

**Testimony of Bernard Fishman, Director of the Maine State Museum**

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Senator Daughtry and Representative Brennan, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I am Bernard Fishman, the Director of the Maine State Museum. I will give you a brief summary of the traditional nature and work of the Maine State Museum, and then I will address the museum's current situation regarding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, of the massive Cultural Building capital repair project, federal support, and changes to the museum's finances.

The Maine State Museum began in 1836 with mineral displays in the State House and has been in operation, in various forms, since that time, but not continuously: it has been closed six times and opened seven times; perhaps its current condition is a seventh closure, though internally we are as active as ever, as busy as bees but in a variety of new directions.

The museum became an autonomous unit of state government in 1965, and, as defined in statute, was established to further the cultural and educational interests of the people of the state, to present through its collections and activities the proud heritage and unique history of Maine, and to preserve and exhibit Maine's environmental and cultural richness. In 2019 we had approximately 45,000 on-site visitors to our facility in Augusta's Cultural Building, including over 14,000 students in structured programs, the largest on-site student engagement of any Maine museum. The museum is one of the only three percent of American museums which have officially met the high professional standards of national accreditation. Our collections are the broadest and most comprehensive in Maine, consisting of some 800,000 artifacts and specimens, including what is probably Maine's largest collection of natural history and environmentally related materials. In addition to normally arranging for hundreds of Capitol-area tours, not only for the exhibits in the Cultural Building but for the Blaine House and State House also, we manage extensive historical collections in both locations.

In addition to numerous public programs, research, publications and presentations of many kinds, our special pride has been the 40,000 sq. ft. of long-term exhibits in the Cultural Building, and the two large temporary exhibits we would develop there almost every year, on topics ranging from Malaga Island to Maine gunsmithing, from Native American textiles to Maine's Jewish community, and from Women's Suffrage to Maine in World War I. Our most recent public exhibit was our bicentennial display, *Regional Struggle-National Story: Maine's Path to Statehood*, which most sadly was open for less than two weeks before the museum closed last March (illustration).

COVID-19 forced the museum to close. After extensive work to make the museum as safe as possible, we opened again in June, only to close again within days because of the sudden and catastrophic failure of the Cultural Building's climate control systems. Now we are in the midst

of what may be a three-year project, directed by the Bureau of General Services, to replace those systems, remediate all the asbestos remaining in the building from its original construction, and to effect other building repairs. Our sister agencies, the State Archives and State Library, have of course also been deeply affected by the Cultural Building's closure. It is heartbreaking that these long-overdue repairs had to be undertaken as a result of an emergency, and not through a comprehensive and deliberative process.

The resulting closure eliminated the museum's earned income, about \$ 125,000 annually, through the disappearance of admissions, program fees, and museum shop revenue. Private contributions have been reduced, especially for our *Friends* organization. The museum, as a state agency, was not considered eligible for federal operational grants distributed through the Maine Arts Commission and the Maine Humanities Council, or for PPP forgivable loans. We have received no federal government support for our ongoing operational activities. In 2020 we were able to complete private fund-raising for the final match of a National Endowment for the Humanities Challenge Grant we had secured earlier for our new Education Center, which will be built in the Cultural Building as the ongoing repair project will allow. The state legislature made a generous appropriation to

this project, but the museum raised almost 90% of the project's \$ 850,000 budget privately, over a five-year period. The federal match amount was \$ 95,000, but it can't be used for operating support.

