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Thursday

The Patriot Ledger

August 21, 2003

Susanna Rowson: A revolutionary woman's story

By VALERIE A. RUSSO

For The Patriot Ledger

HULL - Susanna Haswell Rowson isn't a household name today, but maybe she ought to be.

She grew up in Hull during the Revolutionary War and went on to write "Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth," the topselling novel in America before the publication of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" by Harriet Beecher Stowe. She was also an actress on the British and American stages and the founder of a girls' academy in Boston.

At 3 p.m. Saturday, character actor Jessa Piaia of Cambridge will portray Rowson in a free one-woman show at Hull Public Library, 9 Main St., the site of Rowson's childhood home.

"We're a library, so we should honor writers

and educators," said Daniel Johnson, the library director, "and it's appropriate to recognize Susanna Rowson, who lived on this site and succeeded at a time when it was difficult for women to have careers."

Piaia uses drama to reveal the contributions of women to American history. She has portrayed the religious reformer Mary Dyer, aviator Amelia Earhart and suffragist Susan B. Anthony. But she finds Rowson the most interesting character to portray because of her three-pronged career as an actor, educator and author.

"It's fascinating how her different interests merged. That's where imagination comes into play." she said. "I can make some pretty likely statements by taking the facts and gently filling in some of the transitions."

The performance is set in 1803, the peak of Rowson's literary and academic accomplishments. Attired in the high-waisted

Empire style of the Federalist period, she will reminisce about her childhood in Hull, her career as an actress and playwright in Boston, Philadelphia and England, and her 30 years at the helm of the academy for girls that she founded. And she will talk about her literary works, which included textbooks, plays and her best-selling morality novel (based on a true story) about an innocent girl who was brought to America by a British officer and then abandoned.

"'Charlotte Temple' wasn't a big seller in England, but it was immensely popular in America. More than 200 editions have been published since it was written in 1791," Piaia said.

"There was a whole Charlotte cult that formed. People believed that Charlotte was buried in Trinity Chapel burial ground in Manhattan, near Wall Street. A group would go to this unmarked grave every year, from the

late 1790s to the mid-1800s."

Piaia began researching Rowson in 1986, when she was asked to create a program for two performances at the Bostonian Society.

"They were interested because they had some needlework in their collection that was made by students at Mrs. Rowson's academy. They wanted me to find out more about the school's founder and bring her story to life," she explained.

Her research continues and her discoveries about Rowson's life and times are reflected in her performances.

"I just recently found out that her house was located where the Hull Public Library stands today. So I'm very excited to bring the character back to Hull, where she lived from age 5 to 16. She was a very influential woman in her time, yet unknown for the most part, in today's society."