

Hearse House Museum

651 Old Turnpike Road

Resource Information

Eligibility

State Register Eligible

Towns

Salisbury (Merrimack County)

Periods of Significance

1885-1975

Boundary Description

The current tax parcel is the recommended NH State Register boundary.

Evaluations

9/10/2025 - State Register Eligible

Criteria A

Yes

Criteria B

No

Criteria C

Yes

Criteria D

No

Consideration A

No

Consideration B

No

Consideration C

No

Consideration D

No

Consideration E

No

Consideration F

No

Consideration G

No

Has Integrity

N/A

Summary Statement

The Hearse House Museum is recommended eligible for both the NH State Register and the National Register of Historic Places. The building is significant for its role in local government, funerary practices, and transportation. It is also significant for Architecture as a well-preserved example of a building type.

Integrity Statement

Appears to retain excellent integrity.

Comment

Not Available

Hearse House Museum

651 Old Turnpike Road

Resource Status

Eligibility

State Register Eligible - 9/10/2025

Areas of Significance

Architecture
Politics/Government
Transportation

Periods of Significance

1885-1975

DHR Summary Statement

The Hearse House Museum is recommended eligible for both the NH State Register and the National Register of Historic Places. The building is significant for its role in local government, funerary practices, and transportation. It is also significant for Architecture as a well-preserved example of a building type.

Submitted Statement of Significance

Built in 1885, the Salisbury Hearse House is eligible for the NH State Register for its association with late 19th century funerary practices, local government and transportation, and for its architecture. Throughout its history, the building has housed the Town's hearse, starting in 1885, and then the Town Roller, beginning in 1912. It has played an important role in the Town's funerary practice as well as its maintenance of roads. Architecturally, it is a well-preserved example of a hearse house, a building type that is becoming increasingly rare in the state.

Integrity Statement

Appears to retain excellent integrity.

Architectural Information

Architectural Type

Building

Current Uses

Recreation/Culture, Museum

Historic Uses

Other

Original Construction Year

1885

Original Construction Timeframe

Not Available

Architects/Builders

A. H. Parsons (builder)

Building Styles

Greek Revival

Residential Building Form

Not Applicable

Exterior Features

Foundation Materials

Stone, Unspecified

Wall Materials

Clapboard

Roof Materials

Asphalt Shingles

Roof Types

Front Gable

Chimney Locations

None/Removed

Chimney Materials

None Available

Number of Stories

1.5

Entry Locations

Façade, Off-Center

Windows

Double-Hung - Multi-Pane

Window Replacement Details

Not Available

Property Moved Details

Not Available

Property Lost Details

Not Available

Site Features

Settings

Rural Village

Outbuildings

None Available

Landscape Features

Other

Narrative

Architectural Description

The Hearse House is located at Salisbury Heights, formally known as Center Village, on a small lot of 0.09 acres on the southwest side of Old Turnpike Road, U.S. Route 4. The building is a typical carriage shed of the late 19th century, with two doors wide enough to enter/exit a horse-drawn hearse. The carriage shed was constructed using a post and beam frame characteristic of this period. The frame was then enclosed with sawed boards with clapboards covering the exterior wood. The interior walls are wooden slats covered with horse hair plaster. The one-story gable-roof addition is located on the rear.

The gable front roof is clad in asphalt shingles, and the building sits on a cut stone foundation. Corner pilasters support a wide entablature with partial returns on the façade which features double-leaf carriage doors in the left bay, a single 6/6 wood-sash window in the center bay, and a paneled wood door in the right bay. A single window with 6/6 wood sash is centered below the gable peak on the half-story level. The north elevation contains a single window in the original building section, and a window and carriage door on the north elevation of the 1912 addition. A single window is located on the south elevation of the original section and a single-leaf entrance on the addition.

At this time, the Heights area is made up of eleven 18th-century homes, a Baptist Meeting House, the Hearse House Museum, Town House (Hall), Library, and the Town Common.

