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MIZZOU

The Burning of the University

An English professor recounts the night Academic Hall burned.



According to legend, flames started by the first light bulb west of the Mississippi engulfed Academic Hall on the evening of January 9, 1892. Courtesy University Archives C:0/3/8

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By George Armstrong Wauchope, an English professor who wrote the lyrics to the alma mater in 1895.

This story originally appeared in the 1894–95 Savitar, the first-ever edition.

It happened on Saturday evening, January 9, 1892. The ground was covered several inches deep with freshly fallen snow. The great building was standing stately and beautiful in the semidarkness. The dome loomed up against the gray sky in colossal outline.

The work of the day was over; the professors and students were at their various homes scattered over the town; the hour for tea was past. About six o'clock several employees entered the building to open up the chapel for an entertainment to be given by the Athenaeum literary society. The engineer¹ and a janitor² went at once with a lantern to inspect the wires in the basement, where pipe-fitters had been at work a few hours before. About seven, the great bell in the tower of the College of Agriculture clanged out on the crisp night air, summoning the public to the open session. As soon as the bell began to ring the janitor opened the doors to the chapel, and in about ten minutes the engineer turned on the lights. The gas jets in the hall and along the chapel walls were also lighted. "After the lights were turned on," said the janitor, "I stayed in the hallway on the first floor, and the young men were calling on me to get them things out of their hall on the third floor. In probably about fifteen minutes the first alarm of fire which I heard was given by George Venable, who called my attention to a little blaze of fire around the sun-light. I then ran to the basement and cut off the light. While I was in the cellar, the sun-light fell. There were two distinct wires for this which ran up the library floor without crossing; there were four wires for the other lights, and two switches."

From the basement, the engineer returned to the boiler-house. “Mr. Lockwood³, an engineering student,” said he, “was helping me. After I had gotten the engine started, I noticed that it did not run well; I had only forty pounds of steam turned on, when I should have had sixty-five to pull the machine. It was then five minutes past seven, and we should have had the lights turned on. I got the machine started up pretty well when all at once I noticed the lights go down, then go up, and about that time Boulton Clark, the fireman said, ‘The building is on fire.’ Feeling sure that the fire was among the wires, I turned the lights off, and went to see where the trouble was. We used that night a 400-light machine manufactured by the Addison Electric Company, and so far as I can learn, we had never had four hundred lights turned on all at once before.”

While this was going on within, a stream of figures in dark silhouette against the snow were seen crossing the campus on their way to the entertainment. The auditorium of the chapel, with its graceful balcony, its spacious rostrum, its fifteen hundred opera chairs, was brilliantly illuminated. The air was filled with gladness. Only a week before, the students had returned from their homes, where they had gone for the holidays. Everywhere could be heard the chatter of happy voices with occasional salutations and good-humored repartee. Some of the audience, perhaps a dozen, had already taken their seats, and others were coming in, when suddenly and without warning the large central sun-light fell with a crash into the parterre, barely missing the heads of several occupants. The hall was left in darkness. All was

consternation. Everyone was on his feet in an instant, and all started with a rush toward the exits. If the accident had happened a few minutes later a panic might have ensued. Seeing there was no immediate danger, the crowd passed out hurriedly through the folding doors into the hallway, thence through the vestibule into a place of safety.

No one realized for a moment what was happening. Some glancing up at the massive paneling which supported the floor of the library, saw little jets of smoke puffing out from a score of apertures. It was plain enough now; the ceiling was on fire, the electric light wires having become poorly insulated in some mysterious way, had ignited the inflammable material of the library floor. The whole chapel was quickly filled with the pungent odor of burning pine.

Immediately the startling cry was raised, "*Fire! Fire! The University is on Fire!*" A hundred voices took it up; men and boys several squares away heard and echoed that cry. The frightful news flew abroad on the night wind. Hundreds of citizens seated comfortably around their firesides were appalled by that dread, unusual sound. "The University is on fire!"

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In a few minutes, men, women and children — almost the entire population of Columbia — were hurrying breathlessly along in a dark stream, by every street, in

the direction of the campus. A lurid light was reflected against the sky. The night was bitterly cold. The janitor, the fireman⁴ and a student⁵ ran up into the library. They could see nothing but smoke along the floor, and the whole space between the floor and the ceiling appeared to be on fire. After cutting a hole with an axe in the floor about twenty feet south of the library desk, they carried in the hose, from the rack in the hall on the third floor, and turned on a stream which was of pretty good size as long as the water held out. There was a cistern in the basement into which water from the pond south of the main building was pumped by means of a Worthington pump with a capacity of 15,000 gallons an hour when running at full speed. The water used in the hose on the second and third floors came from the cistern, but the supply was soon exhausted.

“I struck two blows with the axe,” said the fireman, “and made an opening in the floor about a foot square. Black smoke was all I saw; the handle broke, and the axe went through the floor. When we left the library; a small stream of water was still flowing from the hose and flooding the floor. The smoke was so suffocating when I went in that I could not possibly walk straight; but on the second floor it was not so dense.”

