

DIGITAL HUMANITIES – SPRING 2018

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The Cortland Fire of 1919

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On February 27, in 1919, there was a mysterious fire that started and burned down the entire Cortland Normal school. To this day, no one truly knows what actually caused this fire, but some rumors were circulating around about possible catalysts. One of the rumors were that the back doors were left open in the morning and another rumor suggested that an individual tossed a lit match or cigarette into the paper chute within the building. Further investigation interpreted that the paper chute that stretched throughout the first and second floor of the building is what helped the fire spread so easily and quickly. Fortunately, classes were able to resume within about the next week in the Methodist Church, YMCA, Cortland High School, and Miller Club house.

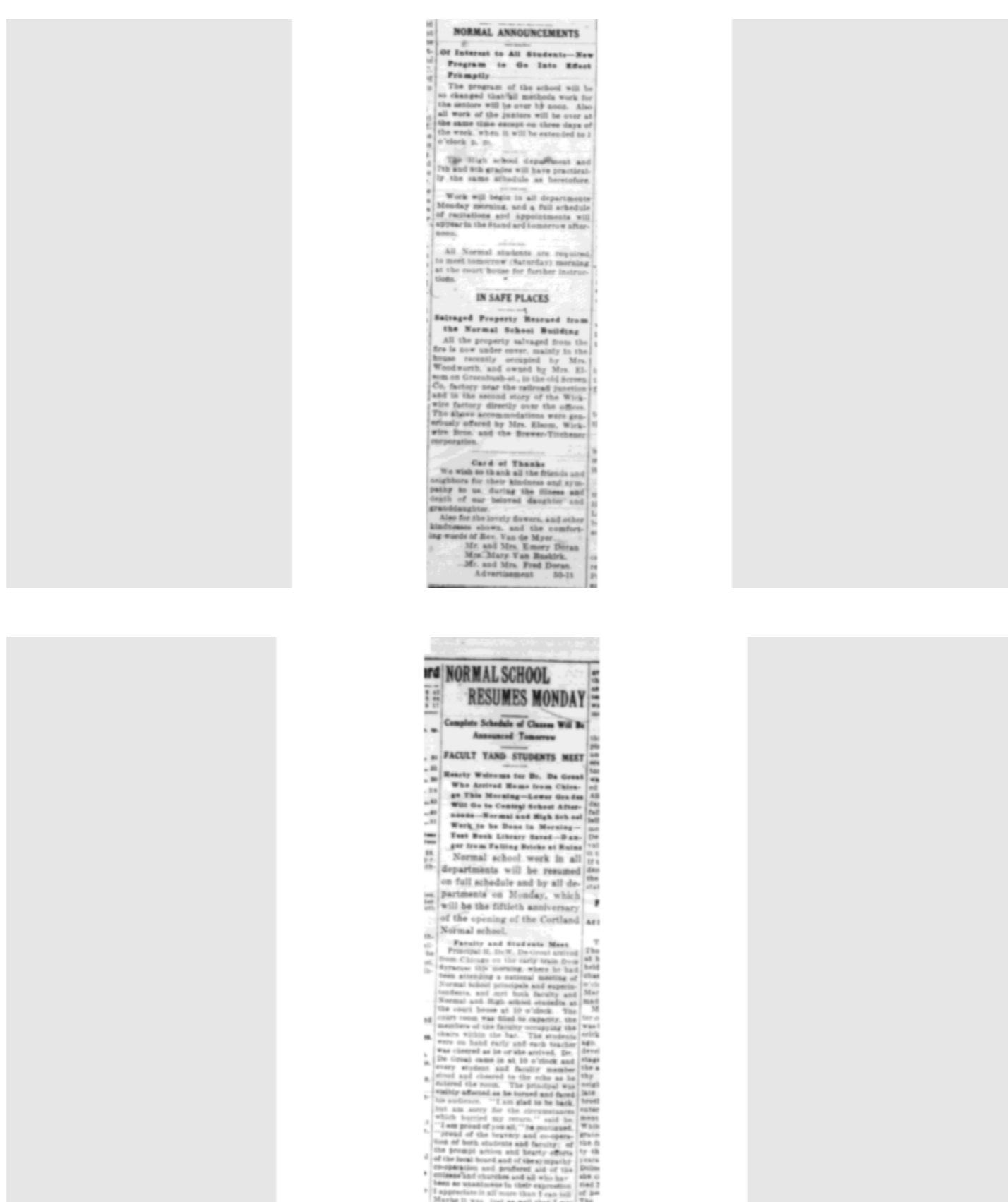


Photograph of Cortland civilians and bystanders watching the school burn

What was strongly debated after the fire and complete destruction of the school were the new potential locations for the new college. Many people fought over where the school should be rebuilt, whether it should move to the Randall flats, go up on the hill that overlooked the city, or even just be built right where the original normal school existed. Even though the events were a tragic loss and set back for the attending students and college committee, the insurance was able to provide sufficient compensation for the damages (about \$165,000 in damages).



Newspaper article (possibly from the Syracuse Journal) going over the damages and potential relocations



There have been suspicions that the fire was a premeditated action due to the absence of Dr. DeGroat, the principle of Cortland Normal school, and the fact that there were already anticipated plans for significant expansion to the school. Of course it still is not determined whether or not the fire was intentional or not, but because of this series of events, we now have our SUNY Cortland College of today.

The Cortland Standard newspaper headline about the events of the 1919 fire

Research and sources all courtesy of the SUNY Cortland College Archive

