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**GREGG TRIPOLI**, executive director of the Onondaga Historical Association, stands in the stacks at 321 Montgomery St., in Syracuse. The OHA is celebrating its 150th year this year.

# Connecting With History

Onondaga Historical Association celebrates 150 years

**By Maureen Nolan**  
Staff writer

It was 1862, the Civil War was under way and the founders of Syracuse and other local communities were dying off or gone.

History was washing in, history was washing out and in recognition, the powerful people of the day created an organization to preserve what it could: the Onondaga Historical Association.

The association celebrates its 150th anniversary this year. It will hold a jubilee celebration and fundraiser Friday built around the Emancipation Proclamation, issued the same year the association began.

The association's main mission is education and its research center is a go-to resource for people doing serious study or the merely curious. Its museum is fun for people, whether they are history buffs and scholars or not.

The building is a repository of stories, because history is made of great stories that people need to know, said association Executive Director Gregg Tripoli, who has guided the organization through a period of major change since he assumed the job nearly five years ago.

These days, the association tells the stories through tweets, oral history projects, exhibits at local businesses and on placemats in a restaurant near the association museum, offices and research center at 321 Montgomery St. Stories can unite the community, Tripoli said.



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**THIS IS** one of the permanent exhibits on display at the Onondaga Historical Association. See a photo gallery from the Onondaga Historical Association at [syracuse.com/photos](http://syracuse.com/photos).

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# OHA exposure has been skyrocketing

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“Just as your history really defines you as a person, our community’s history defines us. And that is something that we share, that is collective. That’s something that we can all claim. That’s something that we can all rally around,” he said.

Tripoli, who says he came to the job as a regular guy with a business bent, not an academic with his nose in the archives, opened up the bricked-in front windows to invite the public in and to show off a new gift shop. It includes lines of items made for the museum, for instance, T-shirts bearing historic logos and ads from long-gone Syracuse breweries.

“When Greg was brought on board, one of the goals that was put in place was to increase OHA’s relevance and visibility in the community,” association board President Tom Burton said.

That’s happened, Burton said.

The research center has been expanded and improved to be brighter and more user-friendly. The association now earns money by developing exhibits for local businesses and organ-

izations that tell their part in the history of Onondaga County. The museum exhibits change instead of relying primarily on permanent exhibits, which gives visitors a reason to return or to stop in for the first time.

With help from community members, the association is collecting the stories of local African-Americans in its Black History Preservation Project.

Attendance has been rising in recent years, and in 2012, annual attendance shot up 246 percent over the previous year, Tripoli said.

The audience the museum reaches beyond its walls, through outreach, also jumped 63 percent, to 332,755. That includes, for example, reaching people with exhibits on the Onondaga County Public Library, at Syracuse Stage and through articles in magazines.

“That number will dramatically increase in the coming year as we expand into documentaries and television programming with PBS as well as films we are producing for Onondaga County school districts,” Tripoli said.

The association, which has an annual budget of about \$1 million and a staff of about a

dozen, gets its money from government grants, the revenue it raises through the outreach ventures, gift shop and donations, which are on the rise, Burton said.

So is the combined value of the association’s investments and endowment, which has increased by about \$455,000 to about \$2.1 million over the last four years, Tripoli said.

The association, in partnership with the Onondaga Nation, among others, is making history of its own, Tripoli and Burton said. It is taking over a museum now known as the Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois and converting it to tell the history of Central New York’s natives, the Haudenosaunee, also referred to as the Iroquois Confederacy.

Partners in the project include Onondaga County, Le Moyne College and Syracuse University.

“The notion of having a Haudenosaunee center like that is historic globally, but it certainly is historic locally. So from a mission standpoint, we’re touching more people and telling more stories than ever before,” Burton said. Contact Maureen Nolan at 470-2185 or [mnolan@syracuse.com](mailto:mnolan@syracuse.com).

### The founders

Here are a few of the citizens who founded the Onondaga Historical Association 150 years ago:

**Dr. Henry D. Didama.**

Physician who was active in several Central New York medical associations and was on the staff at St. Joseph's hospital from its founding. He eventually became chief of staff and would have worked with Mother Marianne Cope, who was recently officially recognized as a saint by the Roman Catholic Church.

**James Noxon.** Lawyer, later judge of the New York State Supreme Court and a former New York state senator.

**Homer DeLois Sweet.**

Surveyor, civil engineer. Edited important atlas of Onondaga County in 1874 and produced a major map of the Adirondacks. Also known for his poetry.

**John A. Green.** Successful wholesale grocery businessman and a brigadier general in the New York National Guard. He is buried in one of the largest mausoleums in Oakwood Cemetery.

Source: Dennis Connors,  
OHA curator of history