

DIGITAL HUMANITIES – SPRING 2018

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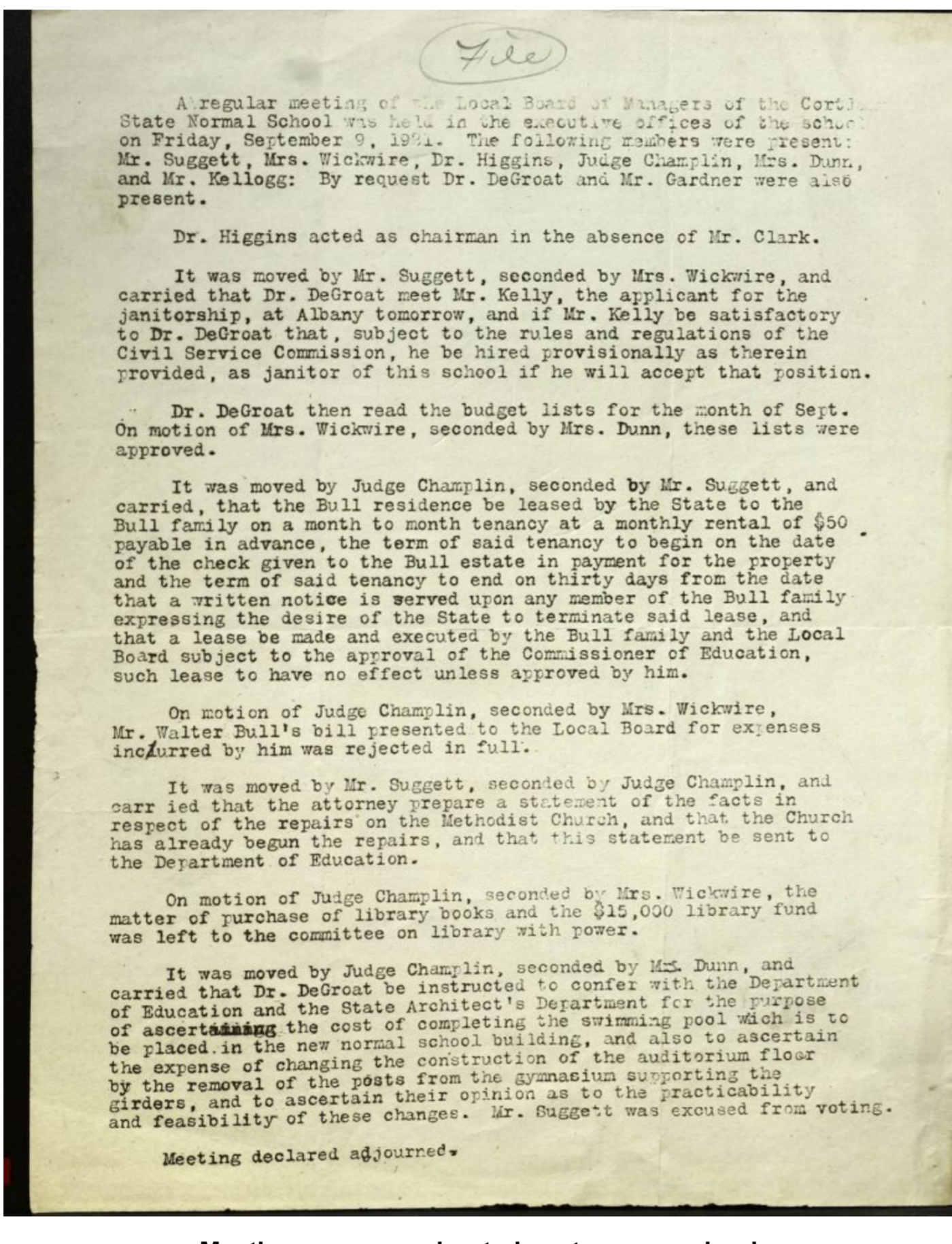
The Cortland Normal School Fire, 1919

By: Peter McKasty, Kara Smith, and JP Ospina



Newspaper headline the day of the fire in the Cortland Standard

On February 27th, 1919, the Cortland Normal School in Cortland, New York, mysteriously burned down, and to this day the cause is unknown (although it is speculated that it started in the lower level next to the bottom of a paper waste shoot, which added a lot of fuel to the fire and caused it to spread rapidly). Originally a school intended to educate future teachers, the Cortland Normal School was located on Court street, towards the central town of Cortland. Prior to the fire, there were speculations that the school would be moved to a new location, but there was some opposition to this plan. The fire itself somewhat catalyzed the transportation of campus to “the hill”. “The hill” refers to the peak at the top of Graham avenue that overlooks much of Cortland and nearby areas.



Meeting summary about plans to move school

key figure in finding the new location for the school.

After the planning was wrapped-up, it was decided the new school location would reside one the hill at the top of Graham ave. After a few years of construction, the new campus opened up in 1923 with its first building: Old Main. To this day, the campus remains in this location and has expanded greatly, with many different dorm buildings and nearly 10 different academic buildings. The campus continues to grow and change every year. Below, we have created a small photo exhibit for you to experience the fire from that very February day in 1919.

In the planning process for the school’s rebuilding, there were many proponents for maintaining the same location, not only for sentiment, but also for practicality and convenience. However, there was also a large push for the location on the hill, even before the fire occurred. One of the main figures involved, Dr. DeWitt DeGroat was a main proponent in the push to move the campus. On the day of the fire, Dr. DeGroat actually happened to be in Chicago, which he claimed to be a “blessing in disguise” as he believed some individuals would have blamed him for the ongoinings of that day. After the decision was made to move the campus, certain figures were honored with buildings named after them, such as Dr. DeGroat himself and a Dr. Higgins, another



Article in favor of maintaining old location of college, Syracuse Journal



CNS on fire, 1919

Groups watching Cortland Normal School burn

All images courtesy of the SUNY Cortland College Archive.