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The Museum That Would Not Die:

The Strange Persistence of the Maine State Museum

by Bernard P. Fishman

Maine is the only New England state with a substantial state museum supported in large part by state appropriations. The Maine State Museum's current annual state allocation of about \$1.7 million, some 80 percent of the museum's total expenses, can't compare with the multimillion dollar budgets enjoyed by most other state museums, but it does provide a basic level of support for many valued public services. Yet it was not always so. The present museum can be said to have been founded in 1836, but it was closed or eliminated six times over the next 135 years before being resurrected for the seventh (and final?) occasion when its current building in Augusta opened in 1971. Its dogged persistence in reviving itself, against any reasonable expectation and sometimes even without organized state support or even awareness, is testimony to the immortality of a certain kind of public need. This saga may be instructive in considering how public policy can be shaped by somewhat inchoate public desires, often politically mute, yet in some cases, extremely persistent. The perseverance of the Maine State Museum arises from basic communal and indeed human needs and also from Maine's particular circumstances.

The museum began as an enterprise to house and display geological and biological specimens collected between 1836 and 1839 by Charles T. Jackson of Boston, who was legislatively authorized to conduct the first scientific survey of Maine. A circular (Maine State Museum, object 2013.56.1) sent out by Jackson, dated November 4, 1836, encouraged citizens to contribute specimens to the survey and stated that "It is in contemplation to form a large collection of the mineral products of the State, for the use of the Legislature, and for the citizens. Probably a State Museum or Cabinet of Natural History will be established at Augusta for this Purpose." This was in fact accomplished that year when the legislature authorized the creation of a geological room in the statehouse. The State House Portrait Collection, now a part of the state museum, was also begun the same year, with the loan to the state, on consignment for possible purchase, of a gigantic, rather

eager copy by George Endicott and his artistic collaborator Moses Swett of Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington at the Battle of Dorchester Heights. The portrait was liked well enough, but not actually paid for until 1850, when the state acquired it for less than one-third of the original asking price of \$1,000.

From the scientific survey, over 1,500 specimens were received and placed in the embryonic state museum; but with no mechanism established for the sustained management of a museum, the displays were sadly neglected. Over the next 25 years, they actually disappeared, their specific fates unrecorded. The same happened again with what was collected through a second geological survey in 1861, from which specimens were similarly directed to be placed in the State House in the museum's second manifestation. In 1890, W. S. Bayley, professor of Geology at Colby College, reported that these had been "thrown promiscuously into boxes...the specimens themselves rendered valueless...the catalogues accompanying the collections (having) disappeared." Bayley salvaged "the few specimens still remaining from the general wreck" by sending them to Colby College. More lasting was the attention given to Civil War battle flags returned by Maine regiments. The first flags arrived in 1864, and in 1872 the collection was given its own specially built cases and displayed in the State House rotunda on what was assumed to be a permanent basis. Sometimes accompanied by cabinets of war relics and other curiosities, these flags elicited an almost sacred regard for the sacrifices expended in the great conflict and promoted a feeling of respectful awe among visitors. In time the flags became the responsibility of the Maine State Museum.

When the museum was reconstituted for a third time, it was through personal, and to an extent private, initiative. Maine citizens had been donating a steady trickle of illustrative mounted specimens of the state's wildlife for display in the State House, when in 1896 the Maine Sportsmen's Fish and Game Association proposed to develop an exhibit of the fish and game of Maine "as a source of pride to the citizens of our state" (*Maine*

Sportsman, April 1896).¹ The legislature made space available in the State House, a public call was circulated for specimens to make the exhibit “worthy of the greatest fish and game state in the Union,” (*Industrial Journal*, October 9, 1896), and the state museum was launched for the third time. Under Leroy Thomas Carleton, the new commissioner of the state’s Inland Fish and Game Commission, the collection became a personal project and expanded further. By 1899 it had outgrown its original two rooms and was given an attractive suite of refurbished accommodations in the State House basement, where a fascinating menagerie of taxidermy was created to greet curious visitors. Wildcats and lobsters shared display space with turtles and trout, while moose, bear, and deer killed by trains, hunted out of season, or simply donated by proud sportsmen loomed over all. So popular had this motionless zoo become that when the State House was rebuilt in 1909–1911, the whole lower floor of the new building’s south wing was given over to it. The museum was closed again, but this time for a major reinstallation, and it opened for a fourth time in 1911, the same year the battle flags were rehoused in fine new steel cases. Maine Governor Frederick W. Plaisted said of the flags at their rededication ceremony that they would “provide an inspiration to the boys and girls of the state for generations to come,” (*Daily Kennebec Journal*, December 26, 1911) and that they represented “a priceless heritage,” themes repeated often in connection with the museum.

