The Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum will open for the 2011 season on Saturday, May 28. On display will be several significant artifacts, only a fraction of the items donated to the Museum last summer by antiquarian bookseller C. E. Van Norman. Mr. Van Norman, of Neversink, New York, spent years acquiring the Ingersoll memorabilia that came his way. In August 2010 he generously donated more than fifty varied items ranging from old news clippings to a one-of-a-kind bust of Ingersoll.

The bust is cast in plaster and finished in a dramatic dark bronze. Its design is similar to the fifteen–inch plaster busts that are relatively common on the freethought market. But at 28 inches from base to pate, this specimen is almost twice the size of any previously seen. “It’s the first Ingersoll bust I have seen at that size,” said Museum director Tom Flynn. “It’s the only known example.” Following needed restoration work, the bust will be placed on display at the Museum.

Additional items include a previously unknown period photo of the Ingersoll statue (by sculptor Fritz Triebel) installed at Glen Oak Park in Peoria, Illinois, on October 28, 1911 and the only known surviving copy of the souvenir program from the unveiling ceremony. These items will be displayed at the Museum alongside other photos and artifacts pertaining to the Peoria statue.

Charles P. Farrell, Ingersoll’s brother-in-law and official publisher, is in some ways the “mystery man” of Ingersoll’s life. The books he published remain widely available on the antiquarian freethought market, but photos and artifacts relating to Farrell himself are extremely rare. The Van Norman collection includes two such items – a business card from Farrell’s publishing business and a fabulous rarity, a complete letter in Farrell’s hand. These two will go on display at the Museum.

The remainder of the Van Norman collection, ranging from period books to newspaper clippings to notes an unknown person apparently took during an Ingersoll speech, will be catalogued and stored at the Robert Green Ingersoll Memorial Committee’s office at the Center for Inquiry – Transnational in Amherst, New York. Additional artifacts from the collection may go on display in future years.