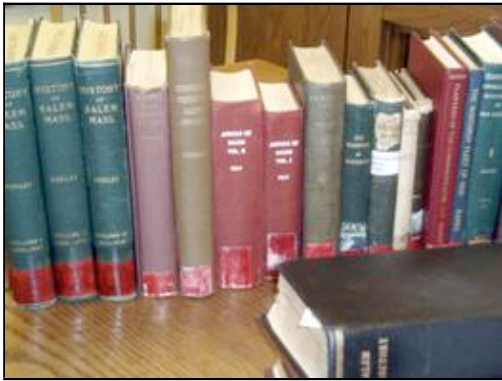


## 'Incalculable advantages' — Salem's public library



By Maggi Smith-Dalton/Naumkeag Notations  
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Salem -

In the spring of 1731, disappointed with the result of a private “sharing” library experiment, Benjamin Franklin proposed establishing a circulating, subscription library for Philadelphia, to members of the Junto.

He described this group in his “Autobiography”: “... in the autumn of the preceding year, [1727] I had form’d most of my ingenious acquaintance into a club of mutual improvement, which we called the Junto; we met on Friday evenings. The

rules that I drew up required that every member, in his turn, should produce one or more queries on any point of Morals, Politics, or Natural Philosophy, to be discuss’d by the company; and once in three months produce and read an essay of his own writing, on any subject he pleased. Our debates were to be ... conducted in the sincere spirit of inquiry after truth, without fondness for dispute or desire of victory ...”

When Franklin proposed to the Junto that they form a subscription library it was an innovation in the American colonies. Colonial America’s libraries hitherto were private collections, mostly assembled by and for wealthy men. A circulating, subscription library, on other hand, as Franklin envisioned, would be opened to his fellow citizens at large, albeit for a fee.

Thus would the quest for knowledge and self-education be served in the larger community; and the establishment of such a library would eventually be understood to foster, nurture and serve democratic ideals.

Franklin’s colleagues agreed, and the “Instrument of Association” for the Library Company of Philadelphia was drawn up on July 1, 1731. By November 1731, the Library Company had 50 subscribers, and the first meeting of the library directors was held at Nicholas Scull’s Bear Tavern.

Blessed by Franklin’s coined motto, “To pour forth benefits for the common good is divine,” the first — and until the mid-19th century, the largest — public library in America took root and flourished. Its long and distinguished life included the honor of serving as the Library of Congress when the capitol of the young country was located in Philadelphia.

The Library Company flourishes, supported by its shareholders (but open to the public) to this day. It was followed by other membership institutions such as the Boston Athenaeum, founded in 1807.

Such associations of friends, neighbors and colleagues, formed for purposes of self-improvement, a “spirit of inquiry after truth,” and education, like Philadelphia’s Junto, were a common feature of 18th-century American cities, Salem included. And such associations often took as their mission the improvement of their community’s intellectual, moral, social and educational life.

### **A bookish Salem**

Salem has been hospitable to books since its earliest days; it has been estimated by one writer that there were approximately a thousand books in Salem as of 1700, and the names of bookshops and booksellers abound in early newspapers.

In March of 1760, a prominent Salem social club, the Monday Evening Club, meeting at a popular local tavern, subscribed a fund to establish “a well-chosen library in this Town.” And so Salem’s Social Library was formed. Shares were available to all who could pay for them; members were restricted to residence within a circumscribed radius of the city. The Salem Philosophical Library followed in 1781. (These two organizations were the predecessors to the present-day Salem Athenaeum.)

In 1789, John Dabney, a printer and bookseller, and a Salem postmaster, began a 30-year service in providing books which circulated by rental. Rev. William Bentley, who obtained much material from this

source, stated that when Dabney opened his first bookstore, “anything deserving the name was unknown,” but the bookseller “began as if we were readers of a higher class.” Bentley wrote in 1819 that the “whole town ... profitted” from Dabney’s bookselling and the circulating library.

### **Public libraries for all?**

Public libraries have existed since classical times; the Great Library of Alexandria, based largely on copies of Aristotle’s own collection, is perhaps the most famous library in antiquity.

One consequence of the assassination of Julius Caesar was a delay in building the public library he had planned. Pliny’s comment about the library which was finally completed some years after Caesar’s death, “He made men’s talent’s a public possession,” was a tribute to both the generosity of the concept and to the services that such a library could provide in a community.

