

DIGITAL HUMANITIES – SPRING 2018

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Fire Inspires New Location for Cortland Normal School

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Cortland Normal School before the fire of 1919, which ultimately burned it down.

The Cortland Normal School began in 1868. For the first 50 years the main building resided in the middle of the town until one unfortunate morning in late February 1919. Mere days before Cortland Normal School's 50th anniversary, on February 27th 1919, the building caught on fire. The caretaker discovered the fire at 6:15 A.M., but it was already spreading throughout the school. An article published by the *Cortland Standard* days after the fire detailed how the fire may not have enveloped the entire school had the fire protections extended above the third floor. Sadly, the entire contents of the building burned to the ground and what was

left barely resembled its original form. The walls of the building remained standing as a memorial to what once was. The origins of the fire are still unknown, but it may have been caused by an oily rag, or a similar substance spontaneously combusting. Visitors captured the results of the fire after the school was destroyed.



Photograph Post-Fire 1919



Photo Taken for Cortland Standard, Feb 28 1919

Luckily for the Normal School, and the town of Cortland, the building was insured for \$162,000. Principal DeGroat was not in Cortland at the time of the blaze, but heralded it as an opportunity for relocation, and expansion. DeGroat had dreamed of creating a new building for some time, and considered it fortunate that he was not present for the 1919 fire lest people would suspect his involvement.



An Early Morning Blaze Burns Historic Institute to Ground—Origin Unknown—Damage \$150,000

Plans came together quickly for continuation of classes at alternative locations until a new building could be constructed. Students enrolled in the Normal School at the time of the fire resumed their studies at the local Y.M.C.A., Grace Church Parish House, the Conservatory of Music, First Congregational Church, First Presbyterian Church, Central Fire Station, Franklin Hatch Library, C.C. Wickwire Building, St. Mary's Parish Hall, and the First Baptist Church. For further information on the fire, check out the original Cortland Standard Newspaper articles on [Fulton History](#).

Research and Images all courtesy of SUNY Cortland College Archive.



Cortland Standard, March 3rd, 1919