The Salem Witch Museum: Past and Present

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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 story of the Salem witch trials of 1692 and provided context for understanding the phenomenon of witch-hunts and witchcraft from the fifteenth century to the modern day.

The museum was founded during Salem's push to redevelop itself as a city of unique historical importance in the late 1960s and 70s. Public interest in Salem's connection to the witch trials was piqued by Arthur Miller's 1953 play, *The Crucible*. Fascination with everything related to witches continued to increase on a national scale after several episodes of the TV sitcom *Bewitched*, filmed at various locations throughout Salem, aired across the country in 1970. The Salem Witch Museum was founded shortly thereafter to educate the public about the real history of the city's witchcraft 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. 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 1982, Michaud sought to broaden the museum's family appeal by working with the Salem Chamber of Commerce to launch Haunted Happenings. What began as a simple, one-day family friendly festival has grown exponentially over the years. Today, Haunted Happenings is an enormously popular month-long, citywide autumnal celebration which draws hundreds of thousands each year.

In 1999, a second exhibit titled *Witches: Evolving Perceptions* was added to the museum to expand visitors understanding of the history of witchcraft. This exhibit examines the European witch trials, the evolution of the image of the witch in popular culture, and the phenomenon of witch-hunting.

Interest in the story behind Salem's witch trials has only grown over the years. 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 History Channel, the Travel Channel, Secrets of the Dead, the Today Show, and World Book. Visitors from all corners of the globe continue to visit the museum throughout the year. 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 instrumental in bringing the Salem business community together to plan and implement the yearlong series of events. The dedication of the Salem Witch Trials Memorial, given by Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel in August 1992, remains a highpoint of that year.

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. This award is now granted by the organization Voices Against Injustice, previously known as the Salem Award Foundation. The purpose of the award is to recognize those who seek to alleviate discrimination and promote tolerance in the world today.

In 2010 the museum began a series of updates to both the museum's interior and exterior. This began with restoration of the front façade of the building. The original building was constructed between 1844-1846, and used as the Second Unitarian Church of Salem until the 1940s. As this Gothic Revival architecture, both visually captivating and historically significant, is an essential element of this museum, restoration efforts were a priority. The museum went on to renovate the front plaza, expanding and making the front of the property more accessible and accommodating to visitors.

In January of 2018 the museum began the task of updating its interior content, beginning with the second presentation *Witches: Evolving Perceptions*. An enormous timeline of witchcraft history was expanded, in the hope of better expressing the complex legal, social and religious changes that led to the massive European witch-hunts. These updates also included re-recording the theatrical speeches given by the three-tableaux featured in this space and installing several relevant artifacts displays, including a first edition of L. Frank Baum's renowned 1900 children's book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The museum will continue updating its content, culminating in an expected update to the main presentation.

Alison D'Amario, an English teacher from Topsfield, joined the museum in 1986. She led efforts to create an education program around the trials that could be adapted to schools, historical societies, and business groups. The work begun by D'Amario continued with the expansion of the museum's Education Department in 2018, bringing on a full time Director of Education and Assistant Director of Education. Today, this department offers a range of educational materials and experiences, including virtual events hosted throughout the year covering a range of topics, virtual classroom sessions available for students from elementary to university level, and an ever-expanding Witch Trials Online Sites Tour. In 2019, detailed resource packets were created for descendants of individuals involved in the witchcraft trials. Packets for 25 people, including those who were executed, individuals who were accused, who died in jail, and accusers, are currently available with more expected soon!