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The Salem Witch Museum Launches Major Conservation Project

Salem, Mass. – The Salem Witch Museum’s dramatic façade has disappeared behind a shroud of black netting, and won’t reappear until later this fall. After a full eight months of preservation work to the museum’s brownstone and brick exterior – costing upwards of \$500,000 – the classic Gothic Revival structure won’t look any different than it did before all the work began. Every one of its crenellations, arched windows, buttresses and battlements will appear to be untouched.

According to local preservation expert Roger Tremblay, Jr., of Roger A. Tremblay Contractors, Inc., this is exactly how it should be. “The challenge of our work is to make it look as if nothing has been done while strengthening and preserving the integrity of the building,” said Tremblay. “This is especially important with a building like the Salem Witch Museum that’s such a prominent landmark in the community.”

Tremblay is part of a team of skilled carpenters, apprentices and stone masons that includes his brothers and company co-owners Jesse and Dan Tremblay as well as Scottish-trained master stone mason conservator Michael Drummond Davidson, president of the Mississippi Stone Guild. All are working together to preserve the 165-year-old building that started out its life as a church. According to Roger Tremblay, it’s not just the stone work that’s being preserved, but the roofing and windows as well, including the building’s massive pointed-arched triforium window.

According to Davidson, who has overseen such high-profile restoration and renovation projects as the Louvre Museum in Paris and New York’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the operative word for the Salem Witch Museum project is *preservation*. “We are not *restoring* the building,” said Davidson. “If we were, we’d rebuild the building’s original towers that were shortened several decades after it was built. Our job here is to conserve and preserve the original materials of the building’s historic fabric so it keeps its original character.”

The process is a lengthy and complicated one involving, as Davidson says, “scientific sleuthing and sophisticated forensics.” The team has had to determine the geology of

the building's stone, test its composition for strengths and weaknesses, determine how it was quarried, fabricated and then fit into the building as a whole. According to Davidson, the secret of all stone edifices lies in the mortar that joins the stones together. His challenge as the project's master stone mason has been to create a modern-day compatible mortar for the museum's Philadelphia brown stone, allowing the stones to expand and contract, or "breathe," without breaking off and deteriorating as they had done in the past.

Among other responsibilities, the Tremblay brothers and their team are in charge of dismantling the massive central window, transporting it to their company headquarters in Peabody and working on the window's deteriorating framework from there. The window is so large that, even though they have been dismantling it in sections, the job necessitated taking down a wall in their shop in order to fit the pieces inside.

If nothing will appear to be different at the job's completion, why go to such lengths and to so much expense? Besides the fact that the Salem Witch Museum – in all its distinctive and crenellated glory – is one of the most photographed buildings in the city and part of the historic fabric of the community, museum administrators and the preservation team agree: it's about preserving the total Salem Witch Museum experience.

"The museum's Country English Gothic edifice sets the tone for a visitor's experience inside the building," said Davidson. "The experience of learning about the history of witchcraft would be very different if this museum were housed in, say, a sleek 1960s modern structure."

According to Davidson, who hears and sees a story in every stone, each building has a story of its own to tell. Preserving Salem's history and telling these stories is Salem Witch Museum's prime objective. As Dan Tremblay says, "Salem is a museum city. This renovation project is just another way the Salem Witch Museum sets the tone and raises the bar."

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.