

Onondaga Lake boasts a proud history

I bumped into old family friend Gregg Tripoli last month at the Syracuse Technology Garden, down city.

We reminisced about our days in Liverpool Little League, because his late father, Dom Tripoli, coached me and my brother and Gregg and his brothers on the little lakeside diamonds.

Ah, yes, the lake. That's what brought Gregg and me to the new tech center. We both wanted to look

over an exhibit of paintings, photographs and diagrams related to the history (and the future) of Onondaga Lake.

"It's coming back," Gregg mused about our long-polluted body of water.

He's right. More swiftly than expected, the one-by-five-mile lake is being cleaned up after decades of fouling by mercury, sewage and soda ash.

Gregg brings a historical perspective to the lake's reclamation.

Early last year, he was appointed executive director of the Onondaga Historical Association. His colleague, OHA curator and local author Dennis Connors, put together this fascinating look at the lake's last 500 years.

Starting with Iroquois images including Len Tantillo's painting of two Mohawks paddling a canoe, the images continue chronologically. Liverpoolians will marvel at "Boiling Salt 1788," a 1904 oil painting by George K. Knapp depicting village pioneer Asa Danforth chopping wood while Comfort Tyler hauls a barrel of brine.

A large graphic dated 1860 shows several salt-boiling scenes, from the hot kettles to the wooden barrels to the canal boats.

In the last half of the 19th century photography became popular. A big black-and-white photo from the 1890s captures Victorian revelers at Pleasant Beach Pavillion, one of a handful of resorts and amusement

parks that once ringed the lake.

An early-20th century photo provides a close-up of the still-extant railroad overpass on Onondaga Lake Parkway – you know, the one semi-trucks keep crashing into – but

the picture was snapped before they turned the Oswego Canal into a road. It's jarring to see water flowing underneath that familiar overpass.

A more recent shot document

the 1960 Regatta, with rowers in the background and rooters in the foreground.

The exhibit, "Renewal of a Community Resource: Onondaga Lake's Historic Role in Creating Syracuse's Identity," will remain on display through November, at the Syracuse Technology Garden, at 235 Harrison St., at the corner of South Warren, across from Hotel Syracuse; 474-0910; thetechgarden.com.

To explore more local history or to contact Gregg, visit cnyhistory.org.



Russ Tarby

Downtown After Dark