

Mount Holyoke Afire!

1896, 1917, 1922

Robert Herbert, 2018

On September 27, 1896, Seminary Hall, Mount Holyoke College's central building, went up in a sensational, all-consuming conflagration. Many believed at first that it meant the end of the institution. The huge structure housed the living quarters of most of the faculty and students as well as classrooms, offices, the gymnasium, the laundry, the kitchen and dining room, and the power plant. The latter, only attached to the building, survived but its roof and interior woodwork were gone. There remained only two academic buildings, Williston and Shattuck halls, besides the library and three frame houses used as supplemental dormitories.¹

Astonishingly, students and faculty never thought of quitting. They rallied around with fortitude and even some humor, and made do with surprising aplomb. In some ways, the college literally prospered in the aftermath of the fire. Within eighteen months, loyalty and renown provided the wherewithal for the construction of five brick dormitories and an administrative building, followed by the opening of five more new buildings from 1899 to 1902. These eleven edifices are a turn-of-the-century wholesale reconstruction of the institution. They're still at the heart of the college's campus.

In 1917 came another fiery calamity. Williston Hall, which housed the natural sciences, was in turn destroyed by fire, its whole contents lost. Then in 1922, a third conflagration struck when Rockefeller Hall went up in flames. The fires of 1917 and 1922 didn't match the impact of the 1896 loss but taken together the three fires are exclamation points in the history of the institution. To look at their images and documents is to recover the history of each as it intersected the lives of students, faculty and staff while they contended with such traumatic events.²

¹ In forming the Mount Holyoke Historical Atlas in 2012, Robert Schwartz's students in History 293 entered excellent single pages on each of the three fires, including contemporary documents. Laura Ann Alaimo '81 wrote her senior honors thesis, "Building Mount Holyoke College, 1896-1900," a careful account of the building campaign following the 1896 fire. In the spring of 2019, James Gehrt, Robert Herbert, and Aaron Miller will form an exhibition MOUNT HOLYOKE AFIRE! New student research will be an important component.

² I want to thank very warmly James Ghert, Digital Projects Lead for the college's Digital Assets and Preservation Services. He has copied and clarified all the photographs, plans and prints that appear in this study. I've also benefited from the kind and professional assistance of Leslie Fields, Head of Archives and Special Collections, and Deborah Richards, Archivist.

Seminary Hall 1837-1896



Seminary Hall, Hearn cabinet card, c. 1890

Mary Lyon opened the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in November 1837 in a four-story brick structure built by local artisans, called Seminary Hall. It was rather quickly expanded, extending to 164 feet along South Hadley's principal street by 1841. A wing to the south was added that year, and in 1844 the two-story "piazza" was attached to the front to add a domestic note, that is, to make it clear that the Hall was a home. In 1853 the north wing was opened and in 1865 north and south wings were joined by the gymnasium to form an enclosed quadrangle; the power plant was attached on the east side.

College life was often displayed to the public from the piazza which fronted on the town's main street. In a carefully posed photograph, the class of 1877 and their teachers are clustered on both floors of the piazza and in front. To add to the class's roster, three staff men are stationed at the left. The photographer asked the students to move aside from the two trellises so that none would be blocked. With its Doric and Ionic columns, the piazza had added a bit of neoclassical flavor to the plain box behind it.



Class of 1877 on the Piazza



Stereo of rear of Seminary Hall, 1876

A stereo photograph of 1876 taken from the front of Williston Hall shows the composite structure from the rear: the boiler house chimney, the gym, and the upper floors of north and south wings. The gigantic building dominated the village, contrasting with the nearby frame houses. Indeed, the Seminary's activities were central to the town's culture. In 1870 the library was built to the north, connected by a sizeable corridor to

honor Mary Lyon's utopian conception of a community with all its functions under one roof.³ The library was expanded in 1887, the year before the seminary was elevated to Mount Holyoke Seminary and College; it was chartered finally as Mount Holyoke College in 1893.



Student room, Seminary Hall, 1892

Student rooms in the large building were much like contemporary ones, with personalized versions of a common pattern. In a Kodak photo of 1892 of a single room, there is a rocking chair and a single bed with big pillows. On a wicker chair is a doll on pillows, and on the wall, three framed pictures each with hats or the like hung on corners. A pennant hangs below the rightmost picture. A curtain drawn back on the right reveals the corridor with sun streaming in from the rear.⁴

It was on the afternoon of Sunday September 27, 1896, about 4.45, when the fire was discovered in the laundry room.⁵ It spread into the north and south wings but gained slowly enough that students and staff were able to throw from windows and the piazza many belongings and furnishings; some larger objects were carried outdoors.

