

## Charitably



## Speaking

353 Southern Artery

Quincy, MA 02169

---

**A PUBLICATION OF THE MASSACHUSETTS CHARITABLE MECHANIC ASSOCIATION**

---

### President's Message

With the very successful April Quarterly behind us, and Memorial Day weekend having ushered in the beginning of summer, everyone is looking forward to fun and enjoyment with family and friends before we settle back at it again in the fall.

So too, MCMA also looks to have everyone enjoy the summer season as well. However, we do have one "serious" business item planned, that being our July Quarterly business meeting. And my pledge to you is that it will be short and quick so we can get back to enjoying each other's company at our anticipated Annual Clambake Social.

This very festive and looked-forward-to event will once again be hosted by our very gracious hosts, Jessica and Paul Lohnes at their beautiful summer home in Gloucester. If you have never been to this event before, it is the one event of the year that is arguably the most enjoyable we have, especially with our guests invited to attend.

One of my increased areas of focus this year has been to better involve all members. We have asked members to become more committed to some of our committees, and one which has been revived this year is the Visitation Committee. It will focus on being in contact with members who have not attended our Quarterly meetings in a while. Sometimes life puts limits on our abilities to go places, but it doesn't have to limit our ability to keep in contact with our members.

Our history is a treasured part of our existence, and it would not be what it is without each of you making it better. I look forward to seeing each of you at the Clambake Social, July 27th. If you can't make it, you will be missed, but not forgotten. – **Chuck Sulkala**

### Helping Others

It has been several years since we highlighted the work of an organization with which MCMA has been associated since 1972, but this story merits retelling as this organization continues to earn our admiration and support. **National Braille Press (NBP)** was founded in 1927 with the publication of a weekly braille newspaper for blind readers in the local area, and over the past 95 years it has grown exponentially both in its reach and its scope. NBP is now recognized nationally and internationally, and its mission to bring the gift of literacy to blind children and adults through braille continues to expand in ways that were not conceivable in the past. Today, NBP's publishing program includes original books by blind authors plus braille editions of popular titles, periodicals, and self-help books on topics ranging from cooking and child care to computers, iPads, and smartphones, plus miscellaneous items such as restaurant menus and airline safety guides.

A particular focus of NBP is blind children. NBP promotes literacy for blind children through outreach programs and encourages the teaching of braille to blind children by providing age-appropriate braille reading and support materials for caregivers and educators. One highly regarded program

The logo for National Braille Press features the words "national" and "braille" in a blue sans-serif font, with "press" in a smaller font below "braille". A vertical bar of four colored dots (red, green, blue, yellow) is positioned between "national" and "braille".



takes popular children's books, transcribes the text into braille, and embosses it onto transparent plastic sheets. The plastic braille sheets are then interwoven with the print pages so blind children and sighted parents or teachers can read together. Another kids program distributes free tote bags of beginning braille materials to families with blind and visually-impaired preschool children across the U.S. and Canada. The program aims to introduce visually-impaired children to a means of independent reading, and help parents learn "just enough" braille to assist their child as they grow. NBP also produces braille textbooks and tactile graphics (raised-line representations of print images, such as maps and science charts) for teachers of the visually-impaired in K-12 and secondary environments across the country.

years to provide, upgrade, or replace equipment in virtually every stage of these processes. Overall, our assistance has helped NBP both to keep up with demand for their own publications, and to compete successfully for contract braille transcription and pressing projects that have long been a major source of income for them.

Importantly, one-fourth of the NBP staff has a disability, predominantly blindness, and they fill positions at all levels of the organization. MCMA has supported these employees in particular through grants for equipment such as screen readers, braille notebooks, and computers that accommodate adaptive devices. NBP also partners with the Carroll Center for the Blind to help place young adults in internships at NBP to gain hands-on work experience.



NBP promotes braille literacy as an important employment and general living skill. (Over 70% of working-age blind people are unemployed. Of the 30% who are employed, most are braille readers.) NBP

staff work every day to support blind people in their endeavors to lead productive, self-sufficient, and full lives by providing access to information that helps them function more independently and actively engage in work, family, and community. And NBP generously credits MCMA for its contributions in that effort.





## MCMA Profiles

We lost a valued member of MCMA last year with the passing of **Thomas R. Crowdis, Jr.** And not for the first time we learned, only after he was no longer with us, details of a member's life and accomplishments outside of MCMA that we wished we had known all along. Tom Jr.'s story, though, actually begins with his father. Tom Sr. was a native of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, who came to this country in 1920 and soon established a successful construction business. Tom joined our organization in 1954 and was a very faithful member, serving on several committees as well as our Board of Government. He was a skilled carpenter, and made several pieces of fine furniture. He also made for us the display case (as well as the table it stands on) that holds the American flag that flew over *Old Ironsides* on her 187th birthday in 1985. Tom crafted both pieces from a black walnut tree that had blown over in his back yard, and he quietly donated them to MCMA ... he was in his mid-80s at the time.



