

Dear Niagara Stakeholder,

I am not an expert on tall ships. I am not an expert on museums. But I have spent six years as a volunteer on the Brig Niagara. I also hold a degree in history and have spent more time than most in museums and libraries. I know what a good tall ship program looks like, and I know what a good museum looks like, and I know what good leadership looks like. And I can tell you that Captains William Sabatini and Chris Cusson have run the best tall ship and volunteer programs it has ever been my privilege to be a part of. Unfortunately those programs have been under attack ever since the departure of Captain Walter Rybka from his post as Site Administrator of the Erie Maritime Museum.

It seems ridiculous even now that the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission would undermine the most successful Tall Ship program in the country. It is entirely irrational. However, permit me to explain what has been done and it will be clear that, intentionally or not, this is what has happened.

The story of the current Brig Niagara starts in 1820. The gallant soldiers, sailors, and craftsmen who had built the US Lake Erie fleet and won control of the Upper Great Lakes in the Battle of Lake Erie no longer had need of the brig and Niagara was sunk in Misery Bay, to be preserved in the cold water of the lake against future need. There she sat for nearly a century until 1913, when she was raised and rebuilt for the 100-year anniversary of the Battle of Lake Erie. After this, the age-old problem of historical tall ships raised its head: how do you maintain a vessel built to be manned by hundreds on a budget for historical preservation? In 1917 the Niagara was transferred to the City of Erie, who transferred it in 1929 to the newly-formed USS Niagara Foundation. At this point the ship had been badly neglected and needed considerable restoration. The Great Depression prevented this organization from raising the needed funds and the state of Pennsylvania acquired the ship two years later, funding the ship's restoration from 1931 to 1938 under the Flagship Niagara Commission. The rebuild was never completed before Niagara was transferred yet again to the Pennsylvania Historical Commission. At this point the Niagara had the good fortune to be included as a Works Progress Administration project under the New Deal.

With this funding source, respected naval architect Howard Irving Chapelle was contracted to restore the ship. He found that little of the original Niagara remained. Nonetheless he set to work and the bare hull of Niagara was relaunched in 1943. The Pennsylvania Historical Commission was merged into the new Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in 1945, but Niagara was left as a bare hull sitting at a dock. That lasted until 1951, when the hull was lifted out of the water and set on concrete blocks. It was found to be filled with dry rot and in need of yet another restoration. Once again the historical tall ships conundrum had ruined Niagara. Without a devoted crew and funding the tall ship could not be maintained.

In 1963 the PHMC fitted the rotting hull of Niagara with cannon and rigging for the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Lake Erie. In 1973 Niagara was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The fortunes of Niagara changed in 1981 with the formation of the Flagship Niagara League. The FNL was formed to reconstruct Niagara once again, but this time to operate her as a living piece of history instead of an outdoor exhibit that would inevitably be neglected and left to rot. The PHMC and the FNL worked together to restore the ship. The project was led by respected naval architect Melbourne Smith starting in 1986, and the ship was launched in 1988 and completed in 1990. Timbers from the former Niagara were included in the new ship where possible. The Niagara was designated the state flagship of Pennsylvania by the General Assembly in 1988, with her purpose being to act as a “sailing ambassador” for the Commonwealth.

Under her first Captain, Walter Rybka, Niagara was exactly that. Captain Rybka fully understood the historical tall ships conundrum and he had a plan to keep the Niagara operating. He cultivated a robust volunteer community to supply the labor needed to maintain and sail the ship and began a process of supplementing state and FNL-raised money with sail training income. This necessitated a variety of safety improvements to the ship, but in 2005 Niagara was certified as a Sailing School Vessel by the US Coast Guard. Now the Niagara was able to be the sailing ambassador of Pennsylvania and train the men and women who would be sailors and caretakers for the historical tall ship fleet of the nation.

In 2009 the PHMC decided to cut \$250,000 from the Niagara’s budget, rendering her unable to sail. FNL stepped up, and after lengthy delays from the PHMC a public hearing was held, which resulted in the FNL being given permission to operate Niagara. The FNL has had control of operating Niagara since that time on behalf of the Commonwealth and has done an excellent job by any standard. The FNL’s sail training program was recognized as the best in the nation in 2010 and 2015 by Tall Ships America, and Tall Ships Erie was equally recognized as the best in the nation in 2019. The Niagara continues to train many of the sailors that go on to crew the nation’s tall ships, as well as offering a life-changing experience for the trainees that pursue other careers.

The Niagara went into shutdown along with the rest of the world in March of 2020. Site Administrator Captain Walter Rybka retired that year. Given that Captain Rybka was and is the foremost expert at establishing and operating a living tall ship sail training program, this was a serious loss. Unfortunately the PHMC apparently saw this as an opportunity to change a volunteer-driven living tall ship program into a standard museum with paid staff, and went for it. Among the most egregious was Interim Site Administrator Tyler Gum taking immediate action to bar FNL staff from contacting volunteers without explicit permission. This was during the shutdown, when Niagara Captain Chris Cusson ran a series of regular virtual get-togethers and training events that were critical to the emotional health of many Niagarans who were otherwise cut off during shutdown.

