

## LOCAL NEWS

## BLACK HISTORY MONTH

# BLACKS SERVED ON NAVY VESSEL USS ONONDAGA

African-Americans served in the U.S. Navy throughout the early decades of the 19th century, but their numbers increased during the Civil War. Unlike the Army, where blacks served in specific "Colored" units, a ship's crew had to be more integrated.

The first ironclad introduced during the war with two revolving turrets, mounting four guns instead of just two, was the USS Onondaga, launched in 1863. Historians still debate the origin of its name, but several ironclads commissioned in this era used the identity of Native American tribes for inspiration.

The USS Onondaga's December 1864 muster role lists at least 18 African-Americans in its crew. Most were young, with no former experience at sea, so were officially ranked as a landsman — the lowest entry-level position. Others, as reflective of the era, were assigned as cooks or, if teenagers, usually as cabin boys. A Baltimore cabinet maker named Benjamin Jackson, how-



Courtesy of Onondaga Historical Association

**THE USS Onondaga, launched in 1863.**

ever, was ranked as a carpenter.

The 2,592-ton, 226-foot long Onondaga saw action against Confederate naval forces on the James River in Virginia. It was declared surplus after the war and sold to France in 1867, where it was scrapped in 1904.

An exquisitely detailed scale model of the USS Onondaga is in the collection of the Onondaga Historical Association along with a copy of the original muster role.

— From Dennis Connors, curator of history,  
Onondaga Historical Association