

CHESTER HISTORY

Brookside Cemetery, Public Tomb, Hearse House

Brookside Cemetery

One of the first tasks for any new community in the early days of the country was to lay out roads and plan for a meetinghouse, church, and burial ground. Chester was first chartered in 1754, then again in 1761, and finally in 1766. Ken Barrett, who was Cemetery Sexton for 38 years and a source of much of the early information, stated, "The site of the present Baptist Church was the site of the first meetinghouse, so it follows that the oldest burial ground is right next to it." That old meetinghouse was subsequently moved up the street diagonally across from the present Congregational Church, and the present brick Baptist Church was built in 1832.

According to Barrett, the earliest grave marked with a monument in the Brookside Cemetery is for a 22-month-old girl named Catharine Robertson, who died on April 20, 1770. "Following accepted tradition, the burials are placed facing east, and the stone lettering faces west. In the old New England tradition people believed that the resurrection would come from the east." Graves of soldiers who fought in the Revolutionary War and Civil War are buried in this central cemetery opposite the Village Green. Other people buried in the cemetery include many important local families, such as the Fullertons, who built a large house on Main Street and gave the land and funds to build St. Luke's Episcopal Church across the street.

The cemetery is bordered on the south (Main Street) and east sides by stone walls which were erected around 1795, by Lovers Lane Brook on the north, and by various fencing on the west property line with the former Central School property. The Central School is often referred to as the Academy Building, although the Chester Academy – a different structure – was positioned closer to Main Street and was demolished circa 1881. According to Barrett, the stone wall by the present Hearse House used to attach to the corner of Chester Academy when both the stone wall and the Hearse House were originally located closer to Main Street, as shown in the panoramic photo of Main Street on the wall above.



Here lies the
Body of Catharine
the Daughter of Mr.
James & Mrs. Susanna
Robertson who depart
ed this Life April 20th
1770 aged 1 year and
10 months was burned
to Death by Accident



The central allee and its cedar trees welcome visitors to Brookside Cemetery.

In 1867, as a result of the rural garden cemetery movement – begun by Mount Auburn Cemetery, which was developed in 1831 in Massachusetts – the Hearse House was moved to its present location, a road was laid down through the center, and cedar trees were added to form an allee.

In continuous use since the late 18th century to honor the departed, the cemetery is a favorite area for visitors and residents to stroll and is planned as a gateway to a trail system that, bridging the Lovers Lane Brook at the far end of the property, will lead walkers to trails on other Town land. The cemetery that was very much a part of daily life for past generations continues to be an attraction for present and future residents and visitors.

Cemetery Fence

Installed circa 1867, in response to the rural cemetery movement, the decorative cast-iron fence on either side of the entrance road into the cemetery links the Hearse House to the Public Tomb both physically and psychologically. The color and style of the fence match those of similar enclosures within the cemetery, such as the fences around the Fullerton graves.



Public Tomb

The stone structure was built in 1850 of large, pre-cut granite blocks quarried in nearby Gassetts, VT. Put on the train in Gassetts in 1849 – supposedly the first cargo on the line – the stones were taken to Chester Depot, and then transported to their present location.



The blocks were “laid up” on a minimal foundation, according to mason Peter Moore, who repaired the building in 2016. Moore found the building “really rugged and well built” and “in really good shape except for the deteriorated mortar joints here and there.” He said that the Tomb’s granite is not the mica schist typically used in many Chester buildings, but is uniquely “just granite,” and at least 18” thick.

Other construction materials in the Tomb include minimal wooden trim; a slate roof (probably to replace the original cedar shingles); an interior arched plaster ceiling and plaster walls; and an iron door whose single, large jailor-type key provided the necessary security for the building and its treasured contents.

In continuous use since 1850 to temporarily house those individuals who die during the winter but must await the spring thawing of the ground for burial, the building was in generally very good condition. Repairs were necessary to a roof hole and miscellaneous broken slates, ridge cap, trim, and deteriorating mortar, which included past inappropriate Portland cement repairs that did not match the original mortar either in composition or color and that did not allow the building to move slightly with the weather, as was originally intended.

The well-guarded, one-of-a-kind skeleton key, shown at right, has now been reproduced to ensure continued entry to the Tomb.



Hearse House

Erected circa 1830 to house a horse-drawn funeral wagon or coach, the post-and-beam building is 1 1/2 stories high, 18.5' wide by 19.5' deep, with clapboarded walls and a slate-shingled roof over the original, wood-shingle roof. Slots in the north and south wood sills indicate that floor joists once supported a wooden floor. Where the green shutters are located, the original structure had twin sets of tall semi-elliptical-arched, double-leaf doors facing Main Street that gave access to two vehicle bays. The building was originally positioned both in front of the stone wall to its west and closer to Main Street and the Public Tomb than its present position.



The old photo above shows the two sets of double doors on the south wall that were removed and replaced by green shutters.

After a Town vote of approval in 1867, the building was moved within the stone wall of the cemetery and a bit farther away from the Public Tomb – thereby creating a wider vehicular entrance to the cemetery and coalescing the purpose, function, and significance of the combined area.

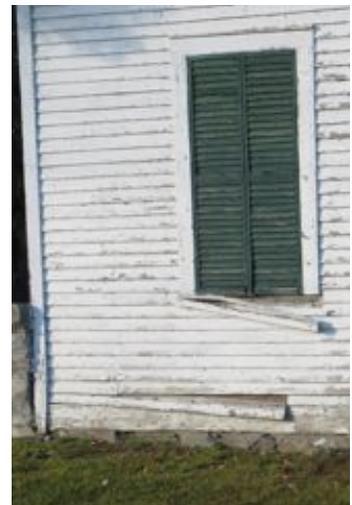
In 1907, the building's doors were removed, the south wall closed in with blind shutter-like louvers and clapboards, and double-leg, sliding carriage doors added on the east side facing the Public Tomb.



That same year a cement floor was laid, and initials of the current Selectmen were inscribed into the curing cement in the sill underneath where the most northern rolling barn door opened. That piece of commemorative concrete was lifted during the 2016 renovation and repositioned in a new concrete floor on the opposite side of this foyer under the display shelf.

Upon the increased popularity of the automobile, use of the horse-drawn Town hearse declined. The hearse was moved in the 1960s to the Yosemite Fire House and then in 1996 to a new wood-frame building near the Adams Funeral Home that had been built to house the hearse. The old hearse shed was then used to store generators and other cemetery and town equipment. In the summer of 2012 a new storage shed – mimicking the old Hearse House in size and design – was constructed behind the adjacent brick Central School to hold cemetery equipment.

Over time the original Hearse House was neglected and allowed to weather and deteriorate. Yet the Hearse House existed as a rare and intact historic building, listed in 1984 on the National Register of Historic Places, and one of only a handful of such buildings remaining in Vermont. In 2014 members of Chester Townscape decided the building needed to be restored. Thus began the project to rehabilitate the structure, bring back the hearse, and create a mini museum to tell the story.



Above upper right, deterioration in paint, trim, clapboards. Above, large hole in west wall from inside, at left, and outside, at right. Below, rot at door, doorway, and east wall.

