

# Reflections on The Columns



University of Missouri - Columbia

**Bulletin**

*Photos courtesy of:*  
*State Historical Society of Missouri*  
*Missouri Alumnus*  
*Warren A. Boyd, Jr.*  
*John Hollingsworth*

## BULLETIN

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI - COLUMBIA

Volume 70

Number 21

August 1, 1969

General 1969 Series

Number 18

Robert E. Kren, *Director*, Office of Public Information  
Louise H. Stephens, *Editor*

Published by the *Bulletin* Editor's Office, 206S Technical Education Services, 417 South Fifth Street, Columbia, Missouri 65201. Issued monthly as follows: four times in March, April, August, September, October, and November; three times in January and May; twice in February, June, and July; once during December. Second-class postage paid at Columbia, Missouri.



*Mid the hills of Old Missouri  
At the gateway to the West,  
Stands our dear old Alma Mater,  
Loved by all of us the best.*

*Gather 'round her stately columns  
Sweetest memories there will cling,  
Of the day when Alma Mater  
Sheltered us beneath her wing.*

# Reflections on The Columns

**I**n the center of Francis Quadrangle at the University of Missouri - Columbia stand six, scarred Ionic columns, the traditional symbol of the campus.

These towering columns are the only remains of Academic Hall, the University's first building, destroyed by fire in 1892. More than a century old, the columns not only have survived fire, but also the elements, wars, comedy and even tragedy.

The columns' history began with the passage of the Geyer Act by the 1839 Tenth General Assembly of Missouri, establishing the first university west of the Mississippi—the University of Missouri. Columbia was selected for the University's location and the first Board of Curators chose A. Stephens Hill, designer of the 1840 Missouri State Capitol, to draw plans for Academic Hall.

The building had three stories and a dome 36 feet high over the center section. The north portico was about 80 feet long and 23 feet wide and was supported by the six columns, each 43 feet high.

Bricks for the walls of the building were fired near the building site. The polished limestone blocks for the columns, in sections not less than two feet, six inches high and weighing 9 to 18 tons each, were hauled from Hinkson Creek by drays pulled by 12 yoke of oxen. The columns were erected in 1842. Academic Hall was formally dedicated in 1843.

Academic Hall was the focal point of campus life for almost 50 years. In addition to classrooms, it housed administrative offices, libraries, chapel room and even a museum of taxidermy. East and west wings were added in 1885, seven years before the fire, to accommodate the growing number of students.

Then at 7:15, Saturday night, January 9, 1892, a devastating fire lashed out to demolish the hall and eventually threaten the future of the University.

The Athenaean Literary Society was preparing to hold a meeting in the chapel in the east wing of the building. Suddenly the lights flared up for a moment, then the huge ornate electric chandelier in the center of the room crashed to the floor, miraculously missing those assembled below. The fire had apparently broken out between the chapel ceiling and the library floor above, believed to have been caused by faulty electrical wiring.



*Artist's conception of the campus about 1868. Clockwise are the President's house, Academic Hall (known then as The University), Observatory, Scientific Building (Switzler Hall) and the College of Normal Instruction (Education).*



*The original University building as it appeared prior to 1885.*

One of the first on the scene was University President Richard H. Jesse. He had been reading in his study when he was summoned by the announcement that "The University is on fire!"

The only water available was from a cistern in the basement and from Lake St. Mary, a shallow pond located where the School of Journalism now stands. The supply was soon exhausted with no appreciable effect on the fire. The valuable collection of books and portraits in the library was doomed.

Effort was then concentrated on saving furniture and valuable papers from the central and western portions of the building. University records, papers from the Secretary's office and most of the books in the law library were saved. Courageous students smashed through the wall in the west wing into the museum and saved several specimens, including the prized, stuffed circus elephant, "Emperor." The elephant was the only "being" hurt in the fire—one of his tusks was damaged as he was removed through the emergency exit.

For a while it appeared that the President's home, close to the east wing, was in danger. Furniture was carried out and deposited in the snow which was several inches deep. Students climbed to the roof of the house and time after time put out fires that started there. The house was eventually saved without serious damage. (The main



*Wings were added to the east and west sides of Academic Hall in 1885.*



*The great fire on January 9, 1892,  
destroyed the building in less than four  
hours. University President Jesse later  
commented, "I do not think water  
works would have saved the building.  
It was doomed from the start."*



section of the house was built in 1867; it is now the oldest building on campus.)

