

# DIGITAL HUMANITIES – SPRING 2018

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## The Curious Case of the Cortland 1919 Fire



Crowd gathering to watch the fire

This photograph shows the students and community members gathering to watch the Normal School Fire. If you look closely enough, the flames are still visible. Soon after this picture was taken, the building began crumbling and caving in due to the fire engulfing the second story.

This photograph was taken after the fire was put-out. The rubble is settling and the crowd is thinning out. The damage had spread throughout the entire school- the building was left unsalvageable. The initial Normal School building was located on Court Street in Cortland's downtown district.



Photograph Directly After Fire 1919



Newspaper Reflecting on the Fire

This excerpt is suspected to be from *The Syracuse Journal*, but the exact newspaper source is unknown. This newspaper article talks about the damage done to the school. To quote the newspaper: "Early Morning Blaze Burns Historic Institute to Ground- Origin Unknown- Damage \$150,000". As this article informs the readers, the cause of the fire is unknown. Some suspect the fire began and traveled so easy because of the paper chute that ran between the first and second stories of the building. Rumors spread that the back-door of the building was left wide open, so someone from the public could have walked in and started the blaze; another speculation is that a mysterious person threw a lit match down the paper chute to ignite the fire. It is documented as being of an unknown cause; the closest speculation was that it was due to spontaneous combustion. It is well-known throughout SUNY Cortland that the president, Dr. DeGroat, had wanted the Normal School to change location, but DeGroat was cleared of suspicion due to being in Chicago at the time. There is no sound evidence to the Dr. DeGroat theory- but the fire ended up being a blessing in disguise to the Normal School. SUNY Cortland would not be the college it is today without the fire destroying the school. It should be noted that this incident was not the first fire to occur at the Cortland Normal School. In February of 1870 the Normal School's boiler exploded and began a fire. The damage was not anywhere near the extent of this fire however. Now

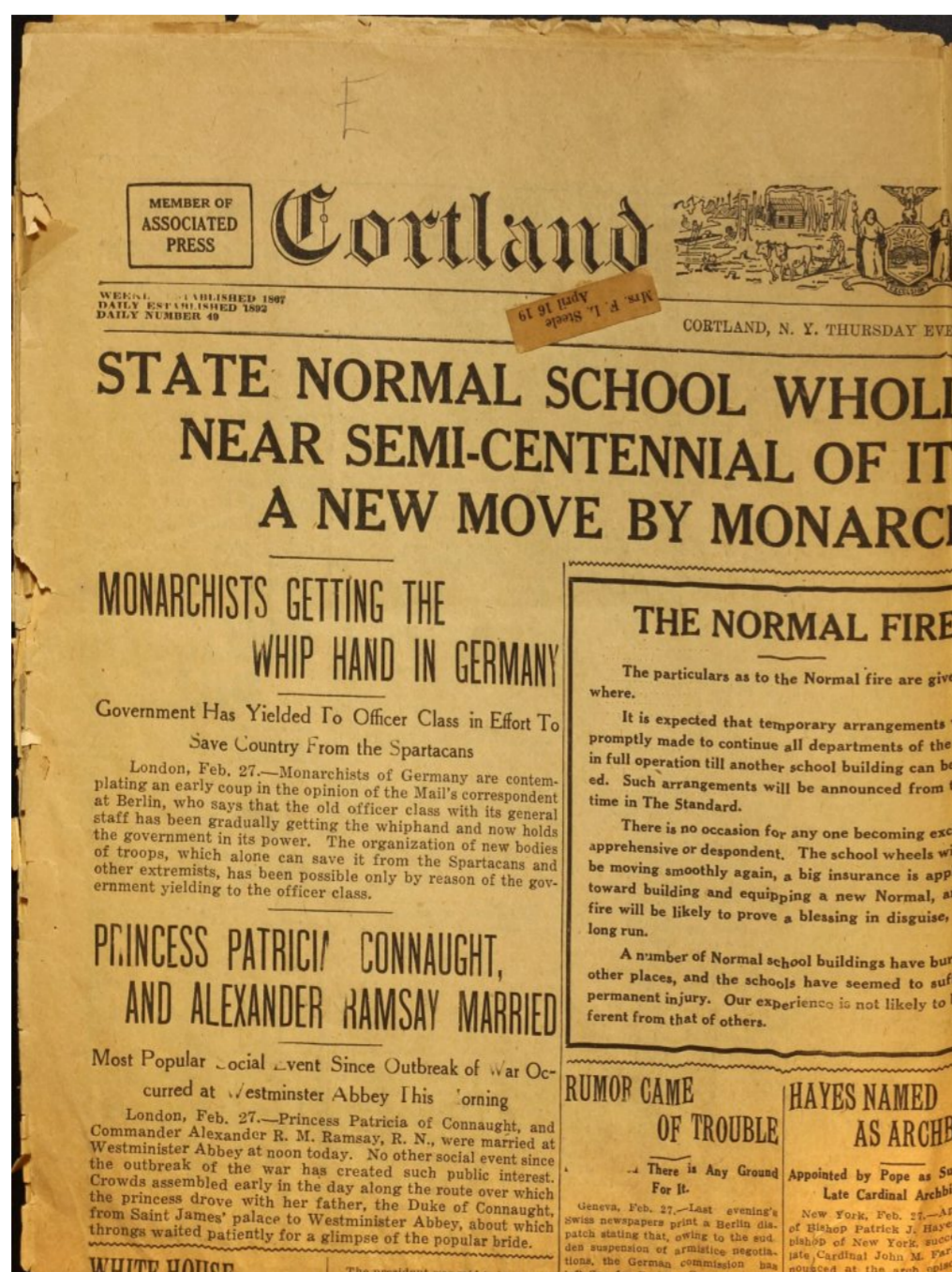
the administrators and school officials had a decision to make- will the school move to Randall Flats or up on the Hill? Spoiler alert- "The Hill" was chosen. Also important to note- the students at Cortland Normal School resumed their studies on Monday- two days after the fire occurred.