The PHMC also selected James Hall to be the next EMM Site Administrator. Based on my direct experience, a more unsuitable candidate would be hard to find.

My exposure to Mr. Hall began in August 2021 when one of the museum docents asked to attend a meeting of the Niagara Volunteer Council. The NVC was formed for the purpose of giving volunteers a voice and was initially elected with ship volunteers. The Erie Maritime Museum docents had their own system at the time. However, that docent had alarming news: Site Administrator James Hall was driving off our volunteer docents. The NVC immediately looked into this and we found it was true. The EMM had lost active docents during the COVID shutdown and many of our most experienced docents found volunteering under Mr. Hall to be intolerable. I found a third of the remaining docent core had left the EMM and were now active at the Hagen History Center. Our docents are not easily replaced. They are generally very experienced older men and women with years of training in the EMM and often sailed on Niagara before becoming docents. They are loyal, dependable, and to hear that they were being driven off was terrible.

I followed up with a meeting with our Museum Educator Charles Johnson, whom I hold in respect. That meeting was interrupted by Mr. Hall and became a meeting between myself and Mr. Hall, with Mr. Johnson sitting in. I made a record and summary of that meeting in the days immediately after. (Please see Appendix) I was gobsmacked by the degree of hostility and suspicion Mr. Hall displayed in that meeting toward the Flagship Niagara League and to me. I was accused of being an agent of the FNL, he repeatedly belittled the volunteer council, expressed that he (Mr. Hall) had all the power and that the council had none, issued a threat to me personally, accused the FNL of fraud, and repeatedly returned to his grievances against the FNL in spite of every effort I made to create a constructive meeting focused on the volunteers. Mr. Hall's demeanor during that meeting was hostile, insecure, paranoid, bullying, and unbecoming of the PHMC.

The volunteer council had a subsequent group meeting with Mr. Hall that was more cordial. However, that meeting did not improve conditions at the museum. When asked about what the loss of Mr. Johnson would mean for volunteers, Mr. Hall explained that he was not a volunteer coordinator and would not be "getting in the weeds" of dealing with volunteer issues. He also spoke about the time he spent writing and submitting reports to PHMC leadership. I asked him explicitly whether he would be willing to devote his time to volunteer issues if it resulted in running the museum at full-week, pre-COVID levels. He answered that only he could make reports to Harrisburg and that even if the museum was successful and running at full capacity it would not matter if no reports were filed with Harrisburg. I feel that position fully expresses Mr. Hall's concerns as a Site Administrator.

Mr. Hall also stated at that time that anyone who wished to help lead volunteers or communicate with the volunteers needed to accept and adopt his understanding of the EMM, which was that he was in charge and had all the power, that all volunteers were PHMC volunteers and the FNL could not have volunteers, and that Niagara was a museum facility of the EMM and nothing more. He particularly emphasized that Niagara was not separate from the EMM in any way. This of course flew neatly in the face of reality. The reality is that the work of maintaining and sailing a tall ship is entirely different from the work done at a museum and is organized and carried out differently. It also requires different people with different skill sets and physical abilities. Finally, it

also ignored that the EMM had been created in support of the 1981 vision of Brig Niagara as the Flagship and Sailing Ambassador of Pennsylvania.

The past months of crisis between the PHMC and the FNL have been par for the course since I became aware of the problem back in August 2021. I have personally observed the FNL Executive Director William Sabatini entering the museum to meet with Mr. Hall only to later hear Mr. Hall state that Mr. Sabatini was not communicating with the PHMC. I have also heard him state other falsehoods regarding the FNL and his interactions with the FNL. At this point Mr. Hall has no credibility with the majority of the Niagara volunteer community that have interacted with him. He may possibly be a manager but he is in no way a leader and does not understand how to lead volunteers or work with associate nonprofits.

There is an unbroken chain of command from Executive Director Andrea Lowery to Director Melissa Mann to Western Division Chief Charles Fox to Site Administrator James Hall. There is always a possibility that Mr. Hall is not accurately reporting some things, but that chain seems to be aware of what is going on at the EMM. It is certainly aware that the EMM is only open two days a week. It is also aware and responsible for refusing to negotiate with the FNL on a new management agreement or a new associate agreement. It is aware and responsible for depriving Erie of Niagara's 2021 sailing season, and for Niagara's drydock visit in Cleveland being delayed until the end of the year. This in turn exposed Niagara to the risk and danger of a December passage through Lake Erie. This is a time of rough, freezing weather which has sunk many Great Lakes ships - or at least the few that still operated that late, given that almost all historical sail ships were in overwinter ports so late in the year. Their captains and owners knew better than to be on the lakes in December, and the PHMC's decisions that put Niagara out there put culpable risk on the ship, crew, and volunteers.

