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### Arethusa, History

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## Arethusa Sorority – History of the Theta Chapter (Cortland State)

The Arethusa Sorority was originally founded in 1864 at Brockport State Normal School. A chapter of Arethusa Sorority was established at the Cortland State Normal School in 1926. This chapter was the seventh Arethusa chapter in New York State. The organization was established with 52 original members. It became known as the Theta Chapter of the Arethusa Sorority in March of the same year. The purpose of the Theta Chapter of Arethusa or Sigma Gamma Phi as stated in its constitution “shall be to promote social and fraternal functions, to contribute to the community as the occasions arise, to uphold high academic standards, and to cultivate the fine qualities of sisterhood.” The sorority received its certificate of incorporation on June 2, 1927.

The following was taken from The Co-No Press (12/4/25)

**During the past several weeks a new chapter of the Arethusa Sorority has been forming in Cortland Normal School. At present there are four sororities and two fraternities in the school. It is deemed necessary however, with the great increase in attendance, to form some new clubs so that a larger percentage of students will be enabled to enjoy the companionship and sociabilities of club life.**

**There is a chapter of the Arethusa Sorority in every other large Normal School in the state. These chapters are very enthusiastic about the forming of Arethusa in Cortland Normal because they need but one more chapter to make their club a national sorority.**

**About 35 Seniors and Juniors have been voted upon and accepted by the committee and Dr. DeGroat. It is expected, however, that the membership quota will reach 60 after the pledging season is over.**

**The following have been elected to hold office:**

**Sady Flynn, President  
Helen Taplin, Vice President  
Mildred Davis, Treasurer  
Virginia Bellinger, Secretary  
Kathy Reason, Faculty Advisor**

**We are glad to welcome this new sorority into our school and wish them every success, both socially and scholastically.**



In January 1926 it was reported in the Co-No Press that the new sorority group had met and enjoyed the reading of a one-act play "The Deacons Hat" by Jeanette Marks. At that meeting the group outlined a course of reading to include biographies of noted men and women.

In February of the same year it was reported that the new sorority had been located two doors down on the left side of "Training School Avenue". It was also reported that on 1/22/26 18 new members had pledged the sorority. After initiation there was in an informal supper and "get together" at which the members enjoyed a vocal selection, piano selections and a humorous reading.

In February 1926 the following was reported in the Co-No Press

### **Arethusa Installed**

#### **Twenty-Six Girls Made Charter Members at Ceremony Following Banquet**

**Formal installation of the new sorority group as a chapter of Arethusa occurred Friday evening, February 13<sup>th</sup>. The event was celebrated by a banquet at the Oasis. Guests of honor included installing officer, Miss Madelyn Curtis, Grand President of Arethusa and Miss Ethelyn Williams both of Brockport Normal; Miss Dorothy Martin, President of Eta Chapter, Oswego Normal; Dr. and Mrs. DeGroat; and Miss Esther Bahls, who is an alumna member of Arethusa Chapter, Brockport. Miss Sadie Flynn, President of the Cortland Chapter acted as toastmistress. Miss Curtis explained the national status of Arethusa. Dr. DeGroat welcomed the chapter into the school; and pointed out the influence a sorority may have for good throughout the school. Miss Reagan, club mother of the new chapter, commented on the sorority as a factor in mutual helpfulness among students. Miss Martin and Miss Williams brought messages of good will from Oswego and Brockport.**

**Grand President and her assistants installed the 26 original members of the group as charter members of the new chapter. The name of the new chapter to be announced later.**

#### **Charter Members:**

**Lena Baldwin**

**Amelia Beardsley**

**Virginia Bellinger, Recording Secretary**



**Anna Cascio**  
**Dorothy Clingen, Critic**  
**Mildred Davis, Treasurer**  
**Margaret Dean**  
**Sadie Flynn, President**  
**Doris French**  
**Mary Heagy**  
**Dorothy Hoffmire**  
**Bernice Jones**  
**Marie Larkin**  
**Sarah Lawson**  
**Dorothy Hoffmire**  
**Bernice Jones**  
**Marie Larkin**  
**Sarah Lawson, Correspondence Secretary**  
**Dorothy Marble**  
**Ethel Marble, Vice President**  
**Mildred McDonald, Warden**  
**Sylvia Outhouse**  
**Mary Phillips**  
**Vera Shaw, Reporter**  
**Anna Strong**  
**Emily Sullivan**  
**Doris Welsh**  
**Helen Zangler**

