

# KENYON ALUMNI BULLETIN



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Published by the Alumni Council in the interest of Kenyon College and its Alumni

GAMBIER, OHIO

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Ernest Ahwajee

Edward Hyman Brout

Albert John Lewis

Martin Elliott Mangel

Jack Boland McDonald

Marc Spencer Peck

George Leon Pincus

Stephen Mahlon Shepard

Colin Macrae Woodworth

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KENYON COLLEGE  
GAMBIER, OHIO

Application for entry as second-class matter is pending.

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Sunday, February 27, 1949 . . .

One of the most persistent legends about Old Kenyon was the story of the fireplaces. Until Sunday, February 27, they were hidden from sight. There was no written record of them. But everyone had heard of them. The four huge chimneys which rose through the center of Middle Kenyon had long been unused—except for one flue which took care of the relatively new fireplace in the old Middle Kenyon Parlor.

On Saturday, February 26, Middle Kenyon men had a fire in that fireplace, a small fire of two logs. By 9 o'clock it had burned down to embers. Someone put some waste paper in it. There was a quick flame which subsided. About 10 o'clock, the Middle Kenyon men began going to bed. Some came in later in the evening, after the Sophomore Dance in Rosse Hall Annex, and brought their dates in for refreshments. By 2:30 the girls and the chaperones had left. Most of the students had gone to their rooms.

Watchman Emerson Billman walked into the east door of Middle Kenyon, walked through the east parlor, saw a few students still sitting in the west parlor, and went upstairs to the third floor. There he punched his Detex time clock at 3:35 a.m. Then he went down to the basement and over to his next station in West Wing. He punched in at 3:40. The last four students who were still up left the parlor at 3:45 and went up through the third floor hall.

By 4 a.m. everyone in Middle Kenyon was in bed. The watchman continued through Hanna Hall and Mather Hall. He punched his clock at 4:10 in Mather, came out on the Middle Path, and looked back toward Old Kenyon. The center hallway, second and third floors, was in flames.

Apparently the fire was discovered first, not by people in the wings or outside the building who could call for help, but by the men on the second and third floors of Middle Kenyon who woke to find themselves choking with smoke. None of the survivors mention flame in their rooms when they awoke. Most of the second and third floor men went to their doors, opened them a crack, felt the blast of heat or flame, and slammed them shut. Then they ran to their windows. Those men whose windows were close enough to the halls managed to jump over to the fire escapes. Others just jumped. Robert Cohn was met with such a blast of fire when he opened the door that he was practically hurled out of the window without realizing that he was jumping. His roommate perished. Only one student came down the flaming third floor staircase. He was Marc Peck. Edward Stansfield found him later very badly burned, on the second floor, and carried him out of Middle Kenyon. Marc died late that afternoon. Edwin Collins jumped to the fire escape, then caught his roommate, who jumped into his arms, and swung him onto the metal platform.



On the next floor down, he saw another student hesitating in a window, told him to jump, and swung him to safety.

Of the 23 students on the third floor of Middle Kenyon, seven are dead, five are seriously injured. Six of the seven dead never got out of the building at all: Ernest Ahwajee, Albert Lewis, Martin Mangel, George Pincus, Stephen Shepard, and Colin Woodworth. Two students, Edward Brout and Jack McDonald, jumped from the second floor, failed to clear the building, and suffered skull fractures. Both died.

Between 4 and 4:10 a number of people outside Middle Kenyon discovered the fire. East and West Wing men began calling the Mount Vernon fire department. Others dragged out the two fire hoses from the basement under the first floor entrances and began playing water into the blazing halls. Another student ran down the hill to the power plant to get the College fire truck. Someone ran up to set off the village fire siren. A student called Mercy Hospital in Mount Vernon, alerted them for emergencies, and asked for ambulances.

Students, volunteer Gambier firemen, and Mount Vernon firemen poured into the burning building, rousing men, helping them out. One man, John McNaughton, who had carried out two students, was thrown against the doorway by the full force of the fire hose as he entered the building to search for other victims. No one got up the east stairway to the third floor, and it is doubtful that anyone

managed to get to the third floor in the center section.

On the first floor there were no casualties. One blind student, Warren Sladky, woke, smelled smoke, heard the shouting outside his door. He deliberated a moment, heard the water rushing through the fire hose, and decided that everything must be well enough under control so that he had time to dress. In a few moments he walked out to safety, leaving his Braille type writer and his ham radio transmitter behind.

Firewalls separated the wings from the blazing center of the building. East and West Wing men had ample time to wake up, do some rescue work, and go back for their possessions before the flames spread along the eaves and down into their Divisions. Some stopped to outfit Middle Kenyon men who stumbled in, choking with smoke and shivering in their pajamas.

