

Onondaga Citizens League

Study Session #1: September 27, 2016

“How CNY Works: Examining the Diversity of Our Economic Base – Past, Present and Future”

12:00-1:30 p.m. The Salt Museum, Liverpool, NY

Presenters:

- Natalie Stetson, Executive Director, Erie Canal Museum
- Dennis Connors, Curator of History, Onondaga Historical Association
- Edward Bogucz, Executive Director, Syracuse Center of Excellence, Associate Professor, Syracuse University’s College of Engineering and Computer Science

The first study session on “CNY Works” focused primarily on the past -- the initial industries and work opportunities in the Central New York area.

When the first Europeans came to the Central New York area in the 1650s, they found an agrarian society. It was the Native Americans who first showed French Jesuits the salty water at the south end of Onondaga Lake. This led to the Syracuse area’s first industry -- the refining and distribution of salt.

From the late 1700s to 1900, Central New York provided the majority of salt to the rest of the country. The construction of the Erie Canal in 1825 expanded the industry, as it made shipping more efficient. In addition to men who worked in the salt factories, the industry had many related industries, for instance the construction of barrels and iron kettles.

A study of the national origin of the employees who worked in the salt industry in Syracuse is instructive as we study immigration trends. In the 1860s, the workers were mainly Irish, in the 1870s, there are more Germans, in 1910, the workers are mainly Italian and Polish.

The salt industry declined after 1900. By then, Ernest Solvay had invented the “Solvay Process,” the industrial process of producing soda ash, which then was used in such things as glass making, soap making, and paper making. Immigrants could find work at Solvay Process. They did not have to speak English. A common pattern was an immigrant finding work at Solvay Process, and then having a son who also joined the factory. The son could speak English, and perhaps moved up the ranks. The grandchild, then, did not work in the factory, but was able to pursue a college education.

In the 1800s, early 1900s, there were always industrial jobs for first-generation workers. There was work available in rail yards. Much of the work in industry was very dangerous.

Often, employees worked six days a week, 10 hours a day.

African-Americans, who came to the area in the 1940s and 1950s, were left out of the factory work equation for three reasons. First, some industries had started to decline by the time many African Americans came to the Syracuse area, and there was less need for unskilled workers. Second, they did not have an older relative who had worked in the industry to introduce them, and, third, plain racism. In 1965, African-Americans and whites sympathetic to their cause, protested Niagara Mohawk's failure to employ African-Americans.

Charles Lipe, a mechanical engineer, opened the Lipe Machine Shop in 1880 on what is today referred to as Syracuse's near-west side. The Lipe Machine Shop was considered the cradle of Syracuse industry. The near west side was a hot bed of innovation, especially related to mechanism.

The Franklin Automobile company began and operated in Syracuse, from 1902 to 1934. It was the largest employer in Syracuse -- employing 5,000. When the company went bankrupt, the devastated community came together and raised \$250,000 to search and recruit a manufacturing plant to come to Syracuse. Carrier, an air conditioning company, came to Syracuse in 1937, setting up its headquarters and becoming a significant employer in the area.

Throughout the 19th century, women who worked outside the home mainly worked as domestic servants for affluent families. However, after 1900, women who immigrated from Italy were hired for their sewing skills. Learbury was an important employer. The Julius Resnick Purse Factory also employed female seamstresses.

Since the early days of industry in Central New York, the manufacturing story in Central New York has always been very diversified. This may be due, in part, to its central location on the Oswego and Erie Canals, good land for farming, and industry leaders who had mechanical expertise.

The diversity of businesses meant that, generally, unions that operated here were small and specific to one area of work. Syracuse was never a "company town," like Rochester was, with Eastman Kodak.

After World War II, General Electric was a major employer in the area. O'Brien and Gere is an important company in the area – employing many and developing several spin-off companies.

A theme that seems to play out in Central New York is that a company gets it start in the area, becomes successful, and then is bought by another company, often with poor consequences for workers in the area. Examples: Chilled Plow, bought by John Deere, Marcellus Casket, bought by Batesville Casket, and Syracuse China, bought by Libby, Inc.