

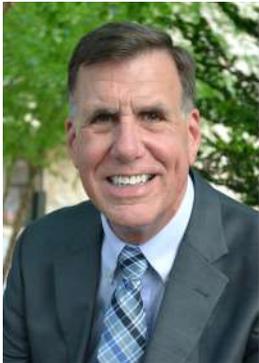


The Newsletter of The General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen

Founded in 1785, The General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen is dedicated to improving the educational and cultural opportunities for people in the City of New York

Congratulations Class of 2020

For The Mechanics Institute Class of 2020 to graduate they needed one more month of study and our exceptional and dedicated faculty rose to the challenge, providing comprehensive online instruction for the graduating students and the remaining students. The actual graduation will be postponed until a future date when the new graduates can again assemble together. In the interim, General Society President and School Chairman Dan Holohan wrote these inspiring and encouraging words to the graduating students:



Dan Holohan

Dear Mechanics Institute Class of 2020

I have such mixed emotions writing to you today. Ordinarily, I would be standing at the lectern in the General Society Library and looking at your smiling face and those of your fellow Mechanics Institute graduates. You'd be in your cap and gown, and you'd be glowing. I would also be seeing the proud faces of your friends and

family members you brought with you for that special evening. When Executive Director Victoria Dengel called your name, your classmates would cheer, and maybe even a child would shout Daddy! or Mommy! That's always been my favorite part. I would get to give you your diploma and watch the pride in your step and the smile on your face as you returned to your seat to well-deserved pats on your back.

I treasure each Mechanics Institute graduation. I was once a night student with a family and a day job. I know it's not easy keeping it all together. And you had the additional stress of a pandemic! I shake my head in wonder at how you managed to do what you did. You were used to your routine of coming to class each week and being with your classmates, to learn, laugh, and share. Then suddenly we asked you to sit alone and attend class by watching your teacher on a screen and you all rose to the occasion. You did that for a month, and you finished strong. I've spoken to your teachers, and they tell me how impressed they were with how you were able to adapt and get the job done. You truly are amazing.

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The Library of The General Society Celebrates Two Hundred Memorable Years



The General Society Library

Our thanks to Dr. Janet Greene for her exceptional chapter about the General Society Library included in 'America's Membership Libraries' published by Oak Knoll Press, which is partially excerpted for this article, and to Polly Guerin for contributions from her engaging book, "The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York: A History" published by the History Press.

November 25th, 2020 will be a very special occasion, as The General Society Library will celebrate its 200th Anniversary. This historic institution will mark two centuries of providing vital access to educational resources, special collections, historic archives and recreational reading for the people of the City of New York.

When you enter the library, you will notice the Library's stunning architecture. In 1904, architect Ralph Townsend transformed the space into a soaring atrium to serve as a new home for The General Society Library and later also serve as a lecture hall. His design added ornate faux-marble columns and decorated plasterwork to a utilitarian space, creating a room that today, under the glow of its delicate skylight, is both grand and intimate.

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As a result of so many General Society programs being postponed this spring, our Managing Editor, Penny Speckter decided to make this a special newsletter dedicated to some of the interesting facts about the Society's distinguished history.

I feel both joy and sadness as I write to you today. Joy because of what you've achieved, and sadness because we weren't able to celebrate your achievements with pomp and circumstance. So a promise: when it is safe to once again gather as a large group, we will invite you back to The General Society for a proper party for you and yours. In the meantime, take what you've learned and make a difference in the world. We are so proud of you, and we hope to see you again in person very soon.

Stay strong!

Dan Holohan

President and Mechanics Institute Chair

Why we are the "General" Society

Perhaps you've wondered what that simple word "General" means in our title. We think John Banta explained it best in 1868 when he addressed the members on his first night as Society president:

"We often notice, in these days, business firms with the word 'Limited' after names, but our Society was evidently not to be one of that class, for our predecessors in the trust confided by the Legislators of the State, you will observe, were incorporated as The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen. There is nothing 'Limited' or special or peculiar about us; we are the 'general' society, that is, the society for all. The very last clause of our original charter is to the effect that it was 'a public act' and was to be 'construed in all Courts and places to be benignly and favorably, for every beneficial purpose therein intended.' Having put our hands to the plow, let us not turn back; let us not be content with leaving well-enough alone. If there are any obstacles in the way, let us consider what can be done to remove them, remembering that, 'whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.'" Beautiful words, and as true today as they were all those decades ago. We are truly the society for all.



Felix Baez, Contract Documents Instructor



Felix Baez brings so much to Mechanics Institute's Construction Project Management Program. He learned last year of the open position for an instructor in Contract Documents from Professor Ynes Leon, R.A., at the NYC College of Technology. "Professor Leon felt that I was a good fit for the open position at GSMT," Felix told us. "At first, it intimidated me a bit because I was stepping away from teaching architectural design courses, but I believed I would be a good fit because I was familiar with the subject matter and I like working with people in the field. I was immediately captivated by the GSMT family during my first visit. I was enchanted by the building's majesty and enlightened by the administration's heartfelt welcome."

Felix is a native New Yorker and attained his Associate's Degree and Bachelor's Degree in Architectural Technology from the New York City College of Technology. He also holds a Master's Degree in Sustainability in the Urban Environment from the City College of New York.