³ \$10,000 for the building was given by Pauline Durant. Her husband Henry Fowle Durant, founder of Wellesley College, had been a lay preacher at the Mount Holyoke and a trustee. They chose Hammatt Billings of Boston as the architect. See Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater, Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (New York, 1984).

⁴ The photo is fixed to a mount provided by "Manufacturers of the Kodak Camera, The Eastman Company." It is signed "C.N.A[illeg.]d, May '92; a note on the back reads "From records of Eliz. Howell '96."

⁵ In the college archives are the chronology and details of the fire as published in the *Springfield Daily Republican* and the *Holyoke Daily Transcript* of September 28, and in *The Mount Holyoke's* October issue. A three-page anonymous typescript by a college staff member, dated October 8, summarizes the steps taken immediately after the fire. (Seminary Hall, box 84.) In a long letter of October 8, Henrietta Hooker, a formidable teacher of zoology, recounts events of the evening of the fire and the next day (LD 7092.8), and President Mead in her annual report for 1896-97 cites relevant facts and figures.

Edith Carter '99 wrote a long letter to her mother a week later, detailing how she and her roommate coped with the fire.⁶ When they smelled smoke they began to gather their things. "Suddenly the fire burst through into the dust shaft in the south wing or the staircase there and into the trunk shafts of the north wing just outside our door." They nonetheless threw books and some clothing out the window. "Then I began to gather another bundle but a forked flame came in through the window & I didn't know when one would come thru' the floor [. . .] so I got scared & grabbed what little I had collected & started off as fast as I could." According to President Mead, students "saved a large part of the furnishings of their rooms, & also of the public rooms."



Ruins of Seminary Hall, 1896

In a photo taken from inside the fence along the street, the ruined walls rise above the fountain and pool. On the left is the large remains of the elevator while on the right is a fragment of the south wall. On a printed copy of the photo, a student wrote: "Front of Main Building. Front door a little to the left of the fountain. South wall at the right hand near Mrs. Cookes [sic]. My room was on the other side of the wall marked by this line [not found], only part of the wall is left. Eleanor's room is first below. Elevator shaft at the left. Court just behind." This photo was evidently widely liked, for not only was it printed but it was also copied by a view camera, whose characteristic shadow on the upper right reveals its origin.

There was no effective way to fight the fire that Sunday afternoon. South Hadley didn't have a fire department so telephone appeals went out to Holyoke and Northampton. The Holyoke fire chief had to get permission from the fire commissioners which took time and once underway, their "steamer" truck was so heavy that it had to

⁶ Letter dated September 30, 1896 (LD 7096.6).

stop for relay horses. It and the Northampton apparatus, coming from a further distance, arrived about an hour after the alarm was raised. The conflagration was then so advanced that nothing could be done. Besides, the belt around the water wheel in the power house had burned so the college couldn't supply water. Its student Fire Brigade had therefore been rendered useless.⁷

On Monday the *Holyoke Daily Transcript* published a very romantic report of the fire, probably written by a college correspondent.

The fire as a spectacle was at its supreme height at about 7.15 o'clock. A perfect torrent of flame poured up with vast clouds of spark-laden smoke softly unfolding themselves in the still night. The great center cupola came down with a crash. Then one by one the big chimneys, tottered, wavered like a person struggling for the dignity and position that belongs to them, then fell. Only two fell out on the green, the others simply collapsed where they stood. [. . .] The teachers were very level-headed but seemed more affected by the fire than the girls. The latter rather enjoyed sitting on their goods and watching the blaze. A good delegation removed their possessions to the old cemetery and weird enough it looked to see them sitting back up against some old headstone with the brilliant light playing about them.

By about 10 p.m. the fire was largely exhausted, although it smoldered on through the weekend. The library was saved because firemen had torn down the connecting corridor.

