

The Midnight Fire

by Sean Flynt

Institutions often commemorate the happiest moments of their history, but the saddest can be among the most inspiring and revealing of character. Samford, founded as Howard College in 1841, certainly had its share of the latter. Within 50 years of its founding in Marion, it endured the Civil War, conversion to a Confederate military hospital, temporary confiscation by Federal troops, bitter denominational relations, racial violence, the forced public auction of its property to pay its debts and the ill will attending the college's relocation to Birmingham.

This fall marks the 150th anniversary of one the most spectacular and tragic events of Samford's early history—the midnight fire of 1854, which destroyed the college's only building and claimed three lives.

HEROES

The fire started not long before midnight on October 15 in the four-story, multi-purpose building and quickly spread up its stairs “as up the flue of a chimney,” as one contemporary account recorded.

As the fire grew, someone roused Harry, a 23-year-old slave who served as the college's janitor and handyman, owned by Howard president Henry Talbird. Warned to save himself, Harry is said to have replied, “I must wake the boys first.”

Harry then worked his way through the fire from the ground floor to the fourth, raising the alarm as he went. With the stairs finally blocked by the flames, most of the building's occupants, including Harry, jumped from the upper windows, preferring the fall to the fire.

At least one student escaped with the help of an unnamed slave on the ground, who leaned a long plank of wood against the building beneath a third

story window and lowered the student 25 feet to the ground. At least four more students and tutor Richard Montague were saved when a Marion resident arrived with a ladder. When student Anderson Talbert was not accounted for among the rescued, “three noble spirits”—Noah K. Davis, Augustus Stollenwerk and a Mr. Washburn—reentered the building and brought him out unconscious but alive.

The people of Marion cared for Howard's many casualties, but three men—one each from among the college's staff, students and faculty—died as a result of the fire. Harry was injured in his fall from the fourth floor of the burning building and died the next day. Talbert died of his injuries a few days later. Montague died years later as a result of the lung damage he suffered that night. As for the physical resources of the college, one contemporary account recorded that “all was lost save faith in God and love for His cause.”

SURVIVORS

Survivors credited Harry with the night's greatest courage, buried him in the White cemetery in Marion and raised funds to erect a large marble obelisk there in his memory. But Harry's story shouldn't end here, because it raises so many important questions. Did Harry, who was not free to make the most basic decisions about his life, really believe he had a choice that night? Did the survivors of the fire honor him as a model of Christian self-sacrifice or merely as a model slave whose duty was to die to protect those who enslaved him? What was Howard College's role in slavery, and how did its well-educated, devout Christian supporters defend the practice?



The historical record, notwithstanding its many flaws, suggests multiple answers for each of these questions, and could inform an important, community-wide dialogue. But the result of Harry's actions is not in dispute. Whatever his motivation, he did

save many of Howard College's students that night. By doing so, he also may have saved the college itself, because if the students had perished along with the building, Howard's supporters might not have summoned the will or resources to start over.

Samford University still maintains Harry's grave in Marion and remembers him with a plaque on Centennial Walk, an image on the University Mace and in the name of Harry's Coffeeshouse, a popular campus meeting place. Most of the other heroes of the midnight fire are all but forgotten. But Samford will remember them, too, in an October 15 service of thanksgiving for their acts, and for the spirit of courage, faith and hope that rebuilt Howard College after the fire and has sustained this community through so many other troubled times. ■

Above: The Marion gravesight of Harry, the slave who awoke Howard College students and faculty, saving them from the fire of Oct. 15, 1854.

Below: Howard College replaced its original building destroyed by fire with this structure nearby.

