A place for everyone
Grand Opening

Portland, Maine
The tenth of May
A day to celebrate
Great effort
Community
Dreams Realized
Music

Merrill Auditorium
A Place for Everyone
The Auditorium—A History

The people of Portland have always set great store on creating centers where members of the community could gather for occasions grand and small. Whether an opera concert by a famous diva or a performance by the local high school chorus, these are the events that foster a feeling of community and help a growing city retain its small town character.

Portland's tradition dates back to 1825, when the first Town Hall was built in Market Square. That building, spruced up with a front porch and classical columns, was first used as a City Hall in 1832. It was torn down in 1888 to make way for the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial monument—in what was thereafter known as Monument Square—but by 1859, a growing Portland had built a suitably majestic new City Hall. Timber-framed, with an ornate stone exterior, it became the city's hub, not just for local government, but also for theater and musical performances.

Just eight years after the laying of its cornerstone, City Hall burned in the "Great Fire," one of the city's most memorable disasters. Although City Hall was rebuilt within two years, when fire struck again in 1908, the destruction was so complete many doubted the building's grandeur could ever be recreated. Debate also raged over the perfect site for the new building—some city leaders wanted to rebuild on the old site, others favored a new complex of civic buildings...
at the east end of Lincoln Park. Ultimately, Portland voters chose to follow tradition, building their new City Hall on the old site.

The new City Hall was as splendid a building as the city had seen, surpassing even the finest features of its predecessors. Designed by New York architect John M. Carrere and local architects John Calvin Stevens and his son, John Howard Stevens, it was a classic example of colonial style, boasting graceful porticos and columns, a deep court and large wings. Any controversy surrounding its creation vanished when the completed building was revealed to a welcoming community. Perhaps the grandest gesture marking the historic occasion was the dedication of the Kotzschmar Memorial Organ, which remains a proud fixture of the City Hall Auditorium to this day.

Talented musician and composer Hermann Kotzschmar had been organist at First Parish church for 47 years, conductor of the Portland Haydn Association for 30 years and a dedicated music teacher to hundreds of Portland children. One of those former students, publishing tycoon Cyrus H.K. Curtis, graced the new City Hall with a custom built organ in memory of Kotzschmar, his beloved childhood mentor. Built by the Austin Organ Co. of Hartford, CT, the organ was designed in perfect accordance with the acoustics and scale of the new Auditorium. With its resounding tone and ornate features, it was a worthy tribute. "No expense was to be spared - the best materials were to be used, and all the aids of modern science employed in the
art of organ building, were to be unspARINGLY drawn upon,” according to
the program for the 1912 dedication ceremonies. The honor of playing
the organ at its inaugural performance went to Will C. Macfarlane, one
of 11 talented musicians who served as Portland’s municipal organist.

Over the years, the City Hall
Auditorium hosted some of Portland’s
most stellar events.
Among the perform-
ers who have graced
its stage are members
of the Boston
Symphony Orchestra,
Leopold Stokowski
and the Philadelphia
Orchestra, John Phillip
Sousa Band, Jeanette MacDonald, Chet Atkins, Gene Krupa, Yo Yo Ma,
Arthur Fiedler, Victor Borge and Lionel Hampton. But despite a few
“facelifts,” including a 1967 renovation that added new seats and a larger
stage, the Auditorium had become a place of faded glory. The trend-
setting design of the early 1900s did not accommodate modern audiences and events. Although people continued to flock to performances,
they did so knowing they would have to endure the building’s quirks -
obstructed views, dismal acoustics, poor ventilation, a leaky roof and a
host of other problems. The Auditorium was ready for change - not just
a renovation, but a floor to ceiling transformation.

In January 1995,
after years of plan-
ning, a renovation project began,
lead by a gift from the
Merrill Family Trust. Completed in February 1997,
the $9.7 million project represented a well-orchestrated and collaborative effort by the community, the Auditorium tenants - PCA Great Performances, Portland Symphony Orchestra and the Friends of the Kotzschmar Organ - Greater Portland CARES, a community fundraising organization, and the City Council of Portland.

Gone are the days when attending a City Hall Auditorium event meant shifting uncomfortably in narrow seats and craning to see or hear the action on stage. Among the new Auditorium's 1900 cushioned, roomy seats, there is not one bad seat in the house. The re-designed auditorium offers clear views of the stage from anywhere in the hall. Acoustical improvements make it as easy to hear a softly plucked violin string as a booming operatic aria.

Many improvements are easy to see, like the curved lobby wall that will display photo and art exhibits, concession stands on all three levels, a new elevator, new and larger restrooms and an efficient state-of-the-art ticket office. Modern lighting and an artistic restoration quality paint job reveal the Auditorium's rich decorative detail. The vaulted ceilings and ornately embellished interior, once darkened with age and lost in the gloom, seem to fairly glow. To PD. Merrill who has closely watched the progressive improvements to the Auditorium that bears his family name, the results are nothing short of stunning. "Not only is it technically a better place, aesthetically it has overcome all the dowdiness that characterized it for so many years. I was never in it when it looked so good."

The new Merrill Auditorium is a state of the art performance hall.
"Below decks" are dressing rooms with restrooms for performers, private "star" dressing rooms and instrument storage areas. The specially designed stage has a sprung wooden floor for dance, enough height to "fly" theatrical scenery and plenty of wing space on both sides. With a quick change, the new orchestra pit can be converted to add more room to the stage or a few extra rows of seats. The new ventilation system with air conditioning will keep audiences and performers cool and comfortable in all seasons. The Kotzschmar Organ, centerpiece of the City Hall Auditorium for decades, is flanked by several new banks of pipes that were removed during earlier renovations. With its neo-Baroque facade polished to a high gloss and stately columns of pipes reverberating with beautiful music, the organ remains the crowning glory of the Merrill Auditorium.