South Hadley residents began clustering on College Street in early evening to view the fire. The electric trolley from Holyoke brought about 3000 onlookers, the biggest crowd the village had ever known. (The trolley line added special cars to accommodate the spectators.) There was lots of excited back and forth with college people. While the fire was still burning, people along the trolley line and nearby villagers were offering rooms in their homes for the students. Henrietta Hooker added that "farmers came from the adjoining towns begging to be allowed to help by taking the girls and their roofless belongings home."

President Mead had sent Miss Hooker into the burning building to check the upper story and attic in order that no students were left there or in their rooms. Then, Hooker wrote, "I went out and with pencil and paper. Miss [Frances] Hazen and I stationed ourselves at South Gate to take the names of students and assign them places for the night." With an amazing proficiency college people had scurried about among the hordes of onlookers and made a list of those who volunteered to house students, then

⁷ On Dec. 4, 1895, the *Boston Herald* announced the formation of the fire brigade. "Massachusetts is the first state to possess a fire department made up entirely of women."

numbering 339. "And by 10 o'clock every student had a comfortable home and we knew where they were." The college placed many in three frame houses they owned, and twenty-five more in the local hotel, but that left a goodly number who had to go to private homes. The college paid homeowners \$5 a week for board and room. Faculty and staff also had to find places to stay. Most students lost their winter clothes which had been in the attic, but all other student and college goods were taken to the Rockefeller skating rink only built the spring before.



September 28, 1896, probably H. W. Macy photograph

On the day after the fire several amateur and professional photographers aimed their cameras at the ruins, mostly from the street in front of the building but some from within the remains. It was probably H. W. Macy of Northampton who positioned his view camera to the southwest (other nearly identical photos are stamped with his name). Most of the onlookers here pose for the camera. Perhaps the photographer asked the two men in the shay to hold their poses, but the white horse in the lower left corner wasn't so cooperative and moved its head. Here and there in the ruins smoke is still rising. Trolley tracks can be discerned through the glaring light reflections of the street.



Workmen before ruins, September 28, 1896

In an anonymous photograph taken the day after the fire, six men are posing for the view camera. Four pretend to pull on a rope but all of them are looking toward the camera. Purporting to be an action photo, it is amusingly undercut by this frankness. Like the preceding view, this one has a dramatic chiaroscuro. The dark branches of the larger tree on the right contrast with the ruin's grey tones and form a counterpoint to the somber vertical of the ruins further to the right. There's a smoldering pile in the left middle-ground which tells us that the prevailing grey rises from other such smoky rubble.

"At the church next morning at 9," wrote Hooker, "every student accounted for. When the faculty came into the chapel of the Church they were met with the students singing the college song and in pauses chanted Rah! Rah! Rah!" Later that morning a sophomore wrote an excited letter. "We have just come from the church where we had a rousing meeting, with cheering, yelling, and singing for College, South Hadley, Mrs. Mead and faculty."⁸ Both Hooker and Mead expressed admiration of the students who had not panicked the night before. Mead wrote that it was not easy to account for their

⁸ Helen Calder '98, September 28, 1896 (LD 7092.8).

self-possession.

Classes were immediately resumed in the library, Shattuck and Williston, although Hooker wrote “Of course we have not expected lessons but we have kept the girls interested and in their places [. . .].” The library had been saved and colleagues from elsewhere contributed books. More were purchased, so that after a patchwork few weeks, courses proceeded under new but effective conditions. Williston Hall became “the ‘general stamping’ for the college. Reception is held in the laboratories, the aquarium is a general lunch room [and] at any time of day the studiously inclined may be seen sitting under the shadow of the megatherium [the gigantic cast fossil].”⁹

Things were hopeful—only five students resigned from the college—because on the day after the fire the trustees ordered the immediate construction of Brigham Hall on a collegiate gothic plan already decided upon the previous summer. A fund for this dormitory, named for Mary Brigham who had died just before she was to become Principal, had been initiated in 1893. It was dedicated in June, 1897, only six months after the fire, designed by the Hartford architect William Brocklesby, on the model of Smith College “cottages” that he had planned.



