

How a Suspected Arsonist Gave W&L A Second Chance To Build a First-Rate Law Building

“Horrible . . . the folly of lack of architectural planning ”

W&L Dean Harry Campbell



HERE IS A GENERAL UNDERSTANDING — which, however, cannot be verified — that the fire that destroyed Tucker Hall at Washington and Lee University in the early morning hours of December 15, 1934, happened because of arson and not by accident.

Every person who ever saw the college campus in the day agreed that Old Tucker was the most out-of-place building imaginable: an oppressive, round, limestone carbuncle, a prison perhaps, perversely situated at the end of a spectacular procession of perfectly scaled, graceful, right-angled, red brick, white-accented Federal halls that stood as the quiet apotheosis of academia. Henry Donald Campbell, a professor and dean who became acting president in 1911, said Tucker Hall was “horrible” and “showed the folly of lack of architectural planning.” How the college leadership had ever decided in 1898 that Old Tucker was what

the elegant Colonnade needed is a mystery that cannot be explained.

There is no mystery, however, that a global belief quickly emerged that the monstrosity should go.

The legend has it that before the devastating fire broke out, at least one law professor heard whispers that he should take his things of value home. On the night of the fire, another fire, assumed to be arson, mysteriously broke out at the Higgins

& Irvine lumber mill in Lexington at 1:50 a.m. (What better place for an intentional fire?) In addition to the local fire department, equipment and personnel from the Washington and Lee fire brigade quickly went to the scene to help. Thus was every firefighter and piece of apparatus for miles around tied up elsewhere when the Tucker fire was called in about 3:30. When the Lexington Fire Department did get to the campus,



The original Tucker Hall, dedicated in 1900 and destroyed by fire in 1934.



Left: The scene during and immediately after the 1934 fire. The Virginia Military Institute cadets in the bottom photo were assigned to help put out the fire and keep it from spreading.



Below: The Rockbridge County News, December 20, 1934.

LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA, THURSDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 20, 1934.

W. & L. Law School, Higgins & Irvine Wrecked By Fires

Simultaneous Blazes With \$100,000 Loss Believed Incendiary; Staunton And Buena Vista Departments Called; Law Library Consumed

Two of the largest fires that Lexington has seen for many years made hideous the early hours of Sunday morning and completely destroyed Tucker Memorial Hall, the Washington and Lee law school building, and the planing mill of Higgins & Irvine near the railroad depot. Practically all of the valuable library was consumed at the law building and all of the contents of the planing mill was burned including a large amount of lumber piled on the adjoining yard. The loss in the two fires is estimated at about \$100,000.

Evidence as to both fires points strongly to incendiarism. W. L. Irvine said Sunday morning that the planing mill had been closed at 3:30 o'clock Saturday afternoon with a small fire left burning in one stove. His partner, J. W. Higgins, was in the building later in the afternoon. This alarm was not turned in until shortly before 2 o'clock Sunday morning and the blaze appeared to have started near the porch on the front. The building itself was an old frame structure and full of inflammable material and attempts to save it were hopeless.

Mr. Irvine at first thought a small safe in the office had been opened and it could be seen that the combination mechanism was off of the door. This apparently had been melted and the contents were found intact. The building contained valuable planing mill machinery and a large stock of materials. It was built during the boom days in Lexington in the early nineties and had always been used as a lumber supply house.

The blaze seriously threatened property adjoining the warehouse and firemen to a large extent directed their efforts to saving the other properties. The heat was intense and frame houses across McLaughlin street belonging to G. I. Harris and Mrs. Charles P. Harrison were badly scorched and several times caught fire. The heat broke the windows. On the Myers street side the homes of Mrs. W. A. Davidson, L. L. Weaver and Mrs. J. A. Taylor were smoking. Electric light poles along both streets were burning, some carrying high tension wires increasing the danger. City water pressure appeared to be low particularly on the hose connected on Myers street. Good streams of water were pumped from the engine until it went out of commission with a broken connecting rod.

Higgins & Irvine estimated their loss at \$35,000. It was only partially covered by \$20,000 insurance on building and contents. No insurance was carried on the lumber on the yard. The firm had about \$500 worth of doors and equipment for VMI buildings in the shop.

