

Mount Holyoke Afire!

Three devastating fires punctuate the history of the college: Seminary Hall in 1896, Williston Hall in 1917, and Rockefeller Hall in 1922. This exhibition illustrates these losses with exciting photographs of the conflagrations, as well as stereopticon views, period letters, newspaper reports and a few salvaged objects that bring to life the lost buildings.¹ Curated by James Gehrt of LITS, Robert Herbert, professor emeritus of art history, and Aaron Miller of the Art Museum, the exhibition is sponsored by the Art Museum, Archives and Special Collections, and the Departments of Art History, English, Geology, History, and the Deann of Faculty's Office.

The huge structure of Seminary Hall 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. Its loss threatened to end the life of the institution. The destruction of Williston Hall in 1917 was nearly as grievous, for it destroyed the laboratories, collections and libraries of botany, geology, physiology and zoology. Less traumatic was the blaze in Rockefeller Hall in 1922 but it was another striking calamity. In none of these fires was an injury reported. Instead, numerous accounts attest to the level-headed aplomb of students and teachers in the face of disaster.

¹ A more detailed history of the fires is online: <http://hdl.handle.net/10166/4626>. 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..

Seminary Hall 1837-1896



Seminary Hall, c. 1890

Mary Lyon opened the seminary in November 1837 in a four-story brick building on the village's principal street. It was steadily enlarged. Wings were added to the north and south, and a "piazza" along the street. Then in 1865 north and south wings were joined by the new gymnasium to form an enclosed quadrangle; the power plant was attached on the east side. Five years later the library was added 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. The gigantic building dominated the village, contrasting with the nearby frame houses. Indeed, the institution's activities were central to the town's culture and its economy. In 1888 the seminary, its curriculum expanded, was elevated to Mount Holyoke Seminary and College; it was chartered finally as Mount Holyoke College in 1893.

It was on the afternoon of Sunday, September 27, 1896, about 4.45, when the fire was discovered in the laundry room. 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. On the next day a student wrote about this salvaging. "Anna and I quickly got our clothes down and in bundles. By that time the smoke was coming into our rooms in streams, but as yet there was no danger from the flames, so we tied wet handkerchiefs over our noses and mouths and worked in the room until we

could stand it no longer.”² According to President Mead, students “saved a large part of the furnishings of their rooms, & also of the public rooms.”

South Hadley had no fire department so telephone appeals went out to Holyoke and Northampton. When the firemen arrived in about an hour the conflagration was so advanced that nothing could be done.³ Moreover, the belt around the water wheel in the power house had burned so the college couldn't supply water from Lower Lake. “The fire as a spectacle was at its supreme height at about 7.15 o'clock,” according to *Holyoke Daily Transcript* the next day. “A perfect torrent of flame poured up with vast clouds of spark-laden smoke softly unfolding themselves in the still night.” By about 10 p.m. the fire was largely exhausted, although it smoldered on through the next day. 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.) With amazing proficiency college people had scurried about among the friendly onlookers and made a list of those who volunteered to house students who then numbered 339. The college placed some of them in three frame houses it owned and in the local hotel, but that left a goodly number who had to be put up in private homes. The college paid homeowners \$5 a week for board and room. The 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 college and student goods were taken to the Rockefeller skating rink only built the spring before.

² An anonymous letter in the archives dated September 8 (Seminary Hall, box 84 folder 4.)

³ 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. Vassar's main building caught fire on February 12, 1914, but despite heavy damage and dislocations, the structure survived



Seminary Hall ruins, September 28, 1896 (H.W. Macy)

On the day after the fire many 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. In a view camera photograph by H. W. Macy of Northampton, most of the onlookers knowingly posed for his camera whose lens and film required a short pause. Probably Macy asked the two men in the buggy to hold their poses although their white horse wasn't so cooperative and moved its head. Here and there in the ruins smoke is still rising. Trolley tracks can be found through the glaring light reflections of the street. On the same day, another photographer posed a group of men at the ruins. They're supposedly working but if one looks closely, they're seen to be staring at the camera.



September 18, 1896, 6 men in the ruins

That morning a sophomore sent her family 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.”⁴ Mead and others expressed admiration of the students who had not panicked the night before. Classes were immediately resumed in the only remaining academic buildings, Williston Hall (opened in 1876), Shattuck Hall (1892) and the library. Lessons were not expected but regular meetings preserved a semblance of normalcy. The library’s books were saved, and colleagues from elsewhere contributed books and more were purchased. After a patchwork few weeks, courses proceeded under new but effective conditions. 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. Within eighteen months, with an astonishing outpouring of donated funds, Brigham, Porter, Safford, Pearsons and Rockefeller Halls were built as well as Mary Lyon Hall, all of them designed in the year before the fire. It was the prestige of the college and the devotion of alumnae and friends that made this resurrection possible.

Because of the previous crowded conditions, many 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 Seminary Hall 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.

⁴ Helen Calder '98, September 28, 1896 (LD 7092.8).

