

Hearse House Restoration

By Donald Fletcher

Chair, Community Preservation Committee

The restoration and protection of Shutesbury's cemetery Hearse House was on the warrant at the Annual Town Meeting on May 4, 2013. The Shutesbury Community Preservation Committee (CPC) recommended \$21,650 to support the restoration. The Shutesbury Town Buildings Committee proposed and will oversee the project. Several other Town and private groups provided testimony and letters of support for the project, as well as in-kind and monetary contributions. These include the Cemetery Commission, Town Center Committee, Historical Commission, and Friends of the Historic Commission.

Restoration of the Hearse House has long been a priority for both the Historic Commission and the Town Buildings Committee. The cemetery Hearse House is one of only two pre-Civil War municipal buildings in Shutesbury, and the only one to have been continuously used.

A Town-owned hearse house reflects a time before there was a funeral industry. A town hearse transported deceased residents from their homes to the church and to their final resting place in the Town cemetery. For many of these final rides, the hearse passed through Shutesbury's historic Town Center corridor, passing other icons of an earlier way of life: a one-room school, the cemetery, the Town Hall, the common, and the stone animal pound. Almost all New England towns once had hearse houses. Our research indicates that Shutesbury's may be one of only six remaining in Massachusetts. Our Hearse House remains in its original site at the entrance to the Town cemetery, along one of Shutesbury's most travelled roads.



before restoration

after restoration

Leverett Road has another part in the story. Over decades, as the road was built up, water began to flow from the road surface into the Hearse House. As a stopgap measure,

implemented many decades ago, fill was added to the interior of the Hearse House to lift the level of the floor above that of the elevated road. This buried the sills of the timber frame, and as a result, the sills and the bottoms of the posts decayed. There had also not been any significant building maintenance in many years.

The Town Buildings Committee had carefully studied the needs of the building and proposed a plan to protect and restore the Hearse House. Shutesbury is fortunate to have detailed records from the Shutesbury Annual Town Meeting vote in 1837. These records contain detailed wording of the building specifications and the motions approving funds appropriated to build a timber frame building to house the Town-owned hearse.

The Town Buildings Committee's proposal to restore the Hearse House led to donations and pledges that will help protect and restore the area surrounding the Hearse House and the entrance to Shutesbury's historic cemetery