furniture and dust chairs. Curt Carter, Student Body President at the time, stated “A pillar fell, but Taylor remains” and pledged to do his part to lead the student body towards rebuilding (TU Echo, February 1, 1960). Dr. Martin prayed, “God give us wisdom, give us faith, give us friends” and dismissed the students (TU Echo, February 1, 2020; Cleveland).

Returning to life as normal would be no easy task, but the Taylor community and many friends of the university rallied together for the good of the institution and its future. According to Dr. B. Joseph Martin, it was “Business as usual... as usual, with all the changes, that is” (TU Echo, February 1, 1960). Faculty and staff brought pens and paper from home in order to hand out to students and colleagues the following week. An army post secured war surplus equipment to help replace the office furniture and other supplies needed at a cheaper price (Cleveland). Safety engineers were consulted to make recommendations for other buildings including further inspections of dormitories to ensure another fire would not break out (TU Echo, February 1, 1960). By Monday morning, a new switchboard was installed so alumni, often called

“Taylorites,” could receive information about the fire and make arrangements to send donations. Alumni and friends of the University sent letters offering encouragement, financial gifts, and assistance with the cleanup and rebuilding process (TU Echo, February 1, 1960; Cleveland).

The burning of the H. Maria Wright Hall was the catalyst for future endeavors for Taylor University. One major focus was a huge capital campaign for not only the recovery of what was lost, but for future renovations and additions to the Upland campus. It was providential that the Alumni Board of Directors were scheduled to meet on January 17, the day after the fire. They quickly organized an emergency campaign, “Operation Emergency” to appeal to alumni while the shock of the fire was still fresh (TU Echo, February 1, 1960). The tagline and battle cry “Taylor’s tower shall rise again” was printed on hundreds of pamphlets with a short explanation of the fire and a bid for help of all kinds (Fundraising Brochure).

Financial support came in as alumni heard the news of the devastating fire and wanted to find a tangible way to help (TU Echo, February 1, 1960). The Taylor Fellowship Association was established in order to organize the fundraising process. With the help of some generous and committed donors, Taylor developed a matching program to double the funds raised (Operation Emergency, 1960). The brochure that was distributed faced the situation with proven facts; it was specific, honest, and helpful so that donors would know exactly where their money was going. Certain, somewhat lofty, goals were set to encourage donors towards helping Taylor not only recover, but showed the administration’s desire to make Taylor a top-ranking institution in the nation (Fundraising Brochure).

There was an atmosphere of hope and determination as the Taylor community sought to make sense of the loss and find ways to proceed, specifically with construction plans. The president expressed desire to rebuild the administration building with some of its original

traditional design elements, including a tower and columns. Installation of wells and potentially a water tower were in progress in case of another fire. The Board of Trustees secured plans to build a new chemistry building, which was already long overdue, and now a necessity. The goal was to have the new buildings completed by September of 1961 so that students arriving that Fall could benefit from the quick construction (Board of Trustees Authorizes Building Campaign, Press Release, 1960).

The institution learned many valuable lessons regarding the long-term planning of the Upland campus, many of these which we continue to benefit from today. As building plans moved forward, everyone agreed that spreading out structures would prevent further damage in case of another natural disaster in the future. A water tower was constructed in a central location. Though this had been considered in years past, that money was put towards new programs and faculty salaries (Cleveland). As a result of the fire, both the tangible and intangible elements were now seen as highly important. While always of value, safety checks were increasingly imperative as leaders recognized how a small spark could be detrimental. Understandably, parents were concerned for their child's safety, so there was a huge focus on renovations to ensure another fire would not begin, especially in the older residence halls. The Magee-Campbell-Wisconsin Dormitory was torn down due to the realization of the potential fire risk (Ringenberg, 2003). A designated spokesperson was hired to handle public relations because incorrect information from the fire was spreading quickly (Cleveland). Increased efforts were put towards preserving history and records, and all documents and valuables were transitioned to fire-proof safes across campus. Though these responses required a financial sacrifice, it was an investment that Taylor willingly and rightfully made.

Additionally, the power of leadership shines through despite a great tragedy and loss to the institution. While Dr. B. Joseph Martin only served as president for a few more years and did not leave with the strongest legacy, his presence and leadership during this event was vital. Partnering with Dr. Rediger and the Board of Trustees, the administration proved that leading under fire, both literally and figuratively, was both challenging and imperative. Space was made for grief, clear plans were formed for the future, and hope was instilled in the entire campus community. The ways Taylor alumni and friends rallied around the institution and bought into the vision for where the University was headed after tragedy is remarkable.

The potential move to Fort Wayne stirred up a lot of questions, but after becoming president, Dr. Rediger's commitment to Upland proved to be of great benefit. Student enrollment grew from 848 in 1960, to 1050 in 1965, and then to 1426 in 1970. Faculty salaries increased as a way to heighten the caliber of Taylor student and strengthen the quality of instruction given (Ringenberg, 2008). New buildings were quickly established, programs were added, faculty members were hired, and more students enrolled. The community recognized that Taylor was strong and that the values of the institution were deeply rooted, even in the midst of chaos. It showed that Taylor was better together in Upland and that she would, indeed, rise again. As Wilbur Cleveland said, "Perhaps in our severe challenges we find our greatest strength" (Cleveland).

The H. Maria Wright Fire and its aftermath, though potentially viewed as an isolated event in history, showcases the value of the right leaders, at the right time, in the right position, bought into the mission and vision of the University. Taylor would not be Taylor without these integral moments in its history. What seemed an insurmountable challenge can now be reflected on, and even celebrated, as true beauty from ashes.

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