Brigham Hall c 1905 (Asa Kinney)

One week after the fire, Hooker said that eight cottages, housing fifty students each, would be built that year. Mead reported that “the cottage plan of rebuilding was adopted, & it was voted to erect as many houses as money was provided for, the only

⁹ *The Mount Holyoke*, vol. 6, Feb. 1897, 202-06. The Megatherium was a seven-foot tall plaster cast in Williston.

restriction being that no debt should be incurred.” Dr. D. K. Pearsons of Chicago, a longtime admirer of Mary Lyon, immediately gave \$40,000 and in April J. D. Rockefeller a like sum. Within a year and a half of the fire, thanks to an extraordinary outpouring of other donations, the college built Brigham, Safford, Porter, and Mary Lyon halls in addition to Pearsons and Rockefeller. All of these had been designed in the months before the fire.¹⁰ One wonders what would have happened had there been no fire to precipitate their construction? Something grand would have been done, because Mount Holyoke was going to emulate Smith’s cottage plan which stood for a college rather than a seminary.

Because of the previous crowded conditions, some greeted the fire as a blessing. Addressing the trustees, Mead wrote “I believe these cottage homes will do more for the student to prepare her for her work than the old life could possibly do, and reverently we may say, that a gracious providence has made this thought very plain.” Smith College’s “cottages” had made the Seminary building seem old-fashioned, so it was not just pious sentiment that mitigated the disaster. New buildings allowed a wholesale revamping of the college’s social and intellectual organization.¹¹

¹⁰ In the college catalogue for 1896-97, published before the fire, engravings of Mary Lyon Hall and the five dormitories were printed. “Mary Brigham Hall” was the caption of one of them, but the other four were called Dormitory 2, 3, 4, and 5. All the engravings show facades of the dormitories that were actually built, designed by Eugene G. Gardner, C. Clark Karr, and Brockelsby, so the plans already had been decided upon. College deliberations on these dormitories have not been found, but the trustees had appointed a building committee at their annual meeting on June 16, 1896. For the new dormitories and Mary Lyon Hall, see Laura Ann Alaimo, “Building Mount Holyoke College, 1896-1900,” senior honors thesis, 1981.

¹¹ In a sad parallel, Wellesley’s College Hall burned down on March 17, 1914. It had also housed students, faculty, staff, classrooms, labs, and art in a building even larger than Seminary Hall. It was replaced by several buildings. On February 12, 1914, Vassar College’s main building was also struck by fire, but escaped with severe damage.

Williston Hall Fire, 1917



Williston Hall, 1889 (J.B. Daniels)

Mount Holyoke's second great conflagration erupted on December 22, 1917, when Williston Hall was destroyed by fire. It was not quite comparable to the disaster that overtook Seminary Hall in 1896, but the building housed botany, zoology, physiology and geology, so the loss of classrooms, laboratories, collections and departmental libraries left a huge hole; hence teachers lost most of their professional notes and books. It was also a cavernous gap in the college's landscape and in its social life. After the great Seminary fire in 1896, Williston had developed a special aura. It had become the center for many academic pursuits and the site of the "senior steps" where ritual singings and gatherings took place.

Constructed in 1876, Williston had been the first autonomous academic building beyond Seminary Hall and its connected library. Dedicated to the natural sciences and art, it soon became crowded and badly needed a substantial wing. Called the Annex, it was added to the north side of the building in 1889. In 1892 physics and chemistry left Williston for the new Mattuck Hall, allowing art and the other sciences to expand into the vacated quarters. New laboratories allowed courses to expand to a higher level to justify the charter as a full-fledged

llege.

When Seminary Hall was burned down in 1896, the library was saved (firemen had locked down its connecting corridor), but Williston and Shattuck were the only free-standing academic structures to constitute the campus. As the oldest survivor, Williston became the venerated site of embedded campus rituals. Its main entrance became the “senior steps” where senior songs were sung and many photographs taken. Even so, the steadily increasing demands for more space for art and the laboratory sciences couldn’t be satisfied by Williston. In 1902 the arts came into their own with the opening of Dwight Art Memorial. By expanding into the third floor vacated by art, Williston could respond at last to increasing enrollments in the natural sciences and the concomitant need for more laboratory facilities.

