

Onondaga historical association's HISTORY

OHA

highlights

fall 2003

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FREEDOM BOUND

The Story of Syracuse and the Underground Railroad

On September 10, 2003, OHA staged a Grand Opening for its new cutting edge exhibit on the history of Anti-Slavery and Underground Railroad Activity in Onondaga County, "Freedom Bound". The reception was attended by all who helped make the exhibit possible including the Funders; the cast and production company of the Jerry Rescue Video; the OHA Underground Railroad Advisory Committee, members of OHA's Board; significant personalities in the city including Mayor Matthew Driscoll; and of course, the staff who did the work! A presentation was made of a \$2,200.00 check from the Underground Railroad Committee of the Southwest Community Center. Special visitors included the Nelson and Henderson families, direct descendants of Frank Wanzer, the fugitive slave depicted as a central character in the "Freedom Bound" exhibit.

This exhibition features state of the art exhibit gallery, a dramatic and exciting object theater presentation with sight and sound effects, the seven carved "faces" recovered from the basement of Syracuse's 1846 Wesleyan Methodist Church, and a compelling video presentation of the "Jerry Rescue". All of these elements work together to create a message that resonates with the emotional and dramatic stories of fugitive slaves seeking freedom as well as the story of those in Syracuse who risked all to help these fugitives reach freedom through the Underground Railroad. The exhibit's powerful message is in direct alignment with OHA's mission to help citizens of today understand our history so that it can help us with current issues.

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FREEDOM BOUND
the Story of the
Syracuse & the
Underground
Railroad

Slavery or Freedom...
Syracuse Joins a
National Confrontation

"Slavery is the greatest curse on earth. Nothing
worse is in the catalogue. I die in the South
rather than living here before the slave."

— Isaac Griffin (from Kennedy diary, 1852)

The history and nature of slavery has long been
an American shame. Slavery became deeply woven
into America's cultural and economic fabric. When the
nation was born in 1776, the founders believed in
human freedom for all its residents. Slavery remained
legal in all original states, including New York.

In the North, the economic advantages of slavery rapidly
disappeared, becoming more opposition led many Northern
states to end slavery. In the South, however, a large expansion in
cotton production increased the financial value and profitability of
slavery. In addition, the influx of African Americans as bondage
required use of forced and more laws, long traditions of racism
and hard physical labor.

As a result, in the North free against slavery, the nation
led a growing division. The actions of both black and
white citizens in and around Syracuse would propel their
community into the center of this momentous struggle.



Thomas Lewis

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

This issue of History highlights celebrates a wonderful achievement for OHA, the opening of the new exhibit "Freedom Bound". The public reception has been enthusiastic, the publicity provided by The Post-Standard and other media has been fantastic and now we must turn the exhibit to the community's, and OHA's, advantage. We will do this for the community through our education programming and community dialogues and for OHA by launching a massive membership drive and our annual Lion's Share Appeal. Please encourage any in your circle of friends that are not members to join or contribute to OHA, you are our best ambassadors!

This brings me to a related point, volunteers. We need more volunteers badly. In order to capitalize on the tremendous interest generated by the new exhibit, we need help. In this time of difficult economic conditions, volunteers are our only option to stretch staff. We need people to do everything from answering phones, to act as museum guides, to work as carpenters, painters, general handymen to help refurbish spaces in the building and perform other custodial duties. We could also use people in our local history education program, to help us with our cataloguing project in the Research Center and people to help out with or give lectures, walking tours, lunchtime programming. Not to mention OHA is in need of a Volunteer Director.

OHA enjoys a loyal and generous membership. I ask those of you that are able to be generous with your time, talents and skills as well. Thank you.


Paul H. Pflanz



OHA LIVING HISTORY

On September 20, 2003, OHA participated in the slave ship Amistad America's visit to Oswego Harbor by providing our Drama Troupe in costume to entertain visitors to the ship. Various presentations were offered relating to the Underground Railroad period and materials promoting OHA's new exhibit "Freedom Bound" were distributed. Our performers interacted with visitors and were featured on the stage. Director Pflanz participated in the opening ceremonies. The OHA Drama Troupe parents group led by Debra Boddie arranged our participation.

