

Mrs. Polk's description of Sewanee cabin arson, 1861

Source: Loose items, Polk Family Papers, University Archives, University of the South.

F. [Frances] D. Polk to [sister] "My dear Susan" 16 April 1861

My dear Susan,

On the night of Friday the 12th our house was destroyed by fire with its entire contents -- only part of the Bishop's private papers, a basket of the silver in daily use, & a few other things were saved. I was alone with Sally, Lilly, & Lucia only with me. I was aroused by the roaring of the flames, & had only time to rouse the servant men who were in imminent danger, then the girls who were farthest off, & then get out these few things. The roof was on fire over our heads when we awoke, & in less than fifteen minutes fell in. It was God's providence we did not perish.

The fire was evidently the work of an incendiary as Bishop Elliott's house was on fire even before ours, & that was closed[,] the family having left for Savanna[h]. We have lost all our clothing but one or two dresses & the clean clothes which fortunately were at the Laundry -- no shoes -- or any thing of that sort saved, but we have our lives.

I think it was the work of some abolitionist. The Bishop is in the interior of La. & will not I presume be up till after his Convention May 1st[,] for he cannot hear of this in time to come before. I am at the house of a friend on the Mountain. Lucius & Rebecca have both kindly written & asked us to come to them. I think it probable we shall accept Rebecca's offer. But the Bishop must decide.

Your affectionate sister,

F. D. Polk

A roughly 2" square was cut from the document near its center. Ink marks on the remaining surface indicate that the cutting removed an area that included some writing.