**Thomas R. Crowdis, Jr.**

Tom Jr., a long-time resident of Acton, joined our organization in 1981, and throughout his nearly 40 years with us he was active in many areas. He served three terms on our Board of Government, several years on our Relief Committee, and more than 20 years each on our Planning and History Committees, serving as chairman on the latter. Born and raised in Brookline, Tom attended Brookline High School, following which he enlisted in the military and served with the U.S. Army in Germany during the waning years of the Allied occupation. (Tom actually enlisted in the Marines and went through bootcamp, but was "transferred" to the Army before shipping overseas.) He later continued his education at Boston University and Columbia University, earning a master's degree in health care management. During his career in that field Tom oversaw and was responsible for the major expansion of Emerson Hospital, in both facilities and services, through the 1970s and early 1980s. Later, as VP of Operations at Genetics Institute in Cambridge, he was responsible for the development of research and manufacturing facilities at multiple locations.

Tom Jr. was a history buff, in particular an avid reader and researcher of Boston history, and a collector of coins, historical postcards, and Revolutionary and Civil War artifacts. Another of his interests was Mechanics Hall, and Tom enjoyed browsing through bookstores and antique shops for memorabilia of that building (and donating to us several items that he found). He also had a keen interest in his family history, spent many summer vacations with family in Cape Breton (where his family dates back to 1778), and with his wife Patricia authored four books on the genealogy of their two family lines. Like his father before him, Tom Jr. was a valued member of this Association, and those of us who had the opportunity to work closely with him sincerely miss his knowledge, his straightforwardness, and his dedication to MCMA.



But the involvement of the Crowdis family continues for us, thankfully, in the person of Tom III, who serves on our Board of Government and our History Committee, and chairs our Functions Committee. Tom also made the major donation that this year allowed MCMA to establish the Crowdis Fund that will help Massachusetts residents starting out in a trade or craft with the purchase of tools or specialized training. That gift was made in memory of his father and grandfather.

## MCMA History

On the wall of the reception room in our Quincy office is a large picture (approximately 72 inches long x 25 inches high) of the aforementioned Mechanics Hall, which was also known as the Mechanics Building. By either name, it was widely known to everyone in Boston from 1881 to 1958, and it was a landmark in the Back Bay long before the "Back Bay" came into being. From 1857 "Mechanics Hall" was the structure we had constructed on Chauncy Street in Boston. That building housed our offices, a large meeting room, and several

rental spaces, but it was inadequate to handle our mechanical exhibitions. Those exhibitions, which from 1837 had been held in Quincy Market and Faneuil Hall, had grown in popularity and prestige far beyond expectations, and requests for more space had increased dramatically. So, by 1880 we had begun seeking a new location. A committee formed to investigate potential locations, including several offered by the City of Boston, eventually chose a parcel in the Back Bay area. This triangular plot of 110,000 square feet was located on Huntington Avenue at the corner of West Newton Street, and in the rear it abutted the Boston and Albany railroad yard. On March 24, 1880 it was voted to purchase the property at a special meeting called for the purpose. Not a single structure was located within miles of the site, and when our plans for a new building were made public, it was immediately dubbed “The Mechanics’ Folly.”

Architect William G. Preston, a member of MCMA, was hired (at a cost not to exceed \$600) to design the building, which was to be 600 feet long (along Huntington Avenue) by 325 feet wide, three stories high with a tower on one end, and it was to be built of red brick (4½ million of them, as it turned out). Features included an electrical generating system, with gas as well as electric lights, a huge hall capable of seating 8,000 people or for holding large conventions or exhibitions, office space both for our own use and for rental purposes, and a requirement that no visitor was ever to be more than 50 feet from an exit. The character of our membership provided an extraordinary pool of mechanics and tradesmen, of course, and ultimately nine-tenths of the contractors performing the work or supplying the materials for the construction were members of the association. The final cost, including the land purchase, came to just over \$491,000.

Opening day in 1881 was celebrated with speeches by state and city officials, as well as other prominent statesmen and military officials. It was a great success. Requests for exhibition space were greater than ever, and many new enterprises sought space to display their products or services. Our building was the most conducive in the city to the holding of large events, and it became host to, among many others, animal shows, flower shows, automobile shows, cooking schools, boxing and wrestling events, political rallies, sportsman shows, and of course our own Mechanical Exhibitions and our trade school. *[In 1881 the Metropolitan Railroad extended its horse-drawn trolley line along Huntington Avenue to allow the public to more easily reach the building. The line was electrified in 1894, and when it was placed underground in the 1930s Mechanics Station (now re-named Prudential) was added.]*

But with the passage of time came competing venues such as Boston Garden, decreasing demand for space, ever-increasing maintenance costs, and even battles with the city over tax assessments. By the time the Prudential Insurance Company in 1956 expressed interest in acquiring the property, we were ready and willing to listen. At our annual meeting in 1957 it was voted to accept the Prudential’s offer, and the building was sold for \$800,000. We continued to occupy the building (as tenants) until December of 1958, and it was demolished the following month. The site is now part of the Prudential Center complex.

*This article is based on research by MCMA’s former Executive Director Ray Purdy.*



At left: 1908 postcard view. Above: 1929 Auto Show.