Comparative Evaluation

Not Available

Historical Background

The Salisbury Hearse House museum is located in what is today known as Salisbury Heights. The town of Salisbury was officially incorporated in 1768. Salisbury Heights, historically referred to as Center Village, developed as a mill village and crossroads with homes, bridges, and businesses, distinct from the main town center.

In 1885, the Town of Salisbury funded the construction of the Hearse House to house the newly purchased \$500 hearse (figure 1). According to Town Reports, the builder was A. H. Parsons and cost a total of \$223.94. Before the advent of funeral homes, most wakes were held at the home of the deceased, and then they were transported by a horse-drawn hearse, often owned by the Town, to the cemetery for burial. This was followed by a memorial service at the church. Since the Salisbury hearse was used in rural areas without many hardened roads; it was equipped with unusually wide wheels.

Historically, horse-drawn hearse carriages were traditionally used to transport coffins during funerals, often featuring a classic and elegant design. These hearses typically included a black, enclosed carriage with ornate details, often with etched glass and intricate woodwork, with similar details seen in Salisbury's hearse (Figure 2). Horse-drawn hearses were used for centuries and were a common sight until the early 20th century, when motorized hearses became more prevalent.

In 1912, an addition for a roller was added to the building for \$370, at a greater cost than the original building. This occurred during the Good Roads Movement when many Towns were interested in improving road systems to facilitate commerce, transportation, and rural connectivity. The movement used journalists, farmers, politicians, and engineers to build momentum for better road infrastructure, addressing issues like muddy, impassable roads during spring and frozen conditions in winter. In New Hampshire, local proponents such as Thomas J. Walker, editor of the Plymouth Record, supported the movement, and the state held Good Roads institutes to educate selectboards and road agents.

A roller, such as the snow roller that was house in the hearse house, was used to compact and pack snow on roads during winter. This created a firm, smooth surface suitable for sleighs, sleds, and vehicles with runners. The compacted snow made travel easier in snowy conditions, although it often led to muddy and impassable roads during the spring thaw. Rollers were essential for maintaining passable roads in rural areas before the advent of modern snowplows and road-clearing equipment. In Salisbury, prior to the construction of the addition, the roller was stored by the people who did the rolling job, for which they were reimbursed. In 1927, the roller was replaced by a tractor and plow under town warrant, with the roller being used on occasion.

The Town of Salisbury donated the building to the Salisbury Historical Society in 1986, and the Society converted the building into a history museum in 1990. The Museum was opened by our then-President, Anne G. Smith. It was her vision to turn this Hearse house into an appropriate space to display the Town's horse-drawn hearse and the many other Salisbury artifacts that had been donated to the Society for preservation. The museum houses the hearse and is adorned with other historical artifacts from Salisbury, such as the actual original Post Office boxes, a store front, telephone switchboard, samplers, a desk, and a cobbler's bench. Many local families have donated Salisbury memorabilia from the same period, and they are also on display. Tours are provided by Salisbury Historical Society docents.

Applicable NHDHR Historic Contexts

700) Transportation - Pre-automobile land travel, 1630-1920.

1507) Commerce, Community Planning, Cultural Landscapes - Public and private cemeteries and burials.

1100) Politics and Government - Local government, 1630-present.

Boundary Description

The current tax parcel is the recommended NH State Register boundary.

Boundary Justification

Land associated with the Hearse House Museum.

Acreage

0.10

Towns

Salisbury (Merrimack County)

Reporting Information

Bibliographical Reference

Economic & Labor Market Information Bureau, NH Employment Security, Community Response Received 6/13/2017. NH Registry of Deeds, Merrimack County NHDHR Inventory Form for Roller Shed, FRE0008, in Freedom, NH, 2012. On file at NHDHR, Concord, NH.

Books:

John J. Dearborn, MD, History of Salisbury, New Hampshire 1890 (Manchester, N.H.).

Paul S. Shaw, MD, Historic Salisbury Houses, Concord, NH, 1993, Reprinted 2018, NHCI, Concord, NH.

