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Student killed in fire

Fiji house destroyed by Wednesday blaze

By MIKE ALLEN
Staff Reporter

Washington and Lee sophomore Thomas John Fellin, an honor student and member of the varsity baseball team, was killed Wednesday in a pre-dawn fire which destroyed the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity house.

Fellin, 19, was co-president of the fraternity and co-chairman of the Pennsylvania delegation to the Mock Democratic Convention. He was on the honor roll and was a member of Phi Eta Sigma, the freshman scholastic honor society.

The fire, which was discovered at 4:45 a.m., gutted the three-story building, leaving only the limestone walls and a pile of charred, mangled rubble.

The cause of the blaze, which took three hours to control, has not been determined.

Fellin, whose room was on the second floor at the front of the house, is believed to have been the only occupant of the house. The school was on spring break.

James H. Forte, a law student and counselor to the Fiji frat-

total loss," and estimated the damage at at least \$200,000.

"Because the building's been destroyed, it's going to be very difficult to determine the cause," he said.

He said that five fire trucks and about forty volunteer firefighters, including units from nearby Buena Vista, battled the blaze. The entire force was on the scene shooting water into the smoldering remains of the house until late in the morning.

The victim was pulled from the flaming house at about 5:15 a.m. by David W. Stevens Jr., a W&L senior who has been a Lexington Fire Department volunteer for four years.

Stevens said that Fellin was on a staircase and less than six feet from an exit when he apparently was overcome by smoke and heat and fell.

"We thought there was a person in the house," Stevens said. "I went in to do a search and rescue...his head was on the second stair" from the door of the side exit which faces the adjoining building.

Positive identification of the victim was made by the state medical examiner in Roanoke using dental records.

Fire Chief Irvine said the weight of the water and falling debris weakened the floor joists, causing most of the building's floors and ceilings to fall through to the basement.

He said the construction of the cement-rock house made the fire unusually difficult to fight.

"The stone walls confined the heat so that our men couldn't go inside," he said. "After we got the victim out, we couldn't go back in."

"Also, the slate roof was an extreme hazard," he added. "The falling, sharp edges were very dangerous for the men."



An aerial view shows the wreckage an early morning fire caused at the Phi Gamma Delta house. All three floors collapsed into the basement. More photos on pages 2 and 3. (Photo by Rick Swagler)

Unscorched trees against the front of the house attested to the confinement of the heat, which Stevens said was extraordinarily intense.

A charred fragment of the slate tile could be seen deeply lodged in a wooden railing at the front of the building.

The building Forte was sleeping in, a former house mother's quarters which is connected to the main house by a covered porch, suffered only water and smoke damage.

The contents of one room in the southwest corner of the second floor were salvageable. Firemen could be seen Wednesday afternoon carrying the possessions of senior Carlton Peebles, including stereo speakers and a television, out of the wreckage.

"We were just able to get

enough water in the right place at the right time," Irvine said.

Some items in the kitchen may also be salvageable.

The wooden fire escape on the south side of the building was undamaged. Fire fighters and photographers walked up and down it all day on Wednesday.

One fire truck returned to the scene at 5:45 a.m. on Thursday when from his window a nearby resident saw first smoke and then a flame in the debris.

Irvine said it was not unusual for a large quantity of charred wood to re-ignite.

Members of the fire department worked Thursday and Friday removing debris from the structure, attempting to ascertain the cause of the fire.

Lexington Police Chief L.O. Sutton, who is trained in arson investigation, was on the site to

assist in "determining the cause and origin of the fire."

"I suspect it will be some time before we determine anything conclusive," Sutton said.

The remaining structure will probably have to be torn down because the limestone blocks have been "spalled" — weakened to the point that the walls are unsound.

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TOM FELLIN

...nity who was asleep in an adjoining building, escaped through a window.

