

Queen honors Little Compton woman

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Anne Keigher holds the certificate signed by Queen Elizabeth.

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LITTLE COMPTON — One of the most glorious moments of her life had arrived, yet Anne Keigher couldn't help but remark on the strange irony of it all.

The British ambassador to the United States, on behalf of the queen of England, had just presented her with a medal making her an honorary Member of the Order of the British Empire. It was July 2 in Washington, D.C., and the 70-year-old summer resident of Little Compton was being honored for leading the restoration of a historic house in London.

It wasn't, however, just any old house. It was the home of Benjamin Franklin — the American who helped lead the fledgling United States in its ultimately bloody quest for independence from Britain.

"I said to the British ambassador that it's so ironic that I am getting this reward for restoring Benjamin Franklin's house — and it's Independence Day weekend," she recalled. "Franklin left in haste in 1775 for reasons we all know."

Yes, indeed. Franklin was soon back in America and serving on a committee charged with drafting the Declaration of Independence.

While Franklin is an American icon, he spent many years in France and England. He made numerous visits to England and stayed for long periods of time in London at a house he rented on Craven Street from 1757 to 1775.

Keigher arrived in London more than two centuries later, in 1987, when her husband, Richard, who worked in international finance, was transferred from Kuwait. Within four

years, she was introduced to a long-neglected house on Craven Street, Franklin's sole remaining residence. With a degree in architecture and substantial experience in preservation and interior design, Keigher volunteered on the board of directors of an organization seeking to restore the building.

She not only had a healthy appreciation for American history, but an ancestral connection to it as well. Born Anne Prescott, in Buffalo, N.Y., her parents told her from an early age that she descended from famous figures from the American Revolution. One was Col. William Prescott, commander of the rebel forces at the Battle of Bunker Hill, who is said to have given this famous order to his troops: "Do not fire until you see the whites of their eyes."

The family lineage also includes Samuel Prescott, who joined Paul Revere on his legendary ride to warn the troops of a British attack on Concord. While Revere was captured, Prescott completed the journey and transmitted the warning to the rebels. She is also a descendant of William Bradford, the colonial governor of Massachusetts.

Keigher saw volunteering on the Craven Street project as an opportunity to put her professional skills to use and to preserve the history of a great American.

"It would be a real challenge," she said. "I was not the architect for it. But I interviewed the architect and the structural engineer and ran the project on a day-to-day basis. I was also the treasurer."

She also played a key role in raising private money to match British grants, an effort that raised nearly \$3 million for the restoration of the five-story, early Georgian brick house, built between 1730 and 1742. She also helped create a vision for the house, one that went against her expertise in interior design: no furnishings.

She explained that furnishings wouldn't be authentic to Franklin's house, nor would they make it distinct from any other historic house from that period. Instead, she said, the goal was to "conserve this house perfectly but interweave 21st-century technology and create a museum as a theater complex."

The result is a museum where videos are shown on its empty walls and an actress plays Polly, the daughter of Franklin's landlord. She leads visitors through the house and tells stories about Franklin.

The effort took 17 years, with the museum opening in 2005 on the 300th anniversary of Franklin's birth. (Keigher's next renovation project is a house she and her husband have bought in South Carolina.)

British officials were impressed with Keigher's work. Last fall, she received a letter asking if she would accept the Member of the Order award from the queen. She said she would be honored. Several months later, she and five of her guests were invited to the British ambassador's residence on July 2.

During a brief ceremony, a highly decorated military officer handed the formally dressed ambassador a small pillow on top of which sat a small box. Inside was a silver pin, which

he presented to Keigher. The ambassador also read a detailed description of Keigher's life and the reason she was being embraced by the queen and the British empire.

"Who would have ever thought?" said Keigher. "I got into it because of my love of history and architecture and I am an American."

She may wear the pin only at formal British events. They are not a rarity for her. She's been to the British ambassador's home previously as a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts on the occasion of the presentation of its Benjamin Franklin medal to Colin Powell. And a year ago she was among several hundred Americans invited to Buckingham Palace to be introduced to the queen.

"The next time I visit the queen I could wear it," she said.

But Keigher downplays the attention the medal has brought her.

"It's not about me," she said. "What you want above and beyond anything is to let the world know about this [museum] so they can make a financial contribution to keep history going. This endowment is so important."

To learn more about the Benjamin Franklin House, visit www.bfhfoundation.org