

Fire 50 years ago gutted former HHS, changed HCC forever

By Chris Yurko

The alarm sounded at 1:25 p.m. on a frigid Thursday. Black clouds erupted from the rooftop, rising into the steel gray sky.

Holyoke Community College was burning.

Within minutes, flames jumped through the attic windows and fire soon engulfed the upper floors of the main college building. Six hours later, despite the efforts of nearly 200 firefighters, the blaze had essentially destroyed the 68-year-old downtown landmark on Sargeant Street, the longtime home of Holyoke High School, on the hill where the Holyoke Senior Center now stands.

"The Holyoke Fire Department found it extremely difficult to fight the fire in the bitterly cold weather," retired HCC history professor George Ashley wrote in his 2005 book, "History of Holyoke Community College, Volume I: 1946-1975," "but many of the students and faculty stood around in the cold all afternoon and watched the building burn to the ground. By nightfall, the site was a grotto formed by the exterior walls of the former building, which were now filled only with rubble and enormous mounds of ice."

That was 50 years ago this month, on Jan. 4, 1968. Some might remember the date if not the day; many have probably never heard the story before, about how the great fire forever altered the history of HCC and how the Holyoke community saved the college from an uncertain future.

The college, founded in 1946 as Holyoke Junior College, had moved into the former high school building just four months before, after completing \$1.5 million in renovations to that facility and an annex across the street. At the time, the college had 1,561 students and more than 60 full-time teachers. According to news reports from the day, there were about 500 students and faculty in the building when the fire started, the cause later attributed to a faulty ventilation fan in the attic.

Everyone got out safely, though one firefighter was hospitalized after suffering



Photos from the HCC Archives

Firefighters try to contain the blaze that destroyed the Holyoke Community College building on Jan. 4, 1968.

a heart attack.

According to Ashley, a few staff and students were able to save most of academic records from offices on the lower floors "as fire raged above them," but many professors lost their personal libraries, collections and doctoral dissertations.

"Almost everyone who witnessed the event was overcome by a combination of horror and despair," wrote Ashley.

The charred remains of many college records, including papers belonging to George Frost, HCC's first president, are maintained today in the archive of the HCC Library in the Donahue Building.

That January, with a week to go in the college semester and finals yet to come, the Holyoke community rallied to find space and equipment so classes could continue. "While the fire was still burning," Ashley wrote, the city arranged for the former Elmwood School to be reopened, and "offers of both space and equipment poured in from local churches and colleges."

The following Monday, Jan. 8, the college held an assembly in the auditorium at Mountain Park to let students know where their classes and exams would be held. About 1,500 students showed up.

At the meeting, according to Ashley, Frost said then that the school would



An empty shell is all that remained after a fire gutted Holyoke Community College's main academic and office building in downtown Holyoke 50 years ago.

be rebuilt: "We will have to start from scratch ... and we will start now."

However, there was great fear in the community that, rather than rebuild the college in Holyoke, state education officials would prefer to merge HCC with the newly created technical community college in Springfield, STCC.

To preempt that effort, Frost and Holyoke Mayor William Taupier launched a campaign to keep the college in Holyoke, joining with business, education and civic leaders under the name "Friends of Holyoke Community College."

The day after the fire, in fact, Taupier, on behalf of the city, optioned a parcel of land, a former dairy farm in a hollow off Homestead Avenue, where a campus could be built.

An advertisement in the Jan. 9, 1968, edition of the Holyoke Daily Transcript Telegram, placed by Taupier and the Holyoke Board of Alderman, urged residents to write to the governor and the chairman of the state Board of Regional Colleges, urging them to support rebuilding the college in Holyoke.

"It would be a serious loss for our community, and our young people," the ad said. "Speak up. Let it be known that we cherish and are very proud of this home-grown community college."

Speak up they did, and, with support from some important state offi-

cial names should be familiar — Maurice A. Donahue, then president of the state Senate; and Holyoke native David Bartley, a 1954 graduate and then-majority leader of the state House of Representatives, who would succeed Frost as HCC president — a \$1.1 million bill for site development of a new Holyoke Community College was approved in May 1968 and later signed by Gov. John Volpe.

"The money will be used to develop a site for the college on the Sheehan property off Homestead Ave. as a campus-type facility to replace the old Holyoke High School, destroyed by fire earlier this year," a news report said.

For the next six years, however, HCC would operate out of a hodgepodge of buildings and disparate classrooms all around the city.

"It was a nightmare," said Ashley, who had started teaching for HCC nine months after the fire. After those tumultuous years, he said during a 2011 interview, the new campus, when it opened in 1974, seemed like "Disneyland."

Jan. 4, 1968, proved to be a pivotal day, not only in the history of HCC but for the city as well, current college President Christina Royal noted in her inaugural address on Nov. 3, 2017.

"The passion and pride the community felt for Holyoke Community College is why we are in this room, and on this land today, the site of what was once the Sheehan dairy farm," she said. "Other two-year colleges had been established in the commonwealth, but ours was the first, and its roots, its history, its mission, engendered a fierce loyalty in the community we serve."

The lessons learned have served the college well.

"The fire demonstrated our collective spirit of steadfastness, resiliency and transformation," Royal said, "and our rise from the ashes to reinvent ourselves, stronger (and with fireproof buildings), all the while demonstrating perseverance for the sake of our students and communities."

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