

MECHANICS' HALL

1857-1859 | Portland

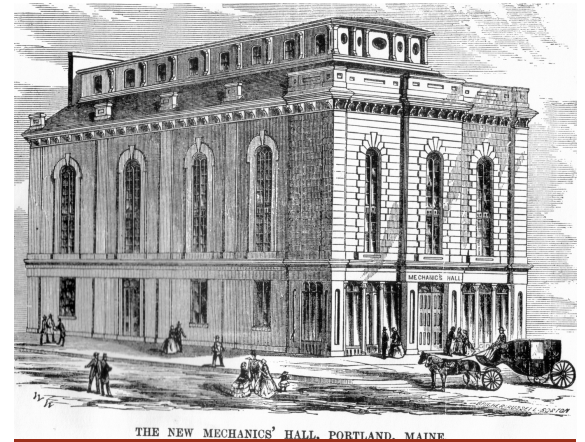


In 1815, the Maine Charitable Mechanics' Association (MCMA) was founded in Portland as a mutual aid society, fraternal organization, and educational institution for the city's artisans and craftsmen. Soon after its foundation, the society began acquiring books for the purpose of assembling a membership library. As the MCMA grew and developed, the need for a permanent space for meetings, events, and its growing library became more pressing. In 1857 the society commissioned a new building on the corner of Congress and Casco Streets. Thomas J. Sparrow, a member of the MCMA and Portland's first professional architect, designed the building. While the construction of Mechanics' Hall burdened the MCMA with heavy debt for the next twenty years, the building was one of Portland's finest and the society had cemented its prominence.

Mechanics' Hall remains the property of the MCMA, which rents out storefronts on the ground floor, maintains its membership library, and hosts events in the building. It is one of the few surviving buildings designed by Sparrow, and is an incredibly well-preserved example of mid-19th century Italianate architecture. Featuring a proud granite façade with tall, arched windows extending between the second and third floors, additional high clerestory windows jut out from a low hipped roof. These imposing windows on the façade are punctuated by keystones depicting the faces of Vulcan and Archimedes, as well as the MCMA's chief symbol, a stylized arm with a hammer.

Photo above right: Sketch from c.1860 showing new hall.

Photo below right: Photograph from 1878. Courtesy Portland Public Library Archives.



The most pressing threat facing Mechanics' Hall is the deterioration of the structure's clerestory roof. Due to gradual weathering, the condition of the roof now constitutes a serious threat to the building's structural integrity. Mechanics' Hall's problems have been compounded by the stopgap nature of maintenance efforts periodically undertaken throughout the history of the organization, which has never possessed the capital to properly address them. Moreover, the MCMA is running out of time to act, as waiting any longer threatens to deepen existing structural issues as well as create new ones which would jeopardize the building's continued survival.

The MCMA is deeply committed to preserving Mechanics' Hall as a public space as well as a culturally important part of Portland's history and architectural heritage. Fortunately, the building's long-term structural issues are addressable, but this requires a large capital investment. The MCMA hopes to draw upon various sources of funding, including federal grants, but for most of these the application and approval process can take years. Given the condition of the clerestory, urgent action from individual donors and the community as a whole is necessary. The MCMA has made incredible strides towards rehabilitation of the 170-year-old building, but connection to a wider audience of supporters is critical to help ensure that the space remains a living connection to Portland's past while serving the organization's long-standing mission, "to make knowledge, ideas, and arts accessible."



Photo above: 1910 image of Congress Street, Mechanics' Hall to the left.

Photo above right: Current image of the exterior of the clerestory.

Photo center right: Current image of the interior of the clerestory.

Photo below right: Current image of the facade of Maine Mechanics' Hall.

