

# HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN SHERBORN

## I. Town Facts and Brief History

### A. Town Facts

Sherborn is a small semi-rural community located about 18 miles southwest of Boston. The town is proud of its rural heritage which is still evident in many active farms and orchards, and preserved in Town Forest and other extensive public lands. Open space comprises more than 50% of the town's area. Because all properties have individual wells and septic systems, minimum house lot sizes are one, two or three acres, depending upon location.

Sherborn is an active, outdoors-oriented town where residents enjoy miles of trails through woods and meadows for walking and horseback riding, swim and boat in Farm Pond, and participate in any number of team sports. A high degree of volunteerism due to strong citizen support for town projects, and commitment to excellence in public education, characterize the community's values today, as they have for more than 325 years.

Some quick facts about Sherborn are:

Total Area:	16.14 sq. miles (10328 acres)
Land Area:	15.96 sq. miles (10214 acres)
Population:	4,545 (12/31/02)
Registered voters:	2,852 (12/31/02)
Total Residences	1,497 (1/1/02)
Single family homes:	1,337 (1/1/02)
Avg. single family tax bill:	\$8,996 (FY03)

### B. Brief History Of Sherborn

Settled in 1652 and incorporated in 1674, Sherborn was primarily a farming community until the early part of the 20th century. It now is a bedroom town for Boston and the surrounding hi-tech area.

Sherborn's original land area encompassed the present territory of Holliston, Ashland, and parts of Mendon, Framingham and Natick.

#### Indians

Little is known about the local Indians. There appear to have been permanent settlements, for the earliest deed of one area refers to the "old fields"; and various implements have been both plowed up and found at Rocky Narrows and near Farm Pond. However, even

the name of the tribe is uncertain, for Sherborn seems to have been at the interface between the Massachusetts and the Nipmuck tribes. Several Indians kept land in town after its incorporation (e.g. Peter Ephriam on Brush Hill and Thomas Awussamoag); they appear to have been connected with the Natick "Praying Indian" community.

### **English Settlement**

The whole Charles River valley from South Natick to the falls at Medway kept its Indian name "Boggestow"; it was sought out by the English because of the abundant marsh grass growing on the wide flood plain. The earliest Sherborn land owned by the English took the form of large (200-1074 acres) grants called "farmes" made by the General Court beginning in the 1640's to individuals for payment of services rendered to the colony. These owners later sold acreage to settlers, the first resale being to Thomas Holbrook, and Nicholas Wood in 1652. They and successive settlers bought those wilderness lands and lived there while retaining their citizenship in the nearest incorporated town: Medfield.

### **Town**

By 1674 Boggestow had grown sufficiently to be incorporated as a new town (i.e. the land had never been part of another town) and was arbitrarily named "Sherborne" by the General Court. The original area was of such an awkward shape that the General Court allowed an exchange of 4000 acres with the Natick Indians in 1679; and it was that new land which formed most of the present town.

In the decade after King Phillips War (1675-6) Sherborn settlers organized the local government and drew up a Social Covenant, paid the Indians for land title, attracted a saw miller, built a Meeting House and called the first minister, and granted home lots throughout most of the present town. In the second decade they formed a town militia company, hired a schoolmaster, and acquired a gristmill. Thus by 1700 they had become an "established" town.

### **General Development**

Throughout the 1600's, 1700's, 1800's Sherborn remained a small and relatively self-sufficient farming community. Little industry developed because of the lack of good water power, although there continued to be saw and gristmills on several of the small, intermittent streams. However, apples grew well, and there were always small cider mills. With the coming of both the railroad and steam power one mill developed further, until by the 1890's it was advertised as the "largest refined cider mill in the world". At that time it pressed over 1.25 million gallons of cider per season and exported "Champagne" cider as far west as Nebraska and Texas and as far East as England and Belgium.

In the late 1700's and early 1800's several small cottage industries developed, particularly along North Main Street. They produced guns, shoes, willow baskets, whips, pitchforks and edge tools. Cranberries became an important crop, as well as mixed farming and

dairying. Crops and crafts were sold in the Boston markets via stagecoach and later railroad.

The early Twentieth Century saw several new trends. In the early 1900's several wealthy families moved into different parts of town and built estates for either year-round or summer use. Those remaining today are located primarily along the Charles River - The area of first settlement. Dairy and poultry raising increased in importance, as did service related jobs.

Following World War II the town began to change rapidly from one with a relatively static population (c. 1500) to a growing and transient one. Developments were built in 1-, 2-, and 3-acre zones. The disappearance of family farms accelerated as the town became increasingly suburban; today estate-farms form most of the few farms which remain. There is still considerable open space. The town is trying hard to retain its rural character; but that is increasingly difficult as land prices and taxes escalate.

