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The Salem Witch Museum: Past and Present

Salem, Mass. – Since its opening in 1972 in a renovated historic church building, the Salem Witch Museum has served as a distinctive local landmark and major contributor to the city’s cultural and historic landscape. For the past four decades, the museum has told the true story behind the Salem witch trials of 1692 and provided context for understanding the phenomenon of “witch hunts” and witchcraft in general from the Middle Ages to modern times.

The museum was founded during Salem’s push to redevelop its core and market itself as a city of unique historical importance in the late 1960s and 70s. Public interest in Salem’s connection to the witch trials of 1692 was piqued by the publication and Broadway production of Arthur Miller’s play, *The Crucible*, in the 1950s, but fascination with everything related to witches and witchcraft increased dramatically after several episodes of the TV sitcom “Bewitched” were filmed at various locations throughout Salem and aired across the country in 1970. The museum was founded shortly thereafter to educate the public about the 1692 trials.

When prominent North Shore business executive Biff Michaud took over the museum’s operations in 1980, he dedicated himself to making the museum more accessible and relevant to a new generation of visitors. Alison D’Amario, an English teacher from Topsfield, joined the staff in 1986. She designed an education program around the trials that can be adapted to schools, historical societies and business groups. Additionally, Michaud broadened the museum’s family appeal by working with the Salem Chamber of Commerce to launch “Haunted Happenings,” a simple, one-day family festival that has evolved into the popular month-long, city-wide celebration it is today.

Under Michaud’s leadership, the museum expanded its marketing initiatives to the group tour and travel market, both nationally and overseas, and translated the content of the museum’s core presentation into eight languages to accommodate its continuously increasing number of international visitors. In 1999, a special exhibit titled “Witches: Evolving Perceptions” was created to provide visitors with context to enhance their understanding of the Salem trials. The exhibit identifies myths surrounding witches and witchcraft, dispels misconceptions and highlights dangers – both past and present – of ‘scapegoating’ certain members of society.

Interest in the story behind Salem's witch trials as well as the history of witchcraft and witches in general continues to grow. The Salem Witch Museum consistently receives the attention of national and international press, and has been featured by such prominent media outlets as the Discovery Channel, the Travel Channel, Secrets of the Dead, the Today Show and World Book, to name a few. Visitors from all corners of the globe continue to make tracks to the museum. According to statistics compiled annually by the *Boston Business Journal*, the Salem Witch Museum is "the most visited museum in Salem."

In 1989, the City of Salem created a commission to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the witch trials. The Salem Witch Museum was heavily involved in bringing the Salem business community together to plan and implement the yearlong series of events. The dedication of the Salem Witch Trials Memorial by Elie Wiesel in August 1992 remains a highpoint of that year. Prior to that time, the Salem Witch Museum itself had served as a memorial to the twenty innocent men and women put to death for witchcraft in 1692.

In its continuing efforts to highlight the plight of the unjustly accused and maligned today, the Salem Witch Museum, along with other members of the Salem Witch Trial Tercentenary Committee, established the Annual Salem Award for Human Rights and Social Justice. The purpose of the award is to recognize those who take action to alleviate discrimination and promote tolerance in the world today. Greg Mortenson, author of *Three Cups of Tea* and champion of education for women and girls in developing countries, was chosen as the award's 2010 recipient.

The Salem Witch Museum has told the story of the victims of the Salem witch trials of 1692 since the museum's founding in 1972. It is dedicated to bringing the larger issue of persecution and 'scapegoating' of all innocents to light through its exhibit "Witches: Evolving Perceptions" as well as through its educational outreach programs. Prominently located opposite The Salem Common, the museum prides itself on being a major attraction on Boston's historic North Shore.