

## Summary of August 24, 2021 Meeting with PHMC EMM Museum Educator Charles Johnson and PHMC EMM Site Administrator James Hall, by NVC Chair Ryan Cook

Note: I did not record the meeting so I do not quote the exact words of the attendees, save for when I place quotation marks around a phrase that was so memorable that my recall of the exact statement is 100% accurate. All other wording accurately relates the statements of the person making them but does not attempt to quote word for word. Furthermore, the meeting went from 0900 to 1130, covering ground, circling back, repeating itself, and jumping around. I do not attempt to include multiple mentions of the same thing in this summary, so while the content is accurate, the chronology of topics is only approximate. Please also bear in mind that this is a meeting summary. The content of the meeting is accurately summarized, but whether or not what was actually said is truthful is another question entirely and outside the scope of this summary. Some details during the two and a half hour long meeting were certainly omitted, but the main points are well-covered and accurate.

### Meeting Summary:

I scheduled a meeting with Chuck Johnson at the EMM in response to a report from a docent from the Niagara Volunteer Council August meeting raising alarm about the state of the docent program at the EMM. The report stated that the docents had been reduced in number from 70 pre-Covid to approximately 20 currently. The causes were attributed to some leaving out of dissatisfaction with Edd Tonkin's firing in Spring 2020, then about half the remainder being unwilling to complete the unnecessarily complicated Mandatory Child Abuse Reporter online training that PHMC began requiring them to do this year, and finally docents leaving one after the other in protest to new EMM policies and actions. These included requiring the use of Timecounts, taking away the docent's table by the museum entryway where docents had been able to sit together, not being allowed to talk to one another, and personal disagreements with James Hall.

I arrived at EMM at 0900 for a scheduled meeting with Chuck Johnson. James Hall decided he wanted to be part of this meeting so the three of us met in his office.

The meeting began with me saying that I was there because the Museum docent program was in crisis and that it should never have gotten to the point where I had to come in to have a meeting about it.

At this point James Hall stopped me and informed me that I was under the misapprehension that I had any standing to effect change at the EMM. He explained that the Niagara Volunteer Council (he actually called the NVC the "Niagara Volunteer Council or Coalition" throughout the entire meeting, despite being repeatedly told the name was the Niagara Volunteer Council) was not a real organization, that it had no standing, that it was harmful to the EMM because it provided a place for volunteers to talk and share their concerns. He further stated that the only

venue for volunteer concerns were Mr. Hall and Mr. Johnson, and anything else was pointless, harmful, and unnecessary. Additionally, he said that the Niagara Volunteer Council was “a joke,” that he laughed when he read Niagara Volunteer Council meeting minutes, and that much of the information the NVC had about what was happening at the EMM and Niagara was false. He stated that only he and Chuck actually knew what was going on and that NVC was spreading lies that made his job more difficult. He also said he did not know what the NVC did and that it had no status with PHMC, and that all policy at the EMM came from his authority under his contract with PHMC.

I explained what the NVC did and that we functioned under a charter with the FNL and signed by Captain Chris Cusson, at which point I was informed that the FNL had no right to do that, did not have volunteers, and that all Niagara volunteers belonged to PHMC. He spent some time explaining that the PHMC assumed legal liability for volunteers and thus all volunteers were PHMC volunteers, not FNL volunteers. He waved a stack of papers he said were contracts and told me that everything he had been told and the legal contracts he had said that the FNL had no standing or authority to have Niagara volunteers, that the FNL was a “friends” organization whose sole and exclusive purpose was to support the needs of the EMM. He explained that the FNL’s contract with the PHMC had lapsed and not been renewed because the FNL was refusing to agree to the PHMC contract.

