

April 11, 2022

Dear Chair Benning and the Members of the Senate Committee on Institutions,

Thank you for inviting Lake Champlain Maritime Museum to give testimony in your committee this session, and for your continued support of historic preservation programs throughout the state. We are writing with additional testimony to clarify Lake Champlain Maritime Museum's decision around the future of our replica canal schooner *Lois McClure*, as well as address issues that were raised by public testimony on this topic.

About the Schooner *Lois McClure*: The schooner *Lois McClure* is one of the Museum's replica boats, built beginning in 2001 to be a historically accurate replica of an 1862-class sailing canal schooner and based on two shipwrecks in Lake Champlain, [*General Butler*](#) and [*O.J. Walker*](#). The goal with this project from the start has been to understand our region's unique sailing canal schooners, what life was like aboard these ships, and their impact on regional commerce. Since its launch in 2004, the vessel has journeyed local waterways as a floating exhibit and emissary of the Museum, docking at local communities where people could climb aboard to learn about the boat and the history of the Champlain Valley and welcoming over 300,000 visitors onboard. The boat is owned by Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, a private non-profit.

Moving Forward after 20 Years of Success: While this project has been an unquestionable success, as responsible stewards we have been assessing the long-term plan for both the ship and the project. Our replica, like any wooden boat, has required repairs that push beyond the goals of this replica project. And at the same time, we are facing a very historically accurate problem: these 19th century boats lasted only around 15 years, which we are already over.

In December of 2021, the Board of the Museum voted unanimously to retire *Lois McClure* at the end of 2023 and move forward with plans to develop an archive of the project, launch an oral history documentation effort, and build a new, accessible, on-land exhibit that may reuse pieces of the vessel as interpretive tools. We are creating a responsible game plan where there was not one before. We want to create a good ending for this replica boat project in a way that honors the project, what we have learned, and our community.

Focusing on Accessibility: Replica boats, while incredible, are inherently not accessible. There was no Americans with Disabilities Act in 1862. The danger with replicas is that you so closely recreate the past that you recreate the problems of the past. As a society, we are learning and improving all the time. While we want to give people the feel of the past, we do not want to recreate the barriers to access that have existed for centuries. Our team has absolutely done our best to be as accessible as possible, but we have a new opportunity here to be fully accessible in every way with a new exhibit. Accessibility is a core value of Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, and every decision we make (programming, funding, communications) has accessibility at its center.

Immediate Repairs: In 2021, Lake Champlain Maritime Museum hired a professional shipwright to assess the repair needs of the boat. In his marine survey, he included a list of repairs that needed to

be undertaken before the boat was sailed, and he included an estimate of \$117,000 to complete these repairs. The shipwright said that if these repairs were completed, the boat would be “suitable for navigation.” With increases in supplies and construction costs, we estimate that this cost in 2022 would be between \$125-\$150,000. These repairs cannot be completed using volunteer labor alone, the Museum must assume that there will be significant cost associated with these necessary repairs.

Annual Maintenance Costs and Touring: The average cost for the Museum to maintain this large wooden replica boat over the past 20 years is \$100,000 per year. This includes staff and supplies for maintenance, interpretation, and insurance. The shipwright hired by the Museum in 2021 confirmed that annual maintenance alone (not including other expenses) will continue to cost \$60,000/year in perpetuity. The costs of annual tours changes depending on the scope of the tour, anywhere from \$20-\$250,000/year. Public testimony incorrectly stated the annual costs for maintenance and interpretation and members of the public who testified are not intimately related with the finances or management of the museum.

Ongoing Major Repairs: *Lois McClure* will always require annual maintenance as well as larger restoration every 5 to 10 years to remain on water (between \$50,000-\$250,000 in major maintenance every 5 to 10 years), as all large wooden vessels do. While we know the short-term costs to keep the boat on water, the future of maintaining such a vessel is unending and unpredictable. [As *Marlinspike Magazine* said](#), wooden boats “don’t ‘retire.’ They get sold, they get repossessed, they get abandoned, they get broken up, they sink at their docks.” As boat builders and historians, we did not want our own replica project to end in any of those ways. And as a museum, we must assess how the future meets the goal of the project, exhibit, and our mission.

