1764

The Library Burns

"Last night Harvard College, suffered the most ruinous loss it ever met with since its foundation. In the middle of a very tempestuous night, a severe cold storm of snow attended with high wind, we were awaked by the alarm of fire." So began the *Account of the Fire at Harvard-College*, the fire that destroyed the largest library in the colonies. Of about 5,000 volumes, only 404 survived. They were either out on loan or, though received by the Library, had not yet been unpacked.

On the morning of 25 January the Harvard community could not have known that its "ruinous loss" would soon be made good by so generous an outpouring of gifts that by Commencement in 1766 the Library would total 4,350 volumes.

Harvard University - Houghton Library / Harvard University. Harvard Library bulletin. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Library.

An Account of the Fire at *Harvard-College*, in *Cambridge*; with the Loſs ſuſtained thereby.

CAMBRIDGE, JAN. 25. 1764.

LAST night HARVARD COLLEGE, ſuffered the moſt ruinous loſs it ever met with ſince its foundation. In the middle of a very tempeſtuous night, a ſevere cold ſtorm of ſnow attended with high wind, we were awaked by the alarm of fire. *Harvard* Hall, the only one of our ancient buildings which ſtill remained,* and the repoſitory of our moſt valuable treaſures, the public LIBRARY and Philoſophical APPARATUS, was ſeen in flames. As it was a time of vacation, in which the ſtudents were all diſperſed, not a ſingle perſon was left in any of the Colleges, except two or three in that part of *Maſſachuſetts* moſt diſtant from *Harvard*, where the fire could not be perceived till the whole ſurrounding air began to be illuminated by it: When it was diſcovered from the town, it had riſen to a degree of violence that defied all oppoſition. It is conjectured to have begun in a beam under the hearth in the library, where a fire had been kept for the uſe of the General Court, now reſiding and ſitting here, by reaſon of the Small-Pox at Boſton: from thence it burſt out into the Library. The books eaſily ſubmitted to the fury of the flame, which with a rapid and irreſiſtable progreſs made its way into the Apparatus Chamber, and ſpread thro' the whole building. In a very ſhort time, this venerable Monument of the Piety of our Anceſtors was turn'd into an heap of ruins. The other Colleges, *Stoughton*-Hall and *Maſſachuſetts*-Hall, were in the utmoſt hazard of ſharing the ſame fate. The wind driving the flaming cinders directly upon their roofs, they blazed out ſeveral times in different places; nor could they have been ſaved by all the help the Town could afford, had it not been for the aſſiſtance of the Gentlemen of the General Court, among whom his Excellency the Governor was very active; who, notwithſtanding the extreme rigor of the ſeaſon, exerted themſelves in ſupplying the town Engine with water, which they were obliged to fetch at laſt from a diſtance, two of the College pumps being then rendered uſeleſs. Even the new and beautiful *Hollis*-Hall, though it was on the windward ſide, hardly eſcaped. It ſtood ſo near to *Harvard*, that the flames actually ſeized it, and, if they had not been immediately ſuppreſſed, muſt have carried it.

But by the Bleſſing of God on the vigorous efforts of the aſſiſtants, the ruin was confined to *Harvard*-Hall; and there, beſides the deſtruction of the private property of thoſe who had chambers in it, the public loſs is very great; perhaps, irreparable. The Library and the Apparatus, which for many years had been growing, and were now judged to be the beſt furniſhed in *America*, are annihilated. But to give the public a more diſtinct idea of the loſs, we ſhall exhibit a ſummary view of the general contents of each, as far as we can, on a ſudden, recollect them.

Of the LIBRARY.