Mr. J. G. Babb, proctor of the University, said, “I reached the chapel about half past seven. When I looked in, I could see no fire, but the smoke was so dense that I could not see across the room, although the gas jets were burning. I then went up to the library. It was very dark and smoke was pouring in

considerable volume out of the door. It was impossible to save any property, as it was then very dangerous to go into the room.”

When President Jesse reached the scene there was great confusion on the stairways and landings. “I think,” said he, “there were a number of others in the library but the smoke was so thick I could not see my hand before me. I went to get a lamp, and went up again with James Guitar⁶. When quite near the library, the light went down on account of the dense fumes and finally went out. I went into the library a second time, and stayed a few moments, as long as I could stand it, and went down fully satisfied that nothing more could be done.”

“I was the last one out of the library,” said Mr. Fellows, “and when I left, I could hardly get out. I left the nozzle of the hose lying in the hole. I then went and helped to take some things out of the president’s house, but the smoke had made me so sick that I started home. Being unable to get home on account of the faintness from the smoke, I stopped with two of my friends and stayed there all night.”

When I first heard the alarm, I was playing a game of chess with a citizen⁷ of Columbia at his home on East Broadway about half a mile from the University. When we reached the scene about eight o’clock, dense volumes of smoke were issuing from the upper windows of the chapel. A reddish flare of intermittent flame was seen by the helpless lookers-on. A fierce struggle seemed in progress — the flames trying to devour the smoke, the smoke endeavoring to strangle

the flames. Suddenly the whole interior was lighted up by a vast billow of flame, and this was quickly followed by a loud crash as the girder supporting the library floor gave way, and precipitated all its valued contents into the furnace below. Twenty-two thousand volumes, eighteen thousand pamphlets, besides files of newspapers and thousands of magazines were lost. The portraits (17), statuary⁸, autograph letters of Jefferson and Clay (many things which were rare and could not be replaced) were valued at \$6,000. The entire loss in the library was estimated at \$35,000. On this there was insurance amounting to \$10,000.

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“It is appalling! We are helpless; nothing can be done!” were exclamations heard on hundreds of lips. The citizens were overwhelmed with consternation and sorrow. “It is distressing to see the accumulations of fifty years going up in flame and smoke,” said an old gentleman⁹, his eyes filled

with tears. “I am heartbroken,” said another¹⁰, ‘to see the old University, the chief pride of Columbia, going in this way.’ Everyone seemed to feel it as a personal loss. “It is the most frightful calamity that has ever befallen, or could befall our town,” was the opinion of all that dense crowd as they tramped up and down in the snow, watching the progress of the fire with sad faces and voices tremulous with grief.

The east wing was now ablaze from basement to summit. All the panes of glass were melting under the intense heat, and trickling down the walls in a molten stream; the ironwork of the fixtures was seen to writhe and twist like serpents in fiery convolutions; all the windows were belching forth from shattered frames masses of purple smoke; curling tongues of flame shot out yards in length. Someone remembered that the tablet of the Jefferson monument — a unique and priceless relic — had been placed for safe keeping in the chapel but it was now too late to save it.¹¹ At this point the heat was so great that the president's house caught on fire repeatedly, and was saved only after the greatest exertions. At one time the danger was so imminent that all the furniture was carried out.

“To the museum! Save the specimens in the museum!” shouted a professor¹², and, heading a body of students, a rush was made to the west wing, which was as yet remote from the onward surging wave of flame.¹³ Doors and windows were smashed in, and scores of volunteers clashed into the dark rooms to save what they could. The valuable contents of the museum of natural history were torn from their stands and carried or dragged out of doors. It was a queer sight to see the big elephant lying on his side in the snow; near by was the tiger, which had been mounted on the elephant's tusks, with a little grinning monkey perched on his back; here a gorilla and an arctic fox were keeping each other company; and here a huge crocodile seemed scarcely at home lying half buried in the snow drift.

“Save the law library!” called out a tall student, and followed by a dozen others, they gallantly penetrated through the darkness and smoke to the second floor, and, bringing out armfuls of books, deposited them on the ground. A few more daring spirits, headed by a professor,¹⁴ ventured up to the physical laboratories on the third floor, and were engaged in carrying out the costly apparatus. It was already dangerous in this part of the building. Gusts of suffocating fumes were pouring along the hallways impelled by the blast behind, and tongues of bluish flame were lapping against the doors of the lecture-rooms.

The fire, meanwhile, steadily advanced, and gained the rotunda of the main building. The immense amount of woodwork here gave the flames a fury and an intensity that is indescribable. The doors and windows were spouting great torrents of fire; the red flames crept steadily along the roof, licking their jaws like ravenous dragons; they caressed and entwined themselves about the columns,¹⁵ or leaped boldly into space. A terrible roar pervaded the air. The sound was like that of an approaching tornado tearing its way through a forest. A billowy sea of flame mounted into the sky as if impelled by the blast of a titanic furnace. A dense shower of sparks floated off over the town, presenting the appearance of millions of scintillant stars dancing on the bosom of an enormous black cloud.