The new Merrill Auditorium represents City Hall's transition from the 19th century to the 21st century without sacrificing its rich history and dignified beauty. All the best features of the old building are enhanced in the new, seamlessly integrated for the comfort and enjoyment of audiences who will spend countless pleasurable hours within its walls. As you walk through the new Auditorium, take time to marvel at the changes. Luxuriate in the new seats. Admire the lofty stage, the gleaming paint throughout the hall, even the new bathrooms. In the spacious lobby, read the plaques listing all the people who helped make this dream a reality. And remember the hundreds of other contributors whose names don't appear on a plaque. Thanks to a shared vision and commitment, Portland once again has a place for everyone.
A History of Paul E. Merrill and Virginia Merrill

In 1929, Paul E. Merrill, the 16-year-old son of a hardworking Cumberland farmer, bought a rickety 1922 REO truck that set him back his life savings of $150. By the time he graduated high school in 1931, he had built a bustling part-time trade, hauling firewood, sawdust, baled hay, potatoes, even chickens or an occasional cow, over rutted country roads. The truck eventually sputtered out, but not Merrill's entrepreneurial spark. That first venture marked him as a man who was going places and with a vision that would one day touch an entire community.

From back road hauling, Merrill quickly progressed to bigger and better things. He bought out a delivery route through Falmouth, Cumberland, North Yarmouth and Pownal and a year later, his ambitions in full swing, purchased his first new truck. Always a tireless worker, during the mid 1930s he was working from dawn to dusk on 20 acres of woodland he'd bought, clearing most of the land himself. Over the years, he took risks and opportunities as they came, establishing himself in the lumber industry, launching a moving business and, in 1937, taking on the new challenge of hauling oil.

No matter how successful he became in later years, Merrill never forgot the lessons in moderation and simple living he learned during the lean years of the Depression. In 1978, interviewed by the Portland Press Herald for an article about self-made men, he said: "Back then, you didn't really live, you existed. But I was still able to go to the dance once a week and take my girl for a ride in the truck. He married his girl, Virginia Sweetser, an organist in the Cumberland Congregational Church, after a six year courtship. They lived cozily in a rented apartment on Coyle Street during the first five years of their marriage. When times were tight, they pulled together, with Virginia contributing money from teaching music lessons to help make a truck payment or buy a gear for a transmission."
As Merrill's businesses prospered, the couple bought a modest house on Berkeley Street where they lived while their children were growing up. Years later, Paul Merrill took over the family farm in Cumberland and built a new house there. Like the Merrills themselves, it was welcoming and understated - truly a working farm with draft horses and cattle and 500 acres of pasture, hay and corn fields. After a hard week, Paul Merrill's favorite "therapy" was to hook up a pair of horses to a sled and visit his camp on his 50 acre woodlot, carrying sugar for the horses and hot soup for himself.

Long weeks and hard work were always the rule in the Merrill family. Paul Merrill often worked six days a week and Sunday mornings as well. Both Paul and Virginia shared a love for community-oriented events they could enjoy with family and friends, especially at the City Hall Auditorium. "He was very tied up with business, but one of the things they liked to do together - when he could get away - was go to the Auditorium," said Katherine Graffam, a longtime family friend and a former cellist for the Portland Symphony Orchestra. Virginia Merrill especially loved musical events at the Auditorium. A talented pianist, she was often Graffam's accompanist and both women were active in the Portland Rossini Club, one of the oldest women's music clubs in the nation. While not a musician himself, Paul Merrill was immensely proud of his wife's talent; he got great pleasure from her enjoyment of
their outings to the Auditorium and the camaraderie of friends and business associates among fellow patrons. Over the years, many memorable events in the Merrill's social lives together took place at the Auditorium - the symphony, theater, organ concerts, lectures, school graduations and their son, Paul D.'s band recitals. "It was always part of our life. There were so many concerts we attended there together," Graffam recalled.

For Paul Merrill, social evenings at the Auditorium represented a rare and welcome break from business interests that encompassed, at varying stages, lumber, furniture and chemical manufacture, ready mix, equipment leasing and commercial development. In the mid-50s, Merrill Transport Company was among the largest truckload carriers in the northeastern United States. In 1977, Merrill began developing a privately owned and operated marine terminal in Portland. On Jan. 27, 1982, the year both Merrills died, Merrill's Marine Terminal unloaded its first cargo. Two years later, a local business magazine named Merrill Man of the Year, citing his vision and contribution to the economic well-being of the people and businesses of Maine.

Paul Merrill's true character was personified by his strong commitment to the people who were his customers, employees and fellow members of his community. Merrill never cut his hometown roots, never took success for granted and never lost his affection for the city that had been the scene of his successes. That love and commitment were symbolized in a legacy to the city that became the $1 million lead donation in the City Hall Auditorium renovations. The Merrill family's gift provided leadership for fundraising efforts that involved the entire community. Son P.D. Merrill said his parents would have applauded using their gift to improve a building that had always been central to their own social life in Portland. "The Auditorium was something both my mother and father shared and enjoyed. It was a happy time for them when they were at the Auditorium," he said. Thanks to one family's generosity and vision, the Auditorium will continue to serve as a place where generations of families build their own happy memories.