

Dear Mechanics' Hall Friends & Members,

Not long after the current pandemic forced us to close the Hall to the public in March, we began to wonder what we might learn from the generation of mechanics who endured the flu pandemic of 1918. We searched through our accessible archives, hoping to unearth a cataloged letter or report to gain a bit of wisdom from their hardship that might ease our own. We could find nothing.

But last week, while cleaning out a desk in the Library, we discovered a folder stuffed inside a drawer. Inside, a typewritten letter dated April 1919, addressed and submitted to the officers and members of MCMA by the "Committee on Library." This annual report isn't particularly interesting—until it makes note that 1,088 fewer books were taken out in 1918 than had been the previous year. The reason? This decline "*was brought about wholly by the fact of the Library being closed about four weeks during the height of the Influenza Epidemic.*"

Apart from what it says about how actively the Library was used back then, this letter is remarkable for how easily it might have been thrown away or remained hidden. Fortunately, this winter, we began the necessary work to ensure the preservation of our historical documents. Constance Bloomfield, an architect, volunteered to survey and inventory much of the Hall's collection. We then applied for and received a grant from the Maine State Archives. This month, former board member and Library Committee Chair Nancy Noble, an archivist at Maine Historical Society, began the more considerable work of cataloging the archives.

Small though it may seem, this letter's discovery in our Library points to a larger challenge facing Mechanics' Hall as we navigate this pandemic and cultural inflection point. How can we ensure that our Library and its multitude of stories—about the ingenuity and tenacity of Maine makers—remain accessible and available today and for years to come? What modest steps can we take to reveal our heritage better, interpret our history, and welcome and guide new generations of artists, tinkerers, and creative risk-takers?

Earlier this year, the Board appointed a Library Taskforce led by library committee co-chairs and Board members Pamela Hawkes and Tom Haushalter. A native of Portland, Pamela was a principal with Ann Beha Architects in Boston for 26 years, assisting clients such as the National Park Service and the National Trust for Historic Preservation while also serving on the Boston Landmarks Commission and the Massachusetts Historical Commission. She led the restoration of the McLellan House

and Sweat Galleries at the Portland Museum of Art and has renewed historic libraries throughout the U.S., including the Nantucket Atheneum, Cambridge Public Library, and the Patten Free Library in Bath.

Prior to arriving in Portland in early 2019, Tom Haushalter served for six years as President of Trustees of the Windsor Public Library in Windsor, Vermont. In that time, he oversaw the revival of the library's programming calendar, expanded its fundraising footprint, and led a critically important restoration of the rare documents and archive rooms. Tom also brings a strong foundation in marketing and storytelling to the committee's task of magnifying our Library's mission and its innumerable assets.

The task force began by suggesting goals that might guide future planning:

- Showcase the historic character Mechanics' Hall's most iconic space.
- Make the Library more welcoming for members and visitors of all backgrounds by providing a range of seating options and showcasing inclusive stories.
- Express the mission of Mechanics' Hall as a place serving "makers" in a myriad of definitions.
- Celebrate the library collections as an important symbol of the organization's history and a benefit of membership.
- Maintain flexibility for programming that is essential to the financial sustainability of Mechanics' Hall.

We invite you to be a part of the conversation. We'll be putting together a panel discussion to review goals, the Library's history and consider strategies to renew and restore it. More information to come soon but if you have a particular area of expertise and would like to volunteer, please write to us.

Warmest Regards,

Annie Leahy, Executive Director & Paul Stevens, Board President