



# STORY OF THE HEARSE HOUSE AND THE HORSE DRAWN HEARSE...

The newest and possibly the largest acquisition made by the Atheneum Society of Wilbraham is the circa 1870's horse drawn hearse. When you step into one of the oldest Hearse Houses extant in Massachusetts, you will visualize by the poles leaning against the wall that this hearse was actually a two-horse power model!!

It is believed to have been manufactured by the Brownell Company of New Bedford, Massachusetts and it was shipped to the mid-West where it was in service in rural areas with many sandy-dirt roads. We believe that it was in service from about 1870 until about mid-1920's when motorized hearses became available.

Prior to the advent to funeral homes, most wakes were held at the home of the deceased and then they were transported by the horse-drawn hearse to the cemetery for burial. This was followed by a memorial service at the church.

Since our Brownell hearse was used in rural areas without many hardened roads, it was equipped with "wider wheels" than were most city hearses which were driven on cobblestone or brick streets.

The glass windows of the hearse are believed to be original equipment, but the window curtains and finial fringe has been restored to resemble the original. Resting in the "business end" of the coach you will observe a wicker "body basket" which was acquired by the Society a number of years ago. It was used to remove bodies soon after death and before they could be placed in a coffin and brought to the cemetery. Remember, embalming was not in widespread use during most of the period that this hearse was in service.

The Hearse House building was believed to have been constructed in about 1870 and originally was located in Adams Cemetery on Tinkham Road just inside the Main Gate. We have come to believe that for some reason it was moved to Gebo's Garage and then perhaps to Burt Lane and then to this location at 450 Main Street when this home was a private residence and a garage for the family car was needed.

From 2001 to 2006 minor repairs were made to stabilize