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Salem: The museum capital of Massachusetts?

By John Goff/Preservation Perspective

Fri Nov 16, 2007, 03:19 PM EST

SALEM - Salem, older than Boston, is one of America's most ancient and historically significant settlements. Our city is known for its 1626 colonial English founding date, its superb collection of Early American architecture, and its globally significant maritime history. It is also known as the place of the 1690s witch trials, and as the birthplace of American author Nathaniel Hawthorne, navigator Nathaniel Bowditch, and architect Samuel McIntire.

In the 1930s, Salem was known as "America's Treasure House." Salem promoted that title in part because of our many fine buildings — and spectacular historic environments like Chestnut Street and the Salem Common. Salem is also a treasure house because many treasures are preserved in local museum collections. For a city of approximately 40,000 people that attracts over 600,000 visitors each year, Salem certainly is a magnet for visitors and tourists. Because it has such an international appeal, and many museums in a small area, can Salem now also claim the title "Museum Capital of Massachusetts?"

Let us take stock of the many historic houses and museum structures that exist in Salem, supporting public education, recreation and our local heritage tourism economy. The best known Salem museum is also our largest, the Peabody Essex Museum, also called the PEM. But in fact the PEM is many museums, a cornucopia of fine historic houses scattered across our city, as well as a cluster of campuses centered on Armory Park. The PEM holdings are diverse, and include such treasures as the 17th century Pickman Goult House, the old Quaker Meeting House, and the John Ward House; the 18th century Ropes Mansion, Crowninshield-Bentley House, Peirce Nichols House, and the Bray House; the Lye-Tapley Shoe Shop, Gardner Pingree House, Derby-Beebe Summer House, the Assembly House, and the Andrew Safford House. On Charter Street, the PEM also has the Yin Yu Tang imported from China, and two picturesque historic Salem brick houses recently moved and preserved to allow the PEM to expand.

In the above incomplete list of the PEM's historic houses and museum features, we have a full 15 structures and sites without even mentioning the Phillips Library — which by itself is another Salem treasure.

Around the many museum buildings maintained by the PEM, Salem has other museum wonders. Most noteworthy, perhaps, are the National Historic Landmark houses and attractions associated with the House of the Seven Gables on Turner Street, and the Derby House, U.S. Customs House, Narbonne House, multiple landmarks, Friendship, wharves and lighthouse maintained by the National Park Service. Other fine attractions include the Gedney House and Phillips House maintained by Historic New England. Yet in our inventorying of assets, we should not overlook Salem in 1630: Pioneer Village maintained and being restored by Salem Preservation, Inc., and other superb Salem museums and landmarks located mostly in the McIntire Historic District e.g. the Witch House, Hamilton Hall, and the Pickering House.

In simple numbers of museum buildings, there are about another two dozen or 24 attractions associated with these sites, bringing us to a subtotal of nearly 40 attractions so far.

In counting Salem's museum attractions, there is also a class of Salem museum that typically involves prominent buildings, and some former churches which have been adapted into museums and educational centers. These museums evolved recently and we might call them "dramatic museums." In most, theatrical elements such as dioramas, stage sets, special lighting and sound systems have been employed to make them communicate well. Under Salem's dramatic museums we should likely count the Salem Witch Museum by the Salem Common, the New England Pirate Museum at 274 Derby St., the Witch Dungeon Museum at 16 Lynde St., the Salem Wax Museum at Derby and Liberty streets, and the Salem Witch History Museum at 197-201 Essex Street.

That gives us an additional 5 museums, pushing our listed museum total to include about 45 buildings and major features such as a replicated tall ship. The total of Salem museum buildings and major attractions could actually well reach or exceed 50 when we add to the above the two visitor's center buildings maintained by the National Park Service, the replicated Privateer Fame, and other good Salem museums we have simply overlooked by accident or confusion about classification. For example, the Pequot House by Shetland Properties functioned as a museum and historic attraction when it was built in 1930. Should it be listed? The replicated tall ship Arbella was also once a major museum/visitor attraction prior to 1954, as was the nearby Ruck House before 1976. Should they be included if people still visit their sites and discuss them?

While Salem has lost some of its most popular museum features (including the Ruck House and the ship Arbella replica, and the ancient well sweep by the John Ward House), an expanding sense of Salem's history is opening up new possibilities for other museums to be created. For example, many have discussed the potential opportunities associated with developing a new real or virtual and/or Salem ferry-based Bowditch Museum, a new Salem in the Revolutionary War interpretive center at 5 Broad St. near the Pickering and Haraden tombs, and a new Parker Brothers Gaming Museum. Possibilities are also being explored for a Native and French Heritage Museum, a fully replicated ca. 1650 Ruck House/Arbella Center, and a 17th century style Shallop Shuttle which would create a new water link between Pioneer Village and Turner Street by the House of the Seven Gables.

Does not Salem gain significantly whenever good new museums are added to the mix? Each new museum can potentially diversify the way Salem markets itself to the world, extend the months of our economic prosperity in Salem, and bring new visitors, school groups, shoppers and ships to Salem.

As Salem builds further upon all it has created, the possibility remains for Salem to be crowned not simply as the "Museum Capital of Massachusetts" but the "Massachusetts Museum"—the first place where many visitors from overseas, Logan International Airport and Boston may want to go to learn more about how Massachusetts, Boston and New England were first settled and evolved.

Salem has great growth potential in the heritage tourism field. Salem could consequently also benefit substantially in the areas of museum creation, maintenance and restorations with a future passage of the Community Preservation Act, or CPA. It takes the equivalent of chests of silver and gold annually to restore and maintain Salem's historic treasures.

As Salem's many offerings as the Museum Capital of Massachusetts are better appreciated, Salem may also be able to develop new resources and programs to train and educate students and professionals in museum management, museum marketing, exhibit design, history research and interpretation, historic craft skills, living history program and pageant development, tour development, etc.

Soon we hope to report further upon Gordon College's newly established Museum Studies and Public History Institute. It promises to directly benefit Salem in 1630: Pioneer Village as well as many of Salem's other history museums. As 2008 approaches, we are excited about Salem as the Museum Capital of Massachusetts. 2008 will mark a French triumph: The 400th anniversary of the 1608 Founding of Quebec. It will also mark an anniversary tied to the founding of our United States: The 225th anniversary of the ending of the American Revolutionary War with the Treaty of Paris in 1783.

2008 will also mark the Bicentennial of the first 1808 education in New Hampshire of Salem's early First Period historian Joseph Barlow Felt. 2008 will additionally mark the 70th anniversary of the founding of our Salem Maritime National Historic Site, the first National Historic Site in the United States, in 1938.

Salem has an exceptional history. It is our history. Yet it is America's and New England's and the Old Bay State's treasure as well. Salem: It is a capital attraction!

John Goff is the president of Salem Preservation, Inc., a nonprofit organization. He is also the principal of

Historic Preservation & Design, a consulting business. E-mail him at jgoff@salempreservation.org.

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