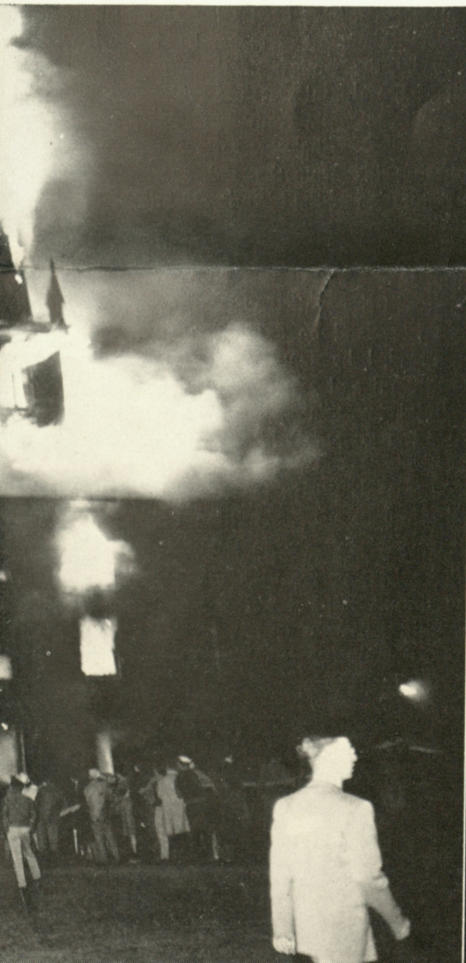
While the fire raged, the Dean's Assistant, William Stiles, began checking room lists. Six men were missing, all from the third floor of Middle Kenyon.

As the dawn came, the scene grew quieter. People looked at each other's drawn, gray faces and said, surprised, "Look, it's getting light." The tower was gone, the bell was gone, the wings were burning and there was no way to save them. The ambulances had gone, loads of volunteer blood donors had gone over to Mercy Hospital, firemen were coiling their soggy hoses. People suddenly realized they were cold,

exhausted, dirty. Then they looked up again at the flaming shell of Old Kenyon, at the heaps of books and clothing outside the Wings, at the strained faces of men who had escaped to fight the fire and save other men—and they realized that their work had only just begun.

As the flames died down on Sunday morning, the cause of the fire was in sight. For the first time in generations, the sixteen fireplaces of Middle Kenyon were visible. The four huge old chimneys, each about 25 feet wide at the base, were honeycombed with fireplaces and flues.

The State Fire Marshal's Office, the National Underwriters Association, the Knox County Sheriff, the Knox County Prosecutor, and Kenyon College investigators began a minute inquiry into the cause of the fire. After examination of the ruins and thorough questioning of countless observers, the investigators agreed unanimously that the fire was caused by sparks which fell back into an old flue, lodged in an opening, and smoldered for several hours between the floors. There may have been an accumulation of dust in the twelve-inch space between the floors. Smoke and gases built up pressure and appear to have burst with almost explosive force into the second and third floors of Middle Kenyon, filling the halls almost instantaneously with smoke and flame. The huge old chimneys were built of rough stone 122 years ago. The lime mortar had deteriorated with age. The investigators agreed that no outside inspection could have ascertained this



condition and that the only way it could have been disclosed prior to the fire would have been to have torn down the entire chimney.

Although the State Fire Marshal's office had never told the College that Old Kenyon was unsafe, and although the U. S. Army had approved the building for use as an Army barracks for 200 men, everyone connected with Kenyon regrets profoundly that the College had not done more. The College had enlarged the water mains, bought a fire truck, put in fire hoses in the basement, installed fire hydrants and extinguishers, added five steel platforms and ladders to the building. Fire authorities agree, however, that a fire which builds up pressure between floors and walls and then bursts into the open is almost impossible to prevent or control, no matter what precautions have been taken or what equipment is available.

The State Fire Marshal, as this *Bulletin* goes to press, is inspecting every College building. Escape ropes and additional fire extinguishers have been provided for other dormitories. Undoubtedly, however, there will have to be alterations in several other buildings on the Hill.

### "an ever stronger going ahead . . ."

There was no question in anyone's mind, even in the somber dawn of February 27, that Old Kenyon would rise again. President Chalmers told the students on Monday evening that Kenyon's spirit was one of "sticking it out and going ahead." In a sense his telling them was only an affirmation of their own faith. In an orderly way, students had sorted out their possessions Sunday, moved into the barracks and guest rooms in Gambier which were immediately offered them, and on Monday had met their classes.