In the period of World War I and the roaring twenties, the museum, still an apparatus of the Fish and Game Commission, saw even more impressive growth. Under its own curator, Thomas James, it developed wildlife exhibits of grand scope and ambition and installed aquarium tanks with live Maine fish, ultimately even a small fish hatchery. But eventually the Depression, modernism, and looming war affected the national mood and the jolly, folksy museum exhibits seemed in need of a major refit. In 1940 a new commissioner, George Stobie, closed the museum for the fourth time in its history in part to provide it with large-scale diorama-type displays and a more comprehensive, streamlined, and realistic presentation of Maine’s native resources. The inspirations were certainly of the type seen in the 1939 New York World’s Fair and the kinds of immersive environmental exhibits that remain today as cherished wonders in New York’s Museum of Natural History. The aquaria were emptied; all the military relics except for the flags were banished to Camp Keyes in

Augusta; the Victorian cases junked; and some 300 mounted specimens were sent off to storage. Stobie hired Klir Beck, who had designed Maine’s World’s Fair exhibit and Maine’s displays at various sportsmen’s shows, to develop the museum’s new exhibits. A few of them were actually realized and present when the museum reopened, though in a somewhat shrunken and understated way, for its fifth appearance, in 1942. The larger vision was never realized.

Even the reduced museum was a great public draw. There was a large painted backdrop of Mt. Katahdin, including a miniature waterfall, plus some displays of smaller animal life, a few live fish, a scattering of historical relics, and a moose family and a bear family. None of these, however, survived the post-war American boom, when money was flush and government expanded on every level. The State House was becoming too small for governmental needs and the new state office building (now the Burton M. Cross Building) had not yet been built. In an act of surprising political vandalism, the State Museum was abruptly closed in 1948 by Governor Hildreth and the 94th Legislature to make way for more committee hearing rooms. For the fifth time the museum came to an end, and this time there was no expressed intent to bring it back.

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But the idea of the museum refused to die. Its cheerful if mangy menagerie was sorely missed. And in keeping with America’s enlarged and unassailable place in the world, the potential for a future state museum seemed to grow and grow. On February 16, 1956, an editorial in the *Daily Kennebec Journal* exclaimed “Only when the [state] library and museum are housed in a structure built specifically for them will they and the culture they represent be assured of the permanent place they should occupy in the life of the state.” The *Lewiston Sun*, in a piece reprinted in January 28, 1956, in the *Daily Kennebec Journal*, editorialized that “a State Museum for Maine is a ‘must.’ We are rich in history...we have unique forest and mineral resources

not possessed by any other state...out-of-staters would take away a better impression of the State if their tour of the seat of government included a fine State Museum.” Klir Beck was called back and from the bits and pieces of old displays in his storehouse assembled four striking big-animal dioramas illustrative of the seasons as experienced in the woods of Maine. These were installed in the State House in 1958–1959 along with a moving model of a Maine covered bridge with real fish swimming in the pool beneath, a working model of a zinc and copper mine, a “magic” display in which a rabbit and its surroundings changed from summer to winter, and an assortment of curios and oddities reminiscent of the old establishment. For the sixth time the museum was back in business, and now there was a growing sense that the new arrangements would lead to something much bigger.