Lexington Fire Chief Keith Irvine, an electrician for W&L, said that the building was "a

Service tomorrow

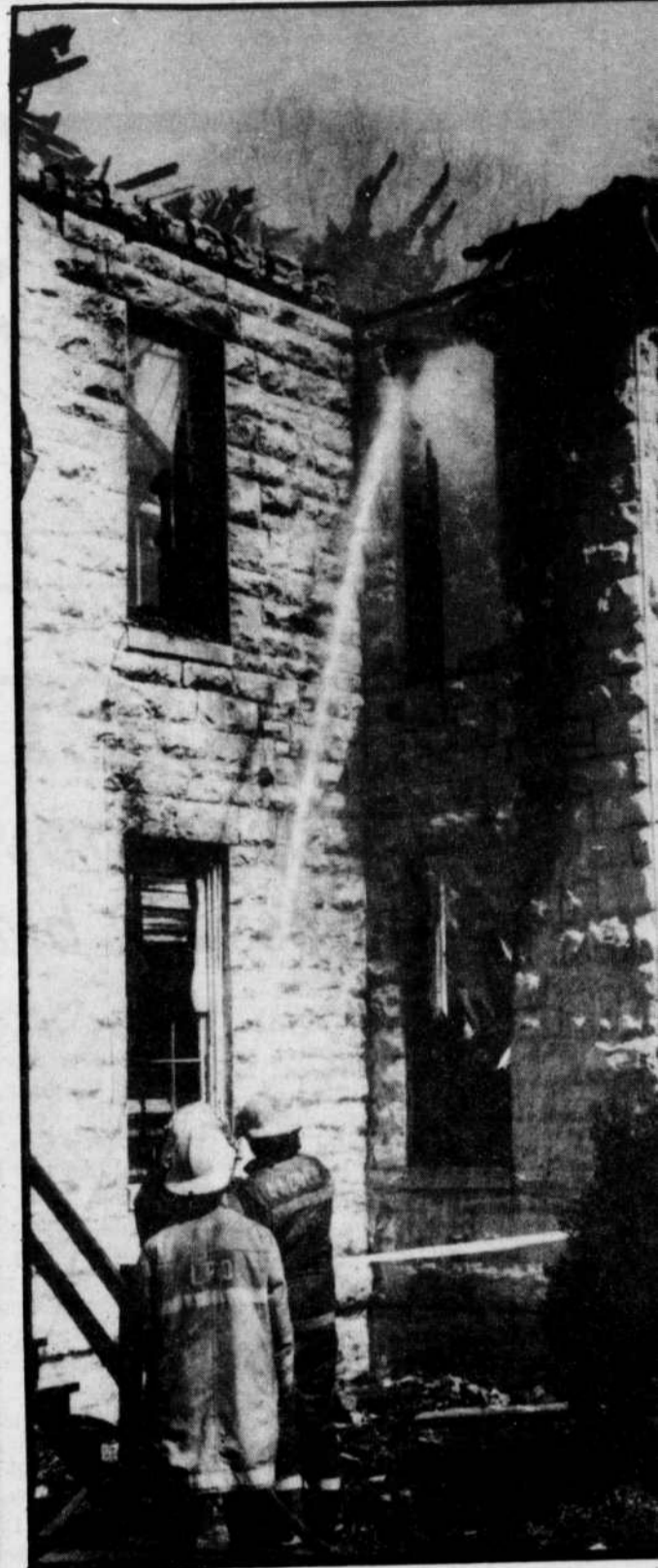
A memorial service for Tom Fellin will be held at 11:40 a.m. tomorrow in Lee Chapel.