The fire in the Washington and Lee law school building was discovered about 3:30 o'clock. According to Deep William H. Moreland when he got there the fire was burning in two disconnected places in the front and in the back of the lower hall. It would apparently have been impossible for embers from the other fire to have set this building on fire with its slate roof and great distance between the two. Some difficulty was encountered in getting the alarm in for the second fire and firemen were hampered in reaching it because all available apparatus including the reels from Washington and Lee and V. M. I. were in use there. Calls were sent to Buena Vista and Staunton and in a short time both cities responded with equipment. Buena Vista had water on the fire 12 minutes after the alarm. They brought 18 men. The Staunton engine had water pouring through its holes on the flames in the record time of 60 minutes after they had received the call. Seven men came along. The interior of the law building was soon a roaring furnace with the flames held in by the heavy stone walls, and entrance was impossible. The roof collapsed at 4:30. Hoses were played on the Main building and the residence of Dr. Jas. Lewis. Hoses near by and neither was

its pumper inexplicably failed. It was inevitable that Tucker Hall would burn to the ground.

As soon as the embers cooled, the university trustees authorized construction of a replacement building — of traditional design.

Here, then, are some of the contemporary reports that might shine a little light. All the documents are from an exhibition the Washington and Lee library mounted in 2014.

Fire Believed of Incendiary Origin

Dickey Says It Could Not Have Started From Cigarette

Origins of the Tucker Hall fire and of the fire in the Higgins-Irvine planing mill remained a mystery today, as local officials moved forward in their investigations.

Meanwhile, various theories were advanced as to the causes of the fires, but most authorities indicated a belief that the Tucker Hall fire was of incendiary origin, while offering no comment on the planing mill conflagration.

C. E. Woodward, Lexington fire chief, said today that "there's not a shadow of a chance that sparks might have set fire to Tucker Hall," and pointed out that the building is more than a quarter of a mile from the planing mill, and that there were many other buildings much more susceptible to sparks.

Chief Woodward further added to the growing pile of evidence of incendiarism by adding that the electricity and heat had been turned off at midnight, obviating the possibility that overheated pipes or defective wiring could have been responsible for the blaze.

Theories that such a fire could have started by means of a carelessly tossed cigarette were scouted by Prof. R. W. Dickey, who said that the building was always kept free of trash, and that the hard-wood floors and solid construction of the walls would make it almost impossible for a cigarette to have any effect.

The rapidity with which the Tucker Hall fire started was shown in the statements of night-watchman Hostetter who had visited the building only about twenty minutes before the alarm was turned in. Lexington firemen who had come to the campus for the University hose-wagons about three o'clock also said that at that time there was no indication of fire in the building.

Early arrivals at the fire were unanimous in stating that in its

earlier stages the fire seemed to be burning in two different places near the front hall and in the rear staircase. Prof. C. R. McDowell, who entered his office in the rear of the building shortly after the fire was discovered, revealed that a ring of fire surrounded the base of the walls, a phenomenon which could not be explained.

Firemen also said that they believed they detected kerosene during the time they were fighting the fire in the front of the hall.

Chief Woodward said that the cause of failure of the Lexington fire engine pumper was also hard to explain, and said that an inspector of the America-France company, builders of the machine, had been asked to inspect the engine.

The investigation is being conducted by Commonwealth's Attorney William Ackerly and Chief of Police King.

Three New Members Chosen by Commerce Scholarship Society

Clarence B. Newcomb, Frederick deR. Strong and Hugh C. Sparks, Jr., have been selected as members of Beta Gamma Sigma, commerce scholarship fraternity, for the class of 1935.

The fraternity was founded at the University of Wisconsin in 1913 and is the Phi Beta Kappa of commerce students. The Virginia Beta chapter was established in 1933 at Washington and Lee. An exceptionally high academic standing is required for membership.

The charter members of the local chapter are Glover Dunn Hancock, Robert Henry Tucker, William Coan, M. Ogden Phillips, Edwin Henry Howard, John Higgins Williams and Rupert Nelson Lature.

Each of the three new men is in his fourth year at Washington and Lee. Newcomb is from Philadelphia, Strong from New York, and Sparks from Eufaula, Alabama.

Williams Thanks Stars That Building Waited Until Xmas to Burn

Law professor C. E. Williams is thanking his lucky stars that the law building waited until nearly Christmas to burn down. Scarcely a month ago he completed a book on law which he has been writing for two years and it is now in the hands of the publishers. However, all of his personal teaching material and teaching notes were destroyed completely.

Dean Moreland, due to the efforts of students who entered a window before the fire gained considerable headway, succeeded in recovering the complete file of records of past law students here. Part of his personal letter file was saved but several boxes of current letters were overlooked in the confusion. The record of current students at the school was also entirely consumed. This, however, can be easily replaced by the records in Registrar Mattingly's office. Dean Moreland fortunately keeps his personal law library in his home.

Professors C. P. Light and R. T. Johnson lost the entire contents of their offices, which were located on the second floor. Among Mr. Light's losses was his private law library, a group of signed pictures of distinguished teachers which he valued highly and valuable notes he had taken as a student at Harvard and as a teacher here.

