Sunday 26 Oct. 1875.

My dear Mammy,

I write to let you know of a most fearful calamity which has befallen the dear old University. This morning I heard cries of fire and found that the Annex was in flames. Everyone was running to the Rotunda and soon a large crowd was assembled. No water could be gotten as high as the flames, only a miserable little stream of water about six feet in length came from the hose when at the level of the ground. In response to telegrams, Lynchburg and Richmond sent their engines by special trains, but the Lynchburg engine was delayed on the road and did not arrive within an hour of the expected time. I received a telegram from Richmond when the fire had been almost put out and wired back not to send the engine. There was nothing to do but to try to keep the fire from Buchanan's and Judah's houses and to save all that was within the Rotunda and Annex. They tried to throw up the porticos between the Annex and the Rotunda in the hope that, if the engine should arrive in time, the two Rotundas might be saved. But all to no purpose. Soon the flames had gained possession of the Rotundas and nothing is now left standing but the bare and ruined walls. The boys worked like fiends to save all that was
possible. But estimates that only 1/6 of the books
was sand, but he is wrong — in my opinion at
least 1/2 or even more were sand. The Austin Collection was
lost entirely. The statue of Jefferson, Mr. Bick's best,
the pictures were saved in fairly good condition.
The School of Letters was lost. Uncle Franklin's valuable
physical apparatus was carried out but the greater
part so broken as to be practically useless.
Only $5,000 insurance will, no where near cover
the loss. It is estimated that $5,000 will scarcely
rebuild the rotunda and annexes; to say nothing
of loss in books and instruments. No change in
lectures which will continue as usual; the classes
meeting in Wash Hall, Temperance Hall, Museum
and Professors' offices. Papa is back in his old
home — S. W. I. where the chairman's office will be.
Papa is so busy that he cannot write to you to
night and total me to let you know of the loss.
And so exhausted myself that I cannot write much.
The Professors are taking it bravely — not lamenting
the past but making plans for the future.

You can imagine how distressed everyone is.
I myself, now that the excitement has worn
off, am getting more and more miserable
eye minute and I can't express how to you
my sorrow. I love this old University with all
my heart and if I were comparatively young
and so grieved what must be the distress of those
old professors who have worked for the university
so long and lectured so often within those
now ruined walls! What a number of blows have
struck this University within the year you have been
away! Misfortune after misfortune has crippled
its usefulness and now that this crowning glory of
the University, this building planned and built by
Jefferson, this splendid library, our so famous copy
of the school of Athens, the dear old clock that
never kept time, should be destroyed seems to me
to be the crowning evil and the worst that
this Nemesis who pursues us could let fall on
our heads. Horrible! horrible! horrible! The thing
gets worse the more I think about it. However,
lamentations do no good. We can only depend
on state aid and the generosity of our alumni.
Have just opened a telegram from Geo. Anderson of
Pensacola saying that he wanted to start a
subscription immediately. Telegrams of sympathy
come from all sides. O’Ferral seems especially
interested. That is a good sign that the state will help
us. Since taking a cheerful view of the situation,
say that in the end it will benefit the U.Va. by
bringing her more before the people. Cannot offer
any opinion on that subject. Thank you very much
for that beautiful pair of gloves and more especially for
thinking of me and of my 70th anniversary. Need
intended to write you a special letter of thanks to Clay
but am too tired and miserable. Love to the children
and yourself. Excuse hasty scribble, I believe
you aff. son - John J. Hibernia