

New England's winds fill those sails: Salem's Maritime Festival

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By Maggi Smith-Dalton/Naumkeag Notations
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Salem -

"The big thing that we promote is community involvement," Mike Parr of Salem's Maritime National Historic Site told me as we sat down to discuss the Maritime Festival.

And Salem State College's Dr. Stephen Matchak, an original founder of the festival, enthusiastically underscored the vital importance of the proud regional heritage of the Maritime Festival for me as well. "It still reflects the folk traditions of [our own] community. Free family fun, noncommercial; keeping it in that same spirit."

Both of these hardworking, dedicated men spoke with obvious love for the festival and all it represents.

But it is in exploring the history of folklife celebrations such as the Salem Maritime Festival which brings home the full impact of its legacy. For the festival as it is presented today is not just as a reminder of the local maritime history of Salem, and of New England as a region — but even more importantly, it occupies a sterling place in the continuum of a proud national tradition. Incubated at the Smithsonian Institution, it is perhaps best understood as an ongoing conversation; a celebration of our diverse, yet unifying, indigenous regional heritage.

A hard-won celebration, at that.

Pioneers

When a youthful Constance Rourke (1885-1941) returned from a 1908-1909 folklore-hunting trip to Europe, she brought with her a newly-kindled fervor for finding and articulating an American indigenous culture. She disputed the idea that American culture was but a poor offshoot, solely beholden to European inspiration, and forever stunted by utilitarian, commercial preoccupations in the development of a native artistic aesthetic.

After teaching at Vassar for a few years, she set out to explore and prove her thesis, displaying, as critic, biographer and literary historian Van Wyck Brooks described it, "a zest that took her into every corner of the country."

Writing in a review in the Winterthur Portfolio, historian James Hoopes identified "tradition, culture, myth, style and criticism," as the "principal issues affecting her work," and, as an independent researcher and writer, she was indefatigable in pursuit of those issues. She explored music, theatre, novelists, painting, religion, architecture.

By the time of her death in 1941, she had become a highly influential and pioneering figure in the

egalitarian appreciation of the folk customs, folk-crafts and folklore exemplifying "The Roots of American Culture." Such roots, she and others following the trail she helped blaze were able to show, were of vital nurturance in the work of Hawthorne, James, Emerson, Melville, Poe, Twain, Whitman ... and as such, uniquely American. Her book, "American Humor: A Study of the National Character," (1931) is still considered to be a major scholarly accomplishment.

Although folklore, and folklife, had been explored academically in the 1880s, such studies were very largely shaped by romantic and somewhat elitist views, emphasizing European sources and culture — especially in New England (and demonstrably in Salem). In the early 20th century, through the 1920s and 1930s, however, the focus shifted dramatically — eventually, to include all American geographical sections, racial groups and social strata.

Michael Kammen's indispensable work, "Mystic Chords of Memory, The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture" (1991) gives a masterful overview of this development.

Unearthing musical treasure

As an example, when, between 1916 and 1918, Britisher Cecil Sharp (1859-1924) came to America to collect traditional Celtic songs in Appalachia, he nevertheless championed the unique flavor of the traditions as he found them in the hills of Tennessee. The West received stalwart support in Utah-born historian Bernard DeVoto's work (1897-1955). Women, too, in a variety of professions or walks of life, played important roles in the growing enthusiasm for indigenous folklore and the native art it nurtured.

In 1927, activist, singer, biographer and poet Carl Sandburg ("The Eternal Hobo" 1878-1967) published his anthology of American folksongs, collected from around the country, entitled "American Songbag." It was a commercial success. His "New American Songbag" appeared in 1950. Mississippi's John Avery Lomax (1867-1948) published his landmark, indispensable collection, "American Ballads and Folk Songs" in 1934. Lomax's fieldwork resulted in a collection of more than 4,000 recordings in the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. Eventually, his entire family, including son Alan, would become major contributors to American ethnomusicology.

In 1931, the White Top Folk Festival, founded by Virginia's John Powell, began its annual celebrations of folksong and folkways. In 1933, Eleanor Roosevelt attended that festival as a guest of honor, and helped Powell initiate a subsequent radio series highlighting America's musical heritage.

During this period, enthusiasm for folk crafts also rose to the foreground. In 1936 the Newark Museum, funded by the New Deal's Federal Art Project/WPA, a show of American folk crafts was mounted, entitled "Old and New Paths in American Design — 1720-1936."

Folklore societies sprang up between the 1920s and 1940s, further enhancing the study and appreciation of indigenous folkways. By 1935, folk festivals sprouted everywhere, democratic and egalitarian in nature.

Smithsonian roots to Salem's festival

Although a Maritime Festival was held on Winter Island in July 1985 as a successor to a previously-held concert series, Salem's festival in its present form was born in Washington at the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival.

Annually produced since 1967 by the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, the Folklife Festival is "an international exposition of living cultural heritage."

The festival is described by the Smithsonian as "an educational presentation that features community-based cultural exemplars ... Each year, the festival features a nation, region, state or theme. The festival is an exercise in cultural democracy..."

In 1988, the Smithsonian's festival featured "Ingenuity and Tradition: The Common Wealth of Massachusetts," and celebrated the American Folklore Society's Centennial. In addition to music from the Soviet Union, the stages resounded to "Bluegrass, Piedmont blues, Cajun and Puerto Rican music, American Indian performance, and double-dutch jump roping."

Dr. Matchak relates, "Some two to three dozen folklorists participated in planning the festival in Washington in 1988." The experience so engaged the Massachusetts folklorists, including Matchak, that they decided to keep it going — "so the people of the state could see their folk traditions," he remembers.

Lowell's Folk Festival was started at the same time, and followed a different path, one more focused on world cultures. "We wanted something domestic." At first the festival was held in Holyoke, and gradually, over the years, he says, it evolved into a Maritime Festival, and to being held in Salem.

A regional focus

Dr. Matchak, who recently stepped down after nine years as chair of the Department of Geography at Salem State, describes himself now as a "happy cultural geographer." But his early training was in folklore, and his heart is still firmly wedded to "New England folklore and regionality."

Mike Parr, too, exudes enthusiasm for the New England maritime and traditional crafts, in addition to the music, which the Salem Maritime Festival brings each year. Together with Michelle Blee, for the last decade or so, he has sought out, invited, supported and honored participants who share and perpetuate the region's legacies. "It's always been my job to pull in demonstrators of [regional] crafts and promote local organizations."

The Salem Maritime Festival, now in its 19th incarnation, can be enjoyed and celebrated for its connection to the nation's larger history through its inception at the Smithsonian; its stalwart continuation of a New England regional and maritime flavor resisting commercialization and homogenization; and as lively, ongoing conversation building community and identity through art, music, craft, history, culture — and fun.

Event info: Kick off Salem Heritage Days this weekend at the 19th Annual Salem Maritime Festival with free family fun, educational activities, entertainment, activities aboard the Friendship of Salem, and on historic Derby Wharf. Events include traditional craft demonstrations and music. The Opening Concert and event will be held Friday, Aug. 3, 7-9 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 4, the festival is held all day, with music 10 a.m. and 6 p.m., plus tours of the Friendship, family activities and more. For information contact Michelle Blee at 978-740-1650, or visit www.nps.gov/sama/parknews/maritime-festival.htm.

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.

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. They will be performing at the Maritime Festival on Saturday, Aug. 4 at 10 a.m.

Send your ethnomusicological musings to Maggi@singingstring.org or visit the Web site www.singingstring.org.

Jim and Maggi Dalton

Singing String Music

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music, history, & culture
from parlor and stage

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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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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.