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Onondaga Arsenal, potentially the last best local remnant of War of 1812, remains greatly overlooked

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By



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

Dennis Connors spent the weekend explaining to an audience in Kingston, Ont. why there's nothing left of the 1812 Onondaga Arsenal but a small corner of the original building.

He spoke at a conference on "Putting the War of 1812 into Regional Context" sponsored by the Kingston Historical Society. Dennis is curator of **history** at our Onondaga Historical Association.

Another member of the association staff, Matthew MacVittle, also spoke at Kingston. His topic was the "Third U.S. Artillery and the Battle of Oswego, 1814."

One of the challenges of building the arsenal, which was authorized by the governor in 1811, was that it was not put on the original site purchased by the state from the Longstreet family, according to Dennis. "Nonetheless, construction proceeded, " according to Dennis' paper.

A prominent resident of nearby Onondaga Hollow, Jasper Hopper, was responsible for the construction.

This move of the site, not far away from the deeded location, would, in later years, "become a dark cloud that persistently hung over the poor building for 200 years; perhaps, in part, preserving the site in some odd way for us today," in Dennis' words, "but at the same time, allowing for a remarkable series of stumbles in trying to save the arsenal building as an historical landmark."

The arsenal at Onondaga was one of three documented by the curator — the others at Watertown and Canandaigua. The buildings, according to Dennis, were generally built of stone or bricks, with a "large doorway, capable of allowing the entry of a cart or small field-artillery piece, ... placed at one of the shorter ends. **Windows** were arranged symmetrically along the façade."

War was formally declared in June of 1812 and, according to Dennis, "residents of Onondaga Hollow must have felt a bit more secure with the well-stocked and sturdy stone arsenal overlooking their homes and churches." It was stocked, he explained, with arms that included 400 muskets and bayonets, plus "two drums and two fifes."

There was a mock wooden cannon mounted to the roof.

Onondaga Arsenal was regularly used as a supply depot for troops using Seneca Turnpike for travel to the Niagara Frontier and Sackets Harbor. In 1850, all of the frontier arsenals were declared **surplus** by the state. Onondaga's was sold to one Albert Hudson. Hudson did not actually buy the arsenal, which was on an adjacent parcel of land. In later years, Mrs. Hamilton House claimed the land and the arsenal were hers.

The **picture of** ownership, as Dennis chronicles, was complicated when the Onondaga chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, or DAR, entered the ownership fray. A local state senator, Horace White, sponsored a bill deeding the land to the chapter. Still, as Dennis explains, the land was not where the arsenal stood. Later, the city listed the DAR as owners.

The issue of preserving the arsenal came up again and again over the years. The structure itself continued to deteriorate.

Land **surveys** were ordered. Trustees of the Onondaga Historical Association showed temporary interest, but backed off because of the costs of restoration and the land title issue. Access to the arsenal site was another issue.

The present reality, Dennis concludes, indicates "no new effort to develop and restore the arsenal site will likely occur during the remaining years of this Bicentennial" of the War of 1812.

The only hope, he continued, is to designate the arsenal a City of Syracuse Protected Site under its Historical Preservation Ordinance. He suggests the city could seize the property for back taxes to clear the way for an archaeological survey by Syracuse University experts in 2013 or 2014. Tim Ryan, a nearby property owner who has championed the arsenal recently, has been told that SU does plan such a survey.

"With the arrival of the War of 1812 Bicentennial, perhaps the Greater Syracuse community can finally rally its forces to, at least,, thoroughly document its most tangible and stubborn remnant from the War of 1812," Dennis said in his conference paper.

I wrote a column about Tim Ryan's interest in the arsenal ruins in May. He calls himself a "frustrated archaeologist" with no formal training. He's excavated a portion of the arsenal basement but gave up for lack of interest from the community.

I called Tim last week to ask what's up with the arsenal. "Nothing going on," he replied.

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