

## **A page in time: December 2, 1903 – Fire ravages the University of Ottawa’s main building**

**By Michel Prévost, University of Ottawa chief archivist**

On December 2, 1903, a devastating fire disrupted the peaceful life of the University of Ottawa. Flames swept through the main building, reducing it to ashes and causing three fatalities. The exact cause of the fire is still a mystery, but it is known to have started in the Academic Hall, where a play had been presented the previous evening. Some have suggested an unattended or forgotten cigarette may have caused the disaster, but this theory was never proven.

The Oblates, who had run the institution since it was established in 1848, worked quickly to save the academic year. A temporary building, nicknamed “the henhouse,” was put up to house the students. The science building, today Academic Hall, became the University’s new main building, in which all classes were held. The University’s museum was converted so that it could house the priests, and the basement was used to house the new chapel and recreation hall.

Far from admitting defeat, the administration decided to rebuild on the same site. The rector at the time, Father Joseph-Édouard Émery, wanted a more majestic building this time. And so, he called upon American architect A. O. Von Herbulis to complete the task.

Tabaret Hall, sitting partially on the site of the building destroyed by fire at the beginning of the last century, is today the signature building of the University of Ottawa.