Valuable paintings destroyed included portraits of Judge F. P. Anderson, Judge Brokenbrough, the founder of the school, and John Marshall. Also destroyed was a bronze bust of John Randolph Tucker.

A complete catalogue of all books in the library and a record of all the law alumni of the school which the FERA had just completed were lost.

Library Books
All library books must be specially charged out if they are to be kept over the holidays.

Flames Sweep W&L Building, Lumber Yard

Midnight Holocausts Raze Law School and Lexington Planing Mill Establishment

Outside Aid Summoned

Cadets Ordered to Scam to Aid Firemen in Work and Protect Institute Property

December 16.—Lexington this morning witnessed one of its most destructive and distressing set of fires. It was a case of bad luck coming in pairs. Two fires, either of which would have been a disaster in itself, broke out within a short while of each other and left complete destruction in their wakes. The properties destroyed represented a money value of \$95,000 of which about \$40,000 was covered by insurance. The Law Building, of Washington and Lee University, in which was contained an extremely valuable law library, and the planing mill and lumber yard of Higgins and Irvine were the properties burnt.

Lumber Yard First

The lumber yard was the first of the properties to catch and an alarm was turned in on this fire at 1:50 a. m. The fire company of Lexington arrived on the scene at about 2:15. Difficulty was experienced at first due to lack of hose and to the inconvenient location of fire hydrants. The fire fighters were also handicapped as their pumper broke down, a connecting rod having burned out. To assist them to bring the fire under control the hose of the Washington and Lee University was borrowed and turned to good account.

Prevent Spread

Most of the energy of the fire.

Above: The Ring-tum Phi, December 18, 1934, two days after the fire.

Left: The VMI Cadet, December 17, 1934, the day after the fire.

HAPPY NEW YEAR. Gentlemen—But don't forget exams start on January 14.

The Ring-tum Phi
By the Students, For the Students

WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1934

NEW LAW BUILDING BY SEPTEMBER ASSURED

Wallis Names Men in Figure Of Fancy Dress Ball This Year
Forty-eight Juniors And Seniors Have Been Selected

LEADERS OF SEVEN GROUPS ANNOUNCED
Dance and Student-Body Officers to Assist President of Ball

Zero Hour Near
General Offensive Opens On 8:25 Fronts Tomorrow

Three Students Injured as Blaze Sweeps Through W-L Law School
\$85,000 Is Estimated Loss From Early Morning Fire

VALUABLE PORTRAIT IS BURNED IN FIRE
Valuable Library Razed; Investigation of Holocaust Begun

Trustees Meet During Holidays To Make Plans For Rebuilding
Expect to Cost Between \$125,000 and \$150,000; New Library Started

DESIGN TO BE LIKE ACADEMIC SCHOOL
Will Be Built on Site Of Burned Building

New Building to Replace These Ruins



490 Students Have Photos Put in Calyx
Sigma Chi Wins Cup—17 Out of 18 Members Photographed

Three Students Hurt
Three students and a resident of Lexington were injured. The Washington fire department, which was called to the scene of the tragedy, is one of the most severe losses the University has ever suffered.

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Above: The Ring-tum Phi, December 18, 1934, two days after the fire.

Right: The Lexington Gazette, December 30, 1934, ten days after the fire.

Rebuilding Plans Are Approved By Board At W. & L.

New Law Building Will Be In Harmony With Other Buildings

The board of trustees of Washington and Lee university meeting here Friday authorized the construction of a new law building to replace Tucker Hall, destroyed recently by fire.

The new building, the board directed, will harmonize architecturally with other campus buildings, and will accommodate 150 students.

Two committees were named by the board to work out details and to report back to the full board at a later meeting, probably in January.

EXCERPT FROM A letter written home on the day after the fire by an unnamed undergraduate: "Here's why I say it must have been arson: On the same night as the other fire, it absolutely was not caused by its sparks; there was no wind, and the fire started not on the roof, but on the first floor. With this as an established fact, the two fires in one night being a coincidence is extremely improbable. The fire chief thinks the lumber fire was also set."

ACCORDING TO THE Ring-tum Phi, the student newspaper, the Lexington fire chief, C. E. Woodward, said "there's not a shadow of a chance" that sparks from the earlier fire had set Old Tucker ablaze. Power to the building had been shut off at midnight, as was customary, so it can't have been defective wiring, the student paper added. "Firemen also said that they believed they detected kerosene during the time they were fighting the fire."

THE CADET, the Virginia Military Institute student newspaper, reported that 100 first classmen (seniors) were sent by Superintendent John A. Lejeune to help fight the fire, in part to make sure it didn't spread next door to the VMI post.