IT contained—The Holy Scriptures in almoſt all languages, with the moſt valuable Expoſitors and Commentators, ancient and modern:—The whole Library of the late learned Dr. Lightfoot, which at his death he bequeathed to this College, and contained the Targums, Talmuds, Rabbins, Polygot, and other valuable tracts relative to oriental literature, which is taught here: The library of the late eminent Dr. Theophilus Gale:—All the Fathers, Greek and Latin, in their beſt editions.—A great number of tracts in defence of revealed religion, wrote by the moſt maſterly hands, in the laſt and preſent century—Sermons of the moſt celebrated Engliſh divines, both of the eſtabliſhed national church and proteſtant diſſenters:—Tracts upon all the branches of polemic divinity:—The donation of the venerable Society for propagating the Goſpel in foreign parts, conſiſting of a great many volumes of tracts againſt Popery, publiſhed in the Reigns of Charles II. and James II. the Boylean lectures, and other the moſt eſteemed Engliſh ſermons:—A valuable collection of modern theological treatiſes, preſented by the Right Rev. Dr. Sherlock, late Lord Biſhop of London, the Rev. Dr. Hales, F.R.S. and Dr. Wilſon of London:—A vaſt number of philological tracts, containing the rudiments of almoſt all languages, ancient and modern:—The Hebrew, Greek and Roman antiquities.—The Greek and Roman Claſſics, preſented by the late excellent and catholic-ſpirited Biſhop Berkeley; moſt of them the beſt editions:—A large Collection of Hiſtory and biographical tracts, ancient and modern.—Diſſertations on various Political ſubjects—The Tranſactions of the Royal Society, Academy of Sciences in France, Acta Eruditorum, Miſcellanea curioſa, the works of Boyle and Newton, with a great variety of other mathematical and philoſophical treatiſes.—A collection of the moſt approved Medical Authors, chiefly preſented by Mr. James, of the iſland of Jamaica; to which Dr. Mead and other Gentlemen made very conſiderable additions: Alſo Anatomical cuts and two compleat Skeletons of different ſexes. This collection would have been very ſerviceable to a Profeſſor of Phyſic and Anatomy, when the revenues of the College ſhould have been ſufficient to ſubſiſt a gentleman in this character.—A few ancient and valuable Manuſcripts in different languages.—A pair of excellent new Globes of the largeſt ſize, preſented by Andrew Oliver, jun. Eſq:—A variety of Curioſities natural and artificial, both of American and foreign produce.—A font of Greek types (which, as we had not yet a printing-office, was repoſited in the library) preſented by our great benefactor the late worthy Thomas Hollis, Eſq; of London; whoſe picture, as large as the life, and inſtitutions for two Profeſſorſhips and ten Scholarſhips, periſhed in the flames.——Some of the moſt conſiderable additions that had been made of late years to the library, came from other branches of this generous Family.

The library contained above five thouſand volumes, all which were conſumed, except a few books in the hands of the members of the houſe; and two donations, one made by our late honorable Lieutenant Governor Dummer, to the value of 50 l. ſterling; the other of 56 volumes, by the preſent worthy Thomas Hollis, Eſq; F.R.S. of London, to whom we have been annually obliged for valuable additions to our late library: Which donations, being but lately received, had not the proper boxes prepared for them; and ſo eſcaped the general ruin.

As the library records are burnt, no doubt ſome valuable benefactions have been omitted in this account, which was drawn up only by memory.

Of the APPARATUS.

WHEN the late worthy THOMAS HOLLIS, Eſq; of London founded a Profeſſorſhip of Mathematics and Philoſophy in Harvard-College, he ſent a fine Apparatus for Experimental Philoſophy in its ſeveral Branches.

Under the head of *Mechanics*, there were machines for experiments of falling bodies, of the centre of gravity, and of centrifugal forces:—the ſeveral mechanical powers, balances of different ſorts, levers, pullies, axes in peritrochio, wedges, compound engines; with curious models of each in braſs.

In *Hydroſtatics*, very nice balances, jars and bottles of various ſizes fitted with braſs caps, veſſels for proving the grand hydroſtatic Paradox, ſiphons, glaſs models of pumps, hydroſtatic balance, &c.

In *Pneumatics*, there was a number of different tubes for the Torricellian experiment, a large double-barrell'd Air-pump, with a great variety of receivers of different ſizes and ſhapes; ſyringes, exhauſting and condenſing; Barometer, Thermometer;—with many other articles.

