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Central New York history shows what it takes to be an entrepreneur

Published: Sunday, December 12, 2010, 4:53 AM Updated: Sunday, December 12, 2010, 10:00 AM



The Post-Standard

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The **Onondaga Historical Association** is, obviously, the repository for many of the artifacts, images and documents that chronicle the entrepreneurial history of Onondaga County. As the past informs the future, the study and the knowledge of our great entrepreneurial heritage can also help encourage and build our entrepreneurial future.

The tremendous accomplishments achieved right here in our community can create pride in our collective shared past and inspire the determination to build a legacy that is worthy of our rich heritage. They can also inspire individuals to take the risk, work hard and pursue their passions by starting a business.

Our local history is filled with compelling and fascinating people and companies that have had **national and international impacts** and that provide classic examples of what it takes and what it means to be an entrepreneur.

Here in Central New York, our entrepreneurial roots are deep and wide. It is a fact that most new jobs in any local economy are produced by the community's small, local businesses. This means that we need to encourage and inspire entrepreneurship on a local level to build our local economy.



Examples from our community's entrepreneurial history can serve as **case studies to encourage and to improve the judgment of those who may be inclined to start their own business** in

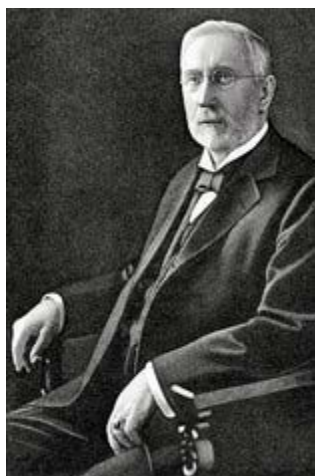
the uncertain environment of entrepreneurial

pursuits. They can provide that local connection with someone who started with nothing but an idea, in an economic, legal, and social environment that was less conducive than today's, took the risk and made it work.

Jeremy Levine, a well-known venture capitalist, points out that "entrepreneurs get inspired to take the risk and start a company at some point in their careers. And the likelihood of being inspired goes up significantly when you're in an environment where you see others who got inspired and were successful."

One of the most important lessons we can learn from our own history is that it's not necessary to be a genius to be an entrepreneur. Too much pressure and emphasis is put on the mistaken notion that success is only derived from inventing that new technology or product that no one ever thought of before.

The fact is, most of the time, true value creation doesn't come from that new technology or that one "big idea," it comes from process innovation — from improving something, making it better or, somehow, more valuable.



OHA

Alexander T. Brown

In OHA's educational program, "Our Entrepreneurial History," we highlight the concept of process innovation, as well as the basic rules of successful entrepreneurship, by telling some of the great stories from our local history.

Alexander T. Brown, for example, was an entrepreneur/inventor who didn't invent the typewriter but developed the first "visible" typewriter, which was marketed under the name Smith Premier. Prior to the Smith Premier typewriter, the typist was unable to see what he had just typed. This was an obvious drawback for the machine and prevented its large-scale use. Brown's improvement helped create the **L.C. Smith Typewriter Company** (of which he was president), made the machine a staple of every office, and led Syracuse to eventually be known as the Typewriter City.

Alexander Brown was also the man who introduced the Syracuse engineering genius John Wilkinson to the great entrepreneur H. H. Franklin. The Franklin Automobile Company was, at one time, the largest employer in Syracuse.



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Franklin didn't invent the automobile, but he was the entrepreneur who incorporated the Wilkinson-designed air-cooled engine into his high-end automobile design, making the Franklin a favorite car of the rich and famous all over the world.

The Shubert brothers of Syracuse provide another fascinating example of process innovators.

Theirs is a true rags-to-riches story of three brothers from a poor immigrant family, in the late 19th century, who used their Syracuse connections and their intuitive

Onondaga Historical Association

Jacob Shubert, left, and Levi Shubert, right, with a portrait of their brother, Sam Shubert, who was killed in a train accident in 1905. The Shubert brothers of Syracuse built the largest theatrical empire the world has ever known and provide a fascinating example of process innovators.

John Wilkinson

entrepreneurial skills to build the largest theatrical empire the world has ever known.

Again, the Shuberts didn't invent theater, but they were process innovators who developed novel methods of promoting and producing theater and, in the process, created an organization that is still thriving and contributing to the industry today.



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Melville Clark playing the Clark Irish Harp.

Melville Clark was another local entrepreneur.

He was also a famous musician — a harpist who headlined at the White House for three different presidents. His experiences with the large, expensive concert harp led him to invent a small, portable, affordable harp called the Clark Irish Harp, which helped him build one of the largest and most successful music companies in the country.

OHA's **archives are filled with stories of local entrepreneurs** who prove that process innovation is at the heart of true value creation in our economy.

These compelling stories not only create pride in our local history, they demonstrate the basic rules of entrepreneurship like hard work, determination, networking, serving the needs of the public, capitalizing on

opportunity, overcoming inevitable failures, and the ability to anticipate and adapt to the future in order to make something better, cheaper, more relevant and more valuable.

Gregg Tripoli is executive director of the Onondaga Historical Association Museum & Research Center. He adapted this article from a talk he gave Nov. 18 at Syracuse University's Thursday Morning Roundtable. You can hear Tripoli's entire speech at **WCNY-FM's archived podcasts of TMR speakers**.



Gregg Tripoli

Tripoli's article is one in The Post-Standard's series about innovation and entrepreneurship in Syracuse. Other recent articles:

- » Bob Herz on the **South Side Innovation Center**.
- » John Liddy on **students creating their own jobs at the Syracuse Student Sandbox**.

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