

Historic houses join together to have a bigger impact



The Avery-Copp House in Groton is featured on a new local guide to historic houses. (Courtesy Avery-Copp House)

Published May 31, 2016 12:01AM | Updated May 31, 2016 8:41AM

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Sixteen historic houses in southeastern Connecticut have combined forces to create the Historic House Museums of Southeastern Connecticut trail brochure.

It's part of a new collaborative effort among the organizations, which came together under the guidance of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition and the Eastern Regional Tourism District.

By working together, the groups benefit — and so do visitors. If tourists stop at one historic house site, they can pick up the brochure that provides information about 15 other sites.

Wendy Bury, the coalition's executive director, says, "If you have somebody in your building who loves history and loves artifacts, and if you can help direct them to something else they would love, that's good customer service."

As for the organizations themselves, many are volunteer-run and have little if any marketing budget.

By combining, though, they can have an impact. In this joint effort, they each paid \$200 to create 15,000 brochures.

"The draw of this was, for a low cost, with a little bit of work and a lot of collaboration, you're going to get something that you would be unable to achieve by yourself. The outcome of this is they now have audience reach they didn't have before," Bury says.

The brochure, which also will be available at visitors' centers and online, will launch with an event from 2 to 4 p.m. Sunday at the Smith-Harris House in East Lyme.

The coalition is hoping this marketing effort leads to more people visiting the historic house museums this summer. It's asking the venues to keep track of attendance numbers to determine if that ends up being the case.

The houses include a trio of Groton houses — Avery-Copp, Ebenezer Avery and Jabez Smith — and a trio of East Lyme houses — Samuel Smith, Smith-Harris, and Thomas Lee.

The descriptions in the brochure include The Leffingwell House Museum in Norwich being outlined this way: "What was built as a simple house in 1675 evolved from a pre-Revolutionary tavern into an elegant home by 1765"; the Capt. Nathaniel Palmer House in Stonington is detailed like this: "Victorian mansion built by two brothers, Captains Nathaniel Brown Palmer and Alexander Smith Palmer, and featuring exhibits pertaining to Nathaniel's discovery of Antarctica and the brothers' adventurous lives."

The collaboration grew out of one of the coalition's roundtable groups; this particular roundtable focused on historical societies. Bury notes that these efforts usually need one person to say, "Let's do something" and to be the "mover and shaker." In this case, that was Stephanie Lantiere of the Avery Memorial Association. She stepped up to coordinate things, and groups handled various aspects of the project.

"Every organization did a small part. Some did more than others, but truly everybody took on a role and a responsibility," Bury says.

Lantiere notes how much something like this is needed, saying, "At the Ebenezer Avery House, we've done surveys in the past few years, and it's amazing how many people don't know where a lot of the historic houses are or don't know we exist ... I think it's important for all of our historic houses to be out there, so people know about us."

The sites reflect history from the 1600s, 1700s and 1800s.

"What an amazing collection these 16 (museums) present together to the community of our own regional history," Bury says.

Lantiere says the collaboration between the historic house museums will continue.

"It's been great," she says.

If you go

What: Historic House Museums of Southeastern Connecticut trail brochure launch

When: 2-4 p.m. Sunday

Where: Smith-Harris House, 33 Society Road, Niantic

Features: Presentation by Walter Woodward, Connecticut State Historian, on "What Makes Connecticut Connecticut?" Also, music by the Band of Steady Habits

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