

Coincidental meeting leads to preservation of historic home

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For Debra Benvie, it was no coincidence last year when — in a burst of excitement — she shouted out her joy at locating the residence of Nathaniel H. Felt, and in the course of celebrating, drew the attention of the one person who could help preserve the stately home.

Her discovery came as a result of visiting the local library. In a room designated for maps and directories of historic Salem, Sister Benvie had been scrolling the directory of 1843 hoping to learn something about the early members of the Church in Salem, Mass. Running her finger over the list of names she came upon the address of Nathaniel Henry Felt.

"That's it," she said, raising her voice well above the library whisper. "10 Liberty St., tailor, 217 Essex St."

Her celebration caught the attention of the only other person in the room. He stood and introduced himself.

"He wanted to know the cause of my excitement about 10 Liberty St.," Sister Benvie said. "After I explained that I had just found the residence of one of the first leaders of the LDS Church in Salem, he explained how he, at that moment, was investigating the history of the home at 10 Liberty St."

"He said the home was located on property owned by the Peabody Essex Museum and would be demolished if no historic value could be found. He said our meeting was timely since he was scheduled to meet with museum directors to determine the future of the home."

After learning of the historic value of the home, and after a few months of planning, museum directors arranged for the Nathaniel H. Felt home to be gingerly lifted from its foundation and gently rolled about 100 yards down a



Historic Nathaniel H. Felt home was tightly wrapped then gently rolled to its new location across from Peabody Essex Museum entrance. The home will preserve artifacts of early Church history in Salem, Mass.

Photo by Paul Corkum

slight incline to its new location across the street from the entrance of the Peabody Essex Museum.

"It will make a nice entrance to the museum," said President Kenneth Hutchins of the Boston Massachusetts Stake.

The Felt home, a stately three-story structure, has gone generally unknown by the Church. Nathaniel H. Felt was a prominent member of the Church in New England who distinguished himself for his missionary zeal. He was a successful tailor in Salem, employing 20 people. He was also a religious man who could not identify himself with any denomination. But after careful investigation, he joined the Church.

In the winter of 1843-44 he was called as president of the Salem Branch, making his home the focal point for meetings and activities. During this time he became acquainted with the leaders of the Church, namely Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball and Orson Pratt, who were regular guests.

The Felt home was galvanized in history on the day Brigham Young learned of the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. Brigham was visiting his daughter who, at the time, was residing with the Felts. He left the next morning for Nauvoo.



The Salem Women's Heritage Trail has also recognized the prominence of the home as the place where Vilate Young, second daughter of Brigham Young, resided while studying in New England.

Knowing Salem's reputation for education and cultural opportunities, Brigham Young sent Vilate at age 12 to live with the Felts to study music. Later, as a 16-year-old, Vilate became one of the earliest settlers to endure the grueling western migration as part of the second company of pioneers to enter the Salt Lake Valley. Her effort has been captured by the Salem Women's Heritage Trail with a display

in the Felt home.

In addition, plans by the Peabody Essex Museum include the creation of interpretive programs and small exhibits, as well as community and museum programs. Actors dressed in period clothing will help re-create the history, while local Church leaders are pursuing the possibility of creating a family history library for public use, with future prospects of becoming a visitors center.

In a luncheon held Jan. 25 near the museum on historic Pickering Wharf, President Hutchins met with Salem Mayor, Stan Usovicz, and John Grimes of the museum to commemorate the moving of the house. President Hutchins expressed his appreciation for the accommodation shown to the Church by the

city, and the cooperation and openness by the museum for a display they presented last year detailing the life and work of Joseph Smith.