Prepared By

Sharyn Goddard

Date Surveyed

8/17/2025

Evaluations

9/10/2025 - State Register Eligible

Documents

- 1) Historic Images - Historic Images of the Hearse House.
- 2) Photographs - Current photographs of the Hearse House Museum.

Photos (2)

1) Figure 1 - List of expenses accrued during the construction of the Hearse House, 1886
Salisbury Town Report.

BILLS FOR HEARSE AND HOUSE AND ROAD MACHINE.		\$254 07
Paid expenses in full for hearse delivered at North Boscawen as per bills,		\$500 00
C. H. Prince, cutting lumber,	4 25	
L. B. Shaw, drawing logs to mill,	15 00	
O. W. Farnum, drawing lumber,	10 50	
E. Shurtliet, putting in foundation,	15 00	
C. H. Prince, sawing and planing,	25 52	
C. H. Prince, sawing shingles,	4 12	
C. H. Prince, clapboards and sheathing,	43 95	
A. H. Parsons, building said house,	75 00	
Brown & Foote, paint and hardware,	17 03	
C. M. & A. W. Rolfe, windows,	4 35	
A. E. Quimby, nails, etc.,	6 51	
F. J. Gale, nails, etc.,	1 14	
C. G. Morse, cash paid for paint, etc.,	1 57	
		\$723 94

2) Figure 2 - The original hearse on display in the Hearse House Museum, Salisbury, NH.



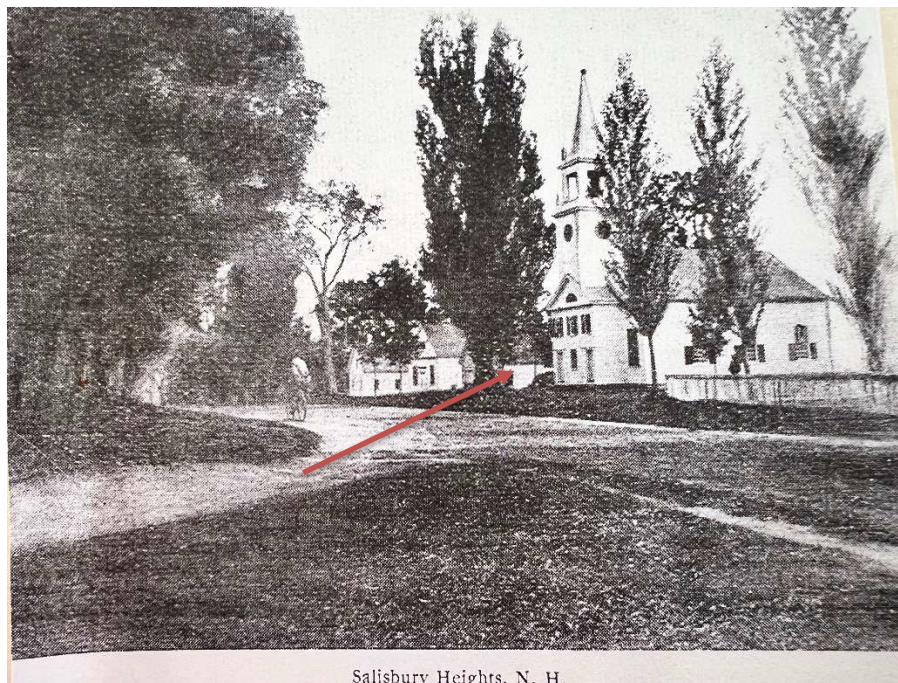
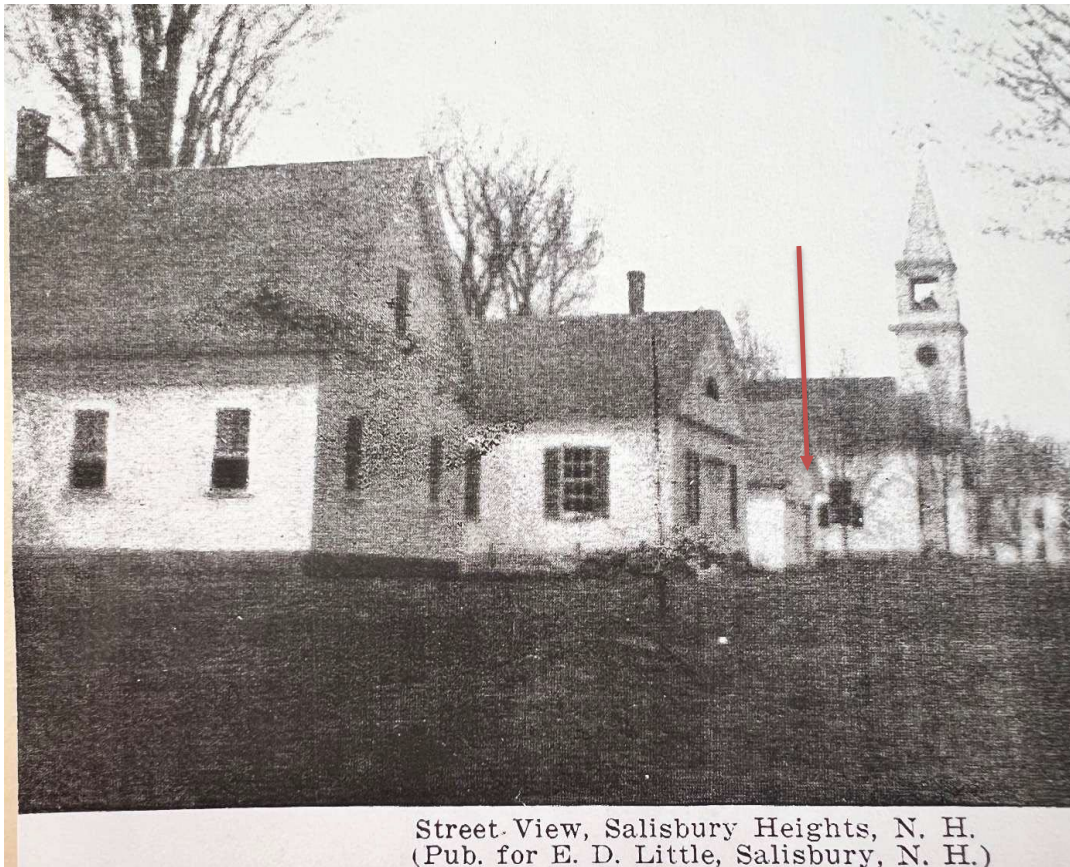
Resource Boundary

