



Syracuse University

College of Law

Syracuse National Trial Competition

The preliminary rounds of the Syracuse National Trial Competition will be held in the beautiful and historic Onondaga County Courthouse. The Courthouse is located at 401 Montgomery Street in Syracuse. We often refer to courthouse as the Teddy Roosevelt Courthouse, because a famous libel trial took place there in 1915, between former president, Theodore Roosevelt, and New York State Republican Party Chairman. William Barnes Jr. Barnes sued Roosevelt for libel following accusations of corruption made by Roosevelt against Barnes. The trial became a high profile news event, which was reported about in newspapers all across the country.

Since the 1880s, Roosevelt and Barnes had been active in New York's Republican Party politics. Barnes, a conservative, and Roosevelt, a progressive, were frequently at odds because of their different political ideologies, and in 1912, when Roosevelt sought to be nominated by the Republican Party for president, Barnes played a key role in obtaining the nomination for incumbent president William Howard Taft. As a result, Roosevelt ran as the candidate of the new Progressive Party, often called the Bull Moose Party. This split among the Republicans enabled the election of Woodrow Wilson. In the 1914 election for governor of New York, Roosevelt supported a progressive Republican, while Barnes backed a conservative Republican. In July, Roosevelt made a widely published statement, in which he accused Barnes of being a corrupt, obnoxious political boss who was in league with the leader of New York's Tammany Hall Democratic Party organization. According to Roosevelt, Barnes and Murphy were secretly working to thwart the will of the people, by preventing the adoption of progressive reforms.

In response to Roosevelt's accusation of a conspiracy, Barnes filed a libel suit, and the trial commenced on April 19, 1915, at the Onondaga County Courthouse. In the law suit, Roosevelt was required to demonstrate that he had not intentionally imparted a malicious public falsehood about Barnes. Roosevelt testified for eight days. Instead of arguing that he had misspoken, had been misquoted or that it was mere rhetoric, Roosevelt argued that what he had said was true. Various witnesses testified on Roosevelt's behalf, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was serving as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. After a five week trial, and two days of deliberation, the jury took returned a unanimous verdict in favor of Roosevelt. The trial took place in Part One, Courtroom 300, where some of the Preliminary Rounds will take place. Transcripts, photograph, books and other memorabilia from the 1915 trial can be found in the Ceremonial Courtroom on the fourth floor of the Onondaga County Courthouse.

Across the street from the Courthouse, on Columbus Circle, is a red brick church that was a part of the Underground Railroad. A few blocks away is Clinton Square, where you can find the bank that was depicted in the SNTC fact pattern. Also located in Clinton Square is the Jerry Rescue Monument, which commemorates an event that occurred in 1851, when William "Jerry" Henry was arrested in Syracuse as a fugitive slave. The arrest was considered a message that the locally-unpopular law would be enforced by federal authorities. The abolitionist Liberty Party was holding a state convention in Syracuse, and when the arrest became known, several hundred abolitionists broke into the city jail and freed the fugitive. A total of 26 of the rescuers were tried for their actions, but only one was convicted.

