DIGITAL HUMANITIES – SPRING 2018

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The Cortland Normal School Fire, 1919

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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.

A regular meeting of the Local Board of Managers of the Cortis State Normal School was held in the executive offices of the school on Friday, September 9, 1991. The following members were present: Mr. Suggett, Mrs. Wickwire, Dr. Higgins, Judge Champlin, Mrs. Dunn, and Mr. Kellogg: By request Dr. DeGroat and Mr. Gardner were also present.

File

Dr. Higgins acted as chairman in the absence of Mr. Clark.

It was moved by Mr. Suggett, seconded by Mrs. Wickwire, and carried that Dr. DeGroat meet Mr. Kelly, the applicant for the janitorship, at Albany tomorrow, and if Mr. Kelly be satisfactory to Dr. DeGroat that, subject to the rules and regulations of the Civil Service Commission, he be hired provisionally as therein provided, as janitor of this school if he will accept that position.

Dr. DeGroat then read the budget lists for the month of Sept. On motion of Mrs. Wickwire, seconded by Mrs. Dunn, these lists were approved.

It was moved by Judge Champlin, seconded by Mr. Suggett, and carried, that the Bull residence be leased by the State to the Bull family on a month to month tenancy at a monthly rental of \$50 payable in advance, the term of said tenancy to begin on the date of the check given to the Bull estate in payment for the property and the term of said tenancy to end on thirty days from the date that a written notice is served upon any member of the Bull family expressing the desire of the State to terminate said lease, and that a lease be made and executed by the Bull family and the Local Board subject to the approval of the Commissioner of Education, such lease to have no effect unless approved by him.

On motion of Judge Champlin, seconded by Mrs. Wickwire, Mr. Walter Bull's bill presented to the Local Board for expenses inclurred by him was rejected in full.

It was moved by Mr. Suggett, seconded by Judge Champlin, and carr ied that the attorney prepare a statement of the facts in respect of the repairs on the Methodist Church, and that the Church has already begun the repairs, and that this statement be sent to the Department of Education.

On motion of Judge Champlin, seconded by Mrs. Wickwire, the matter of purchase of library books and the \$15,000 library fund was left to the committee on library with power.

It was moved by Judge Champlin, seconded by Mrs. Dunn, and carried that Dr. DeGroat be instructed to confer with the Department of Education and the State Architect's Department for the purpose of ascertaining the cost of completing the swimming pool which is to be placed in the new normal school building, and also to ascertain the expense of changing the construction of the auditorium floor by the removal of the posts from the gymnasium supporting the girders, and to ascertain their opinion as to the practicability and feasibility of these changes. Mr. Suggett was excused from voting.

Meeting declared adjourned.

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 ongoings 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

CNS after burning down

Groups watching Cortland Normal School burn

All images courtesy of the SUNY Cortland College Archive.