Fifteen years later the fatal fire was discovered about 4.30 on the Saturday before Christmas, 1917. It began on the first floor of the Annex, so the basement could be entered at first. Miss Woolley had been entertaining guests at her home and was among the first to enter the flaming building. Eleanor Mason, a junior at the time, was snow-shoeing from nearby fields when she saw the smoke and flames. “We were still able to carry out some books for Miss [Abby] Turner from the Physiology department [. . .]. I remember even loading up Miss Woolley with a pile of books, and Miss Marks arriving with overshoes for her. It was bitterly cold and the snow was deep.”¹²

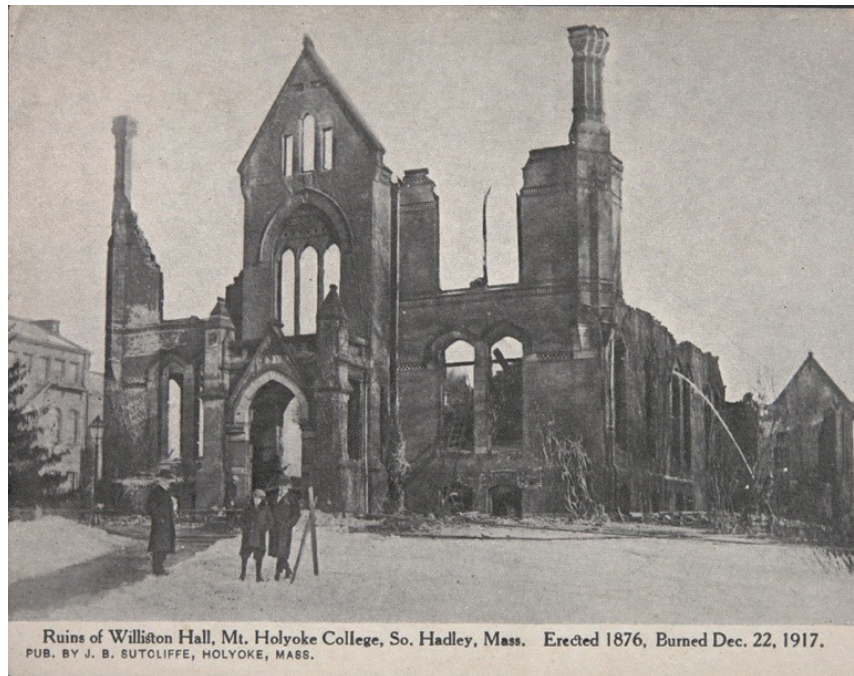
Firemen from the college and South Hadley responded soon and companies from South Hadley Falls and Holyoke arrived not long after. By about 6 p.m. six streams from fire hoses were doing their best but the fire was accelerated by two explosions of the botany department’s supply of chemicals and alcohol. So rapid and devastating were the flames that by early evening only the shell of the structure remained.

¹² A letter c. 1983 from Eleanor Mason ’19 to Irma Rabbino, office of Public Information, in Williston Hall file, box 106. Jeannette Marks, teacher of theater, was Miss Woolley’s intimate friend.



Williston Hall after the fire (Asa Kinney)

Smoke drifted up from the still smoldering ruin the next morning when Asa Kinney set up his view camera. In his photograph, glare of the snow enhances the starkness of the building's mournful shell. Tripods near the center and on the right edge were probably supports for fire hoses. A day or two after the fire had died down, J. B. Sutcliffe of Holyoke also used a view camera to make a photograph which he published as a postcard, an indication of the widespread notoriety of the conflagration. His three onlookers have turned away from the fire to pose for the camera.



Williston Hall after the fire (J. B. Sutcliffe)

December 22 was a holiday so the campus was depleted, but several people were nearby and rushed to the building before it was completely enflamed. Abby Howe Turner, a teacher of zoology and physiology, was among the first there. Four weeks later she wrote a lively account of the conflagration.¹³ Coming in a rush from the village store about 4.30 that Saturday, she entered the Training Annex and joined a few others, including Miss Woolley and Asa Kinney, to carry things outside. Kinney and college men salvaged twenty-six microscopes and two cases of dissecting instruments.

We saved many of the department things from my office, Miss Stokey's office was well cleared and most of her research materials saved. [. . .]. Miss Woolley who was early in the building helping take things out says that the lecture room looked like a bed of coals when she saw it last, only a few minutes later. Mr. Kinney came [. . .] almost as soon as I did though we did not meet at once.

Turner's letter is full of romantic phrases drawn from her vivid flashback to the raging fire.