All at once there came a crash as terrific as the explosion of an arsenal, and the colossal, copper-sheeted dome was blown loose from its fastenings, and fragments were hurled high in air. Several men

were in the building at the time. “So violent,” says an eye-witness “was the propulsive force of the blast that for a moment the sensation was like the shock of an earthquake. The floors vibrated, and the walls appeared to be swaying in upon us. We fled terror-stricken for our lives.” Though at several times anxiety was felt for those in the building, and, though there were several narrow escapes from suffocation and falling walls, no one was seriously injured.

On account of the size and isolation of the building this was one of the most magnificent spectacles ever seen in the state. That great roaring palace of fire with its red-litten windows, its flame-wrapped cornices, its fire-crowned dome, standing out against the black shadows of the night, and the white waste of snow, formed a picture which can never be forgotten.

A new element of grandeur was now about to add itself to the scene. The fiery tide was lashing and surging around the room in which were stored fourteen thousand rounds of ammunition for the rifles of the cadets: besides these there was a

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considerable store of shells and powder for the artillery detachment. The commandant of cadets ¹⁶, seeing that an explosion was imminent, took a squad, and passing along near the building, pressed the crowd back to a safer position. Then above the volcanic violence of the conflagration was heard the explosion of the cartridges and the bursting of the shells. “The detonations,” remarked an old soldier ¹⁷, “were as rapid as the firing in a hotly-contested battle.” At frequent intervals was heard the crash of some falling wall, and a great crest of flame would show where partition or floor had fallen in and given another morsel to the all-devouring elements.

Many persons stood watching the progress of the holocaust till a late hour, fascinated by the scene though chilled by the bitter cold. It was after midnight before the fire had swept across and destroyed the west wing of the University. A group of students sat at an upper window of the Agricultural College ¹⁸ and watched until the last wall on the north end swayed and fell outward with a loud crash. So intense was the heat in this wing that workmen, in clearing away the debris four months afterwards, unearthed heated stones and red-hot iron rods.

A detail of cadets remained on duty all night to guard the property of the state. Shortly after midnight there was another heavy fall of snow. The campus was almost deserted, and the ruined walls looked grim and spectral in their snowy mantles. ¹⁹

On the next morning (Sunday, January 10, 1892) there was a called meeting of the Faculty at 9 o'clock.

A telegram from Governor Francis was read, urging that “effective steps be taken to hold the student corps.” A bulletin was issued to the students declaring that “the Faculty had unanimously decided to proceed as usual with the work of the University.” A large and enthusiastic meeting was held at 10 o’clock in the Opera House, at which hopeful speeches were made by many professors, citizens and students. No services were held in the churches of the town, the ministers being present at the mass meeting. With one or two exceptions, the entire body of students enrolled at that time (584) stood firm and refused to leave the University. At 11 o’clock on Monday, January 11, a second meeting in the Opera House was held. Addresses were made by Governor David R. Francis, Hon. G. F. Rothwell, Judge B. M. Dilly, President R. H. Jesse and others. Numerous telegrams of sympathy from all over the country were received and read. A circular was sent to every patron, stating that all the churches, halls and other public buildings in Columbia had been thrown open for the use of the University, and that work would go on uninterrupted. On Tuesday morning chapel exercises were held as usual, all classes were provided for and not a recitation was missed.



The remains of Academic Hall after the fire. Courtesy University Archives C:0/3/8

1. G.W. Lanigan↵
2. Joseph Zumsteg↵
3. Now professor of physics in Trinity College, N.C.↵
4. Boulton Clark↵
5. J. N. Fellows, an engineering student↵
6. Mayor of Columbia↵
7. Mr. J. Th. Fyfer↵
8. Among these were the life-size portraits of Gov. D. R. Francis, Judge E. D. M. Bates and Major J. S. Rollins, the latter painted by Gen. Bingham, together with a bronze bust of Maj. Rollins. Also a portrait of Presidents Lathrop, Shannon and Reed, R. L. Todd, Prof. Matthews, Hon J. L. Stephens, Dr. Anthony Rollins↵
9. Mr. R. L. Todd, the first graduate of the University↵
10. Mr. J. Th. Fyfer↵
11. Several days after the fire this tablet was excavated almost red hot from the ruins by Prof. H. C. Penn. It was found broken into three pieces and was beginning to pulverize. It was, however, sealed in an air-tight glass case, and is now in a fair state of preservation. The inscription reads: “Here was buried THOMAS JEFFERSON,

author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia.”↵

12. Prof. J. P. Blanton↵

13. Although but little air was stirring at first, the fire created a breeze that soon grew into a stiff easterly wind, and fanned the flames rapidly through the building.↵

14. Dr. William Shrader, professor of Electrical Engineering↵

15. These six Ionic columns still stand, somewhat shattered and fire-scarred, a silent memorial of the fate of the old University. There is a strong sentiment against their removal.↵

16. Lieutenant B. B. Buck of the U.S. Army↵

17. Dr. Edward A. Allen, professor of English↵

18. In the lecture room of Dr. Edward D. Porter↵

19. About \$350,000 worth of property was destroyed by the fire, and upon this there was an insurance of \$147,500.↵

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