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To honor architect, Salem celebrates its historic houses

Tom Dalton

SALEM | This is the year of Samuel McIntire.

In honor of the 250th birthday of the city's famed architect, the Peabody Essex Museum is staging a major exhibition in the fall on McIntire's wood carvings. And, just like last year's blockbuster PEM exhibit "Painting Summer in New England," the McIntire show is spawning a whole cottage industry of lectures and tours.

Tomorrow, the city will kick off "Celebrate Salem, Four Centuries of Architecture and Design" with a family day at the National Park Service Visitor Center to spotlight city treasures that are often taken for granted -- houses and buildings.

"It's an extraordinary city for architecture, absolutely extraordinary," said Bonnie Hurd Smith, a Salem consultant working with the North of Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau. "Just within a radius of a few blocks, you've got both the Narbonne house (circa 1672) and the new Peabody Essex Museum addition (2003). That's mind-blowing."

The highlight of tomorrow's family day is an architectural tour of the downtown led by a guide dressed as Sophia Peabody, one of the three famed Peabody sisters and the wife of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

And it's not just any guide. Emily Murphy is a park ranger and doctoral student in history at Boston University whose dissertation subject is the Derbys, one of the city's wealthiest and most prominent merchant families. The tour will focus on architecture connected to Hawthorne and buildings that were standing while he lived in Salem.

"McIntire really is the inspiration for this," Murphy said of the series of events this summer. "He's the one who really put his mark on Salem."

Although most of the great Federal period homes linked to McIntire are in the outlying historic district that bears his name, one of his masterpieces, the Gardner-Pingree House on Essex Street, is expected to be one of Murphy's stops. McIntire designed much of the interior and exterior of this Federal classic.

Walkers will get a chance to see a lot of architecture connected to Hawthorne, including the home on narrow Herbert Street where the writer spent his youth. The Richard Manning House, named for Hawthorne's grandfather, was built in 1793 and is privately owned today.

"He grew up in this house," Murphy said, "with a whole passel of unmarried aunts and uncles."

The tour also will stroll past a home where Sophia lived and see the home on Salem Common -- today the Odd Fellow's Lodge -- where Mary Crowninshield, a wealthy Hawthorne girlfriend, lived.

"She ends up marrying Jared Sparks, the president of Harvard," Murphy said.

Largely due to McIntire, Salem is identified with the Federal period of architecture, which heralded in a new

nation. But it is much more than that, Murphy said. There are 17th-century homes sprinkled around the city, like the House of the Seven Gables, and outstanding examples of Georgian, Victorian and other architectural styles spanning the centuries.

"The different districts (in the city) do have their own identities," she said. "And it's not just a smattering. There are good examples of everything."

Celebrate Salem Events

What: Salem's Musick: Secular Songs and Dances of the Puritans

When: Tomorrow, 3 p.m.

Where: The Witch House, 310 Essex St.

What: North Shore Boston: Houses of Essex County, 1865-1930

When: Thursday, July 19, 7 p.m.

Where: The House of the Seven Gables, 115 Derby St.

What: Washington Square walking tour with local historian Jim McAllister

When: Saturday, July 21, 10 a.m.

Where: Peabody Essex Museum (start)

What: Archaeology of the Turners, findings from an archaeological dig

When: Wednesday, Aug. 8, 7 p.m.

Where: The House of the Seven Gables

What: Salem Arts and Letters Tour

When: Saturday, Aug. 18, 10 a.m.

Where: Peabody Essex Museum (start)

For more information, go to www.escapesnorth.com

