

## The 1964 Columbia College Fire

by A Student

On Wednesday, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1964, a fire ravaged the campus of Columbia College. It destroyed two dormitories (Old Main and East Wing) and some classrooms and caused damages estimated up to two million dollars.<sup>1</sup> According to the 1964 President of Columbia College, Richard Wright Spears, no one was killed in the fire. The only injury sustained was a sprained ankle of student Jane Whiticker.<sup>2</sup> The reactions of the students, faculty, and surrounding Columbians show the spirit of Columbia College and the positive effect the college had on the surrounding community. Most of the reactions were as positive as they could be in the face of disaster; the community was filled with the hope and faith that Columbia College would rise again.

After the students had evacuated the burning buildings, a history professor noticed, at first, a feeling of helplessness and despair. But that same professor recounted later that “very quickly there grew a sense of determination that ‘we’re going to overcome

*The introduction succinctly summarizes the event that the paper will discuss.*

*It also clearly states the paper’s thesis.*

*Body paragraphs are (in this case) arranged in chronological order. In another paper they might be arranged thematically, to prove different aspects of the thesis.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Columbia Record*, February 12, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> R. Wright Spears, *One in the Spirit: Ministry for Change in South Carolina*, (Columbia: The R. L. Bryan Company, 1997), 84.

this.”<sup>3</sup> There were many students standing outside in pajamas and hair curlers, holding as many things as they could carry. *The State* newspaper reported, “A few girls carried out guitars. Some held onto bibles. One clutched a Johnny Mathis record. Some hastily filled purses. A few grabbed a handful of cosmetics. One carried a toothbrush.”<sup>4</sup> Yes, they stood and wept as they watched their home and belongings burn, “‘but we are all safe’ they whispered between chattering teeth.”<sup>5</sup> The students knew that “everything’s going to be all right.”<sup>6</sup>

That growing sense of determination described by the history professor was also displayed in an article that appeared in the *Columbia Record*. A student told a man sitting next to her that, “My room was alright one minute.... It was that window there. Then all of a sudden it just fell away from the wall. I could just see everything I had falling into the fire.”<sup>7</sup> The article reports that the girl “sobbed and then looked up again and smiled as though she realized that her being safe was more important than all of the belongings she might have accumulated. The man beside her smiled too.”<sup>8</sup>

After the fire was put out, “Some girls passed among the

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<sup>3</sup> *Columbia Record*, February 11, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> *The State*, February 13, 1964.

<sup>5</sup> *The State*, February 13, 1964.

<sup>6</sup> *The State*, February 13, 1964.

<sup>7</sup> *Columbia Record*, February 12, 1964.

<sup>8</sup> *Columbia Record*, February 12, 1964.

*Student has chosen quotations that add flavor and context (“Johnny Mathis record”) while also advancing the narrative and the thesis.*

*Paper is based on primary sources-- newspapers, memoir, the yearbook--and they are **properly cited**. (Very important!)*

firemen, distributing hot coffee. One helped dress a firemen's cut hand."<sup>9</sup> As the smoke cleared, students began going back into the rubble of their dorms to try to salvage any belongings they could find. Left standing in front of Old Main were four charred columns that would become famous in the history of the college. A senior was staring at them and said, "As long as they stand, Columbia College will stand. We can be thankful that no one was hurt. It looks like something out of Ancient Rome. Columbia College will rise again. You just wait and see."<sup>10</sup>

She was not the only one who saw meaning in the columns. As President Spears surveyed the damage to Old Main he remarked, "I'm glad those columns were saved. They can be our symbol now as we plan rebuilding programs. It means a lot to see those columns standing. It means there is hope if you have faith."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, they stand today as a memory of the tragedy and as proof that Columbia College indeed did "rise again."

The columns inspired *Columbia Record* to write, "They stand today, tall and stretching heavenward; the four pillars of Columbia College. Charred, they stand. But they stand."<sup>12</sup> The same could be said for Columbia College. Even though buildings were destroyed, the people of the College still survived. The

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<sup>9</sup> *The State*, February 13, 1964.

<sup>10</sup> *The State*, February 13, 1964.

<sup>11</sup> *The State*, February 13, 1964.

<sup>12</sup> *The Columbia Record*, February 14, 1964.