Felix told us that Spring 2020 was certainly an unusual semester for everyone because of the pandemic. "We had to come to a complete halt about two-thirds of the way into our semester," he said. "But even though we were all confined to our homes indefinitely and unsure of what was to come, we all agreed that we had invested too much work and time into the semester to just stop. I'm grateful for all the support I received from the administration and the students. We were able to complete the course together online and safely from our homes. This experience has proven to me once again that we are a resilient people and that we can accomplish anything when we work together. Though we ended the semester away from each other, I am grateful for the opportunity to have met everyone in person."

We asked Felix what advice he would give to a young person considering his field. He said, "The survival of humankind rests in the minds of our designers and in the hands of our builders. We will always need places to live and to congregate. Our industry assures that building construction is safe and that the work is executed properly. This is essential for the safety and longevity not only for the builders, but also for those who will occupy the structures. Because we are a species that needs socialization and interaction with one another, it is more important today than ever before that we rethink and project better ways to live. This pandemic has proven that we need safer and less-congested places. We know that our world can change rapidly, and we know that, as a society, we can adjust to change. Our living environments have to become healthier places. Our existence relies on it. We must design and build for a more sustainable future and continue to promote health in our surrounding environments. We must design our spaces not just for profit, but for the well being of all."

Felix Baez is truly showing the way forward and we are proud to have him on the Mechanics Institute team.

The Library of the General Society Celebrates

Two Hundred Memorable Years (continued from page 1)

The room has housed the book collections of The General Society since 1899, but is actually the fifth location of the Library, which was founded in 1820 as a resource for the apprentices by the master craftsmen of New York City. Today the room is also known as a venue for educational and cultural events including lectures, concerts and film screenings. During the hours before these public events, however, the room is inhabited by students, researchers, readers and writers who work in a majestic space surrounded by books published since the late 1700's.

As founders and custodians of this remarkable library, each generation of members of The General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen of the City of New York has added to a collection of useful and instructive reading material for the use of the working people of New York.



The Original Signature Membership Logbook dating from 1785

The resulting book collection is therefore a living artifact of the reading tastes of New York residents since 1820, and has been a treasured resource for countless generations. Writers find inspiration in its quiet reading room. Artists, architects, engineers, city planners and historic preservationists look to its books and periodicals for information and inspiration. Adult students haunt its shelves after work, devouring books and magazines that help them to understand the context and future of their working lives.

The beginning of this story lies in 1785, shortly after the American Revolution when 22 craftsmen joined together to form "The General Society of Mechanics" as a mutual benefit and fraternal organization. Robert Boyd, Blacksmith, was chosen as their first president, and selected the blacksmith's insignia and motto as their own. "By Hammer and Hand All Arts Do Stand" asserted the importance of skilled work in the building of a new Nation.

By 1820, 1325 men from 102 trades, who called their skills mechanical or "handmade arts," had joined The General Society. Some prospered while others faltered, as a combination of skill, luck and changing technology transformed their workshops. The educational system practiced in the Artisan world changed as well; traditional guidelines of apprenticeship specified that the master was obliged to teach his apprentice to read and write. In 1820, the members of the General Society founded two educational institutions, a day school and a library to respond to this need.

The Library, founded in 1820, as the Apprentices' Library, was created to support the Mechanics School, and to encourage the education and advancement of the members' children and the apprentices.



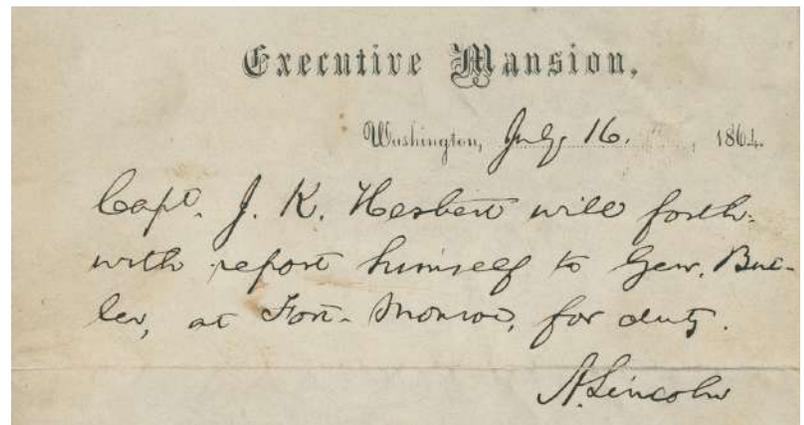
Library Accession Books

Books were both expensive and scarce in 1820, so to establish its library, The General Society solicited support and donated books from the mechanics of the City. Established by General Society member, Thomas Royce Mercein, the Library opened to great fanfare. There were fears that the launch would not be well attended, and indeed some naysayers even questioned the need for the library.

But 300 eager apprentices flooded into the building, eager to borrow books, as well as a "numerous and respectable audience" including the Mayor, Members of the Common Council and Legislature, and so began one of the most successful General Society programs.

It was the second Library to be founded in New York City; The New York Society Library was founded in 1754. By March 1823, the membership learned that there were 200 "constant readers" among the 1,000 apprentice members and books of every description were among the 6,000 volumes available. In 1862 women readers were invited to join the Library to further their knowledge and education.