In *Optics*, there were ſeveral ſorts of mirrors, concave, convex, cylindric; Lenſes of different foci; inſtruments for proving the fundamental law of refraction; Priſms, with the whole apparatus for the Newtonian theory of light and colors; the camera obſcura, &c

And a variety of inſtruments for miſcellaneous purpoſes.

THE following articles were afterwards ſent us by Mr. Thomas Hollis, Nephew to that generous Gentleman, viz. an Orrery, an armillary Sphere, and a box of Microſcopes; all of exquiſite workmanſhip.

For *Aſtronomy*, we had before been ſupplied with Teleſcopes of different lengths; one of 24 feet; and a braſs Quadrant of 2 feet radius, carrying a Teleſcope of a greater length; which formerly belonged to the celebrated Dr. Halley. We had alſo the moſt uſeful inſtruments for *Dialling*;—and for *Surveying*, a braſs ſemicircle, with plain ſights and magnetic needle. Alſo, a curious teleſcope, with a complete apparatus for taking the difference of Level; lately preſented by Chriſtopher Kilby, Eſq;

Many very valuable additions have of late years been made to this apparatus by ſeveral generous benefactors, whom it would be ingratitude not to commemorate here, as no veſtiges of their donations remain. We are under obligation to mention particularly, the late Sir Peter Warren, Knt. Sir Henry Frankland, Bart. Hon. Jonathan Belcher, Eſq; Lt. Governor of Nova-Scotia; Thomas Hancock, Eſq; James Bowdoin, Eſq. Ezekiel Goldthwait, Eſq; John Hancock, A.M. of Boſton, and Mr. Gilbert Harriſon of London, Merchant. From theſe Gentlemen we received fine reflecting Teleſcopes of different magnifying powers; and adapted to different obſervations; Microſcopes of the ſeveral ſorts now in uſe; Hadley's Quadrant fitted in a new manner; a nice Variation Compaſs, and Dipping needle; with inſtruments for the ſeveral magnetical and electrical experiments—all new, and of excellent workmanſhip.——ALL DESTROYED!

Cambridge, Jan 26. 1764. As the General Aſſembly have this day cheerfully and unanimouſly voted to rebuild *Harvard* Hall, it encourages us to hope, that the LIBRARY and APPARATUS will alſo be repaired by the private munificence of thoſe who wiſh well to *America*, have a regard for New-England, and know the importance of literature to the Church and State.

* *Harvard*-Hall, 42 feet broad, 97 long, and four ſtories high, was founded A. D. 1672.

BOSTON: PRINTED BY R. AND S. DRAPER.

1764.

This broadside announcement of the fire was no doubt widely distributed.

Harvard University - Houghton Library / Harvard University. Harvard Library bulletin. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Library.

1764

The Library Is Rebuilt

Among the donors summoned forth by the fire John Hancock made the largest individual gift; with it 1,300 volumes were purchased. The province of New Hampshire gave funds that made possible the acquisition of 700 volumes, and many colonists, especially Bostonians, gave books or money.

The Library could not have been rebuilt so quickly, however, without numerous benefactors from England and Scotland, for whom Harvard College became the favorite colonial charity. As one of them, Nathaniel Lardner, wrote to Ezra Stiles in turning down a request for books for the Ecclesiastical Library in Newport, "For now the Harvard College is the object of the regard and attention of those who concern themselves for N.E., and in behalf of which we have received importunate requests from several, asking for a supply of books of all sorts and for mathematical instruments, etc."

The greatest donor by far during the eighteenth century was Thomas Hollis, the third Thomas Hollis to support the College and its Library. He had already sent numerous books, many of which survived the fire because they had not yet been unpacked. Hollis had his gifts handsomely bound and ornamented with a variety of emblematic tools, cut especially for him and intended to represent his "republican" tendencies.

The fund that he bequeathed in 1774 is the Library's oldest endowed book fund. It still buys books for Harvard.

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