

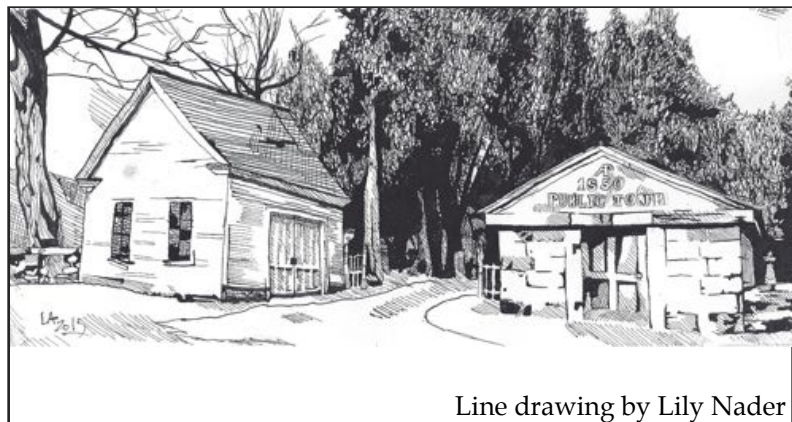
RENOVATION and REVITALIZATION

In 2014, a rumor circulated that the Hearse House was going to be razed. Residents and historians were concerned about the potential loss of the visible, albeit modest, landmark in the central Village Green area – a landmark that was a unique part of Chester’s heritage and a rare example of Vermont history. According to local architectural historian Hugh Henry, the Hearse House retained “integrity of location, design, setting, and workmanship with materials dating 1830-1907.” As such, it was worthy of being restored and preserved.

Chester Townscape – a group of community volunteers who had originally formed as the Chester Beautification Committee in 2014 and then joined with two other community organizations in 2015 to incorporate as the tax-exempt Chester Community Alliance, Inc. – decided to take on the project of rehabilitating the building, returning the Town’s hearse to its original house, and creating a museum to tell of the significance of the building, its place in Chester’s history, and the process, funeral customs, and language associated with death and remembrance.

Project Approval and Funding

With the support of the Select Board, Chester Townscape applied for and received, on behalf of the Town of Chester, a Robert Sincerbeaux Fund Grant from The Preservation Trust of Vermont for a Condition Assessment of the Hearse House. The resulting report, dated August 28, 2014, by Scott Newman, M.Sc., ad-



Line drawing by Lily Nader

ressed the importance of the building, necessary repairs for its renovation, and the estimated costs involved in its remediation.

With the detailed Condition Assessment of needed repairs in hand, as well as funds provided by initial fundraising efforts by Chester Townscape that substantiated community interest and support, Chester Townscape secured

approval from the Select Board for a two-pronged project. The first goal was to repair and renovate the Hearse House, adjacent Public Tomb, and connecting cast-iron fence at the entrance to the Brookside Cemetery. The second goal was to create a mini museum displaying the Town's impressive horse-drawn hearse (stored elsewhere) and focusing on the hearse and funeral customs of the times in order to highlight Chester's history and to provide a unique attraction for



visitors and residents. Chester Townscape then proceeded with a full fundraising campaign in 2014-2015 that secured grants from the Town of Chester and Chester Trustees of Public Funds, donations from businesses and private citizens, and promises of in-kind help from the Town and area professionals to enable the entire project.

Step #1. Public Tomb

In April of 2015, mason Peter Moore of Pawlett, VT, was hired to make repairs to the tomb, which he termed a "beautiful" building..."all hand done – with granite blocks coming from a small deposit in Gassetts, VT."

- Using a variety of hand and power tools, he ground or chiseled out deteriorated mortar joints. The building is set on some supporting stones, but does not have a substantial foundation, so it moves and causes small separation points and cracks. Over time some of those cracks can let water in that



freezes, expands, and then pops the mortar out – a process called spalling.

- He replaced missing or crumbling mortar with historically accurate soft, lime mortar. According to Moore, "Trying to match the old mortar is

not just for color. It's for structural reasons because...it has *give* to it and flexibility. Whereas if you used a modern-day hard Portland cement, it would crack and tend to disturb the building a little bit more...the lime mortar lets it move and doesn't basically rip the thing apart...."

- He ground off a bit on the top of the right-hand side of the iron door where it was sticking onto the granite string course above it, and painted it.

Then missing or broken roof slates were replaced, wooden cornice was repaired and painted, and a new copper ridge cap was installed. In fall 2016 metal worker Tim Hutchinson of E.T. Machine Company in Springfield, VT, made two replicas of the single, antique skeleton key to be given to the Adams Funeral Home and Town of Chester for access; and local painter Brian Mosher painted trim and the door.