The trustees voted on Saturday, March 5, to restore Old Kenyon immediately and to endeavor to raise at once, from all possible sources, the \$750,000 — \$1,000,000 which may be needed in addition to the insurance payment. The interior of the building will be modern construction and fireproof. The exterior will be a restoration of the original building which has always been a symbol of Kenyon. Insofar as it is feasible, the old stone, quarried from Gambier Hill under the personal supervision of Bishop Chase, will be used in the restoration.

The College is now having preliminary discussions with architects and, as soon as arrangements are completed, accurate estimates of costs will be made and work on the plans will begin.

### "in time of trouble . . ."

In a community like Kenyon, a tragedy like the Old Kenyon fire is a deeply personal grief. Somehow the world outside of the College seems to have sensed this. The telegrams, phone calls, and letters which have poured into the College, literally from every state and from a half dozen foreign countries, have been personal expressions of sympathy. People everywhere, though they might never have seen Old Kenyon or known any of the nine young men who lost their lives, still wanted to help.

Well over \$60,000 has come into the College in the first few days following the fire, without any requests or solicitation. The townspeople of Gambier and the College faculty immediately contributed clothing and an emergency fund of almost \$4,000 for student relief. The Kiwanis Club of Mount Vernon sponsored a relief fund and collected over \$2000 dollars in less than a week. The Mount Vernon Rotary Club raised \$11,600 from its own membership. The Boy Scouts are making a mile of pennies down Mount Vernon's Main Street. Students from Ohio University, Akron University and Indiana Technical College have already raised funds and sent them to Kenyon. A group of machine shop employees in Akron sent in a check. Students of numerous other colleges and many other organizations have fund drives in progress. In Cleveland, alumni groups of nine fraternities from eleven colleges are raising money for the students of Middle Kenyon. The Cleveland Play House, under the sponsorship of the Kiwanis Club of Mount Vernon, is putting on a benefit performance for the restoration fund in Mount Vernon next week.

Kenyon students have begun a spontaneous effort to raise as much money as possible among themselves for the restoration of Old Kenyon. They plan to collect contributions in their home towns during their Spring vacation. The Kenyon Singers have begun a series of benefit concerts in nearby Ohio cities for the restoration fund.

This is only the start, the first expressions of a tremendous determination. There are thousands of people in the United States who know and value Kenyon, who believe with the student editor of the *Collegian*: "When catastrophe strikes a weak victim, the result is usually ruin, but when catastrophe falls on a strong community like Kenyon College . . . the result is never ruin, never a regression, never a failing, but an ever stronger going ahead."

### SECRETARY'S COLUMN

This special edition of the *Alumni Bulletin* has been prepared under great difficulty. During the fifteen days which have now elapsed

since the fire, we have worked incessantly, taking out only time necessary for meals and a few hours sleep each night.

You, the alumni, would be proud of the way Kenyon and Gambier have reacted to this unspeakable tragedy. When I arrived from New York at 9 o'clock Sunday morning to find Old Kenyon still burning, I also found President Chalmers, Dean Bailey, Stu McGowan, Bill Stiles, Assistant to Dean Bailey, and others still in their pajamas with overcoats thrown over them, and I did not see any of them dressed until afternoon. Dean Bailey had been ill when the fire broke out, got up against orders and put in an heroic day on Sunday and was working again on Monday, but was then taken to the hospital where he has since been operated on.

President Chalmers talked personally with the parents of those students who had lost their lives and of those who were injured, with many of them several times. His leadership in the emergency was superb. The whole community, taking its cue from him, has done a really remarkable job. Members of the faculty and their wives have taken turns at Mercy Hospital to be with the injured there and with their parents. The undergraduates have done all manner of things, including orderly duty at the hospital and at the infirmary. The Kenyon Student Relief Committee of students and faculty, was immediately formed with the Chaplain as Chairman, and that committee has seen to it that every victim of the fire has been taken care of. Books and clothes have been replaced, travel expenses for students, and parents in some cases, have been assumed, and a very considerable amount of money has been raised largely by the women of the village.

The spirit of the alumni was first evidenced by an affectionate telegram from A. C. Whitaker, '88, to President Chalmers early Sunday morning offering his sympathy and \$25,000 toward the restoration of the historic old building. From then on messages flooded in by telephone, telegraph and mail offering money and assistance.

Old Kenyon will rise again! The Trustees at a meeting in Cleveland on Saturday the 5th, which was attended by Lou Brereton, President of the Alumni and myself, made the decision to rebuild immediately and to ask for money from all quarters. Architects and engineers have already started to work. Something like \$60,000.00 is already in the fund, but it may take three-quarters of a million dollars after insurance payments, to do the job.

You will be hearing from us regularly. I am sure the alumni will not wait for an "appeal", but will contribute to the restoration fund to the maximum of their ability as quickly as possible. Now is the time.

R.B.B.