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'Every door is open to you' — The ongoing voyage of the Phillips Library

By Maggi Smith-Dalton/Naumkeag Notations

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SALEM - "Ladies and gentlemen, when our very brief literary and opening exercises are completed, you are not only invited but requested to view the premises completely. Every door is open to you, and members and officials will take pleasure in guiding you."

When General Francis H. Appleton addressed these words to hundreds of "members and friends" of the Essex Institute on Sept. 9, 1907, he was at once surveying new vistas for the Institute's intellectual, historical, and archival work, and a new and elegant physical landscape in which to do that work.

The occasion on which Appleton spoke was a grand celebration of the Essex Institute's acquisition of its "New Quarters" — provided by the remodeling and joining of two separate buildings: Its previous quarters and the adjoining Plummer Hall (where it had, from 1857 to 1905, shared space with the Salem Athenaeum).

Plummer Hall, at 134 Essex St., was originally built with an 1845 bequest to the Athenaeum from Caroline Plummer, given in honor of her brother, Ernestus Augustus. The site Plummer Hall occupies is also the location of the birthplace of William Hickling Prescott (1796-1859). Prescott's 19th-century writings on the conquests of Mexico and Peru are credited with "inaugurating serious research" in Latin American history in this country. His work, despite current historiographical reassessments, still commands respect today.

The Essex Institute, a privately-funded historical society serving Essex County and Salem, traced its roots jointly to 1821 — with the birth of the Essex Historical Society — and to 1833, with the formation of the Essex County Natural History Society.

The merging of these two societies in March 1848, resulted in the founding of the Essex Institute, which focused on the collection and preservation of diverse materials for "historical study and teaching in domestic and community life in New England," as an undated Institute informational brochure describes it.

In particular, the Institute's collections, publications and activities grew to provide support for those seeking to place the region's history into context both nationally and globally. As it matured, the Institute's collections came to include the James Duncan Phillips Research Library, with 300,000 volumes; thousands of historical manuscripts, photographs, and artistic artifacts; several galleries; and, eventually, historic houses dating from the 1600s to the mid-nineteenth century.

The Institute grew rapidly — with predictable results. Periodically, the cry went up — "more money," "more space!"

At the 50th anniversary of its founding in March 1898, then-President Rantoul said, in his commemoration address, that the Institute might have reached a "crisis" point.

"Not only valuable books and rare historical papers — the natural accretions of a great library — have been gathered here, but relics and manuscripts and pictures and ancient records — a priceless legacy to the antiquary and the student of local annals, rich material ready to the hand of the historian — have poured in upon us until our receptivity is overtaxed. Buried under the indifference or lost sight of in the greed of the modern Philistine, these relics spared by the tooth of time would have no ministering value to the public; but when rescued ... they become ... most important parts of a great representative exhibit, picturing as nothing else can do ... the actual domestic life of the New England that is gone."

"The Institute has for twenty-five years, succeeding the Lyceum in the field of oral popular instruction, conducted annual courses of free public lectures ... Through its picture and flower and microscope shows, and concerts, and entertainments, it has done its share towards bringing high culture and sound learning and useful knowledge within the reach of everybody."

But, he went on to say, after more bequests and the ever-increasing scope of its mission, the Institute was pressed against the wall again, literally speaking. "The practical question is this ... No room to grow! What will become then of the zeal and enthusiasm of those friends of a lifetime who take a daily pride in our success?"

His *cri de coeur* echoed through the years, and in 1905, the Salem Atheneum sold Plummer Hall to the Essex Institute, and built, with the receipts of that sale, its current home at 337 Essex.

A new era

At the opening in September 1907 of the conjoined buildings on Essex Street, President Appleton could take much pleasure and pride in the completely remodeled new home of the Institute as he gave his address from the new balcony which connected the two buildings to the enthusiastic guests below. Now, he said, the Institute must "encourages the opening — broadly — to all uses for which it has been founded ... To make known to our citizens that it exists, and, accurately, what it exists for, we ask all who realize that benefits, and helpful pleasure, can come from its patronage, and use."

"Let it be our pride, and aim ... to have the Essex Institute stand a leader in its line of work."

