

RESEARCHING IN SYRACUSE: CENTRAL LIBRARY OF ONONDAGA COUNTY

by Jean B. Palmer, MSLS

Nearly every day out-of-town visitors come to the Local History/Genealogy department of the Onondaga County Public Library. They are looking for records of ancestors or fleshing out personal information about them, as well as studying events that occurred here or in the states that are the focus of our collection: New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and all the New England states.

Onondaga County Public Library

Had it not been for the Military Tract, the Salt Reservation, and the Erie Canal, Syracuse might not have developed where it is. The Military Tract was set apart in 1782, with Revolutionary War soldiers drawing lots as payment for their service in 1791. Two years later the first cauldron kettle arrived to boil brine found around Onondaga Lake, thus beginning a trade that encompassed a square mile reserve surrounding the lake. The following years saw the completion of the Erie Canal influencing the development of Syracuse and evolving into the present day Barge Canal. Many Irish settlers came to help build the canal, to work the salt, and to build the railroads. Germans arrived to contribute to the salt industry by fashioning vats and barrels needed to ship the salt. Naturally the salt was transported on the canal. In this way, Syracuse grew and prospered interdependently.

By 1862 nine million bushels of salt per year were being produced. Meanwhile other industries such as foundries grew up to make fundamental equipment for the salt industry. Also in this mid-century the New York State Fair had its beginnings here. The central library was formed by consolidating school libraries in 1857. Syracuse became home to notably diverse industries: candles, steel, typewriters, Franklin and other automobiles, bicycles and beer. Niagara Mohawk's headquarters were here. In the twentieth century General Electric, Carrier Corporation of air conditioning fame, and the pharmaceutical company Bristol Myers Squibb were among the famous industries in Syracuse.

Local History/Genealogy

All of these aspects of Syracuse history can be researched in the Local History/Genealogy department. This department

originated under the direction of the Rev. Dr. Ezekiel Mundy (1880-1915) who began the collection and invented a classification system for local history materials. It is still in use and we are still proud of it. At the time of the move into the Carnegie building in 1905 the collection was called Local and

Family History. It contained about 8,500 volumes of which thirty-five percent were related to the topic of genealogy, including family genealogies. The name of the collection varied over the years, but there were always librarians fascinated with the subject who assisted users and who created unique finding guides to enhance accessibility.

Gerald J. Parsons, MSLS, FASG, was the department head who created a mature collection with unique holdings. In upstate New York this department is

recognized as an outstanding site to do genealogy. In 1988 the library moved to a multipurpose building called The Galleries of Syracuse where the library occupies one tower. As of 2007 there are 43,000 books, plus major collections of microfilm (such as 4,200 rolls of Syracuse newspapers), microfiche, CD ROMs, and maps.

Researching Local Families

Pioneer Index

One dedicated librarian indexed early Onondaga County families in the genealogy collection thus creating the Pioneer Index. This card file is arranged alphabetically by individual names with notes about the family and citation of the source. Although this file has not been expanded in years, it is large and remains the first place to look for families arriving in Onondaga County before 1850.

The Onondaga Families vertical file includes notes and letters written by users and librarians over the course of a hundred years. During the Depression, the Works Progress Administration hired people to index nineteenth century Syracuse newspapers and scrapbooks at the library and historical association. There are more than two hundred boxes containing abstracts of articles and their citations arranged by such topics as Residents: Early, Clergy, Attorneys and Judges,



An entrance to The Galleries of Syracuse, home of the Central Library of Onondaga County.
Photo courtesy of Richard F. Palmer.