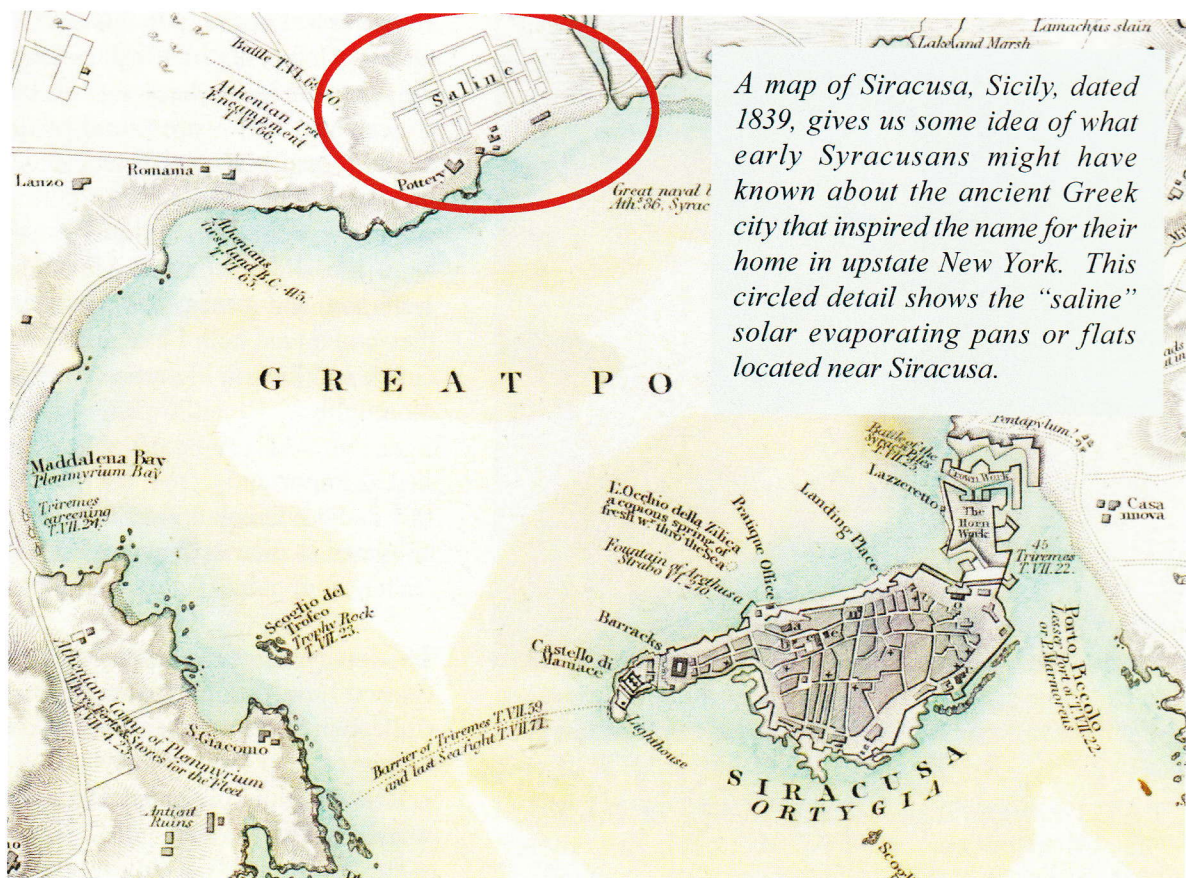


SYRACUSE



A map of Siracusa, Sicily, dated 1839, gives us some idea of what early Syracusans might have known about the ancient Greek city that inspired the name for their home in upstate New York. This circled detail shows the “saline” solar evaporating pans or flats located near Siracusa.

HOW DID SYRACUSE GET ITS NAME? By Dennis Connors

Many Syracusans, especially those who have lived here for a bit, might recall that our city’s namesake is an ancient town on the Italian seacoast in Sicily. The Italian immigrants that settled in Syracuse, New York, during the early 1900s, however, must have wondered how this upstate locale wound up with the name of that Sicilian city of Siracusa. In some regards, it is not surprising, but in the case of Syracuse, it has an interesting tale and a bit of a twist.