The Library exhibited phenomenal growth, from the first 400 volumes in 1820, to some 14,000 volumes in 1830 to 100,000 books in 1900.



A note written by Abraham Lincoln

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The Library of the General Society Celebrates

Two Hundred Memorable Years

(continued from page 3)

The Library collection was also expanded by generous donations by members. In 1837, a popular lecture program was introduced that highlighted the enthusiasm for adult pursuit of knowledge that continues to the present day. Some of the preeminent lecturers of the day who participated were Horace Greeley, the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, Rev. John Pierpont, and topics covered included "The Antiquities of Egypt," "Chemistry," "Work and Labor," "Arctic Regions," "Nature and Society" and the "World's Fair." In 1858, the Apprentices Library was renamed the "Free Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of The City of New York," eventually abbreviated to The General Society Library.

In 1886, The General Society's Library became subsidized by public funds, since at that point New York lacked a public library system. The General Society's circulating collection, within three years, was the largest Library in the City both in terms of circulation and volumes. As the Library grew in popularity and size, in 1899 it moved eventually to the Library's final home at 20 West 44th Street.

Here the generous \$250,000 gift of General Society Member, Andrew Carnegie, made possible both a reconstruction of the building and the addition of the unique Library with the soaring skylight that lies at the heart of The General Society building. A bequest from financier Amos Eno, whose head carpenter was a Society member, further enhanced the library with a set of cast iron vertical shelves for the Library.

However, also in 1899, public funds were channeled away from private libraries in preparation for establishing a public library for the City and the Library became self-supporting. Today the collection continues to serve both as a membership library for the public and a free library for students enrolled in the educational programs sponsored by the General Society.

The book collection includes books and periodicals on a wide variety of subjects. Most notable is a collection of material classified as the "Useful Arts". These books and periodicals include a treatise on electricity published by Benjamin Franklin in 1757, to books and scientific reports concerning the building of the infrastructure of urban America. Many of these books were texts for classes taught at the Mechanics institute. A major component of this collection includes books on architecture. In addition, the Library is populated by a wide cross-section of popular contemporary fiction and non-fiction and has a collection devoted to publishing.

In recent times, some of the many authors who were library members or have spoken at the Library include Isaac Asimov, Brendan Gill, Tom Wolfe, Alice Walker, Richard Ford, E.L. Doctorow, George Plimpton, Colson Whitehead, Michael Cunningham, Alice Hoffman and Richard Price.



Historic Book Plate

The Library Today

Since The General Society's founding in 1785, extensive archives continue to be accumulated. Vital to safeguarding these pieces of history was the grant-funded construction of The General Society Archives Room which was completed in 2010. Just some of the important pieces we store in the archives room are the original 1785-1802 handwritten minutes book, the original membership signature logbook and an original printing of the 1798 Charter of Incorporation. Some museum items include a historic bookplate signed by GSMT member Jacob Lorillard, and letters written by Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln.

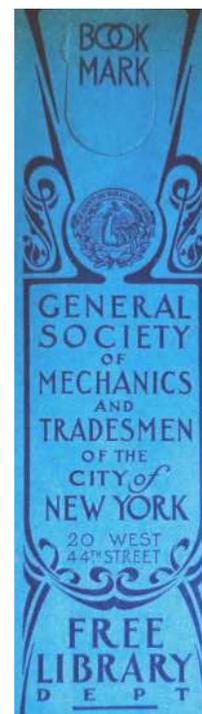
Temperature and humidity are the important elements that affect paper. The degradation of paper consists mainly of oxidation, hydrolysis and fiber bonding, with mold growth becoming apparent in high humidity and brittle paper in low humidity. The climate control stability provided by our independent system is most important, since constant change will stress paper products. LED lighting is used to eliminate damaging ultraviolet light in the space. The archival housing of our valuable records creates microclimates to minimize the rate of change, as well as provide an acid-free environment for further protection.

Today, The General Society Library remains one of only three membership circulating libraries located in New York City.

It makes its extensive collections available to other institutions and the public. The book and periodical collections of the Library span two centuries and are suited to both scholarly research and recreational reading. Library members also enjoy access to current fiction, biography and non-fiction.

The Library continues to support the educational programs of The General Society, including The Mechanics Institute and The General Society's own lecture programs, a tradition that started in 1837 and includes the "Labor, Literature and Landmark" lectures and the "Artisan" lecture series, a salute to the original 22 craftsmen who founded the Society. It also serves as a center for many cultural organizations in support of their own programs.

The General Society Library, as an important cultural and educational institution, has extended its reach and influence throughout its history. May it continue to flourish for generations to come.



Historic Book Mark

Electrical Technology Student Margarita Herrera



Margarita Herrera was 12 years old in 1989 when she arrived in Washington Heights from the Dominican Republic. She later moved to the Bronx and graduated from Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics, one of the highest-performing high schools in New York State, with a graduation rate of 95%. After graduation, Margarita went to work at Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital in Plant Operations, working on their HVAC systems. From there, she accepted an

invitation to enroll in the Refrigeration Institute, where she spent 225 hours and earned her EPA Certification.