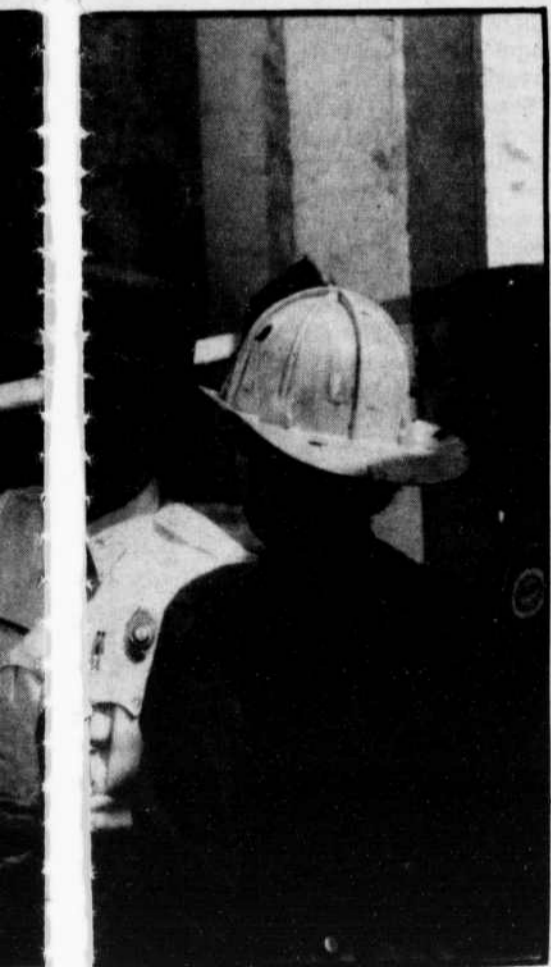
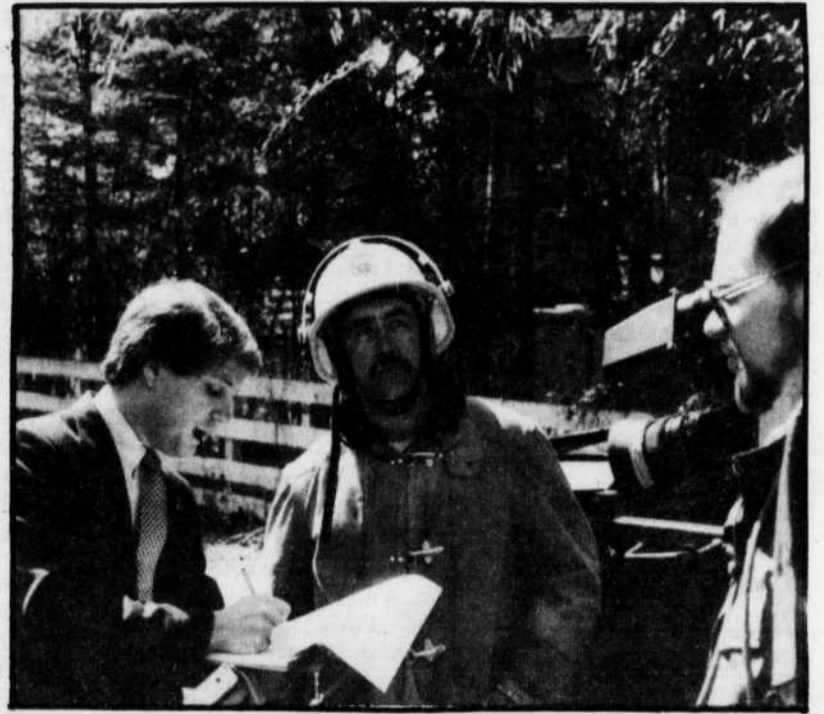
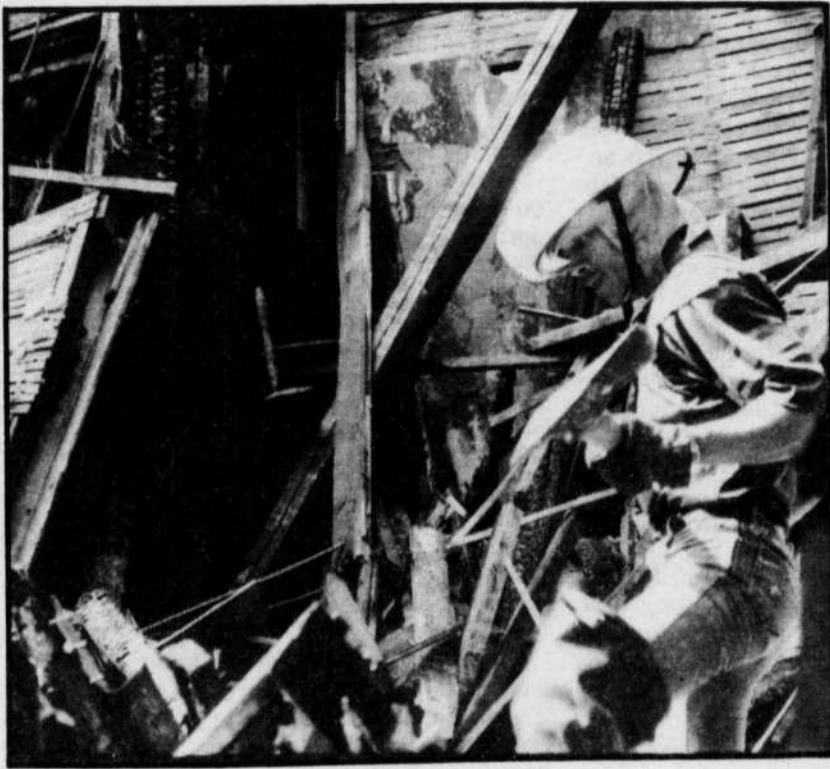
