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Future uncertain for ruins of stone arsenal built in Syracuse for War of 1812

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**Dick Case / Post-Standard columnist**
By

David Lassman / The Post-Standard

Tim Ryan walks through the ruins of Onondaga Arsenal off East Seneca Turnpike in Syracuse. It was built to house munitions during the War of 1812.

Syracuse's only remnant of the War of 1812 – we're now observing its 200th anniversary – lies hidden in a grove of trees off of the East Seneca Turnpike hill in the Valley neighborhood.

The Onondaga Arsenal is a neglected relic of a forgotten war in a patch of woods behind a row of homes on Arsenal Drive, just off the turnpike. It's been there since 1812, crumbling away. Only one section of limestone wall, the northeast corner, remains. The rest fell down or was pulled down over time.

Tim Ryan is an Arsenal Drive neighbor and one of a handful of Syracusans who care about the arsenal, which once stood by itself on the brow of a hill.

This retired U.S. Navy veteran, and his son, Charlie, now a CBA high school senior, excavated the hidden basement of the aged leftover of what had been a three-story building, over five years. He gave up because he couldn't raise any interest in saving the arsenal.

"I just wanted to get in touch with the arsenal," Tim explains.

His family home, where he lives today, is at the bottom of Arsenal Drive, which rises sharply from Monticello Drive South. Tim grew up in the house, left for a career in the Navy, then returned. He says the basement of the home dates to 1808 and once was suggested as a site for the arsenal. It was rejected as "too low" and the arsenal went up on a higher property, with an outlook on the community of Onondaga Hollow.



"I used to play around the arsenal when I was growing up," Tim says. "I knew Mrs. House." That's Lucy House, who lived in the so-called "cannon house" on the Seneca Turnpike hill. She died in



Onondaga Historical Association

An 1880s photograph of the Onondaga Arsenal off East Seneca Turnpike in Syracuse.

1971 at the age of 102. The small abandoned cemetery near the home was used by the House family.

One of the challenges of the arsenal is deciding who owns the property.

Dave Clifford, the Syracuse assessment commissioner, said the arsenal is recorded as a "vacant parcel" of land, 1.5 acres, and is tax

delinquent to the tune of \$14,500. The owner is listed as Onondaga Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, which got title from the state in the 1920s. The original idea was to preserve the arsenal but the chapter had to settle for placing a bronze tablet on a boulder in a tiny park nearby.

The tax bills, however, used to go to Ralph Cleveland of Baldwinsville, who once claimed he owned the arsenal. I spoke to Ralph last week; he told me he hasn't paid the taxes in years and only did "to keep it away from someone doing something foolish with it. It belongs to New York State, as far as I know."

"It's a genuine part of our heritage," according to Dave Clifford of city assessment.

Tim Ryan wanted to do some digging at the arsenal site. He contacted Carol Greene of Bridgeport, a regent of the Danforth Chapter of the DAR at the time. She gave him permission to excavate.



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Metal artifacts found in the ruins of Onondaga Arsenal along East Seneca Turnpike in Syracuse.

Tim and his son removed soil and chunks of limestone from the basement in plastic buckets. Their work revealed a stone foundation with a stone partition down the middle. They left a tall maple tree that's grown up inside the arsenal over time. The corner of the structure looms menacingly; a large chunk of limestone at the top of the wall sits precariously.

"Yes, we found there was a basement," Tim explains, standing in the cellar hole one morning last week. We'd crawled up a steep hillside behind the home of a friendly neighbor to get to the site. Tim calls himself "a frustrated archaeologist." He said real archaeologists from Syracuse University have contacted him; he plans to take them on a tour next week. He toured history buffs during a Town of Onondaga Historical Society

event a few years ago.

Tim says another neighbor's complaint brought city building inspectors to his dig a while back. The neighbor had said he had heavy equipment at the arsenal; that was not true, he said. The inspector suggested he get a permit and take down the remaining wall as a hazard.

The Onondaga Historical Association has an oar in this muddy water, also. Back in the 1980s, OHA board members visited the arsenal but ultimately rejected the idea of owning the site. The tax bill was too much and city councilors

refused to forgive it.

Dennis Connors, curator of history at the association, owns a huge file on the landmark which he says tells a "long, tortuous story." Dennis wrote an article for the current OHA newsletter: "The Sad Saga of the Onondaga Arsenal."

His conclusion: "Upon reaching its 200th anniversary, the Onondaga Arsenal stubbornly refuses to disappear. The location and potential ownership, however, remain real challenges for any future public access... Certainly, as a minimum, the arsenal location holds value as an archaeological site worth investigating."

Dennis will present a paper about the arsenal at a War of 1812 conference in Kingston, Ontario in October.

He has suggested, in the past, that the arsenal be declared a protected Syracuse landmark.

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

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