Williston Hall, 1876-1917



Williston Hall, 1889 (J.D. Daniels)

Mount Holyoke's second great conflagration erupted on December 22, 1917, when Williston Hall was destroyed by fire. It housed botany, zoology, physiology and geology, so the loss of classrooms, laboratories, collections and departmental libraries left a huge hole. It was also a cavernous void in the college's landscape and in its social life. Constructed in 1876, it had been the first autonomous academic building beyond Seminary Hall. Dedicated to the natural sciences and art, it soon became crowded and so a substantial wing, the Annex, had been added in 1889. In 1892 physics and chemistry moved from Williston to the new Shattuck Hall, allowing art and the other sciences to expand into the vacated quarters.

After Seminary Hall burned down in 1896, Williston became the favored site of 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 made the building over-crowded. In 1902 the arts came into their own with the opening of Dwight Art Memorial. At last Williston, by expanding into the third floor vacated by art, could respond 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 Saturday before Christmas, 1917. Firemen from the college, South Hadley and Holyoke, after some delay, did their best but so rapid and devastating were the flames that by mid-evening only the shell of the structure remained; it was still smoldering the next morning when Asa Kinney brought his view camera.



Williston Hall's ruins, 1917 (Asa Kinney)

A month later, Abby Howe Turner, a teacher of zoology and physiology, wrote an account of the fire full of romantic imagery.⁵

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

Turner also summarized the losses which included the departmental libraries, the teachers' personal papers and collections, 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 renowned fossil animal tracks in the basement were found. Although of sandstone, they were demolished by the fiery collapse of the upper floors. The most acute loss was the fossil of the early Jurassic dinosaur which Mignon Talbot had discovered, *Podokesaurus holyokensis*.

Appeals went out 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 urgent request for funds sent out by President Woolley.

Williston survived, in a manner of speaking, because its bricks were used for a building down by Lower Lake. Opened in October, 1918, and nicknamed “Little Willy,”

⁵ “Williston Hall Fire,” typed ms. dated Jan. 21, 1918 (Williston Hall, box 106, folder 2).

it housed temporary quarters for botany, zoology and physiology. When Clapp Laboratory was dedicated in 1924, the natural sciences moved there. At that point Little Willy became the school's service building. It no longer has its nickname but today, 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.

Rockefeller Hall, 1897-1922



Old Rockefeller Hall, 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.⁶ 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. Fire departments had come from South Hadley and Holyoke to join the college's firemen but they were hampered by low water pressure. By evening only the skeleton of the building remained.

⁶ 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.



Rockefeller with fire hose and ladder

The devastation shows in a photo taken in mid-afternoon. 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.

Because the fire had at first been confined to the kitchen wing on the street side of the building there had been time to remove some of the furniture and belongings. Policemen used ladders to reach through windows and lowered things to sheets and blankets stretched below. 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.

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. Margaret Chapin '25 in a letter to her mother made 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." Upon the 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 to the gym. Other students made do for the spring term with various dormitory guest rooms, libraries and reception rooms converted for their 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.

Chapin's letter to her mother describes the scene:

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. With all of this new fallen snow, the roofs of almost any of the buildings melt indistinguishably into the sky, and until one sees a few gaunt chimneys sticking up at an unprecedented height, one might almost think the roof was still there, covered with snow. [. . .] 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 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.⁷

Earlier, on the morning of the fire, Trustees Edward N. White and Joseph A. Skinner had come there and handed out railroad tickets to replace those that were lost to the flames; they also gave financial assistance to some needy students. The loss was reckoned at \$120,000 but much more than that would be needed for a new building. Early in the new year, J. D. Rockefeller Jr. gave \$175,000 toward a new building, carrying on his father's generosity for funding "Old Rocky" in 1897. The new dormitory was ready in 1923. It housed 124 students compared to ninety who had lived in the destroyed hall.

Shortly after the 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. All gas lights would be removed from dormitory basements, and future dorms would be built of concrete and steel like Mandelle, going up 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 but there was little of the trauma of the fires that took Williston and Seminary Hall. It was only a dormitory that disappeared, not the several science departments of Williston and nothing like the conflagration that consumed Seminary Hall.

For us today, these three lost buildings are so remote—2017 was the centennial of Williston's fiery disappearance—that they can only be found in photos, documents and a few objects reclaimed from the ashes. However, with the aid of their display in this exhibition, we can indulge our curiosity about Mount Holyoke of that era. We can take a walk around the campus and in our mind's eye replace existing buildings with their forebears. It's true that if we stand in front of Rockefeller Hall which occupies the site of its predecessor, the view of this corner of the campus has not significantly changed. However, if we walk over to the sidewalk in front of Mary Lyon, we can let the old

⁷ Letter of January 14, 1923 (LD 7906.6).

photos call up the sprawling Seminary Hall that had dominated the street and the college until the autumn on 1896. Finally, we can go into the campus and look over at Clapp, now aware that until 1917, Williston Hall once stood there.