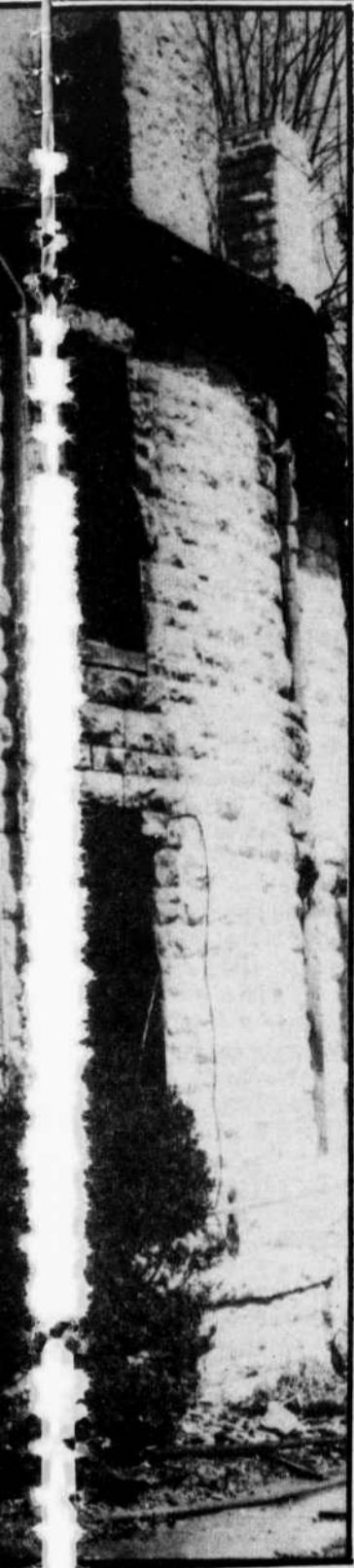
Dean of Students Lewis G. John said that classes will not be cancelled.

