

# Easter Sunday, Syracuse, 1884: 'The quick, sharp beating of horses' hoofs ...'



The intersection of South Salina and Fayette streets, 1890. (Onondaga [Historical Association](#) | submitted photo)

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*Thursday, while searching for **Easter rituals and traditions of Syracuse** in the files of the **Onondaga Historical Association**, I stumbled into this clip from *The Syracuse Standard* of April 14, 1884. It offered extraordinary detail for that period - the piece carried no byline - and it captured a vivid snapshot of the city, exactly 130 Easter Sundays ago. I read it with great interest until the writer began insulting "laboring men and their wives," whom he described as grotesque - which basically refers to the people who raised me and shaped my sensibilities.*

*Still, the initial and [general description](#) is so unusual ... and offers such a vivid impression of another time (how about the saloons opening early on an Easter morning?) ... that I thought you might appreciate it, this weekend:*

**THE GLAD SONGS OF EASTER**  
**April 14, 1884**

The long, bare, silent streets of the city gleamed bright and dry (Easter) morning as the sun rose dazzling in a clear blue sky. In wide strips, the pavements of the deserted thoroughfares were darkened with the shadows of tall buildings, and in contrast the illuminated stretches of the street seemed to reflect back the shining sunlight. Windows glistened, gilt signs glittered, and in the stores enormous curtains of blue or olive or soft [shades of brown](#) glowed in the intense white rays.

Away from the business sections of the city, the shadows were mostly those of tall, gaunt trees. [Private houses](#) basked in the universal radiance. Robins sang. There was a feeling of warmth. The turf was a pale fresh green, and the air was faintly tintured with the fragrance of verdure.

The clattering bells of milkmen, the walk of some stray pedestrian, and the shrill cries of newsboys alone broke the stillness of the morning. At 8 o'clock there was considerable life in the streets, but the city still seemed hushed. The barber shops, the [cigar stores](#) and the newsrooms opened and received small knots of men. Boot blacks stood on the corners, soliciting patronage. The curtains in most of the saloons were up, and in some of the doorways stood clean-shaven bartenders, with well-oiled hair and clean aprons. The number of pedestrians gradually increased, and at 10 o'clock the sidewalks were thronged with well-dressed people on their way to church.



[Downtown Syracuse](#), 1800s. Onondaga Historical Association | submitted photo

The gait of the crowd had lost that nervous briskness which characterizes it on weekdays. The relaxation was so marked that there was a tendency to loiter. For the time being, there was a complete change of ideas in the men and women who composed the crowd. Contracted brows were smoothed and hard-

set mouths lost their rigidity. There was a sparkle of fresh life in the eyes. There seemed to be a disposition, in some classes, to discard overcoats and wraps.

The squeaking and scraping of thousands of shoes striking the stone walks, the quick, sharp beating of horses' hoofs on the pavement, the crack of liveried coachmen's whips, the muffled rumble of elegant equipages, the tolling of rich-toned bells all over the city filled the streets with sounds which seemed distinctly to belong to Sunday. Gaily dressed children with bright colored stockings and red cheeks; young women radiant in new spring bonnets and stylish costumes; sedate businessmen in silk hats and rich, well-fitting garments; servant girls adorned in gaudy hues and clasping prayer books in their thick hands; faultlessly attired young men with sleek spring overcoats and glitteringly polished shoes; aristocratic ladies, whose most marked characteristics were sensitive, high-bred features, their satiny complexions and their quiet elegance of dress; laboring men and their wives, more or less grotesquely clad, with ungainly forms, dull faces, and a slow, plodding gait; fresh young girls with smiling faces, and whose willow frames were encased in a combination of graceful apparel presenting a combination of splendid tints; together with people so commonplace as have no distinguishing mark but their plainness, walked and sauntered to the churches, and silently filled the great solemn buildings, where the air trembled with organ strains ...

*That's an impression of Easter morning, 1884. I cut it off here, because the piece veered into a long, exact description of many church services. Feel free to leave your thoughts here or email me at [skirst@syracuse.com](mailto:skirst@syracuse.com).*