Step #2. Hearse House

In early 2016, traditional joiner Pete Newton of Windham, VT, was contracted to rehabilitate the Hearse House. Acting as carpenter and general contractor, he accomplished the following work by fall 2016.

- Building was lifted and racking walls made plumb.
- Stone foundation was repaired, realigned, and raised where necessary to right the lean toward the cemetery, where the foundation had sunken over the years.
- Ground was graded to direct run-off away from the foundation.
- New stones and mortar were



added as a baffle atop the stone wall where the wall met the west facade of the building in order to direct roof runoff away from the building.

- Rotted sills, structural beams, sheathing, clapboards, door sections, and trim were replaced where necessary.
- The slate roof was repaired and a new copper ridge cap installed.
- A new reinforced cement floor was floated atop the old concrete floor

to provide a more secure seal to the weather, to deter vermin, and to even out the almost 6" discrepancy in floor level from south to north.

- On May 4, 2016, the Okemo Valley Regional Chamber of Commerce gave permission for electricity to be run from the Information Center to the Hearse House. The Town agreed to pay for the ongoing minimal cost of power to the museum, and a Town crew dug a ditch for the new line and installed service in preparation for the interior construction.
- A new rolling track and trolleys were installed that prevent the sliding doors from falling off the track.
- The exterior of the building was painted by Brian Mosher.
- On September 21, 2016, the Town's old horse-drawn hearse was rolled up Main Street from the garage at the Adams Funeral Home back to its original home and manoeuvred into its new position inside.
- In November 2016, Cemetery Sexton Jeff Sheldon and his Town crew removed a strip of grass and soil measuring about 4" deep and extending outward about 2.5' from all sides of the walls of the Hearse House and Public Tomb. They then installed a strip of heavy-duty landscape fabric, which was covered with small stones, to prevent weeds, dirt, and moisture from impacting the structures and to eliminate the need for close trimming around the buildings.

Step #3. Cemetery Fence

In the spring of 2016, the decorative, cast-iron fence bracketing the entrance to the Brookside Cemetery was lifted, removed, repaired, and powder coated by Ernie Plumb of Andover, VT. Deeply sunken almost 3' below ground level, the posts had to be dug up with a backhoe. On June 2, 2016, the refinished



two-part posts were then bolted back together and repositioned with the fencing to restore the graceful entrance to the cemetery. The green coating over the years will fade a bit and match other fencing within the cemetery.

Step #4. Hearse House Educational Foyer

In April of 2017 carpenter Pete Newton constructed the educational foyer. The space available was 4.5' deep by 19.5' long. Wide pine boards were added to the walls and fastened to the underside of the roof joists to make the foyer tight to the weather and resistant to inquisitive insects and rodents. The west interior wall was designed to be removable and to provide maximum visibility of the hearse inside. Created of six floor-to-ceiling, ship-lapped panels made with narrow wood frames and large expanses of safety glass, the wall can be dismantled if there is a need to get the hearse out of the building. One of the panels is a door for access to the interior. Wooden shelving at counter height runs around the end walls and two panels at each end of the glass wall to provide display areas for information and pictures. The center two panels are clear of shelving to allow for full view of the hearse inside. Electrical outlets and lighting were added to the foyer and to the interior and exterior of the shed, and lighting was added inside the hearse and its lanterns. All labor for inside wiring was contributed by Steve Mancuso of Chester Electric.



With the hearse in place and the foyer constructed, several items on long-term loan from the Chester Historical Society were moved over to the Hearse House, cleaned, and placed inside. These items include two right-hand doors found in the Hearse House years ago and presumed to be part of the original twin sets of doors facing Main Street. The doors are held in place for display by four black brackets created and contributed by Hawks Mountain Ironworks. Also on loan from the Historical Society are a wooden casket carrier and four sled runners for the hearse. The size of the runners indicates that they could fit the present hearse.



Four sled runners on long-term loan to the Hearse House Museum from the Chester Historical Society. The two larger ones replace wheels at the rear of the coach and allowed continued use of a hearse years ago during snowy winters.

Outside the building, the Town of Chester contributed copper flashing that was installed behind the faucet on the cemetery side of the building to prevent splashing onto the newly renovated structure. In August 2017 a granite ramp was constructed to make the Hearse House easily accessible to the public. Designed with granite blocks cut by Landscape Architect Scott Wunderle of Ter-rigenous, LLC; supervised by Wunderle and Graham Kennedy, Chester's Director of Public Works; and then installed by the Town crew, the ramp provides handicapped access and makes the Hearse House ADA compliant.

