

Onondaga Citizens League  
2012 Study Committee Notes—Meeting on April 10, 2012

*Meeting held at the PEC, 605 James St., Syracuse*

*Attendees:* Hari Adhikari; Mark Cass, Felicia Castricone, Elizabeth Allen, Ginny Felleman, Karen Kitney, Susan Linerode, Don MacLaughlin, Helen Malina, Sarah McIlvain, Paul Ariik, Brian Moore, Peter Sarver, Lois Schroeder, John Scott, Tashia Thomas, Nancy Zarach.

*Invited speaker:* Dennis Connors, curator of history at Onondaga Historical Association

*Co-chairs:* Heidi Holtz, Kristen Heath

*OCL:* Sandra Barrett, Becky Sernett

### **Summary**

At the third Onondaga Citizens League (OCL) 2012 Study Committee meeting, Onondaga Historical Association's curator of history, Dennis Connors, presented a lecture that offered a historical perspective of Central New York's immigrant story from the late 18th century to modern times. The focus area subcommittee list with assigned members was distributed, and committee chairs invited more members to sign up for a subcommittee (or subcommittees) of interest. Kristen announced a schedule for when subcommittees would present their discussion, findings and ideas to the larger group. To give the crime and safety subcommittee more time, no date has yet been set for its presentation.

The presentations on the focus areas are scheduled as follows:

May 8—Literacy and Education

May 23—Economic Opportunities and Jobs

June 12—Health

June 27—Housing

We are hopeful the subcommittees will meet to plan these presentations.

The next whole-group meeting will be on Wednesday, April 25 at 12 Noon at the United Way at 518 James St., Syracuse; refugee resettlement agencies will present a detailed overview of how they help refugees.

### **“Welcoming Community”—A Historical Perspective**

Dennis Connors, the curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association, offered members a detailed and insightful lecture on the immigrant story in Syracuse (and its neighboring communities) and offered thoughtful perspectives on what the biggest challenges immigrants (or refugees, in particular, as this is the population the study is investigating) face today.

He began the presentation by discussing the area's “pioneer settlers” (British, Scottish, Irish, Germans, some free African Americans and some slave African Americans, among others) in the late 1700s and early 1800s, and took us through the later half of the 1800s when native German and Irish immigrants exceeded any natural-born United States citizens in the Syracuse area. He discussed the prejudice immigrants faced and their living and working conditions. Most immigrants at this time could “walk off the boat” and get a job. Manufacturing was at its peak, and the salt fields provided the Irish community, in particular, with employment. This doesn't mean, though, it was necessarily easy.

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Still, many immigrants stepped into roles within local government and community groups, and the city and county politics encouraged such involvement. Politicians wanted registered voters as their supporters, and to become a registered voter, an immigrant had to become a citizen. So how immigrants assimilated into the local culture was in part nurtured by the politics of the time. Also, within a generation or two, immigrants were more fully “assimilated”; ethnic neighborhoods shifted and changed, and as new immigrants came into Syracuse, more established groups moved further into the suburbs.

French Canadians moved in the area around the 1900s, as did Jewish immigrants, particularly from Russia, Poland and other Eastern-European nations. He discussed the “tenement area” of Syracuse, which was where the Jewish population settled in the southeast quarter and described the prejudice these families faced as they created the city’s tailoring industry.

Dennis said that not only did ethnic neighborhoods shift as their population and local wealth grew, but their trades expanded as well. And as communities could afford to build and establish places of worship, these churches and synagogues, etc., helped newly arriving immigrants feel more at home. This was true for other community or ethnic organizations. The downside, though, was that it could encourage a type of isolation, as immigrants stayed within the areas they felt most comfortable or welcomed.

Other groups assisted immigrants: the Salvation Army, Rescue Mission, YMCA, etc. There was also the county “poor house” that immigrants in dire need could turn to.

By the 1920s, as many 10,000 Polish immigrants were living in the area, making them the dominant ethnic group.

In 1920, there were around 1,200 African Americans living in Syracuse. In terms of Syracuse’s African-American history, just because the city was known for its abolitionism (for example, the famous Jerry Rescue), it doesn’t mean fugitive slaves felt safe. After the Jerry Rescue, many fugitive slaves moved from Syracuse to Canada. Free blacks faced discrimination post-Civil War, and this tended to limit them to menial labor jobs. Many immigrants viewed African Americans as rivals for employment.

By the 1960s, most of the city’s African-American population lived in what was known as the 15th Ward, which was “virtually the only place blacks were allowed to live,” Connors said. By 1970, the African-American population rose to 23,000, and by 1990, it was 33,000.

A major difference that Connors sees now is that most of the earlier immigrants were white and Christian, and this allowed for smoother transitions into the community. “The recent patterns are more diverse in race and religion,” he said.

Also, the job market was completely different. An immigrant could speak little English and/or be illiterate and could still find a job that would pay him enough money to support a family. “It’s tough to get that good employment these days,” he said. Not everyone had success, he added, but it was easier. And, “A lot of it was done by connections.”

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Members then asked Connors questions, and a further point was made that “strength in ethnicity” and a “critical mass” can make resettlement easier. The question then becomes, according to member Karen Kitney, “How do we get that today?”

**Subcommittees:**

Kristen gave the schedule for when the subcommittees will give presentations/offer discussions (see summary above), and invited more committee members to sign up for a subcommittee. Subcommittee members will email each other (OCL will provide email lists to everyone), and can meet outside of the larger group to discuss their directives and conduct research. Whatever conversations the subcommittee has, they should be reported back to the larger group (a member could take notes to report back to the larger committee, as Becky Sernett, the OCL study writer, won't be able to get to the subcommittee meetings).

John Scott asked where refugees with disabilities fit into the subcommittee topics, and Heidi said more topics could be added, and/or specific needs of these refugees could be addressed within another topic (such as “Health” or “Economic Opportunity and Jobs”) where appropriate.

**Next Meeting:**

The next meeting will be held at the United Way at 518 James St. on April 25, at 12 Noon. Refugee resettlement groups will present a detailed overview of their work in the resettlement process.