In many areas, the Institute fulfilled his mandate. And in at least a few, it was a pioneer. One of the most intriguing is the installation, in 1907, of several unique "period rooms." The concept of a "period room" in which historical artifacts would be placed in contextually-appropriate settings had first begun in European museums; there were several by the end of the nineteenth century. In America, two romanticized exhibits were mounted at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial — "The Connecticut Cottage," and "Old Log Cabin New England Kitchen," furnished with artifacts donated by citizens.

Private collectors also displayed their collections in their homes, sometimes incorporating the woodwork from older buildings into their display areas. In 1904, The Rhode Island School of Design received a gift from Charles L. Pendleton (1849-1904) with the stipulation that his donated collection of decorative arts be housed in a Georgian-style structure — which, apparently, the School built for the collection. The Metropolitan Museum of Art installed two European period rooms in 1906.

However, the Essex Institute holds pride of place as the first American *museum* to utilize period rooms that attempted to portray everyday American life of different eras. This installation was the brainchild of the Institute's secretary, George Francis Dow (1868-1936). The rooms, still open for viewing in the Phillips Library, are set up so as to seem "lived in," and as if the occupants had just stepped out from the scene momentarily. The Essex Institute ceased to exist as a historical society in 1992, when the Peabody Essex Museum in its current incarnation was born. However, the PEM's Phillips Library remains a jewel of unrivaled beauty, and of unparalleled

importance to everyone from ordinary citizens to the scholarly researcher.

Recently-retired librarian Britta Karlberg told me in an interview that "Essex County is famous as having the best-documented history in the United States, and for 200 years has been collecting documents of everyday life."

Because of this, the library's assistance is sought after by researchers worldwide. "Researchers come from all over the world ... New Zealand, India, Norway, people writing novellas, articles for boating magazines ... [authors such as] Arthur Miller, David McCullough, Paul Theroux," Karlberg related.

Subjects such as sailing vessels, immigrant passenger lists and photography get much attention from those who utilize the Library's holdings. Librarians answer questions online, on the phone, through the mail, and in person during the (unfortunately terribly-restricted) hours the library is open.

The Phillips Library has received a much-needed and greatly-lauded boost with the recent appointment of Sidney Berger, 62, a faculty member at Simmons College and a former curator at the American Antiquarian Society, as the first Ann C. Pingree director of the Phillips Library. The new director told me in a recent informal chat that he is excited by the challenge of steering the Phillips towards ever-greater fulfillment of its mission; and judging by Berger's personal qualities of charm, obvious erudition (and some of our shared editorial and writing passions) I too am excited to contemplate the enhanced future of the Phillips.

I can personally attest to the indispensable treasure that is the Phillips Library. This column, some of my articles for other publications, and much of my and my husband's personal scholarly work, which includes the current research and writing of two books, is largely based on work done at the Phillips. The librarians we work with there are truly sterling examples of the best kind of partnership a researcher can have in the painstaking and time-consuming journey of research.

Some years ago, I traveled to Cuba on a singing tour. While in Havana, even at its most prestigious library, I was struck and saddened by the dearth of printed materials and other resources evident everywhere, on every shelf. I remember walking through the stacks, nearly weeping at the deprivation I saw. And, needless to say, what I saw was in sharp contrast to the amazing intellectual riches I have grown up with all my life, and it made me appreciate my access to them all the more.

There is no more precious birthright than free and open access to

information. Without access to libraries such as the Phillips, we are a people without memory. Without the means to understand history, a people becomes prisoner to the moment, and incapable of making wise decisions for the future. Long may our libraries resound to the cry, "Every door is open to you!" — and forever may we cherish that right.

The Salem History Society sponsors a tour of the PeabodyEssexMuseum's Phillips Library, 132 Essex St., Tuesday, Sept. 25 from 6-7 p.m. For library information visit www.pem.org/museum/library.php.

Advance reservations are a must for this tour. RSVP directly to the Salem History Society via the link on the society's Web site, www.salemhistorysociety.org. Last date to reserve a space: Saturday, Sept. 22.

Musicians and historians Maggi Smith-Dalton and husband Jim are specialists in 19th- and 20th-century music from parlor and stage. They have performed and taught American and Celtic music and history, in concert and by giving public history courses, nationwide. They've shared their passion for both performance and historical/musicological research under the rubric, "Understanding History Thru Music," for over two decades.

