THE CIVIL WAR IN CENTRAL NEW YORK

AREA COUNTIES CONTAIN MANY SIGNS OF THE WAR

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Contributing writer

When the first shots of the Civil War rang out, it tore a country in two, announcing the beginning of a bloody, four-year struggle. It pitted North against South, blue against gray, and even brother against brother.

Although Central New York never saw a battle, it felt the sting of the war. It contributed soldiers and supplies and provided a safe haven for escaping slaves.

Now, 150 years after the war began, visitors can see some of the contributions the area made to the war. Monuments, grave sites and houses from the period offer insight to life back then and to the soldiers that gave their lives in battle.

Here's a look at how Central New York counties are linked to the war.

CAYUGA COUNTY

Auburn transports visitors back to a time of luxury and abolitionism by offering tours of the Harriet Tubman Home

LT. BENJAMIN PORTER is buried at Lakeview Cemetery, in Skaneateles. A graduate of the Naval Academy at age 16, he was taken prisoner by the Confederate Army, then put in charge of a ship, only to be killed in battle at age 20.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4
and Secretary of State William Seward’s home.

At the Harriet Tubman Home, visitors tour the Home for the Aged, which Tubman established after the war for older, newly freed slaves. Dark wood period furniture lines the first floor of the two-story white house. Quilts her relatives made hang on the sea-green walls. The tour begins with a 30-minute video about Tubman and her missions to rescue slaves from Southern plantations. Once the visitor center is completed in June, guests will be able to learn from the interactive exhibits instead of the film.

Getting there: 180 South St., Auburn.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, February to October.

Tour time: Allow an hour and 15 minutes; tours leave every hour on the hour. The last tour leaves an hour before closing.

Admission: Free.

Just down the street is the Seward House — a 30-room, cream-colored mansion full of history and luxury.

The gold parlor is lavishly decorated with an 1825 piano in the corner, a chandelier hanging in the center of the room and a silver tea set that Seward used with Abraham Lincoln in Washington, D.C. The gold-leaf armchairs around the room are the original chairs Seward had in Washington, where he would edit Lincoln’s speeches.

Through the 10-foot-tall doorway is the north library, where three of the walls are filled with books. Among the books are Seward’s oldest daughter’s diaries, in which she pressed wildflowers from Civil War battlefields, which her friends encased in their letters, letting her know they were safe.

Madison County is home to several.

A statue of a soldier on a pedestal stands on the green opposite of the post office in Peterboro. The monument was created in honor of the 10th New York Cavalry and was given by one of the men who served in the cavalry.

In addition to the monument, Peterboro has commemorated the war with an annual Civil War weekend, for about 15 years. The weekend will be Saturday and June 12. The event features reenactments, a general store, speakers, bands and children’s activities.

Getting there:
4608 Peterboro Road, Peterboro, between Canastota and Morrisville. (Follow signs for parking behind the firehouse.) Parking is free.

Cost: $7 adults; $3 for 6 to 12 year olds; children younger than 6 are free.

The cemeteries also bear signs other than graves of the war. The Madison Street Cemetery in Hamilton has two cannons from the Civil War around the graves of 10 to 12 Civil War soldiers.

Some of the graves are government-issued with only a picture of a waving flag, the soldier’s name, regiment, birthday and date of death. Some of the headstones have markers in the shape of a star, which signifies the soldier’s involvement with the Army of the Republic, a Civil War veterans group, said Sue Greenhagen, the creator of localhistory.morrisville.edu, a website dedicated to Central New York and Civil War monuments.

Getting there:
Madison Street Cemetery, Hamilton.

Cost: Free.

DR. MARY E. WALKER was the first woman to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for her work as a surgeon for Union troops during the Civil War. Her gravestone, along with a monument in her honor, are located in Oswego’s Rural Cemetery. It is the only grave in the cemetery surrounded by a white picket fence. Another Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, James Lee, is also buried in this cemetery.

OHA PROGRAM

WHAT: The Onondaga Historical Association hosts a program marking the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War.

WHERE: OHA Museum, 321 Montgomery St., Syracuse.

THE PROGRAMS:

7 p.m. Wednesday: John V. Quarstein, a Civil War historian and author, discusses the Battle of Big Bethel, which took place June 10, 1861.

7 p.m. Thursday: Patrick A. Schroeder, historian at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park, gives a talk called “Elmer E. Ellsworth and the 11th New York Fire Zouaves: Heroes or Humbugs?”

5:30 p.m. Friday: Tom Hunter, of the OHA museum, gives a talk called “Butler’s Zouaves and the Battle of Big Bethel, June 10, 1861.” The talk will be followed by a gallery tour.

ALSO: An exhibit of Civil War images called “Shadows of the Storm” opens in the OHA gallery June 8.

COST: Free.