University Chaplain David W. Sprunt said the program will be "simple and brief."

Aftermath

Photos by Rick Swagler





'If we go in now, we're going down'

By MIKE ALLEN

At 4:45 Wednesday morning, I was sitting at my typewriter in the corner room of the third floor of the Sig Ep house. For several minutes, I'd heard a banging sound next door at the Fiji house. I didn't pay any attention to it at first, but the crashing noise continued.

It sounded like the racket the trash people make when they empty the dumpster on Fiji's side of our yard. I looked at the clock. It was too early for that.

Eyewitness Account

I went to my side windows and looked out. There wasn't anything going on in our yard. Then I turned to the set of windows which faces our neighbors. The entire back corner of the Fiji house was engulfed in flames.

I grabbed the telephone but couldn't think of the police department's number, which I dial several times every week for stories.

I pushed "O." "How do I

report a fire?" I asked as if I were three years old.

"What city is it in, sir?" the operator asked.

"Lexington, ma'am."

"I'll connect you," she said.

After hanging up, I looked around my room. Only one tree separates our house from Fiji's, and I fully expected that after I left, I wouldn't be coming back.

What's important? What do you take with you? At that point, nothing mattered. I threw on a jacket and grabbed a pad and pen. I didn't even have my wallet.

I dashed down our fire escape. Sixty seconds had passed since I discovered the fire.

As I went down the outside stairs and into the yard, I saw Jim Forte, who had just escaped through his window. "Hey guy!" he said. "Call the fire department."

"I have! Is anybody in the house?" He wasn't sure. There were two cars in the yard. That had to mean there were people. He said one of the cars was his. I looked at the burning house. Somebody might be in there.

I made an initial attempt to go in the back door, which was right next to us, and was immediately choked by the smoke.

Perhaps the car had been left there over break. There was a car in our yard, too, and the person it belonged to was in South Carolina. I knew there was no point in going into the house if it were empty, or if I was just going to get myself killed as well.

"Help me yell," I said to Jim. "I'll go in if we know there's someone in there."

"Fire!" we shouted. "Fire!" And then: "Is there anybody there? Is there anybody there?"

The only reply was the cracking of timbers and the shattering of roof tiles. I tried again to go in the back door. Impossible.

The police arrived. It hadn't been five minutes since I put down the receiver. Sergeant Richard Rice got out of his car and took charge. "Get away from the house," he said.

"There might be someone in there! We have to get them," I said frantically.

"It's too late," he replied. "I want everyone away from the building!"

I mentally cursed the officer. He was the cool professional. I was the terrified kid who thought there might be a human being in there.

Officer Edward Funkhouser

and I went around to the front of the house, shouting and hoping to wake up anybody who might be in the front — there weren't any flames there yet.

The two of us tried unsuccessfully to go in the slightly open front door. The thickest, blackest smoke imaginable was pouring out of the top of it.

I panicked and ran to the back of the house.

"There's someone in there," I shouted impulsively at Sergeant Rice. "We've got to go in."

"If we go in now, we're going down," he said. "If there's someone in there, it's too late to do anything for them. It only takes five seconds for it to go up."

Ignoring him, I went to the front of the house. Officer Funkhouser and I tried again to see if we could get in the front door. There was no way.

"I want everybody back from the building," Sergeant Rice screamed over the officer's walkie-talkie.

We went back around into the yard. Between the houses, we saw the first fire truck arriving out front.

When there was nothing we could do for anyone in Fiji, I went back into our house, which

hadn't been in danger, to get my fraternity brother who was on the second floor. He'd been awakened by the noise.

"Is there anyone else in the house?" I asked. We were both certain there wasn't.

I went back and stood in Fiji's front yard. After a few minutes, I watched Dave Stevens bring the victim out of the house.

Moments later, I saw Sergeant Rice standing next to the body on the front lawn.

"If we'd gone in, we might have saved him," I said accusingly.

We couldn't have, of course — the exit the trapped victim could use had been consumed by flames when I first saw the fire. I just wanted someone to yell at. Desperate people do stupid things.

"You know what would have happened if you'd gone in that building?" the sergeant said. "In 15 seconds, you would have been overcome by smoke."

"It's an extremely dangerous thing to enter a burning building. Most of the time, you don't come out. We tried to go in, but we couldn't."

"It's a tragedy," he said as we stood there watching the house burn. "It's a tragedy."

Fire

(continued from page 1)

"I think it will have to be razed," Irvine said.

Early Wednesday morning, professors, students and administrators gathered in the residential neighborhood beginning shortly after the first fire truck arrived.

Witnesses who viewed the blaze in its initial stages said that it appeared to have started on the first or second floor in the southeast corner of the building.

Earl Poindexter, a W&L security guard and member of the rescue squad, said that shortly before 5 a.m. he could see the flames from in front of Washington Hall on the Colonnade.

The baseball team, for which Fellin was an outfielder, returned shortly after midnight Wednesday morning from playing Virginia Wesleyan College in Norfolk.