The Cultural Building repair process has been difficult for the museum. It has disrupted most of our operations. It is a highly daunting and intricate process to examine and assess the building's physical properties and the project's scope of work while penetrating multi-layered and extensive exhibits (*illustration*). Some of these displays are quite fragile and are almost 40 years old. Normally a museum like ours, with its 40,000 sq. ft. of displays, would spend at least two years planning and undertaking such a process, not the 10 months or so we seem to have. But BGS is gradually coming to better understand the museum's complex situation, and our communications and mutual cooperation are steadily improving. Nevertheless, it is an unsettling time, even far beyond the pandemic's own difficulties. Over the past four months about 20% of all the museum's staff time, over \$ 120,000 in equivalent and un-reimbursed staff costs, has been spent in direct service of the Cultural Building capital improvement project, mainly in reviewing, documenting, moving, and preparing for the packing of almost a thousand exhibit objects (*illustration*). That necessary but quite distracting expenditure will continue, we think, for much of 2021. Museum staff members, working from a variety of locations, are holding together and adjusting pretty well, but some have told me of their fatigue, worries about working in proximity to others, and lack of stability with operations and duties having to change so drastically because of the building improvement project. And we have not yet even moved our offices out of the Cultural Building and into the state's facility at 10 Water Street in Hallowell, as intended, because a sprinkler system must first be installed there. That sprinkler

installation, in the midst of our storage of 25,000 history collection objects, will in itself will be a daunting and disruptive process.

On a more satisfying note, we have sustained a high level of involvement with our constituents, through various methods of communication, developed new educational and on-line programs, undertaken a new program of collection

research and documentation, continued to care for and to a degree expand the collections, and begun to plan some exciting exhibits for the time when we re-open.

Let me draw your attention to an especially engaging new on-line program, the Pandemic Primary Source Set, which is on the museum website ([www.mainestatemuseum.org](http://www.mainestatemuseum.org)), and is available for teachers, students and homeschoolers, giving them age-graduated lesson plans and considerable information on pandemics in Maine and around the world (illustration). This program is a cooperative venture with the Maine Dept. of Education and other institutions. We are working on another source set topic now. Our collections staff has done deeper research than ever before on hundreds of objects, which will soon be posted on our website to increase public access to our collections. Collection additions continue, though at a slower than normal pace, and have included such important objects as these two Civil War-era acquisitions: this outstanding quilt from Portland (illustration), once featured in *Antiques Digest*, made to commemorate the ship *Norwegian*, and this collection of materials (illustration), perhaps the largest remaining private Maine Civil War collection, representing Col. Isaac Dyer of Skowhegan and his command of the 15<sup>th</sup> Maine Regiment.

Our exhibits have always been a significant aspect of our public educational appeal, and planning for them continues. In time we will re-open with a show called *Comfort and Community: 200 Years of Maine Quilts*, the most important exhibit on this subject ever developed. The exhibit has been delayed by the pandemic and the repair project, but its extensive catalogue, an indispensable and permanent guide to its subject, will soon be published by Down East Press.

Some existing exhibits will be only moderately affected by the Cultural Building capital project, and can be restored. Others will be more seriously altered. The extent of the work required to remediate asbestos on the museum's third, entrance level, will be extensive and coincides with the museum's own desire to replace some of these exhibits, because they have substantially deteriorated through their age, and because they no longer meet museum standards of presentation, design, or public educational value. The Education Center will

occupy about a quarter of that 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. The remaining space will be divided into two exhibit areas, one for a re-imagined natural history exhibit, and the other for a new 'Welcome' exhibit, using new methods, design and technology to introduce museum visitors to Maine in novel and stimulating ways (illustration). In cooperation with the Maine Humanities Council we will soon launch what we call our 'Listening Tour,' a series of community meetings throughout Maine to help us learn more about what the public might want us to consider as we develop these new exhibits, and to help us gather new stories and new objects about Maine. For the new natural history exhibits, we are considering mounting two Humpback whale skeletons from the Gulf of Maine, and parts of a Right Whale, as the anchor for what we would expect to be an awe-inspiring display concerned with maritime and coastal ecology (illustration). We have a chance now to re-make and re-interpret a key part of the museum through these exhibits, out of both desire and necessity, making lemonade out of the lemon of the unfortunate confluence of a killer epidemic and a construction project that has turned our world upside-down. We have actual funds only for the education center: the exhibits are only in the very initial planning stage and will require substantial fund-raising. But we believe the time to plan for a new, welcoming, museum face is now.

I know that I have given you more information than you can easily absorb in one brief session, but I hope that I have been able to convey some of the real enthusiasm I have about the museum's future. I will be glad to try and answer questions you might have.

Bernard Fishman, Director, Maine State Museum