Always striving for more education, Margarita applied to Mechanics Institute's Electrical Technology program in 2019. "I felt like this was the missing piece in my HVAC education," she told us. "Many buildings don't have electricians on staff. I saw this missing piece as something that could fill in the blanks for me and give me greater opportunities. I want to be able to troubleshoot all aspects of our HVAC systems, and the knowledge I'm gaining at Mechanics Institute is allowing me to do that. The more you learn the more you can do."

Margarita told us she loves her teachers because they recognized the humanity of the work and they inspire her. She has also gained many new friends. "My fellow students are not egotistical. They pose questions. There's no competition in our classes. We all work together and help each other grow."

On a broader scale, Margarita said, "Women of color have a chance to learn at Mechanics Institute. They can come out of poverty with what they can learn here. They can meet people who will help them and they succeed. I stand for empowering other women."

Margarita enriches us all.

In Memoriam

It is with great sadness, we mark the passing of our beloved and devoted General Society Members:

John L. Flynn: January 12, 2020
Fred M. Kahn, DDS: April 19, 2020
Andrew H. Schon: March 12, 2020

Plumbing Systems Student Sean Hirschhorn



Sean Hirschhorn loves the St. Louis Cardinals because they play in the city of his upbringing, which is a long way from New York City. He came to us by way of Yeshiva University in Washington Heights, where he earned a BA in Finance and an MA in Social Work. He taught higher education for a while and then decided to take a job with a company that makes boiler controls.

That year-long experience got him thinking about the pipes and all that they do. "I saw the plumbing in all these buildings and fell 110-percent in love with it," he told us.

Sean is studying to take the Master Plumber's exam, which he hopes to pass in 2023. In the meantime, he attended Mechanics Institute in pursuit of this goal. The Master Plumber (who is also the owner) and the General Manager of the company both attended M.I. "They urged me to attend. I realize now that the things I have learned at M.I. are things that I would not learn in 30 years working at our company, because we focus on service work. I now understand what goes into the bigger jobs. I know how to design entire systems."

We asked Sean what he liked best about his teachers and he remembered a day when one of his teachers took his class into a General Society bathroom and told them to look around. "When we came out, he asked us what we saw, and then told us all to make an isometric drawing of all of it. He then asked us how we would make it better and told us to draw that. This approach to education stays with you."

Sean told us that there was great camaraderie between the M.I. students. "We still keep in touch, compare jobs that we're on, help each other with systems, how to do this, and not to do that. It's so valuable!"

Sean Hirschhorn is the Mechanics Institute Class of 2020 Valedictorian and we are so proud of him.

Take Your Career To The Next Level BUILD YOURSELF • BUILD NEW YORK

Established in 1858, the Mechanics Institute continues to provide tuition-free evening instruction in trades-related education. It provides a critical service for men and women in the building and construction industry by enhancing knowledge and depth of understanding in their respective trades. This improves job performance and provides career advancement. Without a tuition-free education, many of our students would be unable to get the education needed to advance in today's environment. Each fall, over 300 students enroll in the Mechanics Institute's programs including Electrical Technology, HVAC&R Systems, Plumbing Systems, Construction Project Management, AutoCAD and BIM.

MECHANICS INSTITUTE
Workforce Development Since 1858

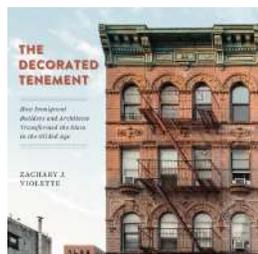
an educational program of
The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
of the City of New York

An Interrupted Spring 2020 Lecture Series

Our 2020 "Artisan" and "Labor, Literature and Landmark" Lecture series did not quite turn out as planned, as the long-term impact of the COVID-19 "pause" on public programming meant that all our Spring lecture programs were postponed. However, The General Society did begin the Winter 2020 season with two public lectures, before The Society was forced to suspend our public programming.

The first lecture was on February 18th, a 'Landmark' Lecture which featured Anthony W. Robins, an acclaimed historian and writer who discussed, *Grand Central Terminal: 100 Years of a New York Landmark* where he outlined the history of Grand Central and its central role in the formation of midtown Manhattan. His engaging and informative lecture was enthusiastically received.

On Tuesday, February 25th, architectural historian Zachary J. Violette discussed *The Decorated Tenement: How Immigrant Builders and Architects Transformed the Slum in the Gilded Age*. Dr. Violette discussed the little-known but enormous impact that new arrivals from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe had on New York Victorian streetscapes. All who attended now looked at New York's many tenement buildings with new appreciation.



'Landmark' Lectures that had to be postponed have been rescheduled for the Fall, including the following lectures:



Parfitt Brothers Architectural Design

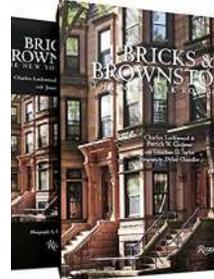
Gregory Dietrich of Gregory Dietrich Preservation Consulting, an architectural historian will describe the work of the Parfitt Brothers, three English brothers who designed some of Brooklyn's most distinctive buildings from Bensonhurst to Brooklyn Heights, in a talk entitled *Finding Their Architectural Roots: Cracking the Mystery of One of Brooklyn's Most Prolific and Distinguished Architectural Firms*. This rescheduled lecture will take place on Tuesday, September 29th at 6pm.