By 8 p.m. the fire in Academic Hall had reached its peak, searing flames curled around the columns. About 8:30, the fire reached the 14,000 rounds of ammunition, to be used by the Cadet Corps, stored in the dome. The gunpowder explosions forced onlookers outside to retreat to safety. The entire dome finally collapsed with a tremendous roar. By 11:00 p.m. only the charred, smoking remnants of Academic Hall were left.

A mass meeting was held Sunday morning in the Columbia Opera House. President Jesse vowed that University work would not be suspended. Classes resumed as usual the following Tuesday in the three remaining classroom buildings and in temporary quarters in three local churches, the Courthouse and vacant rooms in downtown business buildings. The Opera House was engaged for student assemblies and commencement exercises.

The Board of Curators began meetings two days after the fire to discuss plans for rebuilding. A plan drawn up at that first meeting, with only minor changes, was finally accepted and was the beginnings of the present day Red Campus on Francis Quadrangle.



*The morning after the fire revealed the devastated building.*



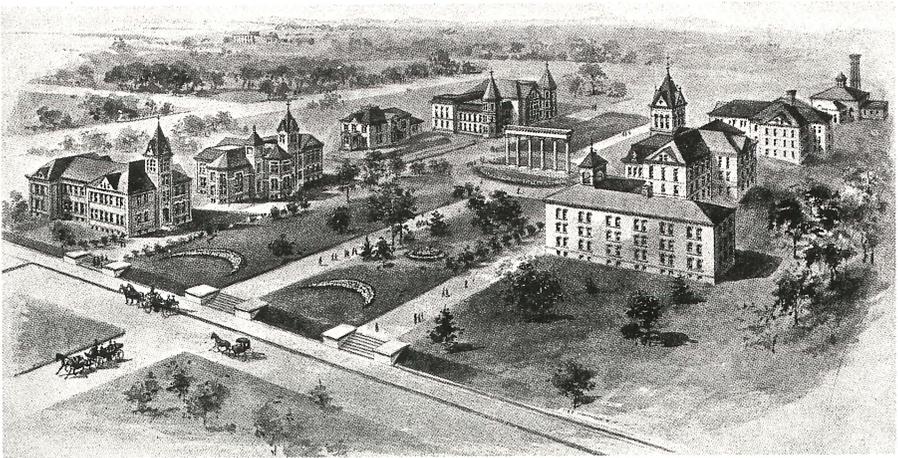
A special session of the State Legislature was called. There were major debates in the session concerning moving all or part of the University out of Columbia. The town was finally allowed to keep the University under the condition that it provide better fire protection, and the Legislature allocated \$250,000 for the new buildings.

The columns were left standing when the ruins of the old building were cleared, but with great difference of opinion as to the columns' fate. Many contended they were unsafe. When the campus was leveled off and the new buildings began to take shape, there was increasing feeling that the columns, perched on a narrow ridge, were positively unsightly and spoiled the effect of the new building.

In August, 1893, the Board of Curators voted to dismantle them, but, under the leadership of such men as G. F. Rothwell, Gardiner Lathrop and C. M. Woodward, alumni protested the decision. Inspection showed the foundations to be safe, and in December the Board voted to retain them. With the grading down of the mound on which they stand and the completion of the new Academic Hall (Jesse Hall) in 1895, the architectural critics were satisfied.

*Below: As the building remains were taken away, the new campus assumed its shape. Right: Students in customary campus dress gathered for a picture as the controversy raged concerning the columns' fate.*





*This drawing submitted by M.F. Bell of Fulton was adopted by the Board of Curators as the master plan for the new campus. With minor changes all of the buildings shown were constructed but the system of drives and walks was changed considerably.*

In 1937, broken parts of the columns, which had been warped by the heat of the fire and had weathered badly, were removed. The foundations were buttressed and the stone waterproofed to reduce further disintegration. In 1949, the bases were again reinforced.

In 1966, an historical marker was erected in Francis Quadrangle north of the columns. A gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry R. Ponder of Marshalltown, Iowa, both University graduates, the marker explains for the campus visitors the history of the columns and their significance to the University.

