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Onondaga Community College looks to help old cemetery on its campus

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Dick Case / Post-Standard columnist
By



Ellen M. Blalock/The Post-Standard

General Ellis Cemetery is an old cemetery on property owned by Onondaga Community College. The college has said it wants to take on more of a role to preserve the cemetery.

Debbie Sydow, president of Onondaga Community College, has a bit of unfinished business as the school prepares to observe its 50th anniversary.

It's a little piece of land in the northeast section of the college property: General Ellis Cemetery.

OCC's on a small run, what with the 50th and dedication of H-1, the former county infirmary across Route 173, as a Regional Higher Education Center. Also, the college was awarded a medal by Onondaga Historical Association last week for its contributions to local history.

Another's in the offing, Debbie Sydow told me last week. She's giving serious thought to "taking more responsibility for keeping the public awareness" of the cemetery.

The first step has already been taken. The Town of Onondaga historian, Jane Tracy, and the folks at Pomeroy Foundation, worked together to put up a new historical marker next to the cemetery, on Route 173.

Debbie said she will work with Jane Tracy in a plan to restore the cemetery, where most of the gravestones are broken or buried. She said she's visited the burial ground with Jane Tracy.

The cemetery is the final resting place of one of our earliest settlers, John Ellis, who came to the wilderness that was Central New York in the 1780s, from Massachusetts. He was a general in the Onondaga militia and a veteran of the Revolutionary War.



Ellis settled first in Manlius. In 1798, he moved to the Town of Onondaga, buying a lot of 250 acres for a farm.



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A blue historical marker has been put up along Route 173 in the town of Onondaga to mark the General Ellis Cemetery. It's near an entrance to the Onondaga Community College.

These high lands were the choice for our first county seat. Onondaga Hill was a preferred site, over tiny Syracuse, because of the foul and unhealthy swamps in the lowlands south of Onondaga Lake. Onondaga Hill had our first courthouse, in 1803, on what was planned as a "village square."

The center of government later was moved to Syracuse, a sputtering village on the new Erie

Canal.

We could look out on the historic spires of that village that became a city when Jane Tracy and I visited the cemetery in 2008.

Onondaga Community College opened with its first classes downtown in September 1962. It moved to the Onondaga Hill campus in 1972 and started classes the next year.

The college inherited the cemetery in taking over what had been the old county farm. The lot, in front of the burial ground, was where John Ellis built his home, which was described by one historian as "the finest in the town at that time. It commanded a wonderful view to the north."

John Ellis died in 1820 and the farm passed to his son, also John Ellis, who farmed the land until 1840. Jane Tracy records the last private owner as Henry Welch, who sold the farm of about 135 acres to Onondaga County in 1909. The house later was an American Legion post until it was demolished by the county in 1957.

During our visit, Jane Tracy and I found a disheveled graveyard. The stones for the graves of John Ellis and his wife, Submit, leaned against a fence, which survives, remarkably, after all these years. The town of Onondaga mows the plot twice a year.

The farm was used by Onondaga County to raise food for the poorhouse, across the road. It was closed in the 1960s. The 1827 poorhouse also was torn down by the county in 1998.

OCC also inherited the remains of Syracuse's early water supply, a 14-acre body of water known as "Pogey Pond." The springs and pond were



Credit: Onondaga Historical Association

John Ellis in 1798 moved to the Town of Onondaga, buying a lot of 250 acres for a farm. This is his homestead on Onondaga Hill dated 1811.

abandoned when the city tapped Skaneateles Lake as its main water supply in 1894. Folks who lived at the poorhouse were called "old pogeys" by some people.

Jane Tracy and I agree: these fragments of our history need to be recognized by the college. Debbie Sydow said she plans to do this.

Yikes!

Two sentences jumped out at me from my colleague Emily Kulkus' story about the last day at the Benderson Center. The city closed the center because it couldn't afford the \$120,000 annual rent. The mayor said the decision saddened her but it had to be done.

Emily reported that Mayor Stephanie Miner met with supporters Friday and said her decision was final.

She quoted the mayor as saying unfortunately, it's only the beginning of tough times for a city in a "dire fiscal crisis."

The mayor added "This is a small issue compared to what's coming down the pike."

Pray that Stephanie explains what she meant by that.

Dick Case writes Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Reach him at 470-2254, or by e-mail, dcase@syracuse.com.

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