

# ONEONTA IN OLDEN TIME & BITS OF ONEONTA HISTORY.

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AN INTERESTING SERIES OF ARTICLES  
BY HARVEY BAKER.

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PUBLISHED IN THE ONEONTA HERALD  
DURING THE YEARS 1892 -1893.

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Compiled by the  
Greater Oneonta Historical Society  
Oneonta, NY.

**BOOK PREVIEW**



SQUARE CIRCLE PRESS  
VOORHEESVILLE, NEW YORK

## **Oneonta in Olden Time and Bits of Oneonta History**

Published by  
Square Circle Press LLC  
137 Ketcham Road  
Voorheesville, NY 12186  
www.squarecirclepress.com

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First paperback edition 2010.  
Printed and bound in the United States of America on acid-free, durable paper.

ISBN 13: 978-0-9789066-7-2  
ISBN 10: 0-9789066-7-5  
Library of Congress Control Number: 2010934131

### **Publisher's Acknowledgments**

The cover design is by Richard Vang, Square Circle Press, using the Corel suite of graphics software. The text of this book was created and formatted by Square Circle Press using OpenOffice.org, a free suite of office software. The book title and chapter subtitles are set in Latin Extra Condensed type, the book subtitle and chapter titles in Engravers, the compiler's name in PTBarnum, and the text in Garamond.

Please refer to the Preface for personal and professional acknowledgments related to the publication of this work.

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The newspaper articles reproduced in this book are presented in chronological order by the date of their publication. Many readers might find that reading through the articles in this order is preferable, especially since Baker frequently mentions or refers to a previous article along the way. Certainly the reader is encouraged to read them in this way to obtain the full flavor and scope of Baker's history. However, the table below groups the articles under general subject matter headings, with the hope that this might be easier for those who wish to explore only specific topics of Baker's writings. One word of caution is that Baker sometimes covers multiple subjects in a single article. This being the case, some articles are listed under multiple subject headings. Ultimately, the reader should consult the detailed index at the back of the book for a more in-depth search of a particular topic.

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## PREFACE

His name is not as widely known today as other famous Oneontans, but Harvey Baker was arguably the most important presence in Oneonta's history. Baker was a prolific writer who contributed to several of the Otsego County papers throughout his life, including many opinion pieces for the *Oneonta Herald*. However, in 1892 and 1893, late in his life and more than fifty years after he first moved to Oneonta, Baker wrote regular columns for the *Oneonta Herald*. Based on his research of the area's history dating back to before the Revolutionary War, his account of how Oneonta developed during his lifetime was published in a series of sixty-three articles.

These particular articles were clearly intended to be a large body of work, since the first article carries the sub-heading of "chapter one." The numbering of the articles continues through "thirty-nine," which was erroneously repeated twice by the typesetter, after which the chapter numbering is dropped. Another interesting aspect is that the series was originally entitled, "Oneonta In Olden Time." This seemed to work well as long as Baker continued with a fairly straightforward chronological history, however, as he wandered off on to singular subjects, the series title was changed to "Bits Of Oneonta History."

The idea to reproduce these columns came from a typewritten transcription of them held in the collections of the Greater Oneonta Historical Society (GOHS). This anonymous document was apparently created to give greater access to Baker's columns at a time when photocopying, microfilming, and or other technologies were not readily available. Whatever its intent, the document was not a faithful transcription. The anonymous typist took some liberties with the content, sometimes updating information, adding comments, or at times deleting entire paragraphs. Why (or even when) this was done, is unknown. Perhaps it was to make the articles more relevant to contemporary readers, perhaps the editor wanted to portray Baker in a particular light, or perhaps the person was simply eliminating redundant information. Regardless, considering the amount of typing it required, it was certainly a noble effort. This current publication of Baker's history makes it widely accessible for the first time since its initial publication more than one hundred years ago.

Over the course of a few years, a committee of interested members of GOHS worked to collect all the original articles and ensure their accurate transcription. The articles are here reproduced as they were printed in the *Herald*. **It was decided that it would be best to retain the original text as set by the newspaper, with typos, spelling variations and all. Typographical errors have been kept for several reasons.** While the handwritten pages of some of Baker's columns have only recently surfaced, it is impossible to know if Baker misspelled certain words and the typesetter was completely accurate in translating the errors, or if Baker was a meticulous speller and the typesetter the one who made mistakes. Variations in spellings of

surnames, places, and organizations were common for the time, and so rather than try to make editorial decisions that might misrepresent Baker's original intent, it was thought to be more important to preserve the "character" of an early publication and to provide a primary source document for researchers.