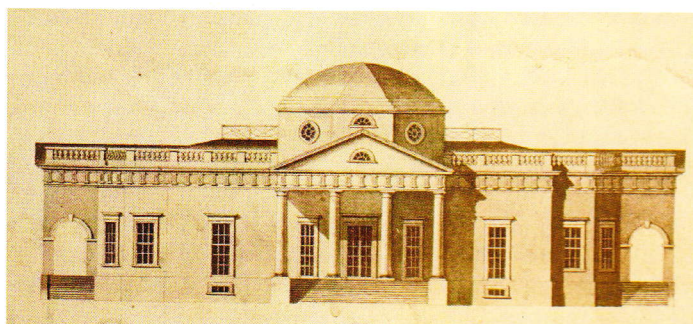
Today, names of communities like Lysander, Pompey, Cicero, or Marcellus are second nature to local residents. No one usually ponders their origin. But, on occasion, an area student studying ancient history or literature will be surprised to learn that the name of his or her town was being used by some Roman or Greek citizen centuries ago. In fact, classical history and localities formed the identity for many Onondaga County places.

Central New York was surveyed and divided up for non-Native settlement after the American Revolution. Treaties between New York State and the Haudenosaunee, controversial to this day, removed the Onondaga Nation to a small, defined territory south of Onondaga Lake. The rest of the surrounding land was divided into townships, then further divided to comprise 100 lots of 600 acres each,

to be offered to New York veterans of the Revolution by lottery. Survey names for the Military Tract’s 25 townships were decided by state officials who were drawn to classical associations.

As populations increased in the late 1790’s and early 1800’s, local civil governments were formed within the Military Tract. Some of these first incorporated towns decided to carry on the names of their original survey designations. So, for example, the 18th century Military Tract township of Marcellus gave birth to today’s Town of Marcellus.

The late 18th century was an era when learned citizens were quite enamored with ancient Greek and Roman culture. Thomas Jefferson was inspired in his enthusiastic



Drawing of Monticello



Joshua Forman

VILLAGE OF CORINTH.

THE proprietors of the Village of Corinth, situated in the town of Salina, now offer for sale the several lots contained therein.

The peculiar local advantages of this village promise, in the public opinion, a more rapid growth than any village which has arisen in the western country.

It is situated on a handsome plain, suitable for building, at the only point where the Seneca turnpike and Great Western Canal intersect, west of Utica; in the heart of a rich and prosperous country, intersected by numerous roads leading to the Salt works, and all centreing in this village; with the Onondaga creek passing through it, on which is now erected, in this village, one first rate flour, oil, and saw mill, and which is capable of furnishing water for machinery to every useful extent.

As soon as the canal goes into operation, it must necessarily become the depot and market of all the country intersected by the above mentioned roads; and from the great resort of people for their supply of Salt, the increased manufacture of this article which the canal communication will make, this place must possess great advantages, as a commercial village, over every other situated on the canal, remote from the turnpike, and where the roads to it yet remain to be made,

The subscribers, confident that this village combines more local advantages than any other between Albany and Buffalo, invite the enterprising and industrious merchant and mechanic to purchase while they may choose their situations, and lay the foundation of their future fortunes, by taking the lead of business in a village which all agree must one day be the first in the western country.

architectural pursuits by classical Roman buildings. His famous University of Virginia Library was modeled after the Pantheon in Rome, as was his own home at Monticello. Americans, who were proud of their young democratic republic, readily accepted associations with ancient locations in Greece and Italy.

Men like John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, were superb classicists — they could read both Latin and Greek fairly well and knew Greek and Roman literature, history and philosophy rather thoroughly.

Just as importantly, from the time they went to school, they saw ancient Greek and Roman statesmen as models to be emulated in their own careers as lawmakers, civic-minded leaders, and public figures of responsibility.

This influence spread down to local civic leaders, men in Central New York like Joshua Forman, a graduate of Union College in Schenectady. He moved to Onondaga Hollow at the age of 22 in 1800, with his young bride, and opened a law practice in this frontier setting, near the Onondaga County seat on Onondaga Hill.