### **Houses**

Because the town was relatively poor in the late 1800's and early 1900's few people "modernized" their old houses by tearing them down and rebuilding. As a result many of the houses built in 1700's and early 1800's remain, as well as six or more with late 1600's portions. Two National Register Historic Districts have been established to include the old Town Center and a two-mile strip along North Main Street; and scattered individual houses have also been listed: a total of 77 old houses. A very small Town Historic District also exists in the old Town Center.

### **Government**

The town is governed by a combination of elected and appointed volunteers and a few key salaried officials. Since town government was set up c. 1678 it has been run by the Selectmen (3 at present) and the traditional open Town Meeting, at which all citizens vote annually on major expenditures and policies. There is no industry zoned in the town. Property taxes support town government and services. Public services are minimal and homeowners rely on individual wells and septic systems. There are a full full-time Police Force and Highway Dept. and both a volunteer "call" Fire Dept. and a rescue Squad, all highly trained. The town has three churches and a modern public library. The schools are small and excellent; the elementary school is local, whereas the junior and senior high schools are regionalized with Dover, a similar town across the Charles River. Town Boards and other organizations depend almost entirely upon volunteer participation, as they have for over three hundred years.

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## **II. Direct Preservation Groups**

There are a number of organizations in Sherborn, both public and private, whose stated purposes include the preservation of aspects of the Town's history. These groups include:

#### A. Public Commissions

1. *Sherborn Historical Commission* identifies and documents the towns important historical and cultural resources; educates the general public on issues of preservation; and advises the Selectmen and other town bodies on preservation matters.
2. *Sherborn Historic District Commission* reviews applications for proposed alterations to the exterior of properties within the Sherborn Local Historic District to evaluate the appropriateness of the work and its potential impact on the District.

#### B. Private Organizations

1. *Sherborn Historical Society* is a private, non-profit society dedicated to preserving artifacts and documents relating to Sherborn's past. Although its museum is housed at the Sherborn Town Offices, the society is not funded by the town and has no role in town administration.
2. *Sherborn Community Center Foundation* operates a social and cultural center for the benefit of the people of Sherborn. Their efforts supported restoration and maintenance of the 1858 Town House, a National Register property which houses the community center.

### III. Indirect Preservation Groups

There are also a number of organizations and individuals whose main purpose is not preservation, but who nevertheless are responsible for the care of properties or other historic assets. These may play a stewardship role, or otherwise may influence the preservation of historic assets.

#### A. Public Groups

1. *Board of Selectmen* is the executive board responsible for the operation of Town government. As such, the BOS, through the various town departments, maintain a number of properties listed on the National Register or on the Sherborn Survey of Historic Resources. In addition The BOS appoints members to the Historical Commission and the Historic District Commission. The BOS is well positioned to influence debate on public matters, including preservation issues.
2. *The Cemetery Commission* operates Pine Hill Cemetery and maintains Sherborn's seven historic burying grounds. These important sites form an invaluable resource of historical, genealogical, and cultural information.
3. *The Town Clerk* is responsible for recording the ongoing transactions of town government. Town records now cover some three and a quarter centuries. Additional collections of information of potential historical interest are maintained by the **Board of Assessors** and by the **Building Department**.
4. *The Sherborn Library* houses a collection of works on local and regional history and maintains the most accessible hard copy of the Sherborn Survey of Historic Resources.

5. *The Sherborn Planning Board* administers the Sherborn General Plan, which is Sherborn's "road map", a plan for the town's future developed by a consensus process. The Board also has a legislative duty to preserve and protect historic public trees and stone walls on designated roads under the Scenic Roads Act.
6. *The Sherborn Open Space Committee* administers the Sherborn Open Space Plan, another town consensus document which specifies preservation of historic assets, landscapes, views, and trees.
7. *The Sherborn Conservation Commission* provides protection for historic resources and landscapes on town lands under the commission's ownership.

#### B. Private Interests

1. *Churches and schools* maintain four properties on the National Register. **First Parish Church** houses the town's Unitarian congregation and the United Church of Christ maintains the **Pilgrim Church**. Both of these are in the Sherborn Local Historic District as well as the Sherborn Center National Register Historic District. **The Dowse Memorial Building** and the **Deborah Perry Dowse Coolidge House** currently house the Life Experience School and the Peace Abbey. While also located in the National Register District, these properties are outside the Local Historic District.
2. *Other Organizations* While its primary focus is on land conservation, the **Sherborn Rural Land Foundation** has recently demonstrated how conservation and preservation concerns can be addressed simultaneously. In 2000, the **Sewell-Ware House**, 100 South Main Street, was acquired by Sherborn Rural. The acquisition prevented further development of the property's 13 acres and almost-certain destruction of the historic house, believed to have been built by Judge Samuel Sewall of witch trial fame between 1692 and 1703. The property was resold with a preservation restriction on the house and development restrictions on the land.
3. *Private Individuals* The majority of our historic resources are private homes. With few exceptions these are dependent for their survival on the continued good intentions of their owners.

