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Call to action: A special Salem History Society column

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SALEM - First of all, because our mamas raised us right, we want to send a big "Thank You," to all those who made the Salem History Society public program for November a success.

Thank you to Alan Denton for his program, "Privateering: Piracy by Another Name?"

And thank you to all the folks who turned out for this program! We were pleased with the turnout, and are excited about the future.

We've come a long way, baby

At the November meeting, a compliment paid to the society brought our president to sharp awareness that we've come pretty far pretty fast...our member not only expressed happiness with the variety of things the society is doing, but remarked "and it's only been a year since we started."

Actually, the society is *very* young! We were incorporated in June 2007 — so we are just coming up on six months old.

As of this writing we have 96 registered members, and even more folks who receive occasional emails from us as well, and we've added members steadily; quite a few joined us in November after our program.

In six months, we've launched:

- A continually-evolving Web site
- An interactive online community, the Salem History Common
- The Salem Historical Resources Directory (a primary service of the society)

- Organized and sponsored an entire series of “Library Crawls” to acquaint you with local research resources
- Organized events like membership sails on the Schooner Fame
- Instituted this regular column
- Welcomed new members, held meetings
- Helped folks with research questions

We have many things to plan and organize in the future, including a scholarly journal, outreach to schools, and more membership services.

Now, let’s get down to basics. We are a “new-model” historical society, and we realize that may take some getting used to for people with established ideas of what a historical society is.

Members and colleagues are already showing, in many ways, how refreshing and attractive they find our model.

We are not a “I’ll sit back and passively watch events” society. It is *your* society, and that means you are invited, indeed urged, to take action.

Let’s talk about what the society can do for you, what we can’t do, and what we ask you, as a member, to do.

This land is your land ...

The Salem History Society was organized around a democratic vision: Helping people find and utilize, out of the many (and often confusing, even to local folks!) Salem and Essex County history resources ... good, solid tools with which to explore that history further — with a goal of self-empowerment.

Our goal as an organization, therefore, is to provide a nonpartisan, welcoming — and eventually comprehensive — resource. We try to facilitate making sense of who is who, and who does what, who you might turn to for help, and so forth.

Our goal is to be a valued service to *both* the seeker and the sought. And, not coincidentally, thus a service to our community.

The Salem History Society is a nonprofit organization. We charge no fees, do not fundraise, and offer totally free services and membership.

We are an all-volunteer, grassroots-oriented society, and though several of us on the board (and in the membership) are professional historians and researchers, and we on the board have been working out an efficient, organized structure to keep the society "on track," our mission is to be as inclusive as is humanly possible to everyone, at any stage of interest and experience in history.

Here's how the SHS is described in our bylaws: The corporation is organized for the charitable and educational purposes as follows.

- The mission of the Salem History Society Inc. is to promote awareness and appreciation of all eras of Salem, Massachusetts and Essex County, Mass. history.
- To promote serious research into the history of Salem and Essex County, MA.

VISION

The Salem History Society Inc. will provide and facilitate meetings, collaborations and cooperation between all groups and individuals, worldwide, with an interest in studying, researching or furthering the study and research of Salem and Essex County, Mass.

To this end, the Salem History Society, Inc. will sponsor meetings, programs; produce publications; facilitate all aspects of the above-stated mission; and maintain online resources.

The Salem History Society, Inc. will remain strictly nonpartisan in its support and encouragement of all groups and individuals legitimately and seriously engaged in the study and promotion of Salem and Essex County, Mass. history. The Salem History Society, Inc. will remain dedicated to being an information society, and will not be concerned with raising funds for real estate purchases or other property ownership, nor will it maintain a physical collection of artifacts and research materials.

So, that's the formal mission and vision. Here's what it means to you, in terms of research questions and information-seeking.

How we help with research questions

We have already instituted several services, which are and will continue to be evolving and changing and growing. These services are only good and

useful if you utilize them, and give us feedback, suggestions, and help (more on that later).

We can help you find or evaluate good sources to answer your questions, especially by referring you to the Salem Historical Resources Directory — which eventually will be as comprehensive as we can all make it. We can often give you some ideas of how to go about your research.

Board members (sometimes) can give you some answers ourselves — if the question falls within a Board member's area of expertise. (Remember, those of us who are professionals tend to specialize in one area, not all of them.) We can perhaps direct you to a friend or colleague who can help.

We can often recommend a "next step," an idea you might not have thought of, etc.

Your question will always be posted in the Salem History Common for our membership to see, discuss, and help with. This is one of the most valuable benefits of being a member.

Our "grassroots" society is meant to encourage talent we don't even know is out there to come forward and be recognized. That too is part of our mission.

What we can't do

We cannot do your research *for* you. For instance, we can't track down your ancestor for you. We can't take you through every research step for every project, and not every question will be answered. The best research library in the world cannot answer every question.

But hopefully, you'll see we're putting structures in place to give you lots of tools to help you do your research on your own.

And we know that many people just don't have background, training, or time to do research. Sometimes, perhaps, it's just a matter of "where do I start" — and frankly, everyone has asked that question somewhere, sometime, no matter who they are.

Well, the society can develop some educational programs in the future — offer suggestions — tell us what you need.

That's *also* where the Salem Historical Resources Directory will help. We do have a "for-profit" category where, among other things, professional researchers can describe their fee-based services.

What you can do if you are a professional in the history or educational field

Put a listing in the directory if you yourself are an expert with training and expertise to offer. The (hey, it's short!) application can be downloaded from the Web site; the listing is free.

If you are a professional, the Salem Historical Resources Directory is meant to be a service to you, too!

Register, and invite your colleagues to join the society by registering, on the online Salem History Common, so interaction is simple and immediate. That's where most questions will be, and eventually, that will be the only place they'll be posted.

Our proper function, in fulfillment of our mission, is to help facilitate finding correct, accurate, and helpful information. "Facilitate" as in refer to legitimate and reliable sources. "Facilitate" is our primary role.

What you can do as a member

Most importantly, you can participate. Discuss things on the Common; let us know what worked for you, who helped, who didn't, what sources you used.

Get together with folks and form special interest groups (*all* the categories folks told us they were interested in are listed on the Common). Meet in a bar, at a coffee shop, on the Salem Common, by the harbor, in your house. Talk over topics, do some research, bring your findings to our attention to the "big" all-member meetings at Cornerstone.

Send us suggestions for Salem Historical Resource Directory entries and categories. They can be anywhere at all — you are not bound by local geographical constraints. Interest in our region's history, and research resources, is a worldwide phenomenon.

Miles to go before we sleep

We hope that the society will continue to grow and flourish for many decades to come. We here on the Advisory Board are putting in an awful lot of volunteer hours to help "make it so."

All we can do is help prepare the soil, get the seeds planted and watch over the garden. *Your* efforts will make it bloom.

See you next time, when we'll fill you in on our experience at the New England History Festival!

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