In 1927 four sororities at the Cortland Normal had already established sorority houses. With the goal of a house purchase, a Board of Directors of the Theta Chapter of Arethusa Sorority was formed in June 1927. The members were: Miss Lillian Olcott, former head of the Art Department; Miss Alice Oliver, assistant in the Kindergarten Department; and Vera Shaw, Eugenia Bartz, Amelia Beardsley, Mary Heagy and Maud Woods, students. Although Arethusa was without any alumni to call upon for help in financing the house, Articles of Incorporation were taken out and a decision made to buy the Nelson Allen house at 45 Church Street. A mortgage was obtained and the purchase made. The house was a large wooden structure with a portico. It was able to accommodate 34 girls. This house was formerly the residence of Dr. Francis Cheney who had been principal of the Normal School for many years. The sorority held an Open House in September 1927.

There is a brief reference to the Arethusa sisters in a 1933 issue of the Cono Press, it playfully describes the sisters as "known as the best housekeepers."

In November 1948 there was a fire at the Church Street Sorority



House that claimed the lives of three Arethusa Sorority sisters.

It was reported in the Cortland Hilltop Press (12/10/48) that the fire started in the rubbish container located in the laundry room at the rear of the house. Most of the house residents were sleeping as the fire started at 1:20 a.m. The fire went up the back stairs and quickly spread. Nine sisters were hospitalized, three were fatally injured.

The young women who died as a result of the fire were Barbara Ann Kelsey, Marie Meyer, and Lillian Rudnetsky.

Barbara Ann Kelsey of Carthage, NY was a senior PE major, active in intramural sports and a member of the Women's Glee Club. She died of smoke inhalation.

Marie Meyer of Sturgeon Point, NY was a senior General Education Major. She was President of the sorority. She was also a member of the Newman Club and the National Education Society. She died of burns to her face, hands and body.

Lillian Rudnetsky of Center Moriches died several weeks after the fire as a result of her injuries. She was a senior General Education major, a member of Masquers, IZFA and A.C.E.

Marilyn "Lynn" Hiller of Rochester was cited for heroism as she was credited with coolly directing her sisters to safety until she herself was overcome by smoke. Marilyn escaped the fire but re-entered the house to assist her sisters. It was believed at the time that she helped to avert an even worse tragedy. She was recognized by the Cortland City Post of the American Legion and the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission.

Administrative records in the form of correspondence indicate that the fire at Arethusa underlined the need for modern, fireproof housing for students at Cortland and throughout the state college system.

Though the fire damaged the house on Church Street it was not destroyed and stands today. However, the Sisters of Arethusa decided to relocate after the fire. According to the Hilltop Press (2/11/49) a new residence at 64 Tompkins St was purchased in February 1949. This house was the former home of Chester B. Stilson. The house had a beautiful terrace and rose garden and was large enough to house 40 girls. The house was dedicated to the three girls who lost their lives in the 1948 fire. The house opened in July 1949.

In the 1970's the popularity of Greek Life at SUNY Cortland began to decline. There were new large and modern residential suites on campus.



Co-ed living became very popular. There was less interest in becoming a part of a group. Perhaps these are reasons for their decline.

In July 1981 the house at 64 Tompkins Street was sold.

In 1988, the Theta Chapter of the Arethusa Sorority closed its doors. Arethusa alumna Kathy Flack '71 and Marsha Alesandro Tunison '71 organized the Arethusa Alumni Committee. The committee polled alumni of the sorority and came up with a Plan of Action to address the future of the committee and the use of the funds from the sale of the sorority house. All alumni who could be located were polled as to what their thoughts were. In 1988 the sorority was officially dissolved. Revenues were donated to the college to be used in a specific way. A scholarship fund was established to be administered by the Cortland College Alumni Association. Three scholarships are awarded annually based on need. Additionally a sum of money was donated to purchase a block of five seats in the Old Main Auditorium. Three of the seats are dedicated to the memory of the three Arethusa sisters who lost their lives in the fire of November 20<sup>th</sup> 1948. A gift of \$8,000 was given to the Outdoor Education Center at Raquette Lake. This money was to be used for physical upkeep of the facility including the purchase of needed equipment, building repairs and/or new purchases. Finally a sum of money was set aside and held by the Alumni Office to be used to build a permanent structure to house Hellenic memorabilia on campus.

The Arethusa Alumni Committee remains active. It arranges reunions as well as an annual get together at Raquette Lake to which all alumni are invited.

Margaret M. (Smith) Arcangeli  
Class of 1973