

'Brine, Boats & Bureaucrats'

Exhibit highlights salt industry's special relationship to the Erie Canal

Onondaga Historical Association

The relationship between Syracuse and the Erie Canal is well known, as it is in numerous communities across the state, from Albany, to Lockport, Rochester and Utica. But the story of Syracuse's salt industry and its vital bond to the canal is much less appreciated. It is a distinctive story that should be highlighted during the Bicentennial Celebration of the Canal.

In response to that, the Onondaga Historical Association has opened a new exhibit in the Marriott Syracuse Downtown entitled "Brine, Boats & Bureaucrats." The gallery space is accessible from the main lobby elevators.

Many communities in New York State were impacted by the completion of the Erie Canal. Syracuse, however, has a particularly unique historic bond with that waterway in the nature of its heritage as America's major salt manufacturing center in that era.

It was, in a significant way, the desire to expand the market for New York state salt, produced around Onondaga Lake, which helped drive the effort to construct a formidable 363-mile canal. That relationship, between the state-owned Onondaga Salt Springs Reservation and New York's effort to build such a canal, would continue for more than 90 years.

One of the biggest chal-



Johann Culverhouse's 1871 painting, "Clinton Square by Moonlight," is part of the Onondaga Historical Association's "Brine, Boats & Bureaucrats" exhibit at the Marriott Syracuse Downtown. *Courtesy of the Everson Museum of Art*

lenges facing state leaders was how to pay for the canal. It was a duty that the state imposed on Onondaga salt that covered a major portion of the cost. In turn, it was the canal that greatly expanded the market for Syracuse salt, leading to both further profit for the state as well as growth and wealth for Syracuse, which immediately became known across America as the "Salt City."

It was Syracuse leaders and politicians that helped promote the canal. It was Central New York engineers who helped build the canal. And, in turn, it was



James Geddes, the first settler and founder of Geddes, pictured in the 1976 Town of Geddes book. A commercial salt boiler, surveyor and politician, he came to Geddes in 1793 and started his salt works in 1794.

The Post-Standard file photo

canal waters that both carried Onondaga salt to markets across the nation, and powered the salt industry's essential brine pump houses. Syracuse salt helped build the canal and, in return, the canal helped shape Syracuse's economy and the very design and physical development of its urban geography.

These stories are explored in the exhibit, which features dozens of historical images, a model of a canal freighter, and several original documents from the 19th and early 20th century. Also included are original portraits of James Geddes and

Joshua Forman, two local individuals who were critical in helping launch the canal and understood the role that salt would play in its birth and development.

A feature of the exhibition is the highly-prized, 1871 painting of "Clinton Square by Moonlight," by Johann Culverhouse. It is considered one of the most romantic and famous paintings of the Erie Canal and has recently returned from a year-long exhibition in the New York State Capital.

The exhibit will be available to the public through Dec. 31.