A lighting system to illuminate the columns at night was installed in June, 1967, as a memorial to William C. Tucker, former Warrensburg publisher and member of the Board of Curators. Funds for the floodlights were provided by alumni and the student association.

The columns have thus remained a focal point of campus activities for more than 75 years. University cadets and bands have marched around them; engineering students have learned the use of compass and theodolite by measuring the columns; art students have painted and sketched them; dramatic groups have performed open-air Greek plays with the columns as a backdrop.

Over the decades, May Day and Tap Day exercises, mass meetings and student gatherings have taken place in their shadow. Old grads have returned after 20, 30 and 40 years to have their pictures taken with the columns for a background, comparing graphically the changing and the changeless. At one time, freshmen

paddling lines were set up near them; now fraternities and sororities "yell in" new pledges there.

Until 1950, graduating classes marched around the columns en route to commencement. Summer school commencement is still held at the foot of the columns, perpetuating this tradition.

It is only natural that many campus traditions and legends would grow up around the columns. One of the favorite questions asked of the freshman is if he can tell which two columns are farthest apart, after assuring him that two of them are definitely farther apart than any of the others. The answer naturally is the two end ones.

For years it was traditional that freshmen could not walk on the grass. This rule was enforced by paddling lines manned by the students in the Colleges of Engineering and Agriculture. Sophomores were allowed on the grass but not on the mound surrounding the columns. Juniors were allowed on the lower terrace around the columns and the top of the mound was exclusively for the seniors.

For many years, the ivy adorning the columns grew on all but one column. There were two popular explanations for this. One was that the first six presidents of the University were buried under the columns and that one of these presidents was an atheist. Thus, no ivy would ever grow on the particular column under which he was buried.

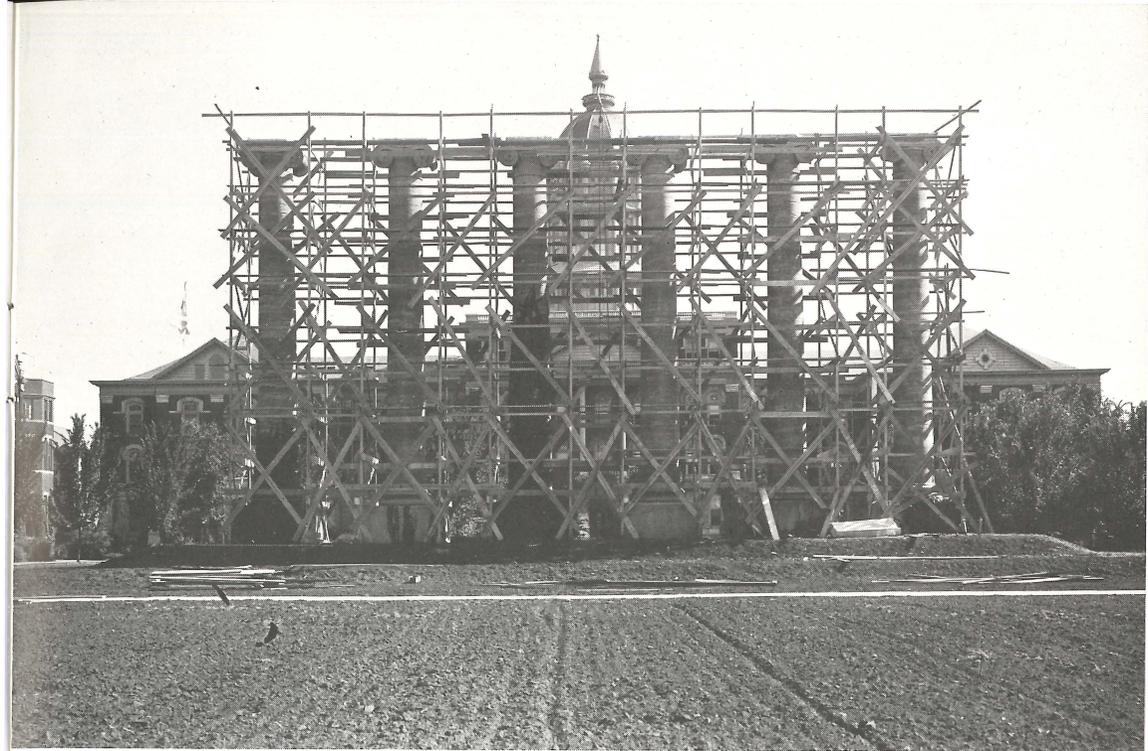
The other favorite was that during the Civil War when federal troops were stationed in Academic Hall, a northern soldier and a confederate sympathizer fought a duel over the hand of a lady fair. Which one was wounded depends on the feelings of the teller, but regardless, the wrong man lost and, in so doing, his blood was spattered on the column, causing ivy never to grow there.