In *Henry Street Settlement – Story of a Loving Restoration*, Rachel Miller and Timothy Miller from Spirit Ironworks, a New York based studio specializing in skillfully crafted ornamental and architectural

metalwork, will discuss the ironwork restoration of one of New York City's most beloved, and historically significant social services agencies, Henry Street Settlement. This rescheduled lecture will take place on Tuesday, October 13th at 6pm.



Henry St. Settlement

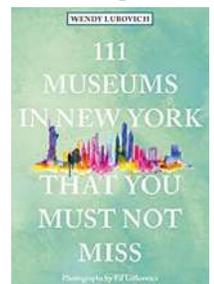


Patrick W. Ciccone, a New York City-based preservationist who has led major historic rehabilitation projects in Manhattan, Brooklyn, upstate New York, and Pennsylvania will discuss the book he co-authored, *Bricks & Brownstone: The New York Row House*. This newly revised

edition is considered to be the gold standard reference on brownstone architecture and interior. This rescheduled lecture will take place on Tuesday, October 20th at 6pm.

The 'Landmark' lectures are curated by Lisa Easton of the Historic Preservation firm, Easton Architects and are held in partnership with The New York Landmarks Conservancy.

Also participating in the Fall lecture series, will be writer Wendy Lubovich and photographer Ed Lefkowitz who will



describe their book, *111 Museums in New York That You Must Not Miss*, providing a treasure guide to the secret corners of the iconic museums and a field guide to the little museums you never dreamed existed. This will take place on Tuesday, October 27th at 6pm.

Also rescheduled for the Fall will be a 'Labor' lecture with Dan Holohan, International Authority on Steam Heating, who will discuss *Steam Heat Sustainability* on Tuesday, November 10th at 6pm.

Two other 'Labor' lectures that will be rescheduled in the future, include David Polemeni, Vice President, Film & Television Publishing Business at BMG, who will describe the evolution of the music scene over the last thirty years. Following this musical theme, in an additional 'Labor' lecture, musician Eric Hayes will discuss his musical career and the reality of being a contemporary musician in the present day, as well as being a heating industry executive.

This program is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, in partnership with the City Council.

NYC Cultural Affairs

*"By Hammer and Hand
All Arts Do Stand"*

A Virtual Independence Day Celebration

For 227 years, The General Society of the Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York Membership has gathered to celebrate the Signing of the Declaration of Independence. Although this year, the members were not able to gather as they usually did, side by side. They did assemble online from across the United States from New York to Pennsylvania, from New Jersey to Florida, to the West coast to mark this historic occasion, and made it a remarkable and unforgettable evening.

The evening of July 1st, 2020 began with a welcome by President Dan Holohan of The General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen. President Holohan then delivered The Presidential Patriotic Address, providing an insightful and reflective look at the history of The General Society during one of America's most difficult times. (Please see the Presidential Patriotic Address in the adjacent column.)

General Society Executive Director, Victoria Dengel, present at the General Society that night, eloquently introduced the remaining portions of the evening.

This included "a stirring reading of the Declaration of Independence, by General Society Past President Tom Székely." He proudly and passionately proclaimed "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." A spellbound audience warmly applauded him as he finished resolutely with these words "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."



A core part of the evening were the moving renditions from General Society Member, Michelle DellaFave of patriotic songs including *The Star-Spangled Banner*, *America the Beautiful* and *God Bless America*. President Dan Holohan described Ms. DellaFave as a patriotic angel."

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We Only Missed This Gathering Once

The Presidential Patriotic Address given by Dan Holohan, General Society President, at the 2020 Celebration of Independence Day on July 1st.



The period of 1807 to 1809 was a difficult time for The General Society.

In 1807, the British had attacked the Chesapeake, a U.S. frigate off the coast of Norfolk, VA. President Jefferson responded by slapping an embargo on all U.S. ports that year, forbidding any trade with the British. This severely affected American business, of course, and the timing of the embargo was made even more painful because, in 1807, Robert Fulton had started a steamboat line between Albany and Manhattan. The steamboats were bringing much-needed coal and lumber south to New York's harbor, but war was looming.

It was a time of both hope and fear for Society members. Our annals show us that we could not muster a quorum for any of the meetings held during those three tumultuous years. As a result, July 4, 1809 stands as the only year in General Society history when we did not read the Declaration of Independence aloud on or about July 4th.

What finally brought great interest back to the Society was the decision to open a school for the children of members. The first consideration for a school occurred at our June 2, 1813 gathering, and although a location in 1813 was granted to the school at Leonard and Elm Street, as the Society did not establish a school within three years, the land reverted to the City.

However in 1820, the Society made the school a reality and rooms for the school (along with the Apprentices' Library) were secured in the New York Free School building in Chatham Street. Decades later, that school became the Mechanics Institute.

The school was just what we needed. It reignited interest in The General Society. Gathering a quorum for meetings was no longer a problem.

Those who came before us truly knew how to adapt, create, and overcome.

...continued on page 8

Please Help the General Society Support Our Programs

The historic GSMT building has space to rent for programs and special events.

- Our grand, three-story library
- Balcony/Museum
- Conference Rooms for smaller meetings
- Classrooms available for regular daytime use or evening lectures, classes, receptions and more

For more information, call The General Society office, (212) 840-1840 ext. 2, or visit our website at www.generalsociety.org and click Rent Space.