*Record* predicted, “the College will soar like the phoenix from the ruins. And there will be thousands of Columbians and Carolinians ready with willing hands to help the bird’s flight.”<sup>13</sup>

The students weren’t the only ones who lost things in the fire. A Dr. J. Milton Arial lost a lifetime of teaching notes, books, and mementoes. But most of all, “he feels the loss, perhaps, of a full and unexpurgated copy of ‘Mort D’ Arthur’ that he had been looking for for years, but had acquired only recently.”<sup>14</sup>

Department head John W. Formo said, as he stood in front of a charred Old Main, “Everything’s gone. All of our slides, our lecture notes, paintings...Everything.”<sup>15</sup> But perhaps the loss that was most depressing and disheartening was felt by Professor Cecil Bierley. President Spears said that one of his saddest memories was seeing the professor staring at the wreckage of the fire. Spears recalls, “He had lost his entire Department of Business, including his office and many personal items. Worse still, the only draft of his doctoral dissertation—and many notes and reference material—were lost! We cried with him.”<sup>16</sup>

Immediately after the fire, Columbia College was ready to rebuild. President Spears’s first move that morning after he realized everyone was safe was to call a meeting of the Columbia

*The paper does not focus single-mindedly on the thesis. This paragraph is “off message,” but it is important to write what the evidence shows and to include evidence that might run counter to the main argument you are making.*

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<sup>13</sup> *The Columbia Record*, February 14, 1964.

<sup>14</sup> *The State*, February 13, 1964.

<sup>15</sup> *The State*, February 13, 1964.

<sup>16</sup> Spears, 89.

College community in the College Place United Methodist Church. There he had a service of thanksgiving and prayer. In his speech he said, “Our minds and spirits will go surging forward as we rebuild our Columbia College...Nothing has happened this night that can’t be rebuilt.”<sup>17</sup> The focus wasn’t on what was destroyed, but rather on what was saved and on ways to continue on. Plans were immediately set in motion for classes to resume on the Monday following the fire. The Board of Trustees “authorized a financial campaign...to secure funds to rebuild facilities lost in the fire.”<sup>18</sup> The Board’s Chairman, T. J. Harrelson, asked President Spears, “Let me, as Board Chairman, and as your friend, Wright, do everything in my power to help rebuild this College!” And he did, even to the extent of “turning over much of his own business affairs to others.”<sup>19</sup> The Board’s reaction to the fire shows great hope and faith in the Columbia College Community. They were not going to let the College be destroyed, either by fire or by financial need.

It could be argued that the reason that there was such a readiness to rebuild the moment the fire happened was because Columbia College had the whole community behind them, ready to help in any way they could. A newspaper article on the day of the fire reports that the Mayor of Columbia, Lester Bates, “believes

*Here is the discussion of the broader community that was promised in the thesis.*

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<sup>17</sup> Spears, 85.

<sup>18</sup> Spears, 85.

<sup>19</sup> Spears, 90.

Columbians will accept the challenge to replace the facilities with even better structures than the ones destroyed.”<sup>20</sup> The Mayor’s prediction was right. According to the *Record*, on the morning of the fire, “Citizens of the area rose from their beds to offer their services—preparing a hot breakfast for the girls, opening the doors to their homes in supernumerary compassion.”<sup>21</sup> But the community’s compassion didn’t stop there. *The State* reported that “Offers of help, clothing, money, places for the displaced students to stay, food and storage space poured in Wednesday morning even before the ashes of the fire had settled.”<sup>22</sup> President Spears recalls offers of help from the Jefferson Hotel, the University of South Carolina, Wofford College, the Orderest Company of Greenville, churches, private homes, and many other institutions. He specifically remembers that “many of the homes in Columbia, and particularly in the Eau Claire community, including those of faculty and staff, provided rooms for the next few months.”<sup>23</sup> The generosity of the surrounding community was felt throughout Columbia College. The paper concluded that after the fire, “The value of the College to the Columbia and Carolina community has been reinforced.”<sup>24</sup>

Another reaction to the fire can be summed up in five

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<sup>20</sup> *Columbia Record*, February 12, 1964.

<sup>21</sup> *Columbia Record*, February 14, 1964.

<sup>22</sup> *The State*, February 13, 1964.

<sup>23</sup> Spears, 87-88.

