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Living aftermath: In Syracuse, revisiting the Civil War

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Sean Kirst / The Post-Standard

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The Onondaga Historical Association's Gregg Tripoli with a captured Confederate national flag: An anniversary that demands community discussion.

A second floor Onondaga Historical Association exhibit hall is lined with relics, photographs and soldiers' sketches from the American Civil War. Most stunning is a Confederate national flag — different in design from the familiar Confederate battle flag — that was seized by Onondaga County soldiers in Savannah during the final six months of the struggle.

A **more intimate retrospective** can be accessed through any home computer. Gregg Tripoli, executive director of the OHA, said staff members at the museum have discovered many diaries from the war years in old files. For the next four years, as the nation commemorates the 150th anniversary of the most searing conflict in its

history, the historical association will pull daily entries from those diaries and post them on Twitter.

The effort began last month. Tripoli already has a favorite. Early in the war, he said, a "Sheriff Wright of Onondaga" noted how one of the millionaire Astors had given \$4 million to help support the Northern armies.

"I give more than he," said the sheriff, referring to how his twin boys had both signed up to fight for the Union.

The Twitter outreach underlines the museum's larger challenge. While the Civil War is hardly a major cause for civic discussion in Syracuse, the anniversary is front page news in the American South. Souvenir shops sell T-shirts recalling the "war of Northern aggression," and historians argue about the motives of the leaders who led the nation into battle. The big debate is whether the root cause was the noble ideal of ending slavery, or the more pragmatic question of preserving the Union and its economic system.

To Tripoli, the answer is easy: "There's no question it was over slavery, and I think most historical organizations have come to terms with that." The war, he said, was touched off by political conflicts over slavery, and the bloodshed led directly to the end of the most savage and onerous practice in national history.

Even so, Abraham Lincoln did not use abolition as a rallying cry in the early days of the war, said Tom Hunter,

curator of the Civil War exhibit. Hunter and Tripoli agree that Lincoln's thinking expanded as the fighting grew worse — transformed in no small part by a friendship with Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave who became a brilliant writer and orator.

While the museum is going through a \$500,000 renovation, and will not fully reopen to the public until mid-July, the OHA this week is **offering a special chance** to see the Civil War exhibit. Beginning tonight, Tripoli said, Civil War experts will visit the museum for talks or presentations on three consecutive nights. Friday's climactic offering features an address by Hunter, who will also lead a tour of the exhibit.

Tripoli is reflective about why Northern communities seem less inclined than their Southern counterparts to fully embrace the Civil War sesquicentennial. The South was invaded, Tripoli said, an experience that resonates for generations. While Union troops were victorious, lingering questions of racial justice in the North — where many cities remain all but completely segregated, where outsized rates of poverty and incarceration afflict too many black communities — may account for a Northern reluctance to glory in the outcome.

Still, those conditions almost demand a larger conversation about the war and the ways in which it transformed the nation. What's beyond question, Tripoli said, is the devastating consequence for everyday Central New York families. Onondaga County sent roughly 12,000 young men off to fight, when the Union fatality rate was about 15 percent. In an era of no telephones or radio, families could wait for months — if not years — before they were informed of a loved one's death.

In both North and South, prisoners of war faced a particularly grim fate. Prison camps were overcrowded and filthy. The OHA exhibit includes a clipping in which a traveler from Syracuse, while in Washington D.C., learned how nine local men had died in a Confederate prison camp. Diahherrea and other illnesses were listed as the cause.

By any measure, the war was an intensely personal struggle whose aftermath reverberates today.

If you've got a few minutes, the OHA can help to show you why.

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