In other years, when the ivy has grown on only one column at a time, this latter story, or a similar one concerning a duel of two students in the 1850's, has been used to explain the one adorned column.

It was in the shadow of the columns that the long-standing and now almost forgotten law-engineering feud had its inception. When the law school was located across from the engineering building in the present sociology building, fights broke out several times each year between the lawyers and the engineers. One side or the other frequently "took possession" of the columns, forcing the other side to valiantly rescue them.

Similar fights and capture-rescue operations have occurred in the more recent agriculture-engineering feud. In 1958, the columns had to be sand-blasted to remove a coat of green paint applied during St. Pat's week.

Pranks involving the columns date back to the building of Academic Hall. In 1842, when the columns were being assembled,



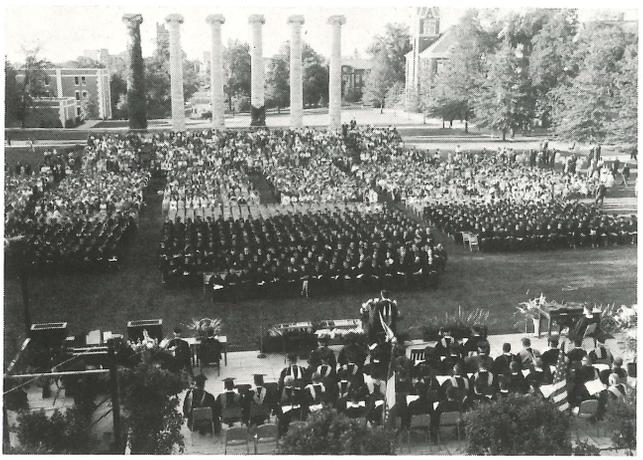
*Loose pieces were removed from the columns in 1937 and weatherproofing was applied to reduce future deterioration.*

*In 1949, the old and decaying bases were chipped away and new reinforced pedestals were constructed.*





*The columns as seen from the roof of Jesse Hall.*



*Summer commencement is held at the foot of the columns.*

*Lighting was added in 1967.*



students borrowed some of the equipment used to put the columns in place to lift an old horse 20 or 30 feet in the air. The horse was left dangling there all night, kicking and pawing furiously.

In the first part of this century, the columns were sometimes used to advertise the annual Farmers Fair. One year the word "FARMER" appeared, one letter at the top of each column. It was necessary to employ steeplejacks to remove the signs which had been placed there by students during the night. Another spring the words "Farmers Fair" appeared on the mound. Agriculture students had planted a different kind of grass seed during the winter and when spring came the difference in the color of the two kinds of grass made the sign on the mound.

Twice in the 1950's, students climbed to the top of the columns for publicity stunts. One was a candidate in the Associated Women Student's "Night Owl" contest who called himself "Perching Paul." He was discovered one morning wearing a long flowing cape with red lining, "perched" on one of the columns. In November of 1959, a student dressed in pajamas climbed to the top of a column to advertise a student production of "Pajama Game." Unfortunately, the weather turned cold and the student spent several uncomfortable hours waiting for the fire department to rescue him.

To most students and alumni, however, the columns are a more solemn symbol of the traditions and meaning of the University. One graduate returned to be married at the base of the columns. Plaster and bronze models of the columns, pins and banners, photographs and paintings, all may be found from Nome to Johannesburg, in homes, offices and schools, in books and on letterheads—anywhere there are Missourians or former students of the University one can probably find a representation of the columns as a reminder of college days. The columns stand today in Francis Quadrangle, commemorating for all future generations the noble structures' history and their place in the hearts of past and present students and faculty.