I suggested that as a someone trained in mediation, that the PHMC and the FNL would benefit from a professional mediator, someone other than myself. He said that I was an agent of the FNL and that the FNL had gone to court and that there were no negotiations happening because the FNL’s only choices were to sign the contract as presented or to dissolve itself. I stated I was not an agent of the FNL but rather a concerned volunteer invested in the success of Niagara. He then spent some time stating that the NVC was an illegitimate organization and asked what authority I thought I had to try to change anything. I explained that my authority was nothing more than moral as a long-time volunteer and that the NVC spent the vast amount of its time conducting activities for volunteers, and had only acted as a voice for volunteers on two occasions. The first was speaking with Mr. Johnson about the Mandatory Reporter online training which many volunteers had a problem with, and the second was this meeting with Mr. Johnson on behalf of the docents. Mr. Hall repeated that the NVC had no standing to do anything and stated that if a volunteer had a concern that he or she needed to come see Mr. Johnson or Mr. Hall. I explained that not all volunteers were comfortable doing that. He then accused the NVC of providing an illegitimate outlet for volunteers to voice concerns and said that this was one of the reasons that lies kept circulating, because if the volunteers only came to Mr. Johnson or Mr. Hall that the volunteers would learn the truth, because only Mr. Johnson and Mr. Hall had the truth of what was happening and what the EMM was doing. (Mr. Hall repeatedly raised this statement at multiple points throughout the meeting, stating that the NVC was illegitimate, had no authority, and was damaging his efforts and the EMM). I believe it was during this explanation that Mr. Hall suggested that I should not get involved in what was going on between PHMC and the FNL, and I would regret it if I did. (I was shocked by being threatened, but unfortunately I do not recall the exact words used. I did tell Mr. Hall that he had

essentially told me to “check myself before I wreck myself” (my words to him to describe what he had told me) later in the discussion and he did not dispute it.)

At some point we were able to return to a discussion of the docent problem. I said that according to what I was told, that of the 70 docents from pre-Covid only 20 remained and then Mr. Hall stated that that was entirely wrong and a lie and an example of how the NVC's existence helped lies and false information spread. At that point Mr. Johnson stated that the actual current numbers were 63 active docents on the docent list, with 30 taking part in the museum floor shifts and 28 of those being active regular docents that made up the vast majority of the daily museum shift docents. Mr. Johnson also said that he had been active in recruiting new docents and had enrolled 21 new docents into the program this year. I asked how many docents had left because of the new policies, chiefly the table being taken away, and Mr. Johnson estimated 10 had left.

Mr. Hall then explained that he was going to contract a builder to install an information desk in front of the museum entryway over the winter that would provide lockers for docents to store personal effects during shifts. He said that he had gotten complaints from guests before of the docents sitting at the docent table talking to each other and that it made some guests feel uncomfortable, and he felt the table was unprofessional and that is why he removed it and would not return it. He said that there was a table for personal effects now provided where docents could not sit and talk, and that there were chairs spaced out in the museum that docents could sit. He also said that he doesn't mind if the docents pull chairs together to talk to each other. Mr. Hall also said that museum visitor attendance was at a high daily level this summer (100 a day, compared to half that pre-Covid) and that docents didn't have time to talk to each other with that many guests coming through. He said that he thought that many of the docents from pre-Covid who didn't come back were likely aging out of being active volunteers and that Covid was a convenient excuse for them to stop volunteering, and he was fine with them using it as an excuse to save face. He also stated that volunteer organizations across the state were all having difficulty finding enough volunteers once Covid restrictions were relaxed in 2021, and the loss of volunteer docents in 2021 was in line with what the other volunteer organizations were experiencing. Finally, he stated that if docents decided that socializing with other docents (at the table) was more important than serving EMM guests as a docent (continuing to volunteer under Mr. Hall's policies) that the museum was better off without them, and that that he didn't need the docents who had left.

I at some point in this stated that the Niagara and EMM were fundamentally volunteer-powered entities and that it was critical that this continue, and asked if the new policies were worth the loss of volunteers. This segued into the amount of time Mr. Hall and Mr. Johnson had spent working the museum floor to keep the EMM open three days a week and how they couldn't keep doing that, which was why Mr. Hall went to two days a week. I asked if the loss of volunteers had anything to do with that and he said it did not and he needed to hire four part-time staff to be docents in order to open the museum (either five or six days a week as I recall) more. He then said the FNL had recently held a fundraiser as part of Erie Gives in which

they raised approximately \$40,000 and that this money would be enough to hire these part-time docents. He said he had approached the FNL with this proposal but they had thus far refused.

I again pointed out that the Niagara community was volunteer-driven, that in pre-Covid operation it had been able to be fully open with volunteer docents, and that the money the FNL raised would likely be needed to return Niagara to sailing shape after two years tied up.

