



Members of the Oneida Indian Nation perform on Tuesday at a ceremony to unveil a mural depicting the Nation's history. The mural, located on Columbia Street across from the Wynn Hospital in Utica, is part of a \$1 million gift from the Nation to the Mohawk Valley Health System. PHOTOS BY AMY NEFF ROTH / OBSERVER-DISPATCH

Oneida Nation unveils gift mural to the MVHS

Artwork is 200-foot-long, 10-foot-high on Utica wall

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The Wynn Hospital in downtown Utica was built on land that was part of a bustling commercial neighborhood several decades ago.

Back in the 19th century, warehouses in the area lined the Erie Canal and mules pulled barges along the towpath.

And just as the Erie Canal was first opening in 1825, the French hero of the American Revolution, the Marquis de Lafayette made a visit to Utica, riding down Rome Street in a stagecoach driven by industrialist Theodore Faxton and pulled by six gray horses with silver harnesses.

The road, on which Wynn Hospital sits today, was later renamed Lafayette Street in his honor.

But before the hospital, the shops, the canal and the marquis, there was the Oneida Nation whose ancestral homelands stretched from the Susquehanna River,

across Oneida and Madison counties and all the way to the St. Lawrence River.

The Oneida Indian Nation unveiled a gift to the Mohawk Valley Health System, which owns the hospital, at a ceremony Tuesday morning: a 200-foot-long, 10-foot-high mural on the exterior wall of the central utility building across Columbia Street from the hospital.

The ceremony included members of the Oneida Nation, many of them dressed in traditional regalia; health system leaders; and local officials.

The mural depicts scenes from the long history of the Oneida people, from the Oneida creation story through the present day when Turning Stone Resort & Casino in Verona and other enterprises have brought an era of prosperity to the Oneida Indian Nation.

"It is fitting that this mural is located outside the Wynn Hospital," said Oneida Indian Nation Representative and Turning Stone Enterprises CEO Ray Halbritter. "This facility, the first of its kind constructed in New York State in a half century, offers Mohawk Valley residents highly advanced medicine and world-class, technologically progressive care where they need it most, including the Oneida people and the more than

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This picture, hanging in the lobby of the Wynn Hospital in Utica, depicts three heroes of the American Revolution: George Washington; Polly Cooper, an Oneida woman who brought food to the troops at Valley Forge; and Oneida Chief Shendoah, a colonial ally.



Members of the Oneida Indian Nation look at a just unveiled mural depicting the Nation's history on Tuesday. The mural, located on the Wynn Hospital central utility building across Columbia Street from the main hospital, was a gift from the Nation to the Mohawk Valley Health System.

PHOTOS BY AMY NEFF ROTH/OBSERVER-DISPATCH

Mural

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5,000 team members who support our Nation.

"Above all, the hospital is dedicated to the well-being of this community – those who call it home today and all who will call it home in the future."

MVHS President/CEO Darlene Stromstad expressed her excitement at having a job that let her preside over such a fun event.

"We are very proud that our campus is going to be hosting this beautiful artwork," she said. "The amazing story of the Oneidas will be seen and experienced by thousands of people for many years to come, and this artwork will be a source of pride for all of the Mohawk Valley." The Nation had pledged a \$1-million gift to the new hospital last year, a gift that was to include the mural and another piece of public art, a copy of a 20-foot bronze statue by artist Edward Hlavka the Nation gave to the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of the American Indian.

The statue depicts three heroes from the American Revolution standing under a white pine tree: George Washington; Oneida Chief Shendoah, an ally to the Continental Army; and Polly Cooper, an Oneida woman who brought supplies to the American troops at Valley Forge. But the second gift ended up being a framed picture of the three heroes, which now hangs in the Wynn lobby. During Tuesday's ceremony, the speakers emphasized that the mural doesn't just tell the story of the history of the Oneidas; it represents the partnerships between the Nation and its neighbors that have led to success and prosperity for both.

"This artwork which adorns Wynn Hospital testifies to the spirit of friendship, partnership and community that characterizes the Oneida Indian Nation's relationships with their neighbors as is evidenced by this gathering here today," said New York State Deputy Secretary for First Nations Dr. Elizabeth Rule. "For each of these reasons, we should all be proud to have this mural and the story that it tells shared here in Utica for all New Yorkers to see, draw strength from and to be inspired by."

Oneida County Executive Anthony Picente Jr. referenced a 2013 legal settlement between the Oneida Indian Nation, Oneida and Madison counties and the state that ended years of legal wrangling over land, taxes and gaming.

Under the agreement, the Nation re-

ceived exclusive gaming rights in a 10-county region and was able to add land to its land trust. And it agreed to pay 25% of its gaming revenues to the state, which then gave a quarter of them to Oneida and Madison counties.

That agreement has led to economic development and growth for the county and the Nation, Picente said.

"That partnership was rooted in the belief that we can do more together," he added. It was the beginning, he said, of the creation of a better community for everyone. "Nothing is impossible when you work together in partnership," Picente added. "These things can happen."

After the ceremony, Brittany Ninham, a member of the Oneida Nation studied the mural. She said she liked two parts of the mural best.

One is the creation scene at the beginning, which depicts a woman on the back of a turtle and the origin of Turtle Island, the first name of the Oneida homelands. She also likes the end of the mural that shows modern times with the Nation's enterprises and what the Oneidas' story has turned into, "how far we've come and the resilience of our Nation," Ninham said.

After the crowd left, passersby on Columbia Street noticed the mural with some surprise. Some stopped to study it; others kept walking but with their heads turned toward the mural. Several gave exclamations of approval.

"That's beautiful," exclaimed one woman. "I didn't even see that ... That brings out Utica now."

The mural, which is attached to the wall, not painted on it, hangs under an overhang with lights so it will be illuminated at night.

It also depicts three women with beans, corn and squash, the three sisters of the Oneidas; long houses and women sitting around a council fire; the Oneidas welcoming a man in a tri-cornered hat; Oneidas loading muskets while colonial soldiers fire; a treaty of cooperation signed with the new government after the Revolution; an Oneida family on a hillside looking down at a farm while another hillside burns; Oneidas in full regalia dancing by the Oneida Indian Nation seal and more dancers in front of the Turning Stone tower; and Wynn Hospital with a golden eagle flying in front of it.

By the hospital picture, the mural says, "The great gift of peace proves once again to be the foundation of prosperity. The Oneidas pass this gift to their children and their children's children so that generations yet to come may enjoy its benefits."