

# After the Fire

By Liz Howard Demoran

May 15, 2001, the alarm went out that the UK Administration Building was on fire. Firemen were on the scene in minutes. It was not the typical false alarm. Kentucky American Water Company was called to boost the water pressure in fire hydrants. Wind whipped the flames that started while a construction worker was putting the finishing touches on the copper façade that was part of a recent refurbishing project on the structure. The entire roof was ignited. It collapsed and the fire destroyed the top two floors of the building. Water damaged the first floor and flooded the basement.

As clusters of people stood watching for several hours, smoke would again wisp upward and flames would break out. Also breaking out was the sentiment to rebuild the 119-year-old campus landmark.

Lee T. Todd Jr., who would become president Todd in six weeks, watched the footage on TV. "I said to my wife Patsy, "Oh, Lord, we can't lose this building."

Charles T. Wethington Jr., who was still president at the time and evacuated the building with the rest of the staff, was sharing that same thought with others on the scene. Former president Otis A. Singletary came by. "I had to see it for myself. I spent a good deal of my life in that building. It holds a whole lot of memories for me. A whole lot of good things have taken place inside there."

Vice president for University Relations Joseph T. Burch returned to campus, too, not taking time to change out of his after work jogging clothes, to see his blackened and charred office through the broken window and realizing that 40 years of mementos of his tenure at UK burned up just weeks before his retirement. "It hurts. It's not so much the things," he said, "but what this building means. Every student who has attended the University of Kentucky (since 1882) has some memory of this building even if it is only walking by."

For Burch the memories are deeper than that. He recalls coming to the Administration Building to tell the dean of men he was broke and even as a grown man and veteran, he needed to move into a dorm after all. He left the building as a hired resident advisor and spent the next seven years in a dorm as he earned his undergraduate and law degrees. That began his lifelong career as an employee with the University.

Indeed the building is a landmark. It is one of three structures original to the Lexington campus built in 1882. It was built with a clock tower in the center that rose high above the building and could be seen for miles around. Many a student followed it from the train station to their check-in point inside. The building also had a few face-lifts — the removal of the clock tower, which is presumed to have been a lightning rod in storms, and then removal of the lower cupola base and the addition of a center peak to match those on either end.

If walls could talk you would hear President William K. Patterson addressing the entire faculty and student body in the second floor chapel whose ceiling was two stories above. It was lined in panels of carved wood and was majestically lit by hanging chandeliers. Or, you might overhear the conversation of students chattering about the important issues of the day during lunch in the

cafeteria, checking out books from the library or explaining to the dean of men some breach of etiquette committed.

You would hear that this building has always been about the future so its no surprise that steps toward its restoration began while firemen were on the scene keeping vigil over the hot spots.

Employees from the physical plant department entered the building about four hours after the alarm was sounded and carried out the portraits of UK's past presidents from the boardroom. Wethington then suited up to survey the damage personally and prepare for securing the area and removing several computers. About the same time, members of the information services staff were reporting to work. Overnight they would establish temporary administrative offices on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor of the Patterson Office Tower for the Office of the President, the Office of Legal Counsel whose time would soon be occupied with insurance and restoration matters and others. Space at the King Alumni House, the Hardyman, Mathews, Peterson, Mining and Minerals Resources, Gillis and Law buildings was utilized for the relocation of 16 administrators and their support staffs.

Within a few days the damaged presidential portraits were sent to a professional restoration firm that had done work for the UK Art Museum. Upon rescue, most of the portraits showed varying degrees of water damage, but none were completely destroyed.

Most heavily damaged was the portrait of Frank G. Dickey Sr., president from 1956 to 1963. The waterlogged canvas was wrinkled and the paint chipped away in several places. Painted by a well-known portrait artist named Welsh, Dickey's portrait along with that of long-time director of the UK Alumni Association Helen G. King were catalogued by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The portrait of King hangs in the King Alumni House.

Paperwork was the next object of attention. Again a professional restoration company was called to box up the scorched, soggy files. They were loaded into a freezer truck to suspend the growth of mildew and mold in preparation for the drying out process that would begin under carefully controlled conditions.

The third step taken right away was to protect the building from collapsing on itself. The walls were reinforced with steel to prevent that calamity.

Currently matters of insurance and funding are being sorted out as details of the restoration are being discussed and plans begin to emerge. The final determination has not been made as to just how the restored Administration Building will look. Todd says the comments are running fairly even between restoring the building to how it looked the day of the fire or to its original design with the clock tower.

When can the Administration building be available for use again? "Speed is not the ultimate in this case. If it takes us 18 months or 22 months, it's not that big a deal. I'd like to do it right where we have time to really think about what we need to do, and to get input from people."

During reconfiguration of the interior, Todd wants to include a space that faculty and students can use. "We can't get everyone in like we used to, but I want to bring life back into the building and not just make it for administration only."

In the meantime, you will find the President's Office in the Gillis Building. It has stood next to the Administration Building since 1898. It's named for Ezra Gillis who was the University's registrar for many years, and upon his retirement in 1937 began the task of creating the University Archives.

"It feels like what I think the Administration Building would feel like," says Todd. "It's down on the ground where the students are. It's approachable and much more accessible than the Patterson Office Tower. As soon as it was recommended to him, Todd said, "I knew it just fit."

## What's Your Recommendation?

The UK Board of Trustees gave its stamp of approval to restoring and rebuilding the historic UK Administration Building. But at what point in time should the restoration focus? Share your opinion with us by fax at 859-323-1063, by mail *Kentucky Alumnus*, UK Alumni Association, King Alumni House, Lexington KY 40506-0119, on-line at <http://www.uky.edu/Alumni>, or email [ukalum@uky.edu](mailto:ukalum@uky.edu).

PHOTO A  
Circa 1882:  
Original design  
of Main Building  
as it was known  
with clock tower



PHOTO B  
Circa 1897:  
After removal  
of top portion  
of clock tower



PHOTO C  
Circa 1919 - 2001:  
As the Administration  
Building has looked  
to over 80 percent  
of UK graduates