Vanessa Johnson, OHA Education Director also presented a interactive dramatic tour of Oakwood Cemetery. "The Soft Whispers of Ancestors - Abolitionists

Buried in Oakwood Cemetery" on September 28 using the performers from the OHA Drama Troupe to portray Rev Jermain Loguen, Edmonia Highgate, Rev. Samuel May and other abolitionist and Underground Railroad figures.



Top: The OHA Drama Troupe poses in front of the slave ship Amistad.

Left: Parent Debra Boddie supports Drama Troupe onstage.

Above right: Parent Jennifer Straludice, daughter Katlin and volunteer Linda Pflanz hand out OHA information to visitors.



Members of the Nelson and Henderson families gather at the reception for the "Freedom Bound" grand opening celebration.

Continued from page one

Through a highly immersive experience, the exhibit tells how slaves made the decision to escape, leaving behind family and the only world they knew, for a chance for freedom. This wonderful story illustrates the courage and determination of these fugitives led by a man named Frank Wanzer who had to fight their way out of Virginia to escape the slave catchers. Visitors meet local abolitionists led by stationmaster Rev. Jermain Loguen. The exhibit interprets the character of the African-American community in the Syracuse area before the Civil War showing the vital role this group played in the success of local Underground Railroad activities.

The second major element is a dramatic, first-person video interpretation of the watershed Jerry Rescue of 1851, a Syracuse anti-slavery event that resounded throughout the country, even inside the very walls of the White House. This dramatic presentation is told through the person of Lucy Watkins as interviewed by a reporter of the Syracuse Standard in the 1880's.



OHA/Exhibit Hours

*Wednesday - Friday 12-4
Saturday & Sunday 11-4*



Top: Elsie Phillips makes a donation to the OHA on behalf of the Underground Railroad Committee of the Southwest Community Center

Above left: OHA Executive Director Paul Pflanz and Syracuse Mayor Matt Driscoll comment on the successful debut of the "Freedom Bound" exhibition.

Left and above right: Guests enjoying the interactive and visually dramatic aspects of the exhibit.



Newly elected OHA Board of Directors President
J. Warren Young.

NEW OHA PRESIDENT ELECTED

Onondaga Historical Association is pleased to announce the election of J. Warren Young as President of the Board of Directors at the June 25, 2003 OHA Board Meeting. Warren is Vice President of Straub, Young & Stout, Inc., Benefit Plan Specialists. Warren joined the OHA Board in 2002 and is a trustee of the Episcopal Diocese of Central New York as well as a member of the Executive committee of the SUNY Environmental Sciences & Forestry Foundation. Warren holds a B. A. Degree from Williams College. Warren has a great passion for things historical and a strong commitment to continue OHA's development.

We also welcome three new OHA Board of Directors members; Patricia S. Edwards, Vice President of the Crouse Hospital Auxiliary and the North Syracuse Board of Education and a member of the Crouse Hospital Foundation, Friends of the Central Library and CONTACT; Marilyn R. Higgins, Vice President of Economic Development and Community Development at Niagara Mohawk, a National Grid Company, board member of the NYS Economic Development Council, chair of the Syracuse Neighborhood Initiative Development Board, former recipient of The Post-Standard Woman of Achievement, Rhea Ekel Clark Citizenship Award, Spirit of American Women Award and SUNY's Distinguished Alumni Award, and holder of a B.S. in Political Science from Oswego State University; Vito J. Sciscioli, retired City of Syracuse Director of Operations, Chair of Housing Visions, Inc., President of Home Headquarters, Inc., Vice-Chairman of Syracuse Industrial Development Agency, board member of The Salvation Army, Syracuse! Housing Authority, University United Methodist Church, and holder of a B. A. from St. John Fisher and a M. P. A. from Syracuse University.

History Highlights

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J. Warren Young, President

Paul H. Pflanz, Executive Director

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or email us at:
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