

Memorandum To: John McDonough, President, The Literary Club

From: Gordon Christenson, David Edmundson and James Myers

Subject: History of the Club Website

Date: May 15, 2024

As you took office, you asked if we would undertake “to write a history of the [Club] website, how it came about, the problems that you faced, the progress, and the future. You all have knowledge that I think should be preserved.”

We agreed, and each has written up the period in which we were most deeply involved, with appropriate comments based upon our personal experience and observation. We attach these, with some preliminary views we all share.

First, many members participated in this endeavor, but as far as we can tell the idea for digitalizing our papers originated with Bill Friedlander. Our own recollections and reflections are but snippets of a longer process involving many.

Second, we are still looking for the minutes of that important business meeting in early 2007 when Ethan Stanley was president and presided over a heated debate that adopted a motion to proceed with a modest website initiative. Looking back six years, we are astounded that this experiment has turned into something none of us could have foreseen. This surely exemplifies a vital and practical collegiality which we believe best describes the Club’s endurance and shows that not all change moves at the speed of a glacier nor is usually misguided.

Finally, in six brief years the website has become a central Club forum for information, a directory, announcements, discussion forum, archives of papers and minutes, and important notices to the members to supplement customary mailings and weekly announcements.

Respectfully submitted,

Gordon Christenson, David Edmundson, and James Myers

I. Literary Club Website Beginnings – A Recollection

David Edmundson

One of the more interesting, enduring, and potentially valuable functions of the Literary Club has been the preservation and publication of the papers delivered from the podium. When I joined 17 years ago, however, these papers were only available during those brief moments before and after the evening's program when most of us seemed more attuned to the pleasures of conversation and the bar and buffet. It occurred to some of us that a good way to improve access to and preservation of the rapidly fading older volumes of papers could be found in the realm of digital record keeping.

Progress from the record-keeping methods of the late nineteenth century to a web page began with a meeting called by Bill Friedlander attended also by Albert Pyle, a professional web-page designer, and me. Bill, Albert, and I agreed that a web page offered opportunities to make our archives more readily available, opportunities that ought to be explored and, if possible taken advantage of. The web-page designer made a proposal which, when taken to the members, proved too expensive. Richard Newrock claimed that any number of his students could provide us with a website adequate for our then limited ambitions.

But before we could advance to that stage, the vocal opposition of a few to any change in our procedures and the uneasiness of linking the Literary Club to the web (an uneasiness linked to security and privacy concerns) expressed by a somewhat larger group essentially tabled the project for the then-foreseeable future.

I was subsequently elected secretary and would email copies of papers to those members who requested them. After the first year of sharing papers electronically, confusion about the advantages of electronic records management had largely disappeared. I would like to claim that the whole business of emailing had been part of a master strategy to soften the opposition by demonstrating the advantages of digital record keeping, but I don't believe the idea occurred to me until the practice had begun and members' responses were so overwhelmingly positive that I came to believe that there existed a foundation on which a web site might be built. Members

could, with this slight change in club practice, enjoy some of the benefits of a website without having to grasp the nettle of voting to do something outside the traditional operation of the club, at least in a literal sense. (For our newer members, it was then the habit of readers to bring copies of papers to hand out to those who requested one. A request was considered a compliment to the reader, an opportunity now lost in our transition to digital records.)

It is, of course, silly to take the position that since there had been no web page in 1849 there should be no web page in the 21st century. How had our predecessors dealt with previous technological innovation? It was at this point that Gordon Christenson looked into the discussions held over a hundred years earlier about whether to use typewriters to replace hand-written archives of papers delivered from the podium. The tempest in that teapot provided some historical perspective to our web-site discussions and calmed some who feared change instinctively. "There, you see," I can imagine some members saying, "the Literary Club changed and still managed to survive for over a hundred years afterward." You will find more on this subject in Gordon's contribution to this history.

Perhaps the most dramatic event in this process from the typewriter to the digital age came when, under Ethan Stanley's presidency, the question came to a vote in a regular business meeting. After some discussion, alternately heated and insightful, it was agreed to have a web page created that would be password protected and serve as a means of making papers available to members. We then engaged one of Richard Newrock's students to design a web site. After a short while I ended my duties as secretary as well as underqualified web-master. These latter duties were taken up with great skill and imaginative care by Jim Meyers, and I have had little to do with the digital Literary Club since, except as a user.

The experience did reveal several truths about our beloved institution, the most salient of which seems to be the old aphorism adapted to our circumstances – Change is often desirable and/or necessary; it is also difficult, and at the Literary Club, usually excruciating. The problem as it emerged then was similar to other difficulties we have faced since – If change is proposed it will offend some, and if change is denied it will offend others. The prized clubability (apologies to baby seals) of these rooms is threatened whatever happens. These two wings of the Literary Club can be seen in some kind of balance leaving those in the middle to decide any issue. Most of these want good governance and an avoidance of clubability-killing strife, and so are willing to kick the can down the proverbial road until some sort of half-measure can be found that will alienate the change-now/no-change-ever wings as little as possible. When the half-measured change

comes into effect, most everyone comes to feel that the change wasn't so bad, the half-measures are adjusted using this new-found understanding, and life goes on, clubability intact. This, in clubably vague language, is how I remember the journey from the idea to the creation of a Literary Club web site.

II. The Literary Club Website: Recalling Its Formation

Gordon A. Christenson

When I joined the Literary Club in 1980, after a paper was read, you could tell how well it was received by the number of requests made by members wanting a copy. The author would write down these names or have a sign-up list. In the next few days, he would make a copy, write a personal inscription and mail it to each member on the list.

With the advance in copiers, members reading papers began to make copies and bring, say, ten or twenty copies along that same evening, saving postage. Members wanting a copy could pick one up right after the paper was read. Running out of copies was a good omen.

