

# History comes alive in Ipswich at 16 Elm Street

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IPSWICH VISITOR CENTER



**Chris Doktor and Sarah Brown portray residents of a historic Ipswich home.**

A historic house that stood in Ipswich for 200 years and now is on exhibit in Washington will be a central attraction as the town celebrates its history this weekend.

For the past three years, volunteers have rebuilt the Georgian-style, two-and-a-half-story, timber-framed house into a three-dimensional, three-quarter-sized replica that sits at its original site on 16 Elm St. For the past 49 years, the original has been the property of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington. It is the largest artifact in the museum and serves as the setting for “Within These Walls: 1 House, 5 Families, 200 Years of History,” an exhibit that debuted in 2001 and explores the social history of the

United States by tracing the lives of five families that lived in the house from 1757 to 1945.

A play based on the same theme, produced each year in Ipswich, is scheduled to head to Washington in August to be performed at the museum. It was written by Ipswich’s J.T. Turner, and is performed by The Actors Company, a local troupe.

“This is a very significant event in the life of a local community,” said Bill Steelman, director of heritage development for the Essex National Heritage Commission and a board member for the Ipswich Visitor Center.

Ipswich is one of the oldest communities in the country, and the house at 16 Elm was built in a style shared by others in this region during that time period, said Steelman. Because so much early American history originated here, he said, early Ipswich stories are national stories as well.

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“I know everybody’s quite thrilled by the opportunity,” he said. “Not everybody gets to play the Smithsonian.”

This is just the second outside production that Samuel Xavier Carnegie, the museum’s creative director, can recall being allowed to perform at the museum. He credits the persistence of the Ipswich contingent and the quality of the play.

“The writing is excellent; J.T. did a great job with it,” Carnegie said. “Overall it was very, very good and when you marry that to the idea of the exhibit itself, it is appropriate and worth having at the Smithsonian.”

While the details of where the play will be produced are still being determined, it may be staged at the exhibit itself, Carnegie said.

“When the play does come here, I would like for them to encourage people to go through the exhibit again and see some of the things that aren’t necessarily covered in the play, because there are some stories that are not covered,” said Carnegie. “Particularly, there’s a story about a slave who lived with the Dodges, and that’s not really covered in the play, but it’s an interesting part of the story of the house. That’s one opportunity people have to use the play as a springboard to think about other issues that you can’t cover in 25 or 30 minutes.”

The 16 Elm replica serves as the backdrop for the play, which will be produced outdoors at 3:30 and 5:30 p.m. on Saturday in Ipswich at the Elm Street site, on the corner of County Street, which abuts the Ipswich Visitor Center. It is part of Ipswich Illuminated, a live art installation scheduled for 6 to 9 p.m. (rain date Sunday), in conjunction with the 26th annual Ipswich Art Show and Sale, which runs Friday to Sunday.

In the spring, the town’s cultural council and visitor center will launch two virtual museums, one at the Elm Street site. Using a \$5,000 grant from The Institution for Savings, the visitor center will install an informational plaque to direct individuals to an online site where they can access (by smartphone or similar device) a video recording of the play, as well as connect to the National Museum of American History’s website dedicated to the “Within These Walls” exhibit.

The new plaque will be installed next to a bronze plaque that marks the location where the original house stood.

A similar installation will be erected on the boardwalk of Crane Beach, commemorating a lighthouse that stood on the spot for 100 years. When the Great New England Hurricane of 1938 destroyed the Edgartown lighthouse, the Ipswich lighthouse was moved to replace it at the Martha’s Vineyard site. The iconic Ipswich lighthouse was replaced by a navigational beacon.

At that site, visitors will be instructed to access a video play entitled “Remembering the Ipswich Lighthouse: Voices from the Beach,” also written by J.T. Turner and performed by The Actors Company.

At the Smithsonian, “Within These Walls: 1 House, 5 Families, 200 Years of History” is a popular exhibit that explores the social history of the United States by tracing the lives of five families that made it their home. There is also a story to how the house was saved from the wrecking ball in 1963.

“It was scheduled to be bulldozed, and there were a couple of local housewives, Helen Lunt and Kay Thompson, who fancied themselves historians,” said Kerrie Bates, executive director of the Ipswich Visitor Center. “One laid herself down on the ground and the other paid [the contractor] — who had the engine running on the bulldozer — a day’s wages to hold off while they went home and made phone calls on their old rotary phones.

“One thing led to another, and the Smithsonian eventually accepted the house.”

<http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/regionals/north/2012/10/10/history-comes-alive-ipswich-elm-street/BqeEUHEqv23dQRDQwXDDQJ/story.html>