Due to the discrepancy mentioned above, the original chapter numbering system has been dropped in favor of using the publication dates to identify individual articles. In the case where more than one article bears the same title for Baker's ongoing narrative, the series is identified by "(Part #)" at the end of the article title.

Bob Brzozowski, Director  
Greater Oneonta Historical Society

Richard Vang, Publisher  
Square Circle Press

## APRIL 7, 1892

# TURNPIKES, CANALS, AND EARLY EFFORTS FOR A RAILWAY

In 1830 the population of Oneonta was given as 1,759 and in 1835 at 1,762, its gain being only three persons in five years. As I have before mentioned, the county of Otsego had a larger population by over five hundred in 1830 than in 1890. In 1780 it was 52,372 and in 1890 it was 50,861—a great loss considering the gain of the state and the United States. The reason of this decrease in our county must be ascribed to a variety of causes. But the main one was the opening of the canal and railroads, and thus creating a great thoroughfare to the prairie lands of the west. So great had become the emigration thither, that our county, among others, was not able to retain at home even its natural birthrate increase. The opening of the railroad lines helped to keep up a continued westward flow, and no means have yet been found to arrest it and retain in our rural counties even a moiety of their own natural increase.

Previous to 1822 Otsego county had five members in our state legislature. At that time the number was reduced to four and so continued until 1837, when we were reduced to three legislative members. In 1857 we were reduced to two, where we have since remained. We will no doubt soon fall to a number which will admit of no reduction, if we send as we have thus far done, whole men to that law-making council.

From 1812 to 1842 Otsego county alone constituted a congressional district, and sent its chosen member to that national legislative council.

Here we have a positive demonstration of the importance of easy and convenient means of transit. For lack of such for so many years the world around has continually increased in its numbers and political importance, while we have not been able to even hold our own. In fact, in our state we have lost three-fifths of our political power since 1822, and about two-thirds of our congressional strength during the same time. Rather a humiliating outlook for our county in this world of gain.

The citizens of Oneonta were never lacking in enterprise. Had their financial ability been at all in proportion to their ambition and foresight, Otsego county of to-day would be far in advance of its present position. Many important enterprises were projected in Oneonta, some of which were early carried into execution. Turnpikes and stage coaches were the popular sources of travel in 1830, and our people early awoke to the importance of such means of transportation.

In 1830, April 15th, a charter was obtained for the Charlotte turnpike, in which Jacob Deitz, William Angel and others of our citizens were named as directors. That enterprise was pushed to completion as rapidly as practicable. As early as 1835 the daily stage

coaches were thundering through the streets of Oneonta on that then great thoroughfare.

In March, 1830, a law was passed in our state legislature instructing the canal board to order a survey "from Otsego lake to Tioga Point or Chemung river, to ascertain the feasibility of establishing by means of dams and slack-water, navigation between these points." A survey was made and a report of the same presented to the legislature but no further action was ever taken in the matter.

April 22d, 1831, a charter was granted for the Oneonta & Franklin turnpike, with William Angel and Jacob Deitz named among its directors. It was soon built and still continues in existence for four-fifths its former length. The mile nearest the village was abandoned by legislative action some years ago. The Charlotte turnpike has also ceased to exist except as a public highway, the toll bridge alone remaining.

April 26, 1832, a railroad charter from Cooperstown to Colliers was granted by the legislature. George Clark, Peter Collier and others were named as its directors. Peter Collier was a member of the legislature about that time, and no doubt his influence had much to do with the legislation of those sessions. Many important public measures were inaugurated by these legislatures.

April 25, 1832, a charter was granted for the Otsego & Schoharie railroad. Peter Collier, Eliakim R. Ford, Jesse Rose, John Westover and Leonard Caryl were named as its directors. Peter Collier, Jesse Rose and Jared Goodyear were also made members of its subscription committee.

April 25th, 1832, a law was passed chartering the Utica & Susquehanna Valley railroad. This road was to connect Utica with Unadilla. The Otsego and Schoharie railroad was to extend to Unadilla. Had these three roads been constructed, with their other contemplated connections, our country would early have received the benefit of railroad developing influence, in both its population and wealth-producing power.

