

## Spencer blazed a pioneering trail

**OVERLOOKED ORLEANS:** Hard work, intellect and service brought Albion man to positions of prominence

By **MATT BALLARD**  
Orleans County Historian

ALBION — The history of Orleans County's African-American population in the earliest decades of our area is scarce and unknown in many aspects.



Spencer

Some residents may be familiar with the story of Richard Gordineer who, as an infant, was sold by his father to Joseph Grant, who eventually settled in the Shelby/Medina area. After New York abolished slavery in 1827, Gordineer became a free man and a well-respected citizen of Medina.

Other stories involve families, like those of Henry Spencer and Jacob Carter, who came to Western New York with local Union Army officers at the conclusion of the Civil War.

Spencer came to Orleans County with Lt. Hiram Sickels of the 17th New York Light Independent Artillery sometime around 1866. After earning enough money working for George Sickels, he brought his wife and children to this area.

One of Spencer's sons, Henry Austin, spent the majority of his teenage years working for Asa and William Howard as an errand boy until he reached adulthood.

While he worked, he made his best efforts to attend the local schools, which he attended for approximately three months out of the year. A biographical sketch of Spencer noted that he kept up with his fellow classmates by "burning the midnight oil."

Spencer attended Miss Mabel Foster's boarding school in Philadelphia, becoming the first African-American admitted to that institution, where he quickly became one of the more popular students. Spencer then attended the Brockport Normal School, where

he was one of the few African-American students at an institution with 700 students. He graduated in 1880, about 10 years after Fannie Barrier Williams became the first African American student to graduate from the school.

During commencement week, Spencer was selected as the Gamma Sigma orator, an honor that earned him a full scholarship to the University of Rochester shortly after. It was not the scholarship that was unprecedented, but Spencer's acceptance to the university, which marked the first time that an African-American person was accepted into the institution.

Upon the conclusion of his schooling, he studied law under the Hon. George H. Smith of Rochester while working to support his family.

Spencer was appointed to a position in Albany in the speaker's room thanks to a former University of Rochester classmate, Hon. James M. E. O'Grady.