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ABOUT JIM & MAGGI

Jim and Maggi Dalton perform music of popular/vernacular, folk and cultivated traditions, covering time periods from the Middle Ages to the present, focusing largely on American, Celtic and British Isles repertoire. They specialize in music of the 19th and 20th centuries. Instrumentation: mostly plucked strings and voices.

Concerts and programs contain commentary designed to place the music performed in historical context for the audience. Programs reflect the continual and ongoing research in which the two delight. They also perform original songs and compositions.

Jim and Maggi have released two recordings to date, and have designed a full spectrum of programs which they present nationwide. They have been featured often on radio and television. (PBS, ABC, NBC, CBS affiliates, Cable Networks; NPR stations, NewsRadio, interview programs across the USA; feature stories in newspapers and magazines, i.e., *The Philadelphia Inquirer & Courier-Post*) They have performed at nationally-known venues (i.e., Colonial Williamsburg, Seneca Falls, the Harriet Beecher Stowe House) and countless local and regional venues nationwide.

They have served as artists-in-residence at various colleges, public history sites, community and educational centers, presenting series addressing American history and other topics in the humanities, using music as the core of each session.

Previous audiences and sponsors have said:

"engaging, scholarly, delightful, warm, intelligent, flexible, humorous, talented, versatile, enthusiastic, personable, joyful ..."



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in our "sunny yellow folder" for
descriptions of our programs, classes,
and concerts ~

Multi-instrumentalist *Jim Dalton* is an educator, conductor and award-winning composer and arranger.

As a performer, he specializes in historical and ethnic playing styles on a variety of plucked string instruments including guitar, mandolin, banjo, mandocello, Renaissance lute, bouzouki etc.

He also plays piano, organ, recorder and tin whistle.

In addition to duo performances with his wife, soprano and guitarist Maggi Smith-Dalton he maintains an active career as a freelance musician -- playing in chamber music ensembles, jazz and world music groups and in opera/theater and symphony orchestras.

He is a member of the New England Mandolin Ensemble.

His compositions have been performed across the U.S. and Canada and in Europe.

His choral composition, "The Rocky Road to Dublin," won first prize in the 1997 Toronto Camerata Competition. Two of his pieces for carillon have been published in anthologies by Fenwick Parva and the Friends of the Albany Carillon.

His composition for solo mandolin, "Gifts of the Bard," is published by Wolfhead Music.

His works are available through these publishers and Singing String Music Publications.

Jim is on the faculty of The Boston Conservatory, teaching music theory, ear training and world music courses for both the Music Theory and Music Education Departments. He has written articles for Blues Revue Magazine and is the author of *Mandolin for Beginners*, published by Workshop Arts, Inc./Alfred Publishing.

He is a frequent guest lecturer on topics such as composition, choral arranging and Irish traditional music. In the 2004-2005 year Jim received a MACRO research grant (Univ. of Wisconsin) to study and analyze palindromic compositions in concert music repertoire and presented this work at the 2005 Macro Musician's Workshop in Madison, WI.

Singer and musician, independent scholar, author and educator, *Maggi Smith-Dalton* has sung as a soloist with choirs and choruses both here and abroad, acted and sung in professional theater productions and produced/participated/performed in radio and television projects and programs.

She is a frequent guest lecturer -- on the integration of humanities and the arts, on folklore, and on American music and history, to name a few topics.

She has given lecture/demonstration programs at the college level (i.e., The New England Conservatory, The Boston Conservatory) and in numerous professional-development courses for educators and teachers at all grade levels.

Maggi enjoys an active performing career, which, after eleven years of work in cabaret, musical theater, and nightclub singing, has included more than two decades of concert performance nationwide and abroad, in partnership with her husband and as a soloist with choirs and in concert.

In addition, she authored a prize-winning short story and writes often for newspapers and magazines (including history and cultural/arts/educational feature articles, and a regular history column for the *Salem Gazette*).

Maggi's work in mainstream media included producing a cable TV series and programming and hosting musical theater, arts interview, and classical music shows for NPR public radio, commercial, and community stations.

A former Chairperson of the Haverhill Cultural Council, Maggi served as Musical Theater Director at Hill House (a community Arts Center) in Boston's Beacon Hill; as Director of "Adventures in Art," a summer arts program; and as a director of children's choirs.

With a background in teaching multiply-handicapped children, Maggi continues interest in and study of music therapy. She is working on a children's book; and is always working on a variety of writing projects.