## IV. Preservation Tools

- A. **Historic Resources Survey** is an important first step in preservation Planning. In Sherborn this step was taken in the early 1980's with the Documentation of buildings, burial grounds, public art, and similar resources dating from the founding of Sherborn to the early 1900's. The resulting **Sherborn Survey of Historic Resources** was expanded in 1999 to include landscapes, barns, sheds, and other outbuildings. It was also extended chronologically to fill some gaps and to cover the period to the beginning of the 1950's.

Listing of a property on the Survey does not preserve the property. In fact such listing is not necessarily even an assessment that the property is deserving of preservation. It places no restrictions on the owner's right to dispose of the property as he sees fit, including alteration or demolition of the property. The **Sherborn Historic Resources Survey** is a planning tool only.

- B. **The National Register of Historic Places** is the national survey. If a local resource is considered significant it may be nominated by the Historical Commission (or another party, such as the owner) for inclusion on the National Register. This is a listing, maintained by the National Park Service, of resources that have been deemed worthy of preservation, following a review by the State Historical Commission, the National Park Service, and the Secretary of the Interior. A parallel and virtually identical register is maintained by the state.

While listing on the National Register is an important indicator of the historical significance of a resource, it is largely an honorary designation. For the average property it places no restrictions whatever and the owner remains free to alter or demolish the property. It does, however, restrict some government actions. Any activity funded using state or federal monies, or that requires a state or federal permit, and that might impact a National Register property must be reviewed by the Massachusetts Historical Commission. The MHC determines if the activity will create an adverse impact and, if so, negotiates with the funding or licensing agency to mitigate the impact.

- C. **Historic Districts.** There are two types of historic district, and while both Designate an area as being of historical importance, the distinction between them is of considerable significance in terms of public policy and the potential impact on the property owner.
1. **National Register.** There are two principal ways for a property to be listed on the National Register. The first is as an individual property, independent of any neighboring properties; the second is as part of an historic district. A district is a contiguous area containing a significant number of historic properties. Within this area individual resources are listed as contributing or non- contributing elements. Contributing elements within the district are considered to be listed on the National Register. There are two National Register Districts in Sherborn.
    - a. **The Sherborn Center National Register District** extends from 39 South Main Street (Rt. 27) and 27 Washington Street (Rt. 16) to the railroad crossing on North Main Street.
    - b. **The Edward's Plain-Dowse's Corner National Register District** begins at Powderhouse Lane and extends northward to North Main Street just north of Rockwood Street.

The historic district extends and strengthens the implied protection from government action referred to above. A third way to be listed on the National Register is as a contributing element to a "thematic" designation. A common theme rather than contiguous geography links individual elements. In Sherborn there is a gatehouse included as part of a Middlesex County water control system.

2. **Local Historic Districts.** Local historic districts are established by a two-thirds vote at Town Meeting under enabling legislation. Once established, the law provides for the creation of a Historic District Commission to review visible exterior alterations proposed for properties within the district. Alterations may not proceed until the Commission issues a certificate of appropriateness. This is, in short, a regulatory provision comparable to a Zoning By-Law.

In Sherborn the local historic district may be viewed as a sub-set of the Sherborn Center National Register District. It extends from South Main Street at Farm Road and Washington Street at the Town Hall to the Central Burying Ground and covers properties up to 200 feet back from the road.

**D. Historic Markers**

1. Historic Districts
2. Tercentenary and other
3. Circa signs
4. National Register plaques
5. Other identifying signs

**E. Scenic Roads.** Sherborn has adopted the Scenic Road Act, administered by the Planning Board.

**F. Walking Tours**

**G. Demolition Delay By-Law.** Sherborn does not have a demolition delay by-law.

**H. Local Option Real Estate Tax Abatement**

**I. Preservation Plan.** Sherborn does not have a preservation plan.

**J. Funding**

1. Survey and planning grants. Sherborn has utilized a survey grant.
2. Preservation Projects Fund
3. Historic Landscape Preservation Grants

**V. Threats to Historic Resources**

**A. Real Property**

1. Development/suburban sprawl
2. Tear-downs and McMansions
3. Transportation patterns
4. Neglect
5. Remodeling
6. Fire and natural disasters
7. Mandated obsolescence - zoning
8. Fire & natural disasters

**B. Artifacts/Objects**

1. Environmental forces
2. Vandalism

**C. Documents**

1. Fire and natural disasters
2. Environmental forces
3. Misuse and neglect

**VI. Losses.**

National Register and Survey properties lost since original listing.

**A. The Town Almshouse/Saint Theresa's Chapel at 35 South Main Street.**

- B. **The James Green House** at 137 Lake Street.
- C. **136 South Main Street.**
- D. **The Chubbuck House** at 37 Maple Street.
- E. **The George Coolidge House** at 80 Maple Street.
- F. **The Whitney House** at 68 Whitney Street.
- G. **The Larkin-Campbell House** at 141 South Main Street.
- H. **The James Salisbury House** at 5 South Main Street.
- I. **The James Frederick Dawson Guest House** at 33 Ash Lane