It was wonderful out in the grove – that magnificent blaze, for the roof fell very soon and the flame was all unhindered. We all worked in that magic place, with the gorgeous light, the fierce heat near the fire, the rain of sparks even as far as Porter – the beauty of it all a thing to remember as well as the tragedy. There were

¹³ "Williston Hall Fire," typed ms. dated Jan. 21, 1918, among the Williston Hall documents in the archives, box 106, folder 2. It's not known to whom the letters were addressed.

wonderful red colors in the flames [. . .].



Mignon Talbot and students after the fire (Asa Kinney)

After the fire, Asa Kinney took poignant photographs of Mignon Talbot and her students poking through the rubble. (He took two slightly different shots which proves that they are carefully posed.) One has an important inscription on the verso, crediting “C. H. Wickerman, Press Representative, Mt. Holyoke College.” It says that Talbot and her students are searching for fragments of her famous early Jurassic fossil *Podokesaurus holyokensis*. Despite concerted efforts to recover portions of it, none was ever found. In 1910 Talbot had asked Kinney to photograph the fossil *in situ*, a little south of the campus, so both would have had a stake in this picture of fruitless searches for its remains. Fortunately, casts had been made and sent to Yale, Harvard, Amherst and Dartmouth.



Podokesaurus holyokensis (Asa Kinney)

Three months after her typescript memoir of the fire, Turner published a longer accounting in which again she resorted to romantic imagery.¹⁴ “Williston was never more appealing than when its empty windows framed rosy clouds of steam and drifting smoke as they died down. The night mercifully covered the harshness of destruction while the clustered windows showed their dignity and grace of outline as never before.” Her imagery proves the persistence of picturesque romanticism inherited from the previous century.

In her article and her typescript memoir, Turner mentioned the few objects that were recovered and she summarized the losses. The contents of Stokey’s and her own offices were saved, but except for a few books, the departmental libraries of botany, geology, psychology, zoology, and physiology were destroyed as were numbers of specimens and slides. Notable personal losses were the papers and collections of Cornelia Clapp, Lydia Shattuck, Ignon Talbot, Anna Morgan, and Samuel Hayes. For the occasional visitor to the building as well as for students, the most grievous losses were the ornithological, botanical, zoological, and mineral collections and the impressive exhibitions of casts including the star attraction, the giant megatherium. Surprisingly, not even fragments of the fossil animal tracks in the basement were found. Although of sandstone, they were demolished by the fiery collapse of the upper floors.

The shock of the disaster and the first thoughts about what to do were expressed in an undergraduate’s letter shortly after the return from Christmas vacation.

“Poor ‘Willy’ is certainly a most dejected looking place. It is being torn down as far as the first floor. The walls of the first floor are fairly sound, so a temporary structure is to be made out of that for the departments of zoology, geology, and botany. Psychology is now in Room 4 Mary Lyon until the third floor of Skinner can be fixed up. [. . .] Apparatus of various kinds and descriptions have been loaned already so that the work may go on. President Woolley said the other morning in chapel that just as soon as money could be raised a new science

¹⁴“The Williston Hall Fire,” *Alumnae Quarterly*, vol. II, April 1918, pp. 6-13.

building would be erected. It would be as fire-proof and modern as possible.”¹⁵

Appeals were made to sister institutions for duplicate books and slides, which were generously answered in the coming weeks. Temporary provisions around the campus were made for all the classes but after their return from the winter holiday, students lacked laboratories and departmental libraries, so their teachers had to be inventive. Classes were continued “without interruption” in Skinner Hall and the library according to an appeal for funds sent out by President Woolley.¹⁶ “From the bricks of Williston Hall, most of which were saved, a building will be erected on the site of the rink to be used temporarily for the departments of Botany, Zoology and Physiology, permanently as a much needed service building, accommodating storerooms for provisions, bakery, carpenter shop and laundry.”



“Little Willy,” Temporary Science Building, c. 1920

Abby Turner wrote that “Willy, Junior” (soon superseded by “Little Willy”) “will be built very simply, not in true laboratory style.”¹⁷ Officially named “Temporary Science Building,” it opened in October 1918, and housed the three departments until 1924, when Clapp Laboratory was erected on the former site of Williston. Then Little Willy became the school’s service building. Today it no longer has its nickname but much remodeled, it houses several non-academic campus services. It’s the only tie, although a very indirect one (only its bricks!), to Williston Hall.

Letter of Ruth Ferry '21 to her father, January 6, 1918, in the archives, LD 7096.6.