What became Syracuse owes its origins to a turnpike, the creek and a mill. Its beginnings were centered near Clinton Square. But the land, at first, was not prized. It was low, dominated by an unhealthy, smelly and discouraging cedar swamp. Places like Manlius and Pompey, were well underway before anyone showed much interest in what would become downtown Syracuse.

The catalyst for change became the state's need to raise money for improving the Seneca Turnpike's connections to the salt works. In 1804, the legislature authorized selling 250 acres of the salt reservation for revenue. James Geddes surveyed the parcel and included a stretch of Onondaga Creek and its water power potential as an incentive. Abraham Walton, a land speculator and Utica attorney, bought the acreage. By 1805, he had a mill erected where the improved road, today's Genesee Street, spanned the creek. Another road, now Salina Street, crossed nearby on its way to the salt works.

Walton laid out a small settlement at the intersection and sold a lot at the corner of Salina and Genesee to Henry Bogardus. The latter opened a tavern in 1806 and the intersection took on the informal name of Bogardus Corners. Soon a few simple houses joined the mill and tavern. After a few years, ownership of the inn passed to Sterling Cossitt of Marcellus,

and the little location became Cossitt's Corners. The nucleus for Syracuse was being formed. Plagued by the unhealthy nature of the surrounding low lands, however, anemic Cossitt's Corners grew very slowly.

Forman, living a few miles south at Onondaga Hollow, was an ambitious and visionary fellow. In addition to his law practice at Onondaga, he

- leased land at Oswego Falls, today's Fulton, New York, to build a grist mill
- He founded a plaster company in Camillus
- became an officer in the militia
- helped organize the Presbyterian Church at Onondaga Hollow
- was elected to the NY State Assembly
- gave money to help establish the academy at Onondaga
- set up a tannery
- became the first Judge of the Onondaga County Court of Common Pleas

And all of this before he was 40 years old.

Most significantly, Forman also understood the potential of increasing talk in Albany about building a canal across the state. Forman pushed for the canal shortly after he was elected to the state Assembly in 1807 and got a resolution passed in 1808 to authorize the first survey of a potential route.

He knew any eventual canal would need to service the salt industry centered at the south shore of Onondaga Lake. If an inexpensive way could be found to transport the salt to market, the economic potential of that natural resource was staggering.

Forman even met with President Thomas Jefferson in 1809 at the White House to try and sell the Virginian on having the federal government fund the canal construction. Jefferson was always interested in new technology and had previously expressed support for internal improvements.

Jefferson's response, however, was disappointing. One source quotes the President as saying the project "was a little short of madness," essentially just too ambitious for its time. Forman left the meeting disappointed, but told Jefferson that if the federal government would not fund it, then the citizens of New York would rise to the task. And eventually, Forman would find a strong ally in New York politician Dewitt Clinton.

Forman was still living at Onondaga Hollow, and owned lots of land there that would become more valuable with an adjacent canal, but the leading citizens at Onondaga derided the canal idea as impractical. And it is doubtful that the canal engineers would have ultimately picked a

route through the hilly terrain south of Syracuse anyway. Meanwhile, the leaders of the salt focused community near the shore of Onondaga Lake – called Salina, also had their doubts about the practicality of a canal and were less than enthusiastic.

Forman, the ambitious visionary and entrepreneur set his sights then on the struggling, swamp-surrounded settlement in the middle, at Cossitt's Corners. About 1815, Forman and a handful of partners formed a land company to buy out Walton's remaining interests in the tract surrounding Clinton Square. Forman continued to be a strong canal advocate and helped guide that revolutionary venture into being through his effective lobbying. Construction of the Grand Canal began at Rome, NY in 1817 and the chosen route was headed for Cossitt's Corners.

But personal problems arose for Forman in 1818, while the canal was still in its early stages of construction. The Bank of the United States had overextended its credit, called in loans from state banks, which, in turn, called in their loans on the heavily mortgaged lands they had financed. Forman and his land company, apparently, were overextended and faulted on a mortgage and their holdings in what would become downtown.

The land was sold in a Sheriff's auction in October of 1818. Fortunately for Forman, the highest bidder was a new partnership that included his brother-in-law, William Sabine. The new owners turned around and hired Forman to be their agent, so he was able to maintain his management of the land that would become downtown.

