

the power & pleasure of ideas

UPDATE FROM THE MAINE HUMANITIES COUNCIL | SUMMER 2014



HOME OF THE HARRIET P. HENRY
CENTER FOR THE BOOK

Maine Humanities Council programs — taking many different forms — illustrate the power and pleasure of ideas at work in communities around the state into this summer and beyond.

Summer reading brings to mind images of readers intent on books: on blankets spread on sand or pebble beaches, on chairs by open windows, on porches overlooking neighborhood streets. Across Maine this summer, people of all ages will pick up books and delve into stories of new places, extraordinary pasts, and entirely original worlds that will linger in their minds long after the final page ends.

The Maine Humanities Council's many summer reading and discussion groups offer a summer reading experience that includes those images, but goes beyond with ideas that extend the book in question. The facilitator, a hallmark of all our programming, makes this possible with guided questions, shared knowledge, and a strain of thinking that runs deep.

In this update mailing, you'll read descriptions of programs created around this model. In one, a fifth-grade teacher uses innovative means to invite her students to reach new understanding of individual Civil War soldiers. In another, a retired college professor takes his groups deep into recent Irish history. And in another, students themselves interpret a text using

their own experiences as catalysts.

The humanities are powerful when enjoyed alone but are far more powerful when additional perspectives and critical thinking/questioning broaden the experience. I hope you enjoy reading examples of that process in this new publication, an update mailing designed to shed light on our humanities work in Maine in between our annual report and newsletter. Let us know what you think; we always love to hear from you. Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Diane".

Diane Magras
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For more information about the MHC programs described herein or to subscribe to our online newsletter for monthly updates, go to mainehumanities.org.



This spring, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded the MHC a grant of \$150,000 to develop and offer programming for veterans in Maine and nationwide. Building on the powerful track record of the MHC's *Literature & Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Healthcare*® at VA hospitals, this new programming will offer facilitated reading and discussion experiences to veterans directly.

The program, a multi-session reading and discussion group, will provide an informal, non-military setting for veterans to connect and share their experiences, give voice to interests and issues of concern, and engage with other veterans. Developed in partnership with a team of veterans, VA staff, and humanities professionals, it will explore issues and themes that veterans themselves highlight as important. The MHC will launch programs this summer in Maine and in 12 other states throughout the country.

The Maine Humanities Council, a statewide non-profit organization, uses the humanities—literature, history, philosophy, and culture—as a tool for positive change in Maine communities. Our programs and grants encourage critical thinking and conversations across social, economic, and cultural boundaries.

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The Maine Humanities Council is an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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LOCAL & LEGENDARY: MAINE IN THE CIVIL WAR

On May 20, Sabrina Nickerson's 5th grade class at Windham's Manchester School walked across Route 302 to Arlington Cemetery for the final stage of the town's *Local & Legendary: Maine in the Civil War* project. The class was completing its unit of study on the Civil War, during which they had studied how Windham's population had contributed to the war on the battlefield and at home. This was the crowning moment, a time to connect with the 23 Civil War soldiers buried in the cemetery that each of the 23 students had been assigned to study. Now it was time to find them.

But students didn't just complete their classroom assignment of recording names, dates, and other information from their soldiers' gravestones, which they would share with the class later; they also did something for the community. Each Civil War soldier's grave received a new GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) marker, as the existing markers had rusted badly. The students had raised \$452 for the 23 GAR markers.

Students found their soldiers' graves with help from Peter Morgan, Commander Mel Greenier, and Vice Commander Karle Leonard of the American Legion Field–Allen Post 148. As they recorded their soldiers' vital information and gave the graves the gift of the new markers, students had a powerful moment to connect with the men who had lost their lives in one this nation's most tragic conflicts.

Sabrina Nickerson, an enthusiastic member of Windham's *Local & Legendary* team, helped make the history of the Civil War real, relevant, and memorable to her students through classroom activities such as these.

Local & Legendary: Maine in the Civil War is a partnership between the Maine Humanities Council and Maine Historical Society that is exploring Civil War legacies across the state. *Local & Legendary* just completed its first of two years with projects like this from Windham, Presque Isle, Belfast, and Portland/Westbrook. Community teams for the final year include Bethel, Livermore/Livermore Falls/Jay, Pittsfield, Rumford, and Scarborough.

For more coverage of Windham's *Local & Legendary* activities, please go to mainechp.wordpress.com.