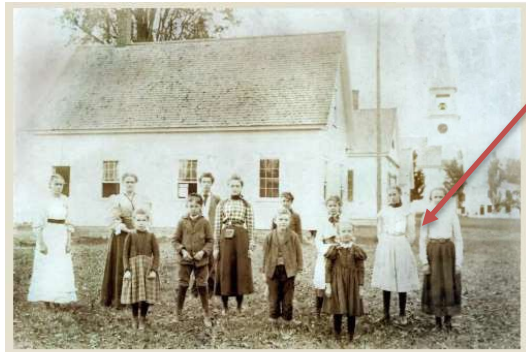


Map Overview



Historic Image, dates unknown.





Center Village School, Salisbury Heights, built 1889, Photo ca 1890, Courtesy of John Drew Trachy. Front row: Eleanor Morrill, Eddie Drew, Alice Kilburn, Dan Webster, and Lucy Sawyer. Back row: Lucy Wiggin, Edna Rand (teacher), George Sanborn, Charlie Morgan, Edith Drew, Lizzie Sanborn, and Alice Morgan

Center Village School, 1890, with the area in the background.



Photo #1 Direction: Looking directly at 651 Old Turnpike, while standing in the driveway in front of NH Route 4 Old Turnpike Road

Hearse House Museum Photographs
651 Old Turnpike Road, Salisbury, NH



Photo # 2 Right Side looking at the Building, Sliding Door where the Roller would enter/exit on the 1912 addition.