Some residents, meanwhile, had thought it might be good to secure a formal post office designation for the little Cossitt's Corners settlement and proposed the name Milan; an Italian city controlled for several centuries by the Roman Empire and declared the capital of the Western Roman Empire in 286 AD. However, a settlement named Milan over in Cayuga County already had been given a post office designation. That settlement later changed its name to Locke, but in 1818, the state legislature had created another town of Milan in Dutchess County and it grabbed a federal post office designation in August of 1818. "Milan" was just not available for Cossitt's.

Forman was continuing to work tirelessly to promote his adopted community. He definitely felt the little crossroads needed a more formal name, one appropriate to its anticipated future as a great city. Additionally, by 1819, Forman was having a survey conducted, and streets laid out. That year, he had also moved from the Hollow to Cossitt's to more closely oversee his work in progress. So Forman made an executive decision and chose "Corinth."

Corinth was the name of an ancient city in Greece. In classical times, Corinth rivaled Athens and Thebes in wealth. We may know of it more now from the two books, First Corinthians and Second Corinthians, in the New Testament.

The company of Sabine & Kellogg, which owned most of the area in what would become downtown, advertised lots for sale in February of 1819 with this glowing description of this new place they were calling Corinth, the newspaper ad probably written by Forman, himself.

Construction on the canal had begun in 1817 and the middle section was completed by 1820. And sure enough, it flowed right past Forman's doorstep at "Corinth." Surely, now was the time to get that formal post office established. The application was made to the federal government for the name Corinth. Unfortunately for Mr. Forman, Cossitt's or "Corinth" had missed the boat again. In 1818, a new town at the northern edge of Saratoga County, along the Hudson River, had been created and called Corinth; and the federal government had just granted it a post office designation in November of 1819.

Forman and his cohorts were not trying to create a new municipal entity. Cossitt's Corner or Corinth, in 1820, was still legally part of the Town of Salina. They just wanted to establish a post office for convenience. A committee was formed to come up with a new name. John Wilkinson, another newcomer from Onondaga Hollow and a lawyer protégé of Forman's, had agreed to be the postmaster once it was established and it was he that would suggest "Syracuse."



John Wilkinson

Well, where did Wilkinson come up with that? As we know, Americans in the early 1800s were quite enamored with using ancient Greek and Roman names to identify the new towns in their young "democracy."

Siracusa, Sicily was founded in 734 BC by settlers from Greece. It has a rich history, one including the great mathematician, Archimedes, who called it home. It was conquered by the Romans in 212 BC despite a fierce defense put up by the Greeks. In fact, legend has it that, among other creative devices, Archimedes built a giant mirror that was used to deflect the powerful Mediterranean sun onto the sails of the Roman ships, setting fire to them.

But, in addition to its association with great Greek and Roman history, it was John Wilkinson's fascination with its geography, which inspired him to make the suggestion.

Siracusa, or Syracuse in its English version, was a city that faced water. Wilkinson thought of Onondaga Lake. There were hills surrounding it. . . same here in Central New York. Nearby there were evaporating flats making salt from seawater, and an adjacent settlement called Salina. Wilkinson could not ignore the similarities.

In fact, today, salt is still made near the western coast of Sicily has it has for centuries, by evaporating waters from the Mediterranean Sea by the solar method. There even is a Salt Museum located near there.

But what drew Wilkinson's interest to Siracusa in the first place? Would you believe the connection was a 20-year old future prime minister of England titled the 14th Lord of Derby?

While a student at Oxford in 1819, Edward Stanley wrote a lengthy poem, in Latin, about the mythology and history of Siracusa. He was awarded the Chancellor's Latin verse

Salt is still made near the western coast of Sicily



prize for his poem, titled Syracuse. Shortly after, Wilkinson stumbled upon the poem in a friend's library in New York City. It caused him to research Siracusa, which was fresh in his mind when the need for our future city's name arose. The other committee members liked his suggestion and the post office authorities had no objection. So, Syracuse it became, perhaps to Forman's disappointment, but having the post office was more important.

Of course, the Erie Canal would be completed between Albany and Buffalo five years later and it literally passed right through the middle of town. Syracuse rapidly took off in population and property values. That same year, 1825, Syracuse formally incorporated as a village with its own elected officials. President of the village board was none other than Joshua Forman and he was generally recognized by his contemporaries as the "Father of Syracuse."

