

Equal Right Heritage Center - URI Hearing Comments

January 17, 2018

Good afternoon. Welcome to Auburn and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon in support of this most important Upstate Revitalization Initiative project. Governor Cuomo's commitment to build the Equal Rights Heritage Center in Downtown Auburn was welcome news to those of us who understand and realize the importance of tourism in our region and recognize the depth of our history.

Twenty years ago, a group of local leaders took the positive and visionary step of establishing the City of Auburn Historical and Cultural Sites Commission. The commission has served as a collaborative effort between the historical and cultural sites, the City of Auburn, the Cayuga County office of Tourism and the Auburn Downtown BID. The establishment of a Welcome Center in Auburn was a long term goal of the commission, and that goal is being realized.

A rising tide lifts all boats, and this collaborative effort has seen much success. In 2017, Cayuga County saw \$101.47 million dollars in tourism spending, \$6.95 million in local taxes and over 1,200 jobs. It is indisputable that tourism is an important and necessary economic driver.

Beyond the economic impact of this project, and quite honestly, more importantly, is the fact that it will highlight the long, storied history of progressivism in Auburn and the entire region. The chosen location for the Equal Rights Heritage Center is really at the epicenter of the 19th Century Progressive Movement.

Right next door is the home of William Henry Seward, Governor of New York, US Senator, and Secretary of State under President Lincoln. In 1846, Seward risked his reputation when he defended accused murder William Freeman, whom he believed to be mentally ill. Seward invoked the relatively new insanity defense, while also raising concerns over racial discrimination towards Freeman, an African American. Seward was an abolitionist whose position on slavery was so radical that it ended up costing him the Republican nomination for President in 1860. He was an outspoken critic of the Supreme Court's 1856 Dred Scott Decision which ruled that African Americans could not be American citizens. Seward also opposed the pro slavery elements of the Compromise of 1850 and in doing so maintained that there was a higher law than the US Constitution. I would be remiss if I did not mention his wife, Francis, who, in her own right was an ardent abolitionist who opened her home to fugitive slaves at the very time her husband was in Washington negotiating the Compromise of 1850.

One mile south of the site is the home of Harriet Tubman, runaway slave, abolitionist, conductor on the Underground Railroad, nurse, Civil War scout and spy, suffragist, and American Hero. Tubman chose to spend the last 50 years of her life in Auburn after purchasing property from the Seward Family. She owned and operated a home for the aged and following her death in 1913, she was interned in Auburn's Fort Hill Cemetery.

Suffragette, organizer of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, and signatory of the Declaration of Sentiments, Martha Coffin Wright, moved to Auburn in 1839 and established her homestead just around the corner, on Genesee Street. Also an abolitionist, Wright was a close friend of Tubman's and was known to host fellow Progressives such as Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Wright's grandson, Thomas Mott Osborne, was a noted prison reformer who, in 1913, was appointed chairman of the State Commission on Prison Reform. He voluntarily immersed himself in Auburn Prison disguised as an inmate and wrote of his experiences in his book, *Within Prison Walls*. He went on to serve two terms as Mayor. This very building was a gift from Osborne's sisters, to the City of Auburn, in memoriam of their father, David Munson Osborne, who was Mayor from 1879-1880.

Finally, as the sun sets every evening, Westminster Presbyterian Church, which began as an abolitionist congregation during the Civil War and has remained committed to a broad range of social justice issues, will cast its shadow on the Equal Rights Heritage Center.

As an Auburnian I am proud of our city's long, storied history of commitment to equality for all and our contributions to American Progressivism. I believe that the Equal Rights Heritage Center will allow us the opportunity to not only share our history but also highlight the rich history of our neighboring cities throughout the region, as well as their contributions.

In closing I believe that the question is not why Auburn, but why not Auburn?

Thank you