



—Phoenix Photo, Hamilton, N. Y.

EXCAVATION OF RECORDS AFTER THE COLGATE UNIVERSITY FIRE

The paper by Howard D. Williams in this issue gives an account of the fire and the emergency measures taken to retrieve records and to restore damaged and burned records.

Records Salvage After the Fire at Colgate University

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CONTRARY to early reports in the press and other news media, the records loss in the Colgate Administration Building fire on October 27, 1963, was neither so extensive nor so catastrophic as was first believed. The experience of the fire and many of the consequent problems, however, seem sufficiently unusual among colleges and universities to warrant their sharing. It is hoped that any interest they arouse may be solely academic and that the need for practical application of lessons or techniques derived from the Colgate fire may never arise.

The insistent whine of the siren about 4 o'clock on a Sunday morning in Hamilton, the central New York State village in which Colgate is located, woke town and gown to reddened skies and a blazing building on one corner of the campus. Through the autumn haze and mist they saw flames shooting from its roof and upper windows. This Victorian structure, 90 years old, had housed Colgate Academy from 1873 until that division of the university was discontinued in 1912. Since that time it had been occupied by the university's administrative offices.

The building consisted of a four-story central section with extensions of three and two stories at either side. The exterior walls were of brick and the interior construction almost entirely of wood, save for 12-inch brick supporting walls. In the center was a stairwell reaching to the top floor and from it corridors led right and left. The university authorities were not unaware that the building was a fire hazard, but higher priorities for the use of limited funds had permitted only minor changes through the years.

Although the local volunteer fire company arrived on the scene within 15 minutes of the alarm, it was clear that the structure was doomed. Presumably the fire had started between 3 and 4 o'clock; its cause remains unknown. The blaze and the heat in the central part created a veritable holocaust—the drafts carried sparks a quarter of a mile away. Fortunately none set fire to other buildings or even to piles of leaves, tinder dry from the preceding Indian

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summer. To assist local firefighters other companies came from four neighboring communities, and at one time they had 16 hoses playing on the blaze. It was brought under control about 9 hours after it had started, but for 2 days the ruins smoked and needed intermittent hosing.

On the weekend of the fire most of the key administrative staff were off campus. President Barnett, a guest of the president of Yale following the Colgate-Yale football game, was awakened at 5 o'clock Sunday morning by his host to take a telephone call informing him of the disaster. Within a few hours he had returned to Hamilton, and by evening the other administrators had joined him to work on plans for setting up their temporary offices. Most were to go into the Old Library, which had been partly used by the Romance language department since 1958, when the library was moved to a new building.

By the next morning all administrative offices were in operation, hampered though they were by lack of furniture, equipment, and records. Within a matter of hours after news of the fire had circulated, neighboring colleges and businesses offered the use of their facilities and the loan of furniture and equipment; they made outright gifts of some used items. Representatives of the New York Telephone Co. were on the campus at 7:15 a.m. on the morning of the fire, and by that evening they had laid new cables and replaced the totally destroyed switchboard with another in the Old Library; by 8 o'clock the next morning service to most of the more than 200 disrupted extensions was nearly normal.

Any attempt to take stock of the records situation in the building had to wait until the ruins cooled and were safe enough to allow investigation. Meanwhile, it was possible to be thankful that nearly all the noncurrent records were in the University Archives and were for the most part housed in the New Library. These records included student academic record pages through the class of 1936 and student personnel folders through the class of 1951. Besides, the Archivist had a large amount of duplicate material that could be made available for reconstituting destroyed files.

A survey of the remains of the building showed that the central part, in which were located the offices of the registrar, of the president's staff, and of student aid, was nothing but rubble. On the north side the supporting walls had retarded the spread of the fire to the treasurer's and controller's offices and the offices of the vice president for development and of the director of public information. In addition there was a walk-in vault built in 1950 for the treasurer



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Drying records by the use of racks improvised by the University Archivist

and the controller; this would, it was thought, save many of their records. Damage to the south end was more extensive—the president's office was almost completely destroyed and the alumni office had suffered severely, though the supporting walls had given some protection to the offices of the director of admissions and dean of students.

Salvage operations began 2 days after the fire with the arrival of the crew from the Pelnik Wrecking Co. of Utica and Syracuse, bringing their power crane and dump trucks. They were carefully instructed to look for and save all papers and were most cooperative. They retrieved records from many of the offices and when they had determined that it was safe for others to enter limited areas, members of the university staff joined in the search and recovery. From time to time the wreckers took down shaky walls to avert danger from falling bricks and plaster. The university Archivist, since he had some knowledge of the records of all the offices, worked with the wreckers for 6 of the 9 days when they were on the scene, identifying files and routing them to temporary storage areas.

