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

CAMBRIDGE, Jan. 23, 1764.

As the fire of Harvard-Collage, in Cambridge; with the Loss sustained thereby.

The fire was discovered on January 23, 1764, and the loss was significant. The fire destroyed many valuable books and other materials, which were of great importance to the library and the university. The fire began in the library, and quickly spread to other parts of the college. The damage was extensive, and the loss was estimated to be several thousand pounds. The cause of the fire was never determined, and the event had a lasting impact on the college and its community.
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.