

Report for Chester 2018 Annual Report

Chester Historic Preservation Committee

With the encouragement of Town Manager David Pisha and Executive Assistant Julie Hance, exploratory meetings with interested citizens were held in late fall 2016 to explore the formation of a new advisory committee that would primarily address the value, condition, and present and future uses of Chester's historic buildings. By November 29, the Chester Historic Preservation Committee had been formed, officers elected, and a Mission Statement approved. Revised slightly at subsequent meetings, the Mission Statement reads as follows.

Chester Historic Preservation Committee (CHPC) provides advice and support to the Town of Chester to preserve and renovate public historic structures and resources for their appropriate time period and uses. CHPC sources expert historical and architectural assessments to prioritize repairs and maintenance and to increase public access. By improving displays and stimulating interest and support, CHPC capitalizes on the valuable assets and important landmarks of Chester's cultural, artistic, historic and architectural heritage. CHPC works with public and private entities to coordinate improvements and to pursue financial assistance for Chester's historic preservation projects and programs.

There are seven historic buildings owned by the Town of Chester that fall under the purview of the Chester Historic Preservation Committee or CHPC: Hearse House, Public Tomb, Academy Building/Central School, Whiting Library, Town Hall, Yosemite Fire House, and Jeffrey Barn on Route 103. The Committee has started a comprehensive check of each of the structures inside and out to see if additional improvements were necessary beyond those listed in the Condition Assessments already obtained for all but the Jeffrey Barn. Since most of the buildings have slate roofs that should have regular inspection and may require annual maintenance, one of the first things the Committee asked of the Town Manager was to contract for a qualified roofer to examine the buildings yearly. That professional is in place.

Hearse House. Renovations were completed in 2017, and the Hearse House Museum opened to the public on October 28. The improvements to the building and creation of the Museum were the inspiration and work of Chester Townscape, which raised the funds and oversaw the work in cooperation with the Town of Chester. Many individuals, businesses, and professionals made the project possible, as well as crucial support and help from the Town in specific areas where staff could contribute materials and physical labor. The Town now has a functioning, unique asset that complements Chester's history and is an attraction for residents and visitors alike. The only remaining need at the Museum is the addition of a gutter to redirect water that can splash inside the museum from the recently created granite ramp. The proper solution for that problem will be addressed in 2018.

Public Tomb. That granite structure had necessary maintenance performed to it through the work of Chester Townscape. Replica keys were made from the single old one. One replica key was given to the Adams Funeral Home, which historically had used the Tomb to hold those who had died but had to wait until spring to be buried. That key will be retrieved since the Adams Funeral Home is closing its operations in Chester and Ludlow in January 2018. The antique lock on the door will be examined in early 2018 to increase ease of action.

Academy Building/Central School. Through a grant, the Town had replaced one side of the slate roof and had contracted for the restoration/repair of all windows. Bids are being sought to paint the windows and cornice in Spring 2018. CHPC is hoping to do its first analysis of building needs in 2018.

Whiting Library. On its tour inside and outside the building and through CHPC's first meeting with the Library Board, CHPC learned about several additional problems: a leak in the furnace room; a heating deficiency in the downstairs conference room, where poor outside drainage caused occasional flooding; missing or broken outside lights; additional painting/caulking/repointing needs; illogical curb cuts for handicapped access; and problems with snow removal. Advocating for the Library, CHPC has worked with the Town to address those problems. The leak and some outside lighting have been fixed. Minor painting will be done when the Academy Building windows are painted. Conference room heating and drainage problems, including the additional paving of the driveway and new curb and drainage configurations, will be on the Public Works list for 2018.

Town Hall. CHPC was asked to present needs and ideas for the exterior of Town Hall and its second floor. Examination of the exterior and interior added some necessities to the list in the Condition Assessment. Research and visits to other town halls and museums led us to realize that, in terms of function and both present and potential use, Chester's second floor was similar to that of the attractive, renovated Ludlow Town Hall, but that our kitchen – with its water and plumbing service – offered amenities that Ludlow did not have. CHPC presented to the Select Board its concept of a renovated look, amenities, and uses for the second floor. The Board was in agreement, and CHPC's ideas and requests were sent to an architect so he could help supply additional information and estimated costs for a USDA grant that was written at the end of 2017 to repair and renovate the exterior and second floor. In the meantime, crack monitors are to be added to the building, and vegetation at the bottom of the fire escape will be removed.

Yosemite Fire House. In preparation for the court's likely favorable decision on Town ownership, the Town recently internally covered over slipped or broken windows, fixed the lock in the side door, and is looking into what needs to be done to ensure stabilization of the structure. While the building is effectively snowed in for the winter, in the spring the first chore will be check elevations to see if the building moved over the winter, to examine the foundation to verify stability of the main structure, and to determine what would need to be done to the addition and replacement of its piers for long-term stability. Two Condition Assessments, done in 2000 and then again in 2015 by the same architect, indicate few changes over the 15 years in spite of serious storms Irene and Sandy and other flooding. But the engineering assessment needs to be done before essential window remediation and painting. In the meantime, CHPC is seriously investigating the idea of a Vermont Firefighter's Museum in this unique structure since the first floor already has a good deal of impressive machinery. We are looking for public and private support for this venture, as well as vehicles, objects, photographs, and information that pertain to Yosemite and/or the Chester Fire Department. Contributors are urged to contact Lillian Willis at 875-1340 or lbwilliset@comcast.net.

Jeffrey Barn. Two committee members finally met in December with a barn expert from the Preservation Trust of Vermont at the Jeffrey Barn on Route 103. This is the last old building owned by the Town that does not have an official Condition Assessment. That document is necessary to determine if the building should be stabilized and restored.

CHPC was assured by the representative from the Preservation Trust of Vermont that he would endorse the Trust's grant of a Barn Assessment, which only requires a match of \$250 from the Town. CHPC is hoping for formal approval of that request and the ensuing investigation in early 2018. As dreadful as the barn looks from the outside, except for a large hole inside caused by the irresponsible placement of overly heavy equipment, the basic structure seems sound. The assessment will be invaluable in determining how to proceed with this resource. While any future use is completely premature at the moment, anyone with ideas about its past history and potential future use is encouraged to contact CHPC.

2017 was a good year. The Town of Chester is taking a serious look at its historic buildings and beginning to deal with regular maintenance and renovation for their most appropriate uses. Residents and visitors have noticed a new positive attitude that acknowledges Chester's history and sees these buildings as attractions and realist resources. CHPC looks forward to another productive year in its private/public partnership with the Town.

Respectfully submitted,

Chester Historic Preservation Committee

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