

Civil War-era ship has an ironclad connection with Syracuse

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By



Photo courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command

USS Onondaga on the James River, Virginia, in 1864-65.

How does Syracuse connect to the USS Monitor, the famous Civil War ironclad ship?

The Monitor's been in the news recently as historians try to identify two skeletons found in the ship's turret when it sunk in a gale in 1862, with the loss of 16 men. The ironclad was rediscovered deep in the Atlantic Ocean back in 1973. Images of the reconstructed faces of the two crewmen were released to assist identification.

The USS Onondaga was another ironclad ship built during the Civil War. It survived and later was sold to France. The Onondaga, according to the Onondaga Historical Association, was the first of its class with two revolving turrets and four guns instead of two. It was launched in 1863 and saw action during the war on the James River in Virginia.

We're told the Onondaga got its name from Charles B. Sedgwick, a congressman from Syracuse who chaired the influential naval affairs committee during the war. His daughter, Nellie, christened the ship July 29, 1863 at Brooklyn.

The ironclads were the objects of controversy during the war. John Ericsson was widely believed to be the inventor of the revolving gun turret. Actually, the turret was patented in January 1843 by Theodore R. Timby, a Syracusan, who said he got the idea from the battery in New York harbor.

According to Dennis Connors, curator of history at Onondaga Historical Association, the muster roll of the USS Onondaga listed at least 18 African-American sailors in the crew. "Most were young, with no former experience at sea, so were officially ranked as landsmen."

The Onondaga was 2,592 tons and 226-feet long. It was declared surplus after the war and sold to France. The craft was built entirely of iron. She was constructed for fighting, not speed or beauty. A smokepipe poked through the deck and sailors slept below. Often the crew's laundry was draped over the upper cables.

Canastota wagon?

Directors of the Canastota Canal Town are looking for a Watson Wagon, made by a company that thrived in the

community in the early 20th century.

The wagon had a dumping feature. The factory in Canastota was the largest dumping wagon plant in the world, according to Joseph DiGiorgio, president of the Canal Town board. In 2010, the president says directors were offered a Watson Wagon that turned out to be one built by another company. They're still looking for an authentic Watson bottom-dumping wagon.

The president said plans are proceeding for a May 5 dedication of a building on South Peterboro Street in the village in front of the Skate Park. "This site will demonstrate the history and development of the Watson Wagon Co.," DiGiorgio said.

406 Danforth St.

A while back, I wrote about 406 Danforth St., a North Side landmark in need of rehabilitation. I wrote about the late 1800s Italianate-style house as one of the 1,900 vacant properties in Syracuse. It's been empty for years and is owned by a woman in Yonkers. No taxes have been paid since 2008.

Paul Saucier called me about the column. About a year and a-half ago, Paul said he noticed a "For Sale" sign in front of the house. When he inquired about the selling price, he was told it was \$49,900.

"I'm told the whole interior has been gutted," Paul explained. "Right down to the studs. It needs a lot of work, but the bones are beautiful."

No. 406 was home of the Murrays, who owned extensive lands where salt was mined. Catherine Murray, when she died in 1908, was said to be one of the wealthiest women in the city. She ran the salt companies she owned.

Toni's score

Last week, I wrote about Nat and Eileen Tobin, and their plans to run two free screenings of the Italian film classic, "Cinema Paradiso," as a 20th anniversary tribute April 1 at their Manlius Art Cinema. They mentioned an inspirational headline on the column I did about the movie house, "He's Living Cinema Paradiso."

Reporters and columnists do not write their own headlines for The Post-Standard — editors do. My colleague Toni Guidice stepped out from behind the curtain for a well-earned round of applause last week, from the Tobins and me, as author of the memorable headline. Toni knew enough about films to know that "Cinema Paradiso" is about a projectionist's friendship with the film's director in a small town in Italy.

Maybe just like Manlius? Thanks, Toni, from your fans.

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