Recovery of records in the development, public information, admission, dean of students', treasurer's, and controller's offices was quite good, for these areas had been spared the most intense heat and much of the drenching from the tons of water poured into the center of the building. Furniture, typewriters, bookkeeping machines, and other equipment, however, were a total loss. The walk-in vault had given excellent protection to the important financial records, most of which had been in steel cases, though some were slightly smoke-stained and damp from steam. Student aid records, except those in the vault, were destroyed. Five of the 10 steel file cabinets in the president's office were saved; the drawers that were most tightly packed were least damaged although many documents were charred on the edges. One file cabinet, on being opened 5 days after the fire, had ashes in the bottom drawer that glowed when blown by the wind. Fortunately most of the files of President Barnett's predecessor, who completed a 20-year term in 1962, had been removed to the Archives on his retirement.

One set of records about which there had been much apprehension was the master information cards for some 12,000 alumni. These had been kept in 9 heavy insulated 4-drawer locked steel cabinets, which had crashed 20 feet into a roaring inferno when the floor of the alumni office had collapsed. Not until 4 days after the fire could these files be excavated from the rubble. Except for the lock

on one drawer, which had functioned imperfectly for some weeks, all had held and the master cards were in nearly perfect condition. Also saved from the alumni office were some 30,000 addressograph plates in the basement; these were only slightly damp and were easily wiped dry.

There was great relief when it was discovered that the student academic record pages for the classes from 1953 onward, which had been kept in post binders in a large safe in the registrar's office, had survived except for slight scorching of the volumes on the top shelf. The student personnel folders for the classes of 1952 and later, which were in six 5-drawer steel files in this office, were relatively unharmed; but most of the loose papers in cupboards and desks were destroyed.

Of particular interest was the condition of a vault in the basement beneath the registrar's office that had been constructed in the mid-1930's, with a 3-inch reinforced concrete ceiling. It held records from the registrar's and controller's offices, including about 250 file drawers, files of canceled checks and vouchers, blueprints and maps, ledgers, and a large steel safe containing student academic record pages for the classes of 1937 to 1952. Not until 8 days after the fire was it possible to remove enough of the great pile of debris to inspect the vault. The wreckers then found that the ceiling over one corner had been punctured and that fire followed by water had penetrated this opening. Stains on the file equipment showed that the water had reached a level of $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet above the floor; by the time recovery began it had receded to 6 inches. This meant that approximately 150 drawers were wet or damp and that their contents would have to be dried.

The records in the basement vault constituted the major salvage problem because of their bulk and the thoroughly water-soaked condition of many. As soon as they could be removed, the dry records were segregated from the wet and both groups were sent to temporary storage. Fortunately there was available on the ground floor of the New Library a combined lecture room and lounge with approximately 2,200 square feet of floorspace usable for drying purposes. This area could be locked off from the rest of the building and had its own ventilating system and thermostat control.

Racks improvised by the university Archivist and the buildings and grounds department greatly facilitated the drying process. Forty-four racks were constructed, each consisting of two tiers of aluminum fly screen 32 inches wide and 8 feet long, spaced 15 inches apart on light wooden frames (see accompanying photograph). They had

the advantage of being easily and quickly made of materials readily at hand. Placed on folding tables, they permitted good circulation of air around the wet papers. Two dehumidifiers were installed and proved helpful. The temperature was kept between 60° and 65° to reduce wrinkling of the drying documents so far as possible.

Opportunely, a retired chemistry professor was available and willing to supervise the tedious drying process, which lasted about 6 weeks. Students and faculty wives provided the labor. The registrar and controller established priorities for reclaiming their records. The wet documents were removed from their folders and spread out on the racks. In some file drawers the wet paper had swollen so much that a few files had to be ripped out in order to loosen the others. When partially dry they were turned, and when completely dry they were reassembled in the proper folders. Because of the wrinkled condition of many records, they took up much more space than they had originally. In some instances sodden piles of documents would begin to dry before they could be separated and had to be redampened before they could be picked apart. Blueprints when laid singly on the racks dried very satisfactorily. Some of the smaller-sized documents dried adequately in loose piles.

Minute books and ledgers required special attention. They were stood upright on their bindings, or leaned against a support if the bindings had been destroyed, to dry out as much as possible before being interleaved with paper towels and then laid flat and dried under weights. In the case of a few of the books, the bindings were removed and the signatures were separated, interleaved with towels, and dried. Most of these will be rebound. Pages removed from ledgers and arranged in loose piles on steel shelves dried satisfactorily after being turned over once.

Among the contents of the basement vault had been about 23,000 feet of microfilm, much of which had been soaked. On instructions from the Eastman Kodak Co. the reels were immersed in cans of water immediately on being recovered and within 24 hours they were sent to the plant at Rochester. There they were treated and saved.

Although many of Colgate's records were destroyed, all of prime value, so far as is known, have been recovered. It will be months before the administrative offices—thoroughly occupied with routine business and adjusting to the Old Library Building in which they have been located permanently—are able to reassemble and evaluate what has been saved. Charred documents and the smell of smoke will be perpetual reminders of the "Ad Building Fire."