“Williston Hall after the Fire,” three printed pages, undated, presumably sent to alumnae and potential donors. Among the Williston Hall documents in the archives, box 106, folder 2.

Turner, *op. cit.*, April 1918, p. 11.

1922: Rockefeller Hall fire



Old Rockefeller, c. 1910 (Asa Kinney)

On the morning of Thursday, December 21, 1922, one day before the fifth anniversary of the Williston fire, another disaster struck the campus.¹⁸ Fire broke out in Rockefeller Hall about 8:30 in the morning and spread so rapidly that it was out of control an hour later. By evening only the skeleton of the building remained.¹⁹ Five years earlier when Williston caught fire, most of the students had already left for the Christmas holiday but on that December day in 1922 the school was still in session and most students were heading to classes from morning attendance at the chapel. One of them, however, Mary Hopkins '23, was packing a trunk in the basement when she discovered smoke and flames by the stairs of the kitchen wing. Flames rushed up the stairs to the kitchen, accelerated by an explosion of gas in the basement.

¹⁸ Before Rockefeller Hall burned in 1922, there was a less disastrous but still notable fire. On March 7, 1920, the first floor of Safford Hall caught fire. College men and village boys unloaded through windows the students' belongings, caught in blankets and sheets below. As would reoccur two years later, the salvaged items were gathered and sorted in the gym. Repairs were undertaken immediately and by the middle of May Safford was ready to be reinstalled.

¹⁹ The following account of the fire and its immediate aftermath comes from overlapping reports in the *Springfield Union* and the *Springfield Republican* on December 22, 1922, in the *Union* on January 10, 1923, and in the *Mount Holyoke News*, January 19, 1923. Also drawn upon is a letter of January 14, 1923, by Margaret L. Chapin '25 to her mother (LD 7906.6).



Rockefeller fire at the beginning

In a photograph taken close to Rockefeller's façade before the fire departments arrived, smoke is beginning to come from the windows. A few articles of furniture seen on the lower left have already been deposited on the snowy ground. It's not known who took this and three of the other photos reproduced here, presumably snapshots from similar cameras.²⁰ In the crowd that has gathered around, a few have moved while the photo was being taken.



Rockefeller's smoky fire

Taken from the southeast a few paces back, another photo shows more smoke pouring from the second and third floor windows, and from windows on the south-facing wall. To the right are another few pieces of boxy furniture. As yet there's no

²⁰ Three are 3 ½ x 5 ½ in., one is 3 ½ x 4 ½ in.

evidence of fire fighters. Fire departments eventually came from South Hadley's Center station, South Hadley Falls and Holyoke to join the college's firemen. For a while the Holyoke apparatus was stuck in the snow but after a pause it lent a hand. All firemen were hampered by low water pressure but also by disagreements among them that led to a small-town kerfuffle. While the Holyoke men were deploying their apparatus they had broken into a couple of the Center's lines to attach their hoses to their pump. They asked the Center men to help but the latter refused because, Chief E. M. Burnett said, they "had not officially been asked." There must have been a heated argument because the attending special policeman escorted Burnett and his crew off the grounds. (They returned later that afternoon.) College firemen and others, including 150 men at work on the construction of the Mandelles, helped the salvage.

Because the fire was at first confined to the kitchen wing (on the far side of these photos) there was time to remove some of the furniture and belongings. Policemen used ladders to reach some rooms through windows and lowered things to sheets and blankets stretched below. Springfield papers named four students from Smyrna, Czechoslovakia and France who were "burned out" and lost everything including their passports. Mignon Talbot, already a victim of the Williston fire, suffered the loss of several pieces of antique furniture. She was one of seven teachers who lived in the Hall, along with ninety students and six maids. Students and staff formed lines to carry what they could to nearby Skinner Hall and Student-Alumnae Hall (now Mary Woolley Hall). Furniture was lugged to the gymnasium.



Rockefeller with fire hose and ladder

In a photo from the northeast a single hose is spraying but the fire has already taken the roof and upper floor; an echoing stream of smoke rises from a second floor window. The large crowd has dispersed but about twenty people (and one dog) are

observing the waning fire. There is some furniture on the left and to the right of center. Because the snow floods the camera with even white light, the figures here, as in the other photos, are flat silhouettes. They seem like puppets spread out on a theatrical stage with the huge building looming as a backdrop.