By the 1990's personal computers were coming into wider use by our members. Emailing copies to those members who wanted one and had email addresses started to change the distribution practices, as Dave Edmundson explained, cutting down the number of copies a member might bring. Some members just quit bringing copies and some never did. By the end of the decade, requests for copies of papers were quite mixed, but always handled with respect.

Around a table one evening in the late 1990's, a group of us were listening to Bill Friedlander discuss the desirability of digitalizing all of our papers and eventually all the papers in our archives, putting them in a Club website efficiently accessible to members. In his recollections, Dave relates early attempts by him, Bill, Albert Pyle and a few others for digitalizing papers. By the time that I was elected Trustee, the Board of Management was actively discussing a possible website. It was then that I looked into how it was that we began to record our papers in the first place. I circulated my findings in "Literary Club Innovation" which is now posted in the "resources" section of our website:

[T]he practice of recording papers in script written by hand first began [in 1884] right after a committee recommended printing club essays in numbered volumes. While taking no action for printing, the club recognized the desirability of recording papers in the minutes by script in their entirety. In 1885, the following year, another step was taken when papers were recorded by script in their entirety in separate numbered volumes. By 1892, the newly-invented typewriter was sufficiently developed to displace written script and became the means for recording our papers. This method until now has been our customary practice.

Also, I recommended to the Board of Management that: "We should consider a publications committee, as suggested by some members, perhaps chaired by a 'webmaster' to guide website design and materials to be published on-line within our traditions and customs."

During Ethan Stanley's presidency (2006 – 2007) with Board support, under Dave Edmundson's secretarial initiative, we decided to take the modest step for a website for papers members would submit voluntarily. The cost of a typist to retype each paper was increasing and papers were stacking up. Digitalizing each paper would allow hard copy to be made on archival paper and kept in the archives, reducing the cost, while seeing if the members would like the availability of all the papers on a password protected website. I moved the adoption of the proposal and defended it from the floor. The debate was spirited, but the motion passed.

The main substantive issue was whether by posting all papers digitally on a website they in effect would be publicly available and that might diminish or change the quality or nature of the paper. One response was that they were already available to the public when copies were sent to the Historical Society (until 1974 they were available in the public library). And the posting of papers on the website would be available to members only and password secured, with each author retaining copyright and deciding whether to withhold his paper.

By the time of my presidency the following year (2007 – 2008), the website took initial shape again under David Edmundson as Club secretary and the members seemed to like it. David continued to oversee it as Vice President (2008 – 2009) and President (2009 – 2010). He recruited Jim Myers, who in 2009 took on duties of webmaster and transformed it step by step into a regular functional site for all aspects of information among the members, including announcements, schedules, notices and discussion forum, as well as digitalized papers.

In our newly amended constitution adopted January 6, 2014, the new office of archivist is made explicit, charged with maintenance of the

electronic records of the Club, including the website, with help from members appointed by the President or Board of Management.

I view this evolutionary change as a significant example of successful innovation in Club operations by a developing consensus in adapting improvements to enhance our papers, traditions and purpose. A proposal for change first develops legs by some specific action with member approval. If accepted, a specific practice grows and becomes new custom, perhaps regularized by amendment to the constitution or by-laws. Of course, even the best-intentioned proposals for change do not necessarily lead to consensus. They can die as well, as in the case of the 1894 recommendation for printing club essays in a numbered book published each year. The members tabled it. Funding required a yearly subscription fee from each member, in effect an unacceptable increase in dues for an otherwise worthy project. Digitalizing papers eliminates that problem, after 125 years.

III. My Work on the Club Website

James N. Myers

When I accepted responsibility for the website in 2009, at the request of David Edmundson, most of the political heavy lifting had been done by others. The website included pathways produced over several years to read member papers. Although members have always had the option of having their papers not included in the website, only two or three such omissions have been required, and none of these from opposition to the website itself. On a weekly basis, members provide electronic copies of papers for the website and for the annual digitally produced volumes.

Shortly after taking on the website itself, I began a personal project, to transcribe early, handwritten papers from the 19th Century, of which a few more than 250 have been transcribed. The transcriptions contain numerous errors, for which the transcriber is responsible. They also contain numerous errors of their authors or original transcribers. It is my hope to correct these transcriptions at some point, and to attempt to complete transcription of all handwritten papers.

In addition, several years ago, I began a project of scanning typewritten papers bound in the annual printed volumes. So as of this writing, the

website has more than 2,000 member papers, with more added as volunteer scanners (Edmundson and Schlachter) provide them.

As most of us recall, Rollin Workman for many years provided an annual printed directory of current members of the literary club. The directory included addresses, telephone numbers, and a certain amount of personal information. Inspired by Rollin's work, I realized that by bringing the directory onto the website, the directory could be up to date almost instantly, without the need for reprinting. Thus, with Rollin's permission and, even more importantly, his data, I created a web version of his directory. Somewhat more recently, I added photos to the directory. Even more recently, Paul Franz volunteered to maintain the directory and has added many photographs, so that a look through the directory provides a photo of almost every member.

Another of the changes that I made was to add a homepage that would include the weekly paper assignments and titles, as well as room for announcements of interest to members. Another volunteer, Mike Kremsar – our Clerk, has taken over this page.

A web page has also been added for miscellaneous documents, the Club's legal documents, guidelines for members, various finding aids, etc. In addition, a recent debate on the possibility of admitting women to the Club, inspired me to add a "blog" page where the subject might be debated. A gallery page has been added with photos taken by Nicola Ranieri of each of the artworks displayed at the Club.

I have announced that my work on the website will end on or before January 1, 2015. The website is flexible and interesting and will be what my successor makes of it. My successor will be Eugene Rutz.