So, once the name was settled, did the connection with Siracusa have any more impact on the community? Apparently, not too much. When historical analogies



Siracusa Coin Detail in Façade of Former Bank of Syracuse in Hanover Square

seemed needed, perhaps for some historical celebration, commemoration or public art, local citizens tended to gravitate to the area's rich Native American history, employing images and legends related to Onondaga Indians. Even the one monument erected in Syracuse to honor Joshua Forman, inside Forman Park, does not have a figure of, say, Archimedes from Siracusa on it, but rather a figure representing Hiawatha of Haudenosaunee Confederacy tradition.

It does seem, however, that a few folks did play off the historical connection to Siracusa. In 1896, the Bank of Syracuse was erecting a classical building in Hanover Square. Someone recognized that the ancient city of Siracusa, Sicily had its own coinage, something obviously associated with banking.

One Siracusa coin, in particular, was famous, dating from about 300 BC. It featured the head of Arethusa, (In Greek mythology, she was a nymph who fled from her home in Arcadia, beneath the sea, and came up as a fresh water fountain on the island that forms the core of Siracusa,



Redfield/Forman Monument in Forman Park



Hotel Syracuse Plate, c1924

Sicily. On the coin, her profile is depicted, surrounded by dolphins which were common in the waters around Sicily. On the opposite site is a Greek chariot. The bank's architect, Albert Brockway, worked images of the coin into the marble pediments over the building's two entrances, where they remain to this day.

In 1924, Syracuse citizens witnessed the opening of their city's grandest hotel – The Hotel Syracuse. Its design was classical revival. Its china, of course, would be produced by Onondaga Pottery, which later became the Syracuse China company. In seeking a custom image for the hotel's china, which would reflect both to its name and architectural style, designers turned, once again, to the image of the coin from Siracusa. Over the years, the hotel would use other plate designs but the one depicted here was found on the hotel's dining room tables when it opened in 1924.

World War II stirred up a bit of local interest, again, in Siracusa, when in July of 1943, British General Bernard Montgomery's forces occupied the city during their March through Sicily, pushing the German forces back to mainland Italy.

What happened to the cast of characters in later life, which were involved with naming our fair city?

Wilkinson, who suggested "Syracuse," would go on to be a leading citizen in his community. Among several other ventures, he helped physically shape its future as the president of the Syracuse & Utica Railroad, which would become part of the great NY Central in the 1850s. Its route through the city played a major role in the 19th century with the location of rail yards, factories and train stations.

One might say his influence didn't even die with his passing. Wilkinson's grandson, also named John Wilkinson, would go on to become the inventive genius behind the locally made Franklin auto in the early 20th century - Franklin manufacturing being one of the city's biggest employers in the 1920s.

Forman, always an ambitious guy, eventually left Syracuse in the late 1820's taking up residence in North Carolina where he again became an agent for a land speculation company. Although he returned to Syracuse on a few occasions, he settled in North Carolina, where he died in 1848. His remains were brought back here later and reburied in Oakwood Cemetery, in the Leavenworth plot. Syracuse's second mayor, Elias Leavenworth, was his son-in-law.

Lord Stanley

And what happened to Edward Stanley, the Brit who started it all? He eventually inherited a title from his father and became the 14th Earl of Derby in 1851, known thereafter as Lord Stanley. He had already entered politics, and would rise to be head of Britain's Conservative Party, serving three times as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during the 1850s and 1860s.

Stanley was a moderate conservative during his earlier years in Parliament, a period when it was debating the abolishment of slavery in the British Empire. Stanley introduced five motions, over time, calling for the emancipation of all slaves in the British colonies within one year. He also presented the final bill to Parliament which gave slaves their freedom in 1834.

Lord Stanley may never have visited the city in Central New York that he had an unknown hand in naming, but we can be sure that Syracuse's band of abolitionists in the years before the Civil War would have looked upon him as a fellow warrior in their fight to abolish slavery in the United States. ■



ONONDAGA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION'S

HISTORY

VOL. 28 NO. 1

HIGHLIGHTS

\$5.00 SPRING / SUMMER 2015