LEFT: GAR marker; RIGHT: David Manchester, a relative of Civil War soldier Joseph K. Manchester, poses with teacher Sabrina Nickerson and student Landon LeClerc. PHOTOS: SABRINA NICKERSON





to consider these issues in their own contexts and challenges them to create their own solutions. The exhibit also addresses stereotypes around Native American art; its artists work in fashion, photography, and acrylic paint, as well as many other mediums seen as “traditional” and “nontraditional” in Native American art.

In May, the MHC awarded a grant to the Abbe Museum for programming around *Twisted Path III*, including ongoing workshops with the exhibit’s artists during which participants will create their own art using “traditional” and “nontraditional” materials, as well as a multi-day retreat for Native artists and the general public in November.

This exhibit is currently underway and runs through December 31, 2014 (more information at abbemuseum.org).

FOCUS ON GRANTS

Twisted Path III: Questions of Balance is the third in a series of exhibits at Bar Harbor’s Abbe Museum that examines the different paths that Native American artists walk as they

navigate a complex world.

Twisted Path III explores Native American concerns about the environment through the medium of contemporary art. It doesn’t present answers about cultural connections to place, resource use, or colonial oppression in that context, but asks viewers

TEACH ME NOW TO LISTEN

If you Google *flax-dam*, you’ll almost certainly find Seamus Heaney’s writing. While this word for the resting place where raw flax softens isn’t familiar to many, for anyone who has read Seamus Heaney’s “Death of a Naturalist,” it’s a place vivid with slimy lines of bog plants and belching, bleating frogs.

In January and April in Portland and Tenants Harbor, respectively, John Ward (Centre and Kenyon Colleges) led discussions on “Death of a Naturalist” and other poems during “Seamus Heaney: Teach Me Now to Listen.” This *Taste of the Humanities* event was the start of a new MHC series to give participants a brief and inspiring lunchtime serving of the humanities.

Poetry benefits from being read aloud, and Ward’s smooth, measured readings of a selection of Heaney’s poems were themselves a means of growing closer to the work. Ward read such poems as

“Digging,” “Clearances,” and “From the Frontier of Writing,” and invited the audience to delve into what individual lines meant, how the imagery made them feel, and what they had learned from Heaney’s stories.

In Tenants Harbor, the discussion over “Punishment” focused on Heaney’s depiction of the “Windeby Girl” discovered in north Germany in 1952, her body preserved by the peat bog in which she had been buried. To Heaney, she was clearly a young adulteress punished with unnecessary brutality for her sins. His sympathy and pity for her prompted, later in the poem, a reflection of guilt for inaction when the Irish women of his time were tarred and feathered in retribution for their relationships with British soldiers. After the group had read the entire poem, explored individual stanzas, and shared their thoughts, Ward revealed that in 2006, an anthropologist/pathologist had



John Ward challenges his Tenants Harbor audience to consider the nuances of Seamus Heaney’s work. PHOTO: KATE WEBBER

revealed the “Windeby Girl” to be a boy, thus scuttling Heaney’s original thesis. “Does it matter for this poem?” Ward asked. Most people said no.

Ward’s presentation — part reading, part discussion, part elucidation — drew out historical, cultural, and political references, invigorating audiences in Portland and Tenants Harbor this winter and spring, showing how real and present Seamus Heaney’s work will always be. The MHC will offer more *Taste of the Humanities* programming in 2015.

MAINE HUMANITIES COUNCIL

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Twisted Path III: Questions of Balance exhibit; see article inside. PHOTO: ABBE MUSEUM

LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE

In *Letters About Literature*, a national contest offered by the Library of Congress and organized in Maine by the MHC, students write a letter to an author (living or dead) about the meaning, inspiration, courage, or support they found in one of the author's works. Letters from Maine students this year shared powerful stories of inspiration, new goals, and surviving loss.

The 2014 panel of judges included educators, librarians, and community activists. The group selected three letters from this year's contestants to represent Maine at the national level: Katie Larson from the Center for Teaching and Learning, writing about Peter Reynolds's *Isb*; Augusta Stockman from Camden-Rockport Middle School, writing about Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl*; and Isabel Crane

from Watershed School, writing about Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods*. Here's an excerpt from Augusta's letter:

Stargirl's unique, free-spirited personality stirred something in my heart. A tiny piece of me said, 'Wait a second. I could do that. I could be like her.'... It took nearly two years to crawl out from behind the façade I had slowly been constructing around myself and then to discard it completely, but I did it. I went from an arrogant child with a false identity to a humble teen who is proud to be who she is.

Congratulations to Augusta and all students who participated.