A Virtual Independence Day Celebration

(continued from page 7)



All songs were sung acapella, and Michelle's exceptional and pure voice soared as she movingly interpreted these emblematic songs. Also present that evening, and playing live in the General Society Library, against a backdrop of red, white and blue bunting, were the Banjo Rascals, an integral part of the General Society Independence

Day celebrations for decades, and this year again their distinctive toe-tapping patriotic music provided a wonderful musical medley that filled the library. A special surprise was an appearance by General Society member Alex Marx's son, Isaac, who fired a mini-cannon, he had lovingly restored, live from the Pennsylvania countryside to mark this historic moment.

The General Society's History of Philanthropy and Almsgiving

This article was inspired and partly drawn from our Managing Editor, Penny Speckter's 1986 NYU Master's degree thesis, "The Philanthropic Activities of The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York, 1785-1885."



*"From Riches to Poverty"
By A.A. Anderson*

The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York is one of the few self-help organizations founded in the depth of the economic depression after the American Revolution, that have survived and prospered to the present day. The Society was a forceful catalyst for instituting a number of innovations that seem surprisingly contemporary to us today.

Following a pattern set in Boston and in Europe, The General Society was founded in 1785 by 22 New York mechanics and tradesmen representing a variety of trades and skills, including a ships' carpenter, a saddler, a shoemaker, a blacksmith, and a goldsmith. They gathered to form the General Committee of Mechanics. The fraternal organization then became known as The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York.

The Society's objective stated in its Charter, was: "for the laudable purposes of protecting and supporting such of their brethren as by sickness or accident may stand in the need of assistance and for the relief of the widows and orphans." At this time, this support was absolutely vital as many mechanics were beset by financial distress, and life expectancy for males was around the age of 38.

We Only Missed This Gathering Once

(continued from page 7)

The Presidential Patriotic Address given by Dan Holohan, General Society President at the Celebration of Independence Day on July 1st.

This year, it wasn't a lack of interest in our gatherings but the need for social distancing that threatened our tradition of reading the Declaration of Independence aloud. But we met that challenge with this online celebration of America's Independence Day. It is certainly not what we are used to, but times often dictate actions and we have met this challenge head-on because that is what we have always done.

We adapt. We create. We overcome.

It is my hope, and I know it is also your hope, that we will be together in person for our next Independence Day celebration, and hopefully sooner still for other gatherings.

In the meantime, our tradition, started in 1793, lives on in word, in song, and in spirit. May God bless America.

Although the members' dues were modest, 16 shillings initiation fee and monthly dues of 12 1/2 cents, this was combined with the assets acquired by the Society over the years, particularly in real estate, to help underwrite the payment of alms. An example of the alms paid in 1834 follows:

At the start, widows with no young children received \$25/year (about \$750/year in 2020). In addition, each child under the age of 14 received \$5.00/year (about \$150/year in 2020). This stopped when the child reached the age of 14. The widow continued to get her pension for as long as she required it. Orphans got \$15/year (\$450/year in 2020), which went to their guardian until the orphan reached the age of 14.

In 1881, benefits increased. We were also taking care of the children until they reached the age of 15, and we gave the widows \$52/year (\$1,300 in 2020). The children got \$25/year (\$635 in 2020). Orphaned children received \$40/year (\$1,016 in 2020) until they turned 16. All alms were paid quarterly. In many cases, relatives and religious organizations also helped both the widows and orphans. Funeral expenses were also paid, but not to exceed \$100 (\$2,540 in 2020).

There was a committee that constantly stayed up to date on how the widows, children, and orphans were doing, and whether they were still in need of help. Many of the orphans later became members of GSMT.

Almsgiving and providing pensions always remained a keystone of the General Society's philanthropic programs throughout the 19th Century, providing invaluable aid to the widows and orphans of General Society members, as well as to elderly members or members who had fallen on hard times.

GSMT and The Mechanics Bank

In the early 19th Century, the Mechanics of New York City began to advocate in New York State for the founding of an independent bank that would help service their financial interests. As a result of this effort led by the General Society, in March 1810 a charter was granted to the Mechanics National Bank of New York. The creation of this institution, the fourth National Bank headquartered in New York, allowed General Society members to purchase shares in the company and borrow funds to create or expand their business.

The venture was very successful, and it was a prime reason that membership in the Society rapidly expanded, adding 288 members to its rolls in 1810, the largest annual increase in its 235 year history.



By the original charter, the Bank had the Society president and seven other members on its Board of Directors, with former Society president and then-treasurer John Slidell serving as the first Bank president. The Board was composed of sixteen members, with two appointed by the State. The 1830s was a period of hard times including a cholera epidemic (1832), a great fire in New York (1835) and the financial Panic of 1837; the value of Bank shares fell precipitously, and the Society began to liquidate a portion of its holdings. As other financial options emerged, the support of mechanics for their own bank dwindled, and eventually forced the bank into a 1920 merger with the National Copper Bank creating the Mechanics and Metals National Bank. The imposing Hammer and Hand sculpture now in the lobby of 20 West 44th Street was originally at the entrance to the Mechanics National Bank at 33 Wall Street.