JAMES LEE is one of two Congressional Medal of Honor recipients buried in Oswego’s Rural Cemetery. He was honored for his involvement in the sinking of the Alabama off Cherbourg, France, while aboard the USS Kearsarge in 1864. A monument and several of the family’s stones are pictured here.

There are more rooms visitors can explore and displays upstairs. A bedroom is dedicated to the Civil War and artifacts from the time, including the bloody sheet from the attempt to assassinate Seward on the same night Lincoln was killed. There are also flowers from Lincoln’s casket, old military weapons and uniforms.

Getting there: 33 South St., Auburn.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday; 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday (July 10 through Labor Day); closed major holidays.

Tour time: Allow 90 minutes. Tours leave every hour on the hour until 4 p.m.

Admission: $8 adults; $7 for AAA members, senior citizen and military; $5 students with ID; children younger than 6 are free.

Across from the Seward House is a monument with an engraving of a Union troop going to fight, dedicated to the Cayuga County soldiers and sailors of the Civil War. There is also a smaller stone monument with a poem written on it, honoring the First New York Independent Battery, which was involved in 36 Civil War battles, including the siege of Yorktown, Gettysburg and Appomattox Court House.

MADISON COUNTY

With New York providing more soldiers than any other state during the war, there are countless graves of soldiers and veterans from the Civil War and numerous monuments to honor them.
ONONDAGA COUNTY

In the heart of Syracuse in Clinton Square stands the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, a 71-foot granite monument that was dedicated June 21, 1910, in honor of the 12,000 men in the five battalions from Onondaga County who fought in the Civil War. The monument includes a list of all of the battles servicemen from the county fought in. It also has two large bronze- work pieces on opposite sides of the monument.

One side depicts “A call to arms” with an angel blowing a trumpet, above statues of men from the different military branches during the Civil War, including the infantry and cavalry.

The side shows a scene of a proud and brave moment for the county from the Civil War. It shows the 149th New York Volunteers at the battle of Gettysburg, particularly when Color Sgt. Lilly reached over a log embankment to retrieve the American flag and its broken staff. The statues show him creating a makeshift splint to hold the flag during battle, an important part of fighting during the Civil War.

A battalion’s flag was waved to give soldiers hope, show their location in case soldiers were separated while fighting and to tell other troops what side they were on, to prevent friendly fire. Soldiers were extremely proud of their flag, said Dennis Connors, curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association.

After the war, several flags came back to the county, and one is usually displayed in a case on the second floor of the county courthouse in Syracuse.

To get an idea of what Syracuse looked like during the Civil War, visit Hanover Square, where most, if not all, of the buildings date from the Civil War or before. When Lincoln was assassinated, his body was taken around the country for people to honor the president. When the train came to Syracuse, it stopped near Hanover Square, and thousands of people turned out.

**Cost:** Free

Skaneateles’ Lakeview Cemetery is the final resting place of Lt. Benjamin Porter, a young, highly recognized sailor. He graduated from the Naval Academy at 16, was taken prisoner by the Confederates, put in command of a Navy ship and fought in numerous battles, all before he was killed at the Battle of Fort Fisher at age 20.

**Getting there:** Lakeview Cemetery, Skaneateles.

**Cost:** Free.

OSWEGO COUNTY

Oswego County has more than 1,000 Civil War soldiers, doctors and sailors buried in its cemeteries — including two Congressional Medal of Honor recipients: Dr. Mary Walker and James Lee.

Walker was the first woman to be awarded the Medal of Honor for her work as a surgeon for Union troops. Her superiors refused to pay her or even hire her because of her gender, so she worked as a volunteer in Washington, D.C., for most of her military career during the Civil War. She was finally hired in 1864 under a civilian contract as the assistant surgeon for the 52nd Ohio volunteers, where she was captured and taken prisoner for four months, according to the National Library of Medicine.

Lee received the medal for his involvement in the sinking of the Alabama off Cherbourg, France, on June 19, 1864. He was on the USS Kearsarge and was recognized for his “gallant- ry under fire” and his ability to remain calm, according to the U.S. Army Center of Military History.

You can visit both Walker’s and Lee’s graves in Rural Cemetery in Oswego. Lee has three plots: a family one, his personal site and a military one. He is buried about 100 yards southwest of Walker’s plot, which is the only grave in the cemetery to have a white picket fence around it.

**Getting there:** 242 Cemetery Road, Oswego.

**Admission:** Free.

Oswego County is also home to a 15-foot monument honoring the soldiers who fought in the Civil War. The granite monument is a sculpture of a Civil War soldier in full uniform, holding a rifle on top of a pedestal. It faces east in Washington Square in the city of Oswego and was given by the Daughters of Union Veterans about 85 years ago, said Justin White, Oswego County historian.

**Getting there:** Washington Square; cross streets are East Second and East Fourth streets, East Bridge and East Oneida streets, city of Oswego.