Most of Fellin's teammates learned of his death when they gathered for their regular team breakfast at 9:30 a.m. at the Kappa Sigma house.

"Some of the guys had already heard, but the majority were told at breakfast," head coach James W. Murdock said.

Fellin's number 27 jersey will be retired. "We all decided on that," Murdock said. "It wasn't just my decision — it was a team decision."

The team attended the Satur-

day funeral at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church in Fellin's hometown of Weston, Pa., which is in the eastern part of the state near Wilkes-Barre.

The coach said Wednesday that Fellin had improved dramatically this season, and that he would have played quite a bit this spring.

"Tommy has always been hard-working and a tremendous student," said Murdock, who said Fellin's grade point average approached 4.0.

"He was never complacent with his performance, and was always trying to improve himself," he continued. "He proved that this year by moving from J.V. to the varsity team as a sophomore."

"He was continuously trying to better himself both athletically and scholastically."

"He was respected by myself and the team. He was well-liked, but not overly outgoing. Tommy was trusting, loyal and a very dependable friend."

"You can't say anything bad about the kid," said Captain Buddy Keller, who taught Fellin in military science for two semesters this year. "If he didn't get 100, he'd get a 99, no matter what you asked him."

Richard B. Sessoms, director of alumni programs for the university and Fiji's chapter adviser, and Dan N. Nolen, associate dean of students for fraternity affairs, represented the school at the funeral.

Sessoms said that Fellin

played a key role in the reorganization of Fiji this year.

"He and Alex Castelli have been co-presidents," he said. "When the Alumni Board of Control stepped in to try to assist Phi Gam with the situation last fall, they appointed a cabinet of leaders."

"Tommy and Alex, who were close friends and roommates, were regarded by people in the house as natural leaders for the future."

Fellin told The Ring-tum Phi in January that the reorganization had been very successful.

"Everyone is showing a lot of enthusiasm and there is a big group effort in everything we do," he said. "I think we spent more time on Christmas decorations than any other house on campus."

"He was a strong student and had good leadership skills," Sessoms said. "He was a quiet person. His was a quiet, very effective means of leadership. It was leadership through example."

"I felt like I knew him as well as anybody could possibly know him," said the adviser, who lives diagonally across Jackson Avenue from the fraternity.

"He was very highly articulate. He didn't do a lot of talking, but when he did talk, he really said something. That's a rare trait."

On Wednesday morning, News Office Director Jeffery G. Hanna reached University President John D. Wilson, who

was traveling on business at West Virginia University in Morgantown.

"Words cannot express my personal sadness," President Wilson said in a statement. "This is simply a terrible tragedy. This community has suffered a tremendous loss."

"I feel deeply for Tom Fellin's family. My thoughts and my prayers are with them. I know I speak for everyone connected with the university in expressing our grief over this tragedy."

Dean of Students Lewis G. John notified Fellin's parents



FELLIN

Wednesday morning. He said he spoke with both his father and his mother, who were last in Lexington during Parents' Weekend this fall.

Dean John said that smoke detectors are required on each floor of the fraternity houses.

The fraternities complete monthly inspection sheets of fire safety equipment. The last completed sheet for Phi Gamma Delta is dated April 2.

Dean Murphy said that he and Sessoms were notifying the members of the fraternity.

He said that most of the 12 students who lived in the house will be put in Baker Dormitory. Some may be put in Woods Creek Apartments.

Sessoms said Thursday that nearly all of the fraternity members had been contacted. He said the reaction was generally "stunned silence and shock to hear that such a tragedy had occurred."

He said a field representative of the national fraternity, which is based in Lexington, Ky., will be in town when students return on Sunday.

Sessoms said the house is fully insured. He said the coverage was recently increased to \$385,000.

University Treasurer E. Stewart Epley said the school does not own the house or the land. Fiji is one of only six fraternities in which that is the case.

He said a portion of the insurance money will go to the university because it has two loans to the fraternity still outstanding.

The Zeta Deuteron chapter of Phi Gamma Delta was established at W&L in 1868, 116 years ago. It is the sixth oldest fraternity on campus.