That culpable risk extends to preparing Niagara for the winter. The Niagara's winter cover is massive and requires many hands and many days to move, assemble, secure, and cover with canvas. It is hard work during the fall which is when it is normally put on, but to delay it until the depths of winter is outright inviting injury. I personally suffered a broken hand when I slipped on a small amount of snow while moving a heavy ridgebeam into place. That was in spite of multiple safety precautions and careful preparation - putting on the cover is simply less safe to do in winter snow than in the fall. Aside from my own slipping, I lay this injury directly on the PHMC. Their actions increased the danger to the ship, crew, and volunteers.

The PHMC vision for Niagara is not sustainable. The ship must be active to survive. I acknowledge that the PHMC has not publicly stated a vision for Niagara to become a static display. However, there are other forms of communication that PHMC has utilized since Captain Rybka's retirement. Most of these have been provided by Site Administrator James Hall. All such points can be supported by the records of meetings or direct testimony.

Whereas:

-James Hall demanded that all volunteers who worked for him accept that Niagara is nothing more than a museum facility;

- James Hall has stated that FNL thinks of and treats Niagara as its private sailing club;
- After the legislators got involved, a member of PHMC leadership asked that Niagara be restricted to daysails and short excursions in 2022;
- James Hall gave permission for Niagara to take her cover off in 2021, then rescinded that permission with PHMC backing or at PHMC direction, which prevented Niagara from having a sailing season;
- James Hall stated later that FNL had been very irresponsible for wanting to take Niagara to drydock in the spring, and that by refusing permission to go to drydock he had saved the expense of having to go to drydock twice (the fall drydocking being for the stern rebuild) while entirely ignoring that this cost savings came at the expense of Niagara's 2021 sailing season;
- James Hall has repeatedly stated that there is no public benefit or benefit to the museum or its mission from public sails on the Lettie G. Howard;
- James Hall has told FNL that sailing operations will be restricted to the hours the museum is open, again seeing no benefit to sailing aside from its direct benefit in driving traffic to the museum;
- James Hall stated that there is no need for the FNL because if James Hall was given the money that went to operate Niagara he could hire a captain and crew himself;
- PA General Assembly Consolidated Statutes Title 37 legally requires Niagara to operate as a sailing ambassador for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania; thus, PHMC cannot and will not admit that they are pursuing a course of action that will result in Niagara being a static museum ship;
- Niagara relies on the income from sailing trainees and port visits to fill her operating budget;
- Niagara especially relies on income from Tall Ships Erie, and without Niagara sailing to the ports of other tall ships during the season it is unlikely that these ships will attend Tall Ships Erie in the same numbers they currently do, and this will inevitably reduce visitor attendance and revenue from an event that comprises a substantial portion of Niagara's income;
- There are a limited number of tall ship sailors and running daysails and short excursions as a square-sailor will make Niagara a significantly less desirable work destination, requiring more money to hire sufficient crew if they are available at all;
- Sailing restrictions will make Niagara less interesting to volunteers focused on sailing operations, leading to a drop in volunteer hours;
- These factors will result in more money being needed from PHMC to fund a daysail/short excursion Niagara;
- PHMC is unlikely to allocate increasingly levels of additional funding each year under the post-2009 reduced budget, which will push Niagara into a death spiral of deferred maintenance until she is no longer safe to operate with passengers, at which point her income will fall further and she will lose more crew and volunteers, resulting in less maintenance being done, eventually resulting in dry rot in the hull, being lifted out of the water, placed on concrete blocks, and rotting away as a static museum display;

The PHMC's actions and staffing have thus been leading towards the creation of a static museum ship despite any claims to the contrary.

Given all this and considering the legal obligation incurred under Title 37 I don't think it's any exaggeration to characterize PHMC's actions as a dereliction of duty towards the Niagara and the Commonwealth. However, I do believe that the severity of this crisis has created an opportunity for the PHMC to re-imagine its relationship with the FNL and the Erie region for the betterment of the Commonwealth and the PHMC. The seeds of this crisis were sown long before it occurred. Now is the time to discard the fruit of those unhelpful seeds and plant the seeds of success for all parties involved.

First, I recommend that the PHMC acknowledge the special expertise of the FNL in operating a successful Tall Ship program based around an actively sailing Brig Niagara and sign a new Management agreement that provides the FNL with the autonomy it needs to continue operating one of the world's most successful Tall Ship programs.

Second, a new EMM Site Administrator must be appointed who will support the Niagara program and repair the damage done to the EMM's operations since Captain Rybka's retirement. This person should either be a respected member of the tall ship community or a local who understands the importance of Niagara to the Erie region and can regain the trust that has been lost. The FNL and volunteers must be part of the process to hire this new Site Administrator and have a veto, so as to prevent the current cycle of mistrust and hostility from repeating itself.

If this proves impossible, the best alternative would be to remove Niagara and the EMM from PHMC oversight and localize operations and funding. However, this would remove Niagara from the oversight and direct support of the Commonwealth and is thus not ideal for the state Flagship. It does maximize local investment and control of Niagara and the EMM, which is of very high value.

With the proper stakeholder buy-in, either solution will secure Niagara's future for more generations of Pennsylvanians to enjoy, learn from, and be inspired by. It's time to set aside recriminations and disagreement in favor of cooperation. It is time to begin anew.

Sincerely,

Ryan Cook