

CHESTER'S HORSE-DRAWN HEARSE

Former Town Hearse

Before the purchase of the Cunningham hearse, displayed here, there was a smaller, horse-drawn Town hearse – perhaps purchased in 1880 – which was sold for \$7.50 in 1908 to Dewitt Davis, a Chester Selectman and one of three who signed the concrete sill at the time of the 1907 alterations to the Hearse House. The thinner hearse probably was accessed through one of two sets of double doors that faced Main Street before the 1907 alterations that closed up those openings and created a single, larger doorway with rolling double doors on the east side of the building facing the Public Tomb.

Present Cunningham Hearse

The handsome horse-drawn hearse on display here was purchased in 1907 by the Town of Chester from James Cunningham, Son & Company of Rochester, NY. Bought for \$450.00, the hearse was shipped to Chester via the Rutland Railroad at a freight cost of \$22.46.



Photo: Lew Watters

Other Horse-Drawn Hearses Made by the Cunningham Company



The Cunningham Company

The leading manufacturer of carriages and funeral coaches in the country from the 1850s to the late 19th century, the Cunningham Company was well known for excellence in design and workmanship, as well as steep prices that ensured the high quality that many distinguished, wealthy patrons desired. Beginning in 1907, the company began experimenting with electric cars, in addition to their heavy horse-drawn vehicles and hearses, and then concentrated on automobiles as they gradually replaced the horse-drawn funeral coaches. By 1910, the company was producing its own automobile engine. Its well-built luxury cars were steadfast in design and equipped to handle long distances and rough roads. In contrast to the company's philosophy of enduring quality and design, other car companies began offering a new model each year. By 1936 the Cunningham Company left the car business; but it went on to experiment in airplanes, tanks, military and farm vehicles and equipment, and then specialized in technological parts and switches until the early 1960s.

Meanwhile horse-drawn hearses had fallen out of use as automobiles became more prevalent. In the early 1960s, Chester's hearse was moved from the Hearse House and stored in the Yosemite Fire House, located just north of the Chester Town Hall on Route 103. The Fire House was built in 1873, when the Yosemite Engine Company No. 1 was formed to service the Depot and North villages until the Yosemite Engine Company (Fire District No. 2) merged with the South Village district on January 1, 1968. When the Town garage was built in 1974, most of the fire equipment at Yosemite was moved to the new facility. The Adams Funeral Home then took several steps. It arranged for the restoration of the hearse by Baptist Church Pastor Tom Charlton, who restored some of the detail work. It secured an agreement with the Town of Chester for the Funeral Home to store the hearse; and it paid to have a garage built near the Adams Funeral Home on Maple Street to store the vehicle. The hearse was moved to that new building in 1996.

On January 18, 2016, John Sanderson, Director of the Adams Funeral Home, submitted a letter to the Chester Select Board stating that there was no objection to the permanent removal of the hearse to the renovated Hearse House, where it would be on display in a unique, educational mini museum featuring the horse-drawn hearse, its restored house, and funeral customs of the times.

Chester Cunningham Hearse Details

Dimensions. Hearse: 70.25" wide x 14' long x 92.5" high. Tongue: 141" long.

Description. Exterior body of wood, painted black. Decorative scrollwork is plaster of Paris applied onto wood. Full elliptical leaf springs front and back. Whip holder on the driver's right side of the box. Storage underneath the seat behind the leather flap. Leather cushion previously recovered. Eight panes of glass make coffin visible in the coach. Double glass doors at rear for ease of access. Two tinned, copper, octagonal torches on either side of the coach with interior reflective panels. Wooden wheels covered with black rubber measuring 24.25" to middle of axle, with diameter of 42". Many hearses had interchangeable wheels and sleigh runners to enable transportation throughout the year. The sled runners on display were found in the Hearse House and, because of their size, likely replaced the hearse's wheels in winter.

Interior has black velvet curtains trimmed with heavy fringe and tassels at top of windows. Metal cylinders on the coffin bed adjust to hold and roll various size coffins. Brass pegs at the rear in brass plaques hold the coffin in place. Brass side rails hold the coffin and protect the glass.

A crack in the frame under the driver's seat precludes further active use without structural repair.

For display purposes, LED electric string lights were installed inside the carriage, as well as inside the lanterns.



According to Cemetery Sexton Ken Barrett, initially the rack carrying the coffin was called the “hearse,” and the wagon was called the “chaise”; but the name “hearse” caught on for the funeral wagon itself.

Use. Stored in the Hearse House by backing the hearse through the double sliding doors facing the Public Tomb, the current formal hearse was used to transport the deceased to and from home, church, and funeral home to the Public Tomb or cemetery for burial. Barrett said the hearse hadn’t been used on a regular basis since the 1920s, although it had been used at least once in an alumni parade in the 1960s or 1970s. The last known formal uses of the hearse were for the funerals of Ina Adams and George Wright.

For Ina Adams – wife of Paul Adams, the Director of the Adams Funeral Home – three photographs on display on the museum’s south wall show the procession to the Brookside Cemetery on August 19, 1999. The casket had been brought from the funeral home to the Baptist Church, where Pastor Tom Charlton officiated at the service while the horses and hearse waited at the curb. After the service, the casket was put in the hearse and taken the short distance to the cemetery. Charlton said that using the hearse was likely a nod to Adams’ family for being in the funeral profession.

For George Wright, on April 4, 2003, the coffin was carried from the Funeral Home to the Congregational Church and then to the Public Tomb for later



burial in Woodstock, VT. The hearse was taken out of service shortly after George Wright's funeral.



Homecoming. On September 21, 2016, members of Chester's Public Works Crew cautiously moved the hearse up Maple Street and Main Street and into its rehabilitated Hearse House and new museum.