In 1965 the legislature set up a Joint Interim Museum Study Committee to investigate the possibilities for the museum’s future and took testimony from citizens and from representatives of interested organizations. Almost without exception the comments were glowing, eager, and highly supportive. There were two main arguments for establishing a major state museum and placing it in its own building: to preserve Maine’s rich cultural and natural history in a comprehensive, inspiring, and instructive way and to provide a significant opportunity for enhancing the state’s tourism and economic prospects. In addition, a new museum would showcase the state and those attributes that distinguished it from other states. In its report to the 102nd Legislature, the Study Commission also wrote that “the ‘cultural’ explosion now sweeping the Nation might demand some sort of museum in Augusta” (Legislative Museum Study Committee Report to the 102nd Legislature). A letter to the commission from Representative and Mrs. Richard Berry (July 7, 1966) said that a new museum building would “mark [a] significant step in the current progress being made in our cultural awareness in Maine.” It was in 1965 that the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities were established, and culture was a big topic of the times. It was a moment in the national consciousness when the United States could imagine replacing the once-dominant cultural achievements of old Europe with new ones of its own. Not to be left behind, the contemplated new museum building in Augusta, which came to include the State Library and a newly established State Archives, was called the “Cultural Building” in recognition of its importance in representing that special value.

The Museum Study Committee returned a strong recommendation to build a state museum, stating, in a gesture to the beloved institution’s long association with natural history exhibits, that the new museum should include a wildlife display. The projected new museum was at last placed on a permanent footing by being officially established as an independent state agency with its own governing commission. A public bond issue to build the cultural building was overwhelmingly approved and construction of what became a \$6 million structure began in 1968. In 1971 the museum opened in its new building for its seventh public appearance. The remaining museum displays in the State House were dismantled and largely discarded, though the four animal dioramas were expensively restored and in 2001 moved into the greatly enlarged underground passage connecting the Cross Building with the State House.

The museum’s adventures continue into the present, of course, with the usual budget tussles and the museum’s accelerating efforts to keep abreast of public interests as well as the rising standards in the museum profession. Yet, the museum has become, and remains, one of the state institutions held in the highest public regard and affection. What it has achieved is effectively, if somewhat naively, expressed as an aspiration in an editorial from the *Maine Sunday Telegram* (June 13, 1971):

the State of Maine Cultural Building is so darn good that it would be a bargain at twice the price....The reasons hinge upon a sense of... values which still exist in Maine but which have sadly vanished in too many parts of our nation.... Maine is more than the most beautiful state in the Union physically. Maine is still the living repository for the sanest, soundest state of mind in the Union....We need a sense of heritage behind us and a sense of passing heritage on...a sense of roots at one end together with a sense of new growth at the other end....These are the values which will live vibrantly and handsomely in the new State of Maine Library-Museum-Archives building, bridging Maine generations past and Maine generations to come.”

It was largely pride in Maine, a public and ultimately personal sense of the value of Maine’s historical and natural heritage, that kept the Maine State Museum alive and brought it back repeatedly. There was a bit of economic boost in the mix, some insecurity in comparison with other states, a nod toward tourism, and a dash

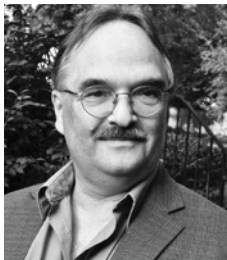
of wanting to keep up with the new cultural waves spreading out from Washington, but it was mainly about being proud of Maine. Maine citizens were deeply proud of their state and some part of their own personal identity and value was connected with to it. It was a version of state nationalism, and we have certainly all seen the powerful effects of nationalism when applied to countries and ethnicities. It is at work at the state level too, in ways we hope are benign and constructive, encouraging education and knowledge primarily. Woe to any who might imagine that the Maine State Museum is a merely decorative ornament of state government: when people have brought such an institution back from the brink again and again over a span of close to two centuries, they are surely voting with their hearts. 🐟



Some of the Maine State Museum displays in 1904, when the museum was part of the Maine Commission of Inland Fisheries and Game and was housed in the basement of the State House. From a photo postcard courtesy of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission.

ENDNOTE

1. Materials cited in this article are all available in Maine State Museum History: Chronological Reference Files 1836--.



Bernard Fishman is the director of the Maine State Museum. He began his career as an archaeologist working for the University of Chicago in Egypt and has since directed five museums, all connected in some way with

historical and archival collections, and public programming and research.



Cornelia T. 'Fly Rod' Crosby (1854-1946) about 1890, from her album 'Maine Views,' now in the collections of the Maine State Museum. Fly Rod contributed a number of specimens to the museum in its early days. She was an avid and famous sportswoman and the first officially licensed Maine Guide. She is said to have shot the last caribou taken in Maine.