Mr. Hall then explained his problems with the FNL. He stated:

- that the FNL abandoned the EMM overnight without telling him despite him wanting the FNL to stay at the museum,
- that there were empty offices at the EMM and plenty of space for the FNL to operate there,
- that the meeting I was having with him was more time than he had spent with FNL director Billy Sabatini in the entire time since he had been hired,
- that this was because Mr. Sabatini was deliberately avoiding him and his invitation to meet, instead opting to go to court and lie to everyone to try and make Mr. Hall and the PHMC look bad and the FNL and Mr. Sabatini look good,
- that the FNL wanted things to go back to the way that they were before with the FNL running most things because the previous Site Administrator was lax,
- that he had disbursed around a million dollars to the FNL, that the Niagara was not operating and he had not gotten a single receipt from the FNL to account for where that money was going
- that Mr. Sabatini was spreading lies and Mr. Hall (repeatedly) said he wondered where that money was going because the Niagara didn't need much money tied up at dock (there was an implication in Mr. Hall's statements that Mr. Sabatini was embezzling that money, though this was not outright stated),
- that the FNL had no legal standing outside of the PHMC and it had no chance of winning in court and that there's "going to be a reckoning" for the FNL,
- that the FNL only cared about sailing the Niagara and didn't care about the museum but that he was hired to run the museum and cared about everything,
- that when he was being interviewed he told the interviewer that he was "not a tall ship guy" and if that's what they wanted the interview should stop right then and there, but he was assured that that is not what they wanted,
- that his predecessor had not been as energetic and hands-on as himself and now he was in charge and everyone was finding out what that meant and that the FNL not happy now that someone who took charge of everything was Administrator because it meant that they couldn't run their own show like they used to when PHMC authority was not being exerted like it legally should have been,
- that he secured \$300,000 from the State to repair Niagara's stern in drydock,
- that he stopped the FNL from taking the cover off the Niagara in the spring of 2021 because the FNL did not have an approved plan from Mr. Hall,
- that the FNL just decided to take the cover off without him approving it and that he put a stop to it as soon as he learned what was going on,
- that he would not have approved taking the cover off then anyway because the FNL wanted to take the Niagara to drydock in the spring and then take Niagara to drydock in the fall as well,

and that it was not fiscally responsible to take the Niagara to drydock twice in one year and that the FNL was not being responsible because all they cared about was sailing the ship,

- that Niagara was strictly an amenity of the EMM, to serve the goals of the EMM,
- that he wanted Niagara to sail in 2022,
- that he had given permission months ago for the Niagara cover to be removed but the FNL refused to do anything to remove the cover,
- that he didn't see any way in which sailing the Lettie G Howard furthered the mission of the EMM in any way, (I explained how it did and he said the same thing later)
- that Lettie wasn't even sailing from the EMM,
- that the FNL was acting like a rogue organization outside of the EMM in sailing Lettie during 2021,

-(upon me asking him what his goals and vision were for the EMM and Niagara) that all decisions, authority, and vision for anything the EMM and Niagara did came from him and his office under his contract with PHMC.

After this I brought up the issue of ██████████, who had recently been rejected by the EMM as a volunteer and banned from being on EMM grounds as a volunteer or FNL employee. Mr. Hall explained that he read that ██████████ had been fired from FNL the previous year for getting into a confrontation with law enforcement and that ██████████ self control was too lacking for PHMC to be willing to take the risk of letting ██████████ come onto EMM grounds. I stated that I had known ██████████ for years, that the incident was an isolated one, and asked if Mr. Hall felt someone should be judged on their worst moment. Mr. Hall replied that ██████████ would have to face the consequences of ██████████ lapse of control and Mr. Hall would be willing to reconsider ██████████ as a volunteer if ██████████ were to apply again after 5-6 years of excellent service as a volunteer at another organization. I asked if Mr. Hall would be willing to read letters attesting to ██████████ character so that he would have more than just the firing incident to refer to but Mr. Hall said that ██████████ had other outbursts in ██████████ file and Mr Hall's mind was made up.

We also discussed Mr. Johnson's upcoming year-long deployment and the necessity of finding a temporary replacement for his position until he returned from his year of naval service. In this all agreed that Mr. Johnson would be missed and it was critical for PHMC to approve someone to do his work while he was away.

Finally, I offered to encourage the FNL to contact Mr. Hall. He encouraged me to cease any activity by the NVC and support him. That concluded the meeting and I was escorted outside by Mr. Johnson.