Public/private subscription libraries flourished from 17th to the 19th century, especially in England and in the United States.

It wasn’t until the 19th century, however, that the idea of a free, municipally-supported library took hold. Founded in 1848, the Boston Public Library holds pride of place as “the first publicly-supported free municipal library in the world.”

In Salem, first efforts to establish a free public library met with failure in the early 1870s. However, in 1885, a collection of books was begun with the intent of forming such a library. A bequest by the family of sea captain John Bertram, who died on March 22, 1882, provided the collection — and a free, city-supported Salem Public Library — with its permanent home.

The last home the Bertram family inhabited, on Essex Street, is the present-day home to the Salem Public Library, which opened its doors on July 8, 1889. Salem’s “Free Public Library” was acknowledged at its founding as providing “incalculable advantages” to the city, “and especially to the children and young persons of our community, and to those whose opportunities for education and culture have been limited by the necessities and circumstances of their lives ...”

### **Salem’s library today**

Salem’s gracefully-housed public library is one of the busiest in the North of Boston Library Exchange (NOBLE) system. Like most libraries today, it is home not only to many wonderful books but is a multimedia center serving the needs of Internet users and movie-watchers, researchers in microfilmed documents and lovers of recorded music equally well.

However, for readers of this column, interested in history, it is the Salem Collection and the Salem Room which are most intriguing and useful. The Salem Collection of books and other materials include concentrations in church history; Salem government; transportation, industry; art, architecture and China trade artifacts; literature, social life/people of Salem, and biographies; general Salem histories of various eras; ships and shipmasters; and of course, the inevitable “Witchcraft Section.” There are vertical files, archived newspapers on microfilm and Essex Institute Historical Collections to engage the researcher, as well.

But most of all, there are the books — books of great character and personality. It is the charm and the weathered beauty of some of the library’s Salem Collection that enchant the most; these travelers from another time calling to you as you survey the crowded shelves.

Personally, I am an enthusiastic Internet user, a so-called “early adopter” of Web technology, and love the relative ease with which I can conduct much research now, especially when I think back to when I began my journey as an historian and writer.

But, thankfully, I will never lose my own devotion to the book as a tool of research, nor my awareness of the irreplaceable advantages which conducting research with printed books and primary materials gives to a researcher. There is, truly, absolutely no substitute for such research for the serious historian. No reputable writer of history can honestly claim that professional standing without a lifetime of hours spent in libraries and archives, among artifacts, primary documents, and books — *many* books.

I spent a delightful hour or so interviewing two devoted reference room librarians for this column at the Salem Public Library recently. I asked Jane Walsh and Susan Szpak many fairly common questions; but some of my most probing queries regarded the future of libraries and the increasing use of Internet

technology. It was my question, "Why books?" that elicited the most wonderful comments of all from my two fellow lovers of Intellectual Quests.

"Think of the people who handled them," said Szpak. It's that connection to the people of the past, the human connection, that lit up both their faces as they told of the everlasting lure of books. And Walsh later added some words which continue to resonate; I'll gift you with them now.

"I can't imagine a world without books ... You can curl up in your favorite spot with a romance and a flashlight in the middle of a thunderstorm. You can surprise a grandchild 3,000 miles away with a book he asked Grammie to look for ... You can sit in a special collection room of a library, and read of daily life in your city or town in the 1850s in a book published by a woman living during that time period. When you hold a book and read, you create a special, private time for yourself ..."

See you at the library!

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*Musicians and historians Maggi Smith-Dalton and her 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. Jim and Maggi are preparing a book and a recording on music in Salem's history; are founders of the upcoming American History and Music Festival; and are founding members of the Salem History Society.*

*One of the cartoon "Simpsons" episodes viewable on YouTube shows an amusing variety of heavens available to each character. Guess what heaven looks like to Maggi? Hint: It ain't just one "good book," or just a couple of golden harps. Send all your antique books and several golden harps to [Maggi@singingstring.org](mailto:Maggi@singingstring.org) or visit the Web site [www.singingstring.org](http://www.singingstring.org).*

# Jim and Maggi Dalton

## Singing String Music

specialists in 19th & early 20th-century  
music, history, & culture  
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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 ..."



~Send for our complete info package  
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.

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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.