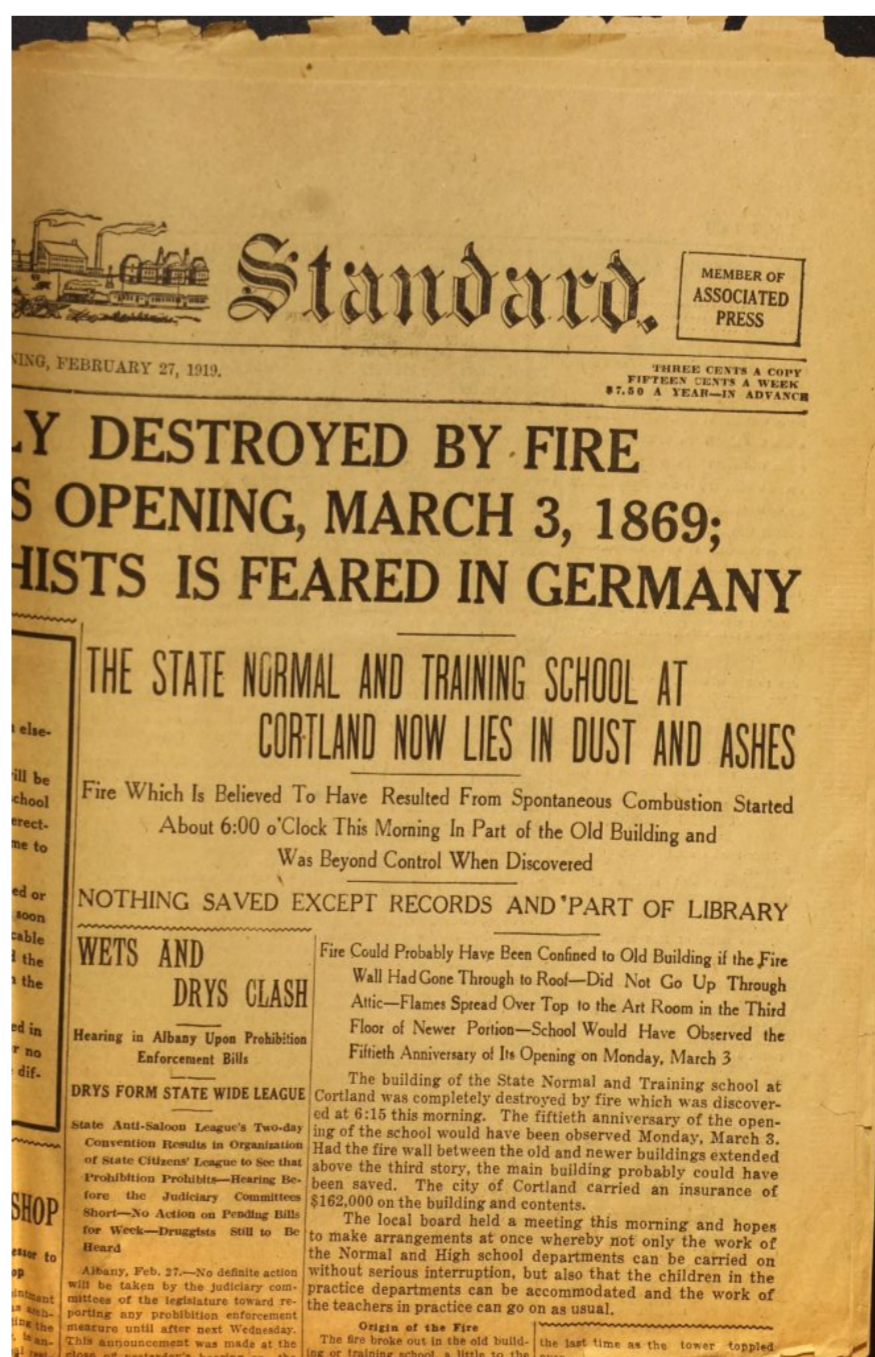
Photograph of the Ruins February 28th, 1919

This photograph was taken the day after the fire, on February 28th, 1919. This picture is crucial for showing the destruction to the building from the fire. Only pieces of the structure of the Normal School survived this terrible blaze. **Ironic that SUNY Cortland's mascot's name is Blaze presently?**

Below is the front-page news article from the Cortland Standard. This was published on February 28th, 1919. All images and sources are courtesy of SUNY Cortland Archives.



Headline the day after the fire in the "Cortland Standard"



Emily Hatch and Barbara Mackey