

## “Fire!”

*8th in the Keepsakes Series, originally published January 12, 2007*

“Fire!” recognizes the destructive blazes that have occurred at K-State since its founding in 1863. As one can see by looking at the photographs, the fires were spectacular and the importance of all the buildings involved makes their destruction or damage significant events in the history of the university.

The most high-profile fire in K-State’s history involves Nichols Hall, originally known as Nichols Gym. Campus unrest was common in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., the shootings at Kent State University and the burning of the Kansas Union in Lawrence), and the gutting of Nichols by fire, and its subsequent reconstruction, is K-State's most visible reminder of those times. The blaze occurred on Friday the thirteenth, 1968, but it took 17 years for Nichols Gym to rise from its ashes to become Nichols Hall!



**Nichols Hall, 1968**

The fire in Nichols Gym was the result of arson. Although it was believed that those responsible could be identified, there was not enough evidence to bring charges. Housing the departments of military science and music (and two swimming pools!), the fire completely destroyed the interior and contents of the building leaving only the exterior walls. When the university administration recommended razing the structure that was built in 1911, large numbers of students, faculty, alumni, and others, were very demonstrative in their objections, thus, “The Castle

Crusade” began to save Nichols. This version of campus unrest included trips to Topeka by students to meet with the governor, and other officials, on behalf of preserving the building. The remains of Nichols were spared the wrecking ball as the result of everyone’s collective effort. Nonetheless,



**President's House 1886-1895**

funds and plans for rebuilding Nichols remained relatively dormant until the early 1980s when Nichols Hall was constructed to house the departments of computer science and speech communications, theatre and dance, as well as a theater (but no swimming pools!). The dedication of the new structure occurred in 1985. The students’ role in saving Nichols was recognized by the incorporation of the mural “Student Achievement” in the main foyer.

Described in the order in which other fires occurred, the following buildings have been severely damaged or destroyed since 1863.

People are aware of the President's House that is located south of Justin Hall. Completed in 1923, William Jardine (and his wife Effie Lane Jardine) became the first K-State president to reside there. However, the first house built for the president of the college was actually constructed in 1885 during the administration of George Fairchild, K-State's third president! Standing in the approximate location of Holton Hall, it was struck by lightning and burned in April 1895, destroying all of George and Charlotte Fairchild's belongings and personal library



**Holtz Hall, 1900**

Holtz Hall, north of Anderson Hall, was erected in 1876 to house the department of chemistry. A fire in 1900 destroyed the interior and a large cupola and row of windows on the roof. As shown in the photograph, students assisted with fighting the fire and saving the contents of the building. The structure was renovated as a women's gymnasium and served in that capacity until Nichols Gym was completed in 1911. It was not until 1963 that the building was named in honor of Adrian A. Holtz who served as an advisor to students, assistant football coach, professor

of sociology, and secretary of the YMCA during his 36 year tenure. Today the building is home to [Career and Employment Services](#).

Perhaps the most spectacular fire in K-State's history destroyed the building known as Denison Hall, or the old chemistry building, in 1934 (this is not to be confused with the Denison Hall that was located south of Hale Library and razed in 2004). Constructed in 1902 and named for Joseph Denison, the first president of the college, it housed the departments of chemistry and physics. The chemicals in the building fed the flames and caused a pyrotechnics show that reminded onlookers of a volcano (see photograph). Located in the area of Eisenhower Hall, Denison was not rebuilt; however, the building was replaced by Willard Hall in 1939.



**Denison Hall, 1934**



**Burt Hall, 1946**

Burt Hall was completed in 1923 for the college of veterinary medicine and named after James H. Burt who served as head of the department of anatomy for many years. A fire destroyed most of the interior in 1946. The structure was rebuilt and most of the veterinary medicine programs moved to Dykstra Hall when it was completed in 1955.



**Waters Hall, 1957**

Waters Hall, on the quad north of Hale Library, was completed in three stages; the east wing in 1913, west in 1923, and center in 1952. On August 25, 1957, the east wing was destroyed by fire of an unknown origin. Named after Henry J. Waters, the sixth president of K-State, that section of the building was used for agronomy, milling, and animal husbandry. The wing was rebuilt after considerable efforts to raise funds for the reconstruction. Shellenberger Hall was erected to the east in 1960 for feed and milling technology.

Prior to the completion of K-State's first Auditorium in 1904, a chapel in Anderson Hall served as an assembly hall. The new Auditorium, with a seating capacity of 2,000, served K-State for many years but by the late 1950s it proved to be inadequate. On January 15, 1965, a fire of suspicious origin destroyed the structure and its contents that included an organ from the Wareham Theater downtown, band instruments, and musical scores. It was determined that the fire was deliberately set and two arsonists were arrested and convicted. The K-State students were members of a "Burn the Barn" group that had posted signs on campus ridiculing the Auditorium's condition. The building featured an enclosed circular slide on the exterior of the building that served as a fire escape (see photograph)! McCain



**K-State's Auditorium**

Auditorium was constructed in approximately the same location in 1970. In the meantime, the fire in



**Shell of the Auditorium, 1965**

Nichols Gym in 1968 once again destroyed most of the university's musical instruments and related material, which led to the popularity of "The Wabash Cannonball" at K-State because it was the only sheet music available to the band at the next athletic event!

Although not as spectacular or destructive as the other fires, a blaze in Anderson Hall is best known for what could have been. During the early morning hours of August 20, 1993, the tower of the south wing of Anderson Hall was struck by lightning. A student, Craig Goodman, who happened to be working in a nearby building, spotted the flames and quickly reported the fire. Structural damage was kept to a minimum but water damage to the three floors of the south wing was

substantial and amounted to over \$1 million. The strength and time of the lightning strike, along with the composition of a 19th century structure, could have been devastating to Anderson Hall and the university (the fire resulted in numerous lightning rods being placed on the roofs of university buildings). The south wing of Anderson Hall was the last of the three construction phases that completed the building; the north wing in 1879, center in 1882, followed by the south in 1884.

Hopefully, with the advent of modern alarms, sprinkler systems, flame retardant building materials, and fire fighting equipment, there won't be a repeat of the past when numerous fires changed the architectural landscape of the university.

=====

*Sources: University Archives Vertical Files and photograph collection; Kansas State University: A Walk Through Campus (1992), by Emil Fischer.*