Rockefeller fire with kitchen wing (Asa Kinney)



Empty shell of Rockefeller Hall

About this time Asa Kinney took his view camera around to the street side and showed the hollowed-out kitchen wing where the fire had first gained force. Smoke rises from the interior but the south-facing portion of the building is still intact. Kinney was making a sheaf of photos of this campus event. In addition to the one facing the front of the burning structure he took two nearly identical photos from this vantage point, the only differences being in the positions of the handful of observers.

A stark view displays the shell of the building in another picture taken on the day after the fire. The gaping windows of its three stories and gable create a mournful image, with two ladders contributing their pathos. Three weeks later, when Margaret

Chapin returned to the college, she described the scene to her mother.

The appearance of four walls and much sky is calculated to produce a ghastly appearance at any time; but I still can't see that place that ought to be Rocky and isn't, without a few qualms. [. . .] The roof is all fallen in, and a part of the wall above the level of the fourth floor; but the bricks are only slightly smoked, and most of the blinds are on straight. [. . .] Moreover, the glass still in the windows has a ghostly way of reflecting street lights which gives me the creeps when I'm out alone after dark. From the back, the effect is downright hideous. The fire began at the back, and the rear wing [seen in Kinney's photo] is nothing but a shell with staring window holes. [. . .] The fire escape from the fourth floor hangs twisted at all sorts of dizzy angles, all the more outlandish because it is crusted with snow and icicles.

While students were away for the holidays, the gym was refitted for residence. Rows of rooms were partitioned on either side of a central aisle. Chapin makes it sound almost cozy. Besides doors, walls, curtains, and beds, each room had "tables, drop-lights, small windows, closets, stall-bars, booms, window ladders and other apparatus which must be very convenient as hat trees, but no ceilings." A photograph taken from the cantilevered running track above the rooms reveals their cellular arrangement.



Blanchard Hall refitted for Rockefeller Students, January 1923

Upon resumption of school on January 10, students used sleds (some borrowed from village children) to haul their salvaged belongings from Skinner and Student-Alumnae Hall [Mary E. Woolley Hall] to the gym. Other students made do for the

spring term with various dormitory guest rooms, libraries and reception rooms converted for sleeping quarters. The exiled staff of Rockefeller used the basement of Student-Alumnae Hall for cooking; the end room of that space was fitted up with piano and furniture for the girls living in the gym to use “as their parlor and reception room.” Faculty and staff made arrangements to live in the village.

Earlier, on the morning of the fire, Trustees Edward N. White and Joseph A. Skinner had been among the witnesses and handed out railroad tickets to replace those that were lost to the flames; they also gave financial assistance to some needy students. The building was still smoldering the following morning. The loss was reckoned at \$120,000 but much more than that would be needed for a new building, estimated to cost from \$250,000 to \$300,000. Early in the new year, J. D. Rockefeller Jr. gave \$175,000 for a new building, carrying on his father’s generosity for funding “Old Rocky” in 1897. Allen Cox, the designer whose Mandelle dorm was underway, was chosen for the new building. It would house 124 students compared to ninety who had lived in the destroyed dormitory.

Shortly after the Rockefeller fire, President Woolley announced that in future a high-pressure pumping engine would connect hydrants with Lower Lake, and a campus fire company would be newly established with new employees. All gas lights would be removed from dormitory basements. Future dorms would be built of concrete and steel like Mandelle Hall, being constructed on Prospect Hill. These changes put the college on a new footing, for the fire had revealed the inadequacies of the upkeep and structure of buildings like Rockefeller Hall. Its loss was painful, especially for its hundred displaced residents, but it fell short of the campus-wide trauma of the fires that took Williston and Seminary Hall.

The buildings that supplanted Seminary Hall are more than a century old, and those that replaced Williston and Rockefeller are themselves centennials. When we walk about the campus we see really old buildings, so it takes an act of historical imagination to recover the even older destroyed structures, and to recall the dramas that were inflicted upon students, faculty, staff and some townspeople. The three lost buildings of a century ago are so remote that they can’t be found in living memories, only in photos, a few letters, newspaper accounts and a few objects reclaimed from the ashes. An exhibition of these, planned for the Art Museum in 2019, will let visitors take a historical tour of the campus.