May 18th, 1836, the Cherry Valley & Susquehanna Valley railroad was chartered. This line was to pass down the Cherry Valley creek to Milford, and then down the Susquehanna until it intersected the Erie. The same year another charter was obtained from Schoharie to the Susquehanna valley. Had these chartered roads been transferred to the soil at that early day, all the advantages of these later times would have been secured by them to our valley, and their benefits would have been enjoyed in part, at least, by the separation projecting them.

I have thus given a record of the legislative action secured by our people during the first six years of the decade of 1830. It will be noticed that each measure contemplated especial benefits to the people of this valley, and had they been followed to completion no locality would have received greater benefits therefrom than would our then young village of Oneonta. In paper railroads thus early we were not lacking. Although public improvements usually appear first in public minds and then on paper, their benefits tell but little for the public good until actual work in their construction is energetically commenced.

My first acquaintance with Oneonta commenced in the early spring of 1841. I came here in February and in March went to Colliersville, where I made my home until September. Since then I have been a citizen of Oneonta. At that time this was a lively, active business town, more active, I then thought, than was Binghamton.

The Timothy Sabin house was being built, and his store was being rebuilt and enlarged. The Solon Huntington store was building, and the E. R. Ford mansion was being completed. The late Charles Reynolds' house was being constructed, besides others unnecessary to name. The town was lively and business thriving. The next year the store where Cornell Brothers are was built, the house which George B. Baird removed, where his yard now is, the Newton I. Ford house, the Anthony White house and several others. During the fall of 1841 and winter of '42 my own residence was built. I, with my father's family, moved into it in May, 1842, and have resided there since. Among those who were here when I came was the late Dr. S. H. Case, Jacob Brown, Mr. Cutshaw, Ephraim Parish, who resided where Mr. Brown does, across the river, Huntington Parish, who then lived where his son George now does. Esek Blend, then a young man, lived up the creek near his present home, and William McCrum was then an apprentice to R. W. Hopkins. Some who were then boys still remain. Among whom are D. W. Ford, D. J. Yager, J. R. L. Walling and Dr. Meig's Case, although he was only four or five years old as I remember him.

Oneonta has ever had among its citizens many men of great ability and good practical common sense. Many of them have left undying evidence of their energy and perseverance for the public good. Among the men of good practical common sense, Timothy Sabin will ever be remembered. I must be pardoned for mentioning one of his sage pieces of advice.

About the time of the presidential campaign of 1848 Stephen Parish and myself had been invited to give a political talk at the William Richardson school house, up the Oneonta creek. Towards night on the day appointed we started in an open buggy to fill our engagement. As we passed Mr. Sabin's place of business he happened to see us, and running out, bare headed, he hailed us. On nearing the wagon he said, "Boys, do you know how to successfully talk politics?" "Not so well but we would be glad of your advice," I at once answered.

"Brag up your own party, brag up your own men, but don't say one word about your opponents," was his reply, at which he turned and hastily entered his store. For more than forty years I have closely observed the soundness of his advice, and have yet failed to note a single instance in which it was not the true policy to pursue. I will leave all further reminiscences for later papers.

From what I have before said of railroad charters in this section, it will be observed that citizens of Oneonta and its vicinity have always been alive on that subject. Having during the decade of 1830 been on the Central near Syracuse, while that road was being constructed, and at Owego while the Erie was driving the piles for that road, although afterwards the pile system was discarded and the earth road bed substituted, I had wit-

nessed the life and activity given to these towns even by the construction and anticipation of railroads. It was but natural that I should imbibe some of their life and liking.

In the month of November, 1845, a call was issued for a railroad meeting at the Van Tuyl tavern, in the north end of the village of Richmondville. Jared Goodyear and myself attended it. Demosthenes Lawyer and myself were chosen secretaries. It was well attended, its call being for the purpose of considering the construction of a railroad from Schenectady to Binghamton. A route to Albany was thought at that time to be impracticable. Speeches were made and a subscription committee appointed to visit Boston and secure subscriptions, of which I was one. Before the meeting of the legislature petitions were circulated throughout this valley, and on the 13th day of May, 1846, a charter was granted for the "Schenectady & Susquehanna railroad to the Erie at Binghamton." We of this vicinity paid Col. W. W. Snow to attend at Albany and secure its passage, he having been a member of the legislature in 1844.

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