

December 16 [1934]

Dear Folks,

After a hectic night of fires we are extremely lucky and thankful that Washington College was not burnt. The Law School, only about twenty-five feet away, was.

After writing an English term paper Friday night I was more tired than any time this year, and went to bed while the rest of the floor was still going strong. I don't know just what time it was, but wasn't so sleepy that I went to sleep immediately, and know that just at twelve Miss Mercer read the boys the riot act about noise, and they went out, to Wit's End (which has reopened). I was sort of half asleep for a long time (I remember humming a certain new tune over and over, but can't think of the tune today); the next definite thing I remember was the boys pounding on my door, and telling me about a fire. By the time I was fully awake they had all gone to see it; I didn't go. The clouds were rather low and they were brightly lit up by the glare; you could also see the flames themselves. After seeing that it certainly wasn't the library and probably not Dr. Gaines's, since I seemed to be getting quite a cold and didn't want to make it worse, I went back to bed. That was about two o'clock. (As a matter of fact, the fire was at a lumber yard near the railroad station.) I must have slept about an hour and a half or more.

Then I was half awakened by the college bell ringing, and saw that there was a fire up that way; I supposed of course in the College building, because we have always been afraid of it burning. Though there was hardly any wind, I supposed, being half-asleep, that the other fire had spread. Putting on shoes and socks, and pants and my overcoat over my pajamas (which left me rather cold around the neck) I ran up the hill. From the house I'd seen that the main fire was in Tucker Hall, but thought the College had started too. When I got up there I saw it hadn't, but it still looked like it probably would.

The fire department, which was still at the other fire, didn't get there for several minutes. The law building, at least the center hall, was a roaring furnace. The crowd, already fairly large, was yelling and screaming "get out of there" to the people who had gone in the windows to some of the offices to save what they could. One of these was Graham Painter, and he got the files out (threw them out the window drawer by drawer). The smoke was pretty bad. He hurt his ankles and knee jumping out the window.

People got up on the roof of that ~~Wit's End~~ wing of the College with fire extinguishers; and in a few minutes some hose came. There was an agonizing delay waiting or looking for a wrench to open the fire plug, but they finally got the water flowing; and the engine got there. The law school was beyond saving, and the big question was to save the College. They played water on that wall. I was afraid that when the wall on that side of the law school fell, as it was obviously about to do, it would start a fire at the foot of the college wall. But it fell off in pieces, and almost straight down. Shortly thereafter they got a hose up on ~~the~~ the college roof, and the crisis was past. Dr. Stone had already moved his most important things out of his office (which is in the endangered wing). By this time, and long before, nearly everyone was there. Our crowd had been in at the first. In fact, they narrowly missed discovering it, and having a chance at seeing the person who did it (it was almost certainly incendiary in origin). About ten minutes before it was discovered, they had been singing on the steps by the Chapel.

Staunton and Buena Vista fire departments came. The former is said to have made the trip in forty minutes. They had a good engine, and stopped right here at the corner by the Old Blue, and pumped water up the hill (the pressure at the plug up there wasn't very good) until ten o'clock this morning.

I got to bed about five thirty, when it was certain there was no more danger. My cold is no worse; in fact, slightly better (I slept uninterruptedly this time till nearly one).

The building and library were wofully underinsured; every one says, for \$30,000. The building was always unpopular, but the library is a bad loss; many items are irreplaceable. None of Williams', Johnson's, or Light's notes or other effects were saved. Many students--among them Carl Sprague and Glover, of my friends--always studied in the law library and left their books and notes there.

A more building, which I checked with the others

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 an established fact, the two fires in one night ~~is/are~~ being a coincidence is extremely improbable. The fire chief thinks the lumber fire was also set. (It was underinsured too). Also, the law building was well kept up, and was in no sense a firetrap like the College or, say, Reid Hall. There may be some developments tomorrow.

I shiver even to write about the thing; I guess you understand better than anyone. The question of the College and the General Library not being fireproof is one of our most serious ones; and I hope this may lead to some improvement. I don't see how, though.

Graham's legs are still pretty bad but he can walk around. We were playing bridge this evening when Mr. Gilliam called up after him. It seems that the AP had gotten the story about him saving the files ~~and~~ but had it that he was badly hurt (at dinner today they thought he was in the hospital, because they'd seen him go away having to hang on to two people). So they tried to get hold of his father for confirmation. His father is in the hospital, in Charleston WVa, but they got hold of his partner, who called up Gilliam long distance. So now we're kidding Graham about being a hero.

Unless you hear otherwise I'll be home Thursday, on the usual Big Four train. I'll be awfully glad to see you. You know, do you not, that Blanche is coming to the library meeting in Chicago? --I won't have much time in Kansas City but will probably get a ticket straight through. I'm afraid the rates will be quite high this year; am not yet quite sure whether there will be any difference between rates on the 19th and 20th. If so, I'll take the late train and get my ticket from White Sulphur, which is the first stop after midnight. --I'm going to leave my car in Clifton Forge. The Whiting people say they are sure there are some safe garages there. Figuring in everything I don't think driving home would pay, do you, even if the weather happened to be all right. If I did I'd have to go direct to Kansas City, then drive up to Chicago on the 26th and 27th. --My trips to and from KC on the train will very likely not be at the same time as yours. Before choosing the Santa Fe automatically I'm going to compare all the schedules, to see if there isn't some way to avoid losing two evenings, or having them very badly cut.

Love, *Sam*

[Blanche McCreane, W & L Librarian, my mother's cousin]