In 1926, the Mechanics and Metals National Bank was purchased by the much larger Chase National Bank that was formed in 1877. In 1955, Chase National merged with the Bank of Manhattan Company, the second National Bank formed in New York, by Aaron Burr in 1799. By the year 2000, Chase Manhattan had merged with the JP Morgan Company, creating the



financial colossus known as JPMorgan Chase. In the age of ATMs and online banking so commonplace in the 21st Century, wherever the Chase logo is found, part of its history can be traced back to the early members of The General Society.

It's About Time

Our monthly meetings begin at 6:00 PM, but it wasn't always that way. In looking through our Annals, we learn that our original bylaws called for members to meet on the first Wednesday of each month at a half-hour after the setting of the sun. Why this was we don't know, but we can speculate that it gave the members just enough time to get to the meeting after finishing their day's work.



But a half-hour apparently wasn't enough time because, in 1823, we changed our bylaws to begin each meeting at a full hour after the setting of the sun. Forty-one years later, in 1864, President George R. Jackson recommended that we assign the start of our meetings to a specific time rather than tie it to the setting sun. "One hour after sunset is indefinite," he said. "And we do not observe it. There should

be a specified hour."

It took another 17 years before we agreed upon that specific hour, that being 8:00 PM. Again, we don't know why they chose this time, and we also wondered if mechanics and tradesmen even owned watches in 1881, so we asked our friends and neighbors at The Horological Society of New York. Their president, Nicholas Manousos, answered with a delightful note. In part, he wrote, "This is a very interesting question! Pocket watches were developed in the 16th Century, but were extremely expensive, and usually owned by royalty. I say 'developed' instead of invented as no one knows for sure who invented the pocket watch as we know it today. Instead, it was a general development by many horologists over time. Back then, these portable timekeepers were thought of more as jewelry than timekeepers, as they were usually not precise beyond an hour. In the early 19th Century, new escapements were developed that made the precision of pocket watches accurate to seconds per day. Still, they were very expensive. By the second half of the 19th Century, the American watchmaking industry had figured out how to manufacture pocket watches on assembly lines, using interchangeable parts. This made the watch affordable to the average person, and is likely why we see the change to the General Society's bylaws in 1881.

This makes perfect sense and we thank our friends at

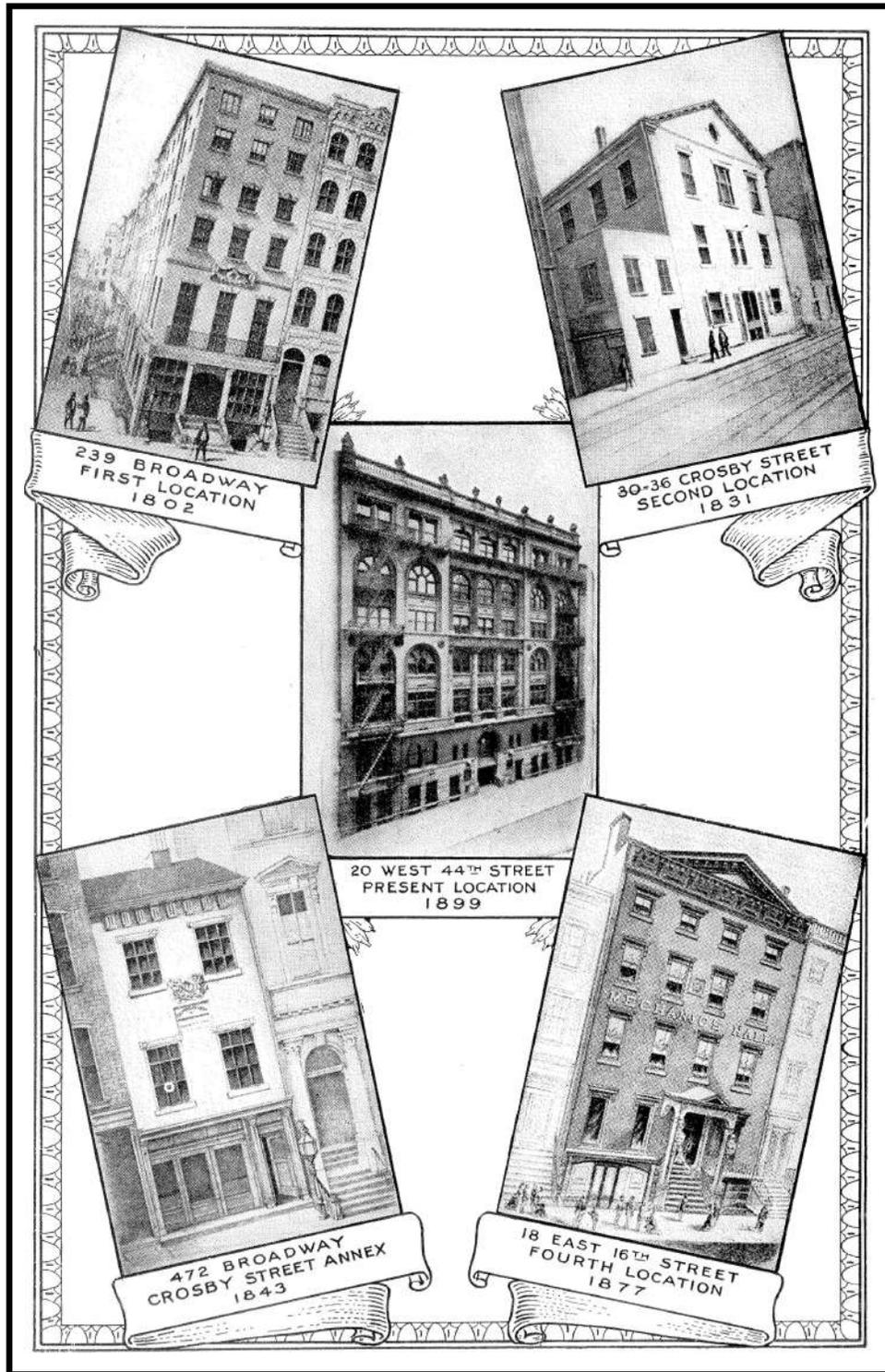
The Horological Society of New York for their insights.