Funding the Project: There is no amount of money that can guarantee any wooden boat can stay on water forever. That is the beauty and nature of wooden boats. It is not enough to look to short-term financial fixes and continue to avoid the uncomfortable question. The goal of our fundraising at Lake Champlain Maritime Museum is to achieve our mission and vision. In addition to our exhibits and replica boats, we run a [boat building and rowing program](#) for thousands of local middle and high school students; we are the managers of the [shipwrecks in Lake Champlain](#); we document and preserve the history of the Champlain Valley for our present and future through archaeological exploration; we welcome [students and teachers](#) to engage with our history and the lake; and we hold [summer camps and on-water teen expeditions](#) each summer that are pay-what-you-can for all. Our fundraising priority is to keep all of this work open, vibrant, accessible, and affordable to our public.

There is an endowment for the Canal Schooner Project to share the history of the canals and canal boats in our region. For the past 20 years this endowment has been employed to cover part of the annual maintenance costs of the replica, but it does not cover the entire cost and it cannot alone guarantee the future. As the project evolves into a new exhibit, the endowment will continue to support this work, with the blessing of its original donor.

Public testimony stated incorrectly that the project has made and could make income in the future. This is not the case, and members of the public who testified are not intimately related with the finances or management of the museum. While we never do this work to make a profit, the boat has not been a profitable enterprise over the past 20 years for the museum in terms of money. It has

achieved incredible impact, and as a responsibility managed nonprofit, our goal is to be financially stable while achieving our mission.

Giving the Schooner to a Partner Organization: While we have had several conversations with peer organizations in New York, Vermont, and surrounding New England communities, we have not been able to identify a new home for *Lois McClure*. Taking on an 88-foot wooden replica boat is a big decision and we are grateful to all our colleagues for considering being a new home for the boat, and for ultimately making the best decision for their organizations. Long-term care for such a vessel is a significant commitment and one that cannot be made lightly by any organization. We are not going to share the list of organizations contacted because we respect their privacy. While we are proceeding with our plan to retire *Lois McClure*, we are able to consider any offers or an alternative home for *Lois McClure* through November of 2022. A new home must be able to financially support the ship, have the space to house it on water or on land, and be committed to continuing its story and history.

A Board Decision with Professional and Community Input: After much discussion and work (with our staff, partner museums, and professional shipwrights) over the past two years, the board assessed the cost of the immediate necessary repairs as outlined by a shipwright, reviewed the annual costs to maintain the boat, forecast the future major repair work that the boat will need, reached out to institutions to ask if they could take the boat, reviewed the incredible impact that the project has had over the past 20 years, and considered the opportunities for what comes next. After considering all of those factors, the Museum's Board of Directors voted unanimously to retire the replica after the 2023 season and move on to the next phase of interpreting this history in our region.

Lois McClure will be on the water and open to the public at the Museum this summer (2022) and next summer (2023) and then she will come off the water at the end of 2023. At that point, we will use parts of the boat to anchor a new exhibit that will open in 2024. We will continue researching and sharing the unique story of sailing canalboats (the boats, the industry, and most importantly the people) for many years to come. More details about the project are on our website:

<https://www.lcmm.org/lois-mcclure-archiving-project/>

This has been an incredible community project with deep impact over the past 20 years. This was not an easy decision to make for the Museum; the project has meant a lot to so many people and they are very committed to it. The Museum and our board believe that our decision is the best for the boat, the museum, the project, and the public. And it is not just the Museum, it is our leading donors, our supporters, and our community partners who are fully behind this effort. Thank you for all of your support of *Lois McClure* (and all our work) that has made this incredible project possible.

Sincerely,

Susan Evans McClure
Executive Director

Scott Hardy
Chair, Board of Directors