



# 'Embarrassing' sprinklers save Calhoun house

By Dot Robertson  
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**CLEMSON** — An antiquated sprinkler system, so old and obtrusive that one Clemson University official had called it an embarrassment, came to life during a fire early Monday and saved Fort Hill, the historic John C. Calhoun home on the Clemson campus, from severe structural damage or destruction.

"That sprinkler system has been there at least 20 years, or even more," said Michael Kohl, head of the university's special collections.

"Just last week I was having dinner with a conservator from Colonial Williamsburg who had come to survey the Calhoun house and its furnishings," Kohl said, and the sprinklers had been a topic of discussion.

"When you are showing someone through the house and talking about life in that period, and there on the ceiling are all those old pipes, it's sort of embarrassing," said Kohl.

But, he added, "Without those sprinklers, the house could have been destroyed."

The fire, which University officials said appeared to have been deliberately set, damaged two outside walls of the early-19th century house, blew out a window of the parlor and ignited the

room's red velvet draperies, which then fell over an antique grand piano that had been a wedding gift to Calhoun's daughter Anna Maria when she married Thomas Green Clemson.

Restored to playable condition only last March, the piano was seriously damaged by heat and water. A repair specialist from Spartanburg came Monday and removed the instrument's mechanism to dry it out before assessing the damage.

Also speckled by heat and drenched with rusty water from the sprinkler were furnishings that had belonged to the Calhoun and Clemson families, paintings, both historically and artistically valuable, of family members, a carpet that was a replica of the original, and family sheet music that was on the piano.

The paintings were removed to the library's special collections rooms to await repair. Furniture and carpeting were being dried by fans. The sheet music was being kept frozen until it could be sent to restorationists in Columbia.

The fire was linked by officials to another which burned an apartment house in the old Calhoun community north of the railroad in Clemson, leaving one victim dead.

The apartment house fire was reported to the Clemson Fire



Michael Cole, left, Clemson archivist, and Alan Williams inspect fire-damaged piano ... The 1838 piano was given to Maria Calhoun on her wedding to Thomas Green Clemson

Department at 2:51 a.m., said Catherine Sams, Clemson University's director of news services. The activation of the sprinklers at the Calhoun house set off an alarm at the fire station six minutes later, at 2:57.

Because firefighters were already on their way to the apartment house fire, only one fireman was left to answer the Calhoun house call, Fort Hill's official hostess Ann Russell said. His response was immediate, but the sprinklers had largely doused the flames. Only a section of weatherboarding at the rear of the house had to be torn away to expose a smoldering

timber.

Ms. Sams pointed out a trail of soot along an outside walkway where three jugs of flammable liquid, thought to be gasoline, had been placed by the arsonists. Two were set near outside walls and a third out the walk toward the small rear house to which Calhoun liked to retreat from a somewhat tumultuous family life.

A trail of spilled liquid between the jugs apparently acted as a fuse, setting off one container and then another.

John C. Calhoun, born in Abbeville County in 1782, served in Congress, as secretary of state

and as vice president of the United States.

His marriage to his cousin Floride Colhoun of Charleston did not endear him to Upstate kin and supporters. But the couple lived on the 1,100 acre plantation, in the 14-room mansion called Fort Hill, from 1825 until his death in 1850. Through a donation by his son-in-law, Thomas Clemson, the land became the site of Clemson University in 1888.

Ann Russell, surveying the smoke and water damage in the house Monday, said pensively, "We really have a treasure here. And to think we almost lost it..."