<sup>24</sup> *Columbia Record*, February 14, 1964.

words: the show must go on! A play had been scheduled by the drama department for the evening of the day after the fire. When tragedy struck, they decided to go on with the show. A sign at the entrance of the theatre explained it all when it said, “We have no ushers. We have no reservations. We have no admission. But we have a show!”<sup>25</sup> The *Columbia Record* reported, “The costume for the leading man in the production was destroyed in the morning’s fire, but a substitute costume was located later today.”<sup>26</sup> This particular reaction to the fire shows again the spirit of the Columbia College community.

In Columbia College’s 1964 yearbook, a section was dedicated to the fire that destroyed numerous buildings on campus. Instead of being melancholy and depressed, it stresses the positive. The section commemorates “the spirit of friendship at a time of distress.” A picture of students gathered after the fire is captioned, “remorse...yet thanksgiving.” Instead of harping on the destruction the students rejoiced that they were alive. In a picture of a car filled with students’ possessions, the caption mentions “the rescued possessions.”<sup>27</sup> It could have said this was all she had left, but the writer wrote “rescued,” stressing the value of what survived. The section continues on, talking about the *indestructibility* of the college as they start to rebuild. It comments that “in the midst of

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<sup>25</sup> Spears, 87.

<sup>26</sup> *Columbia Record*, February 12, 1964.

<sup>27</sup> *The Columbian 1964*, (Columbia, 1964) 13.

her darkest hours, Columbia College's true spirit stood against the test of time."<sup>28</sup> Continued usage of words such as faith, devotion, hope, spirit, thanksgiving, and indestructibility stand as proof of the positive attitudes that permeated Columbia College. Yes, there were "tears for the past," but many students also had "dreams for the future."<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, most of the reactions to the fire were as positive as they could be in the face of disaster. Instead of a time of tragedy, the aftermath of the fire was a time of hope, with everyone involved projecting a willingness to move on and rebuild. Yes, there were some negative reactions, students weeping as they watched their belongings burn. But as time went by, there was a growing "sense of determination that 'we're going to overcome this.'"<sup>30</sup> The 1964 fire was more than just a fire. It redefined the college and community and helped strengthen the bonds that held Columbia College together. It was a major turning point in Columbia College's history, one that proved Columbia College's determination to keep going and to keep fighting no matter what. Looking back to the time of the fire, President Spears says, "That was a time of testing the very fiber, the integrity and the meaning of this Christian College. Fire has a refining element. It offered us challenges for a new beginning. And I believe we rose to those

*Conclusion restates thesis and provides perspective.*

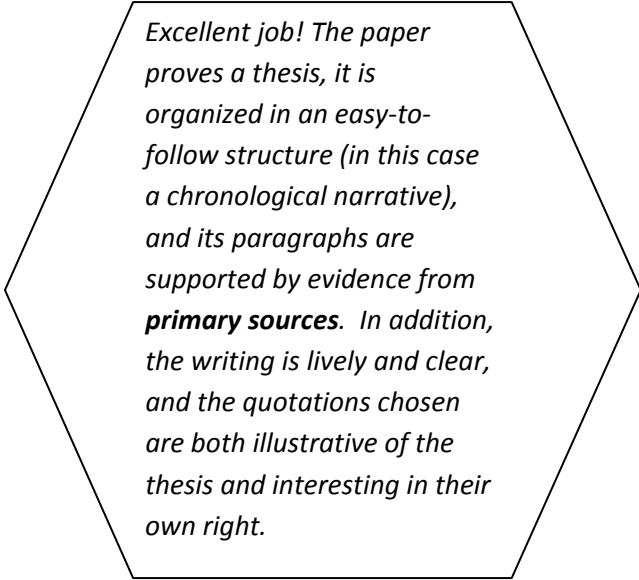
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<sup>28</sup> *The Columbian 1964*, (Columbia, 1964) 14, 20.

<sup>29</sup> *The Columbian 1964*, (Columbia, 1964) 1-21.

<sup>30</sup> *Columbia Record*, February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1984.

challenges.”<sup>31</sup> The 1964 fire of Columbia College proves that while fire can destroy, what is left is sometimes stronger, richer, and better than it was before.



*Excellent job! The paper proves a thesis, it is organized in an easy-to-follow structure (in this case a chronological narrative), and its paragraphs are supported by evidence from **primary sources**. In addition, the writing is lively and clear, and the quotations chosen are both illustrative of the thesis and interesting in their own right.*

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<sup>31</sup> *The State*, February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004.