But why do we now meet at 6:00 PM instead of 8:00 PM?

It's about time!

“The General Society purchased its first building in 1802 at 239 Broadway and called it the Mechanics Hall. Then in 1831, The Society’s second location was 30-36 Crosby Street. The third location, which the Society moved to in 1843, at 472 Broadway, was the Crosby Street Annex. The fourth location, first occupied in 1877, was located at 18 East Sixteenth Street. The Center image in the illustration shows The General Society’s present location at 20 West Forty-Fourth Street, the fifth and final building purchased in 1899.”

Montage of the General Society's five building locations from 1802 to the present.



Hammering On...

The General Society Library Spotlighted in *The Wall Street Journal*

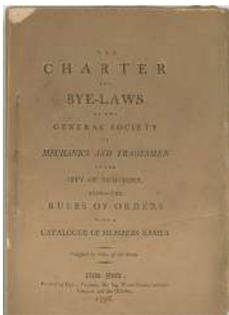
The special characteristics of The General Society Library and its many benefits for library members, including its distinctive space and arresting features were highlighted in a *Wall Street Journal* article in February entitled *Psst, Check Out New York City's Under-the-Radar Libraries* by journalist Anne Kadet. The article highlighted three membership libraries in New York City, including The General Society Library, that provided patrons with access to treasured collections amidst rooms with stunning decor.

A Reminder That Treasures from The General Society Collection are Available Digitally

The digitized collection of 364 objects is composed of selected archival materials and museum holdings from The General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen of the City of New York (GSMT). The items presented in the Industry and Culture Collection document a wide variety of General Society activities including patriotic, civic, educational and literary pursuits. The General Society would like to express our appreciation to the Metropolitan New York Library Council for this opportunity to make some of our collection available digitally.

To view the collection, please visit:

<http://dcmny.org/content/general-society-mechanics-and-tradesmen-industry-culture-collection>

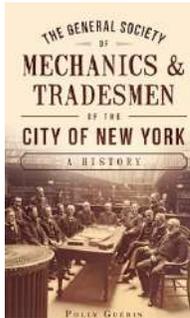


The Charter and Bye-Laws of the General Society 1798



Benjamin Franklin Correspondence: Specifications written by Benjamin Franklin for his printing house dated October 25, 1753

Book Available on The General Society's History



In noted author Polly Guerin's engrossing book, *The General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen of the City of New York: A History*, she details the development of the Society over the centuries. Ms. Guerin describes how The General Society's distinguished and inspirational history is aligned with New York City's physical and cultural development. The book outlines how this 235-year-old organization continues to serve and improve the quality of life of the people of the City of New York through its

educational and cultural programs, including its tuition-free Mechanics Institute, The General Society Library and its nearly two-century-old Lecture Series. *The General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen of the City of New York: A History* is available on Amazon.

The General Society
of Mechanics & Tradesmen of
the City of New York
*"By Hammer & Hand
All Arts Do Stand"*

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For GSMT Event Calendar, visit the
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www.generalsociety.org



**The General Society of
Mechanics & Tradesmen**
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Check our website for current updates on General Society Programs and send us your email to receive event information:
www.generalsociety.org

GENERAL SOCIETY LIBRARY FOUNDER, THOMAS ROYCE MERCEIN



As The General Society Library approaches the 200th anniversary of its opening date, we remember its founder, Thomas Royce Mercein (1782-1843), whose portrait hangs in our Assembly Room and is shown here, along with the cover of his printed address given that day, November 25th, 1820; the date chosen was the 37th anniversary of Evacuation Day when the last of the defeated British troops left New York City. Mercein, who was a Baker by trade, joined the Society in 1803 and served as President in 1827. He was convinced that the success of the new nation would depend upon an educated populace, and stated as much in his address when he declared: "Ignorance and Despotism have shown their kindred qualities, and their indissoluble connexion in every age—and Liberty has ever been most flourishing when the faculties of a nation expanded with moral and intellectual energy."

Mercein aimed at the youth of our fledgling country while also establishing a school for children along with the Apprentices Library, as it was known at that time. The school evolved into our present-day Mechanics Institute, and the Library progressed to a Free Library serving the entire city until the advent of the New York Public Library. The General Society Library eventually assumed its present form as a membership library focusing on labor, the useful arts and architecture, literature, New York City history, and supporting the curriculum of the Mechanics Institute.