Photo # 3 The back of the Hearse House Museum. Mini Split for heat/air to protect artifacts



Photo # 4 Side Entrance Door



Photo #5 Original Salisbury, NH Post Office Boxes

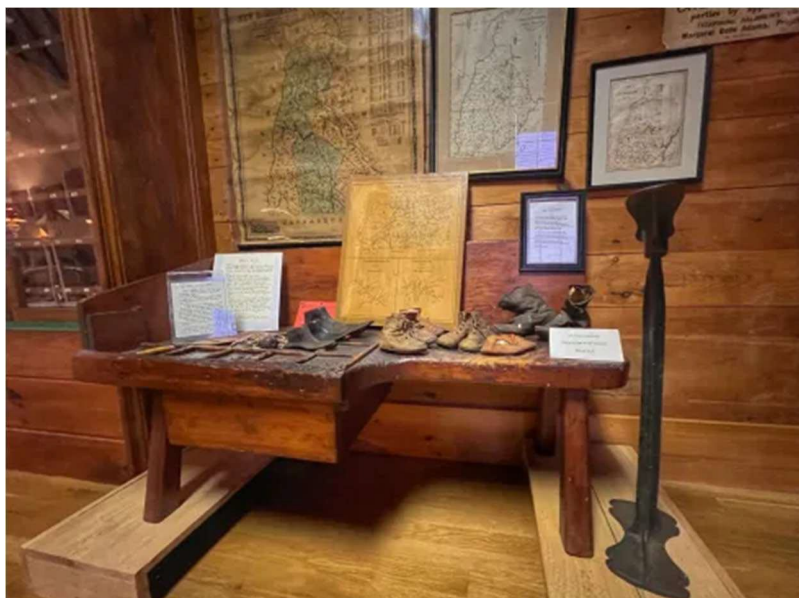


Photo #6 Local Cobbler's Bench



Photo #7 Original Local Store Front

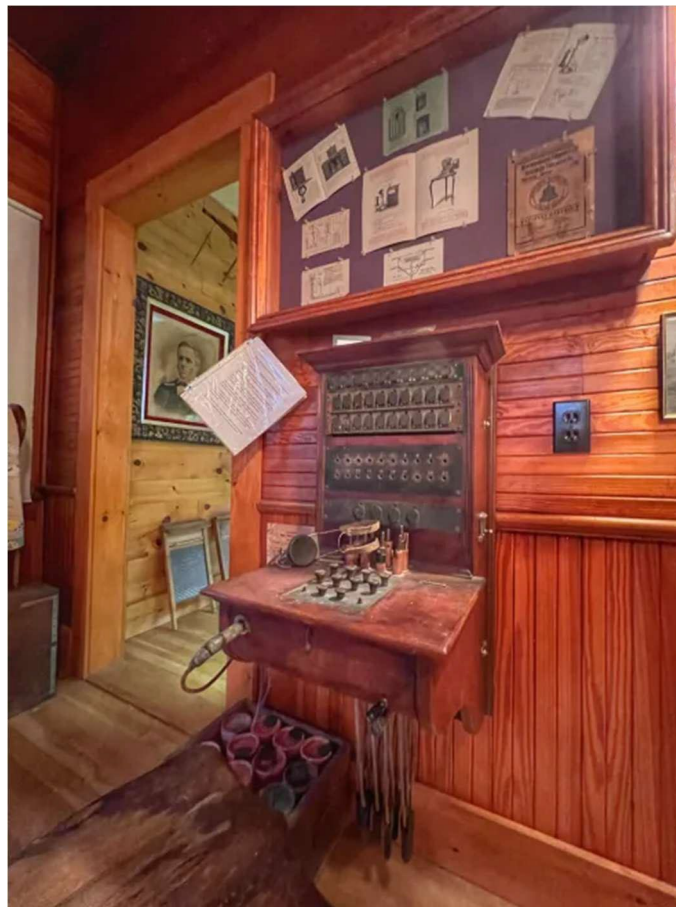


Photo #8 Original Local Switch Board