

## **Hearse House Restoration**

By Donald Fletcher

Chair, Community Preservation Committee

The restoration and protection of Shutesbury's 1840s cemetery hearse house will be on the warrant at the Annual Town Meeting on May 4, 2013. The Shutesbury Community Preservation Committee (CPC) is recommending \$21,650 to support the restoration. The Shutesbury Building 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 Building Committee.

The cemetery hearse house is one of only two pre-Civil War municipal buildings in Shutesbury. It is the only one that has been continuously used. Shutesbury is fortunate to have detailed records of the Shutesbury Annual Town vote in 1837. These include the detailed wording of the approved motions and building specifications when funds were appropriated to build a timber frame building at to house the town owned hearse.

A town owned hearse house reflects a time before there was a funeral industry. The 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 towns once had hearse houses. Our research indicates that Shutesbury's may be one of only six remaining in Massachusetts. Our hearse house remains at its original site, at the entrance to the Town cemetery, along one of Shutesbury's most travelled roads.

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. The stopgap measure, implemented many decades ago, was to add fill to the interior of the hearse house to lift up the level of the floor above that of the elevated road. This buried the sills of the timber frame. As a result, the sills and the bottoms have the posts decayed. There has also not been any significant building maintenance in many years. The Town Building Committee has carefully studied the needs of the building and proposed a plan to protect and restore the Hearse house.

The Building Committee's proposal to restore the hearse house has also led to donations and pledges that will help protect and restore the area surrounding the hearse house, the entrance to Shutesbury's historic cemetery.

Please come to the Annual Town Meeting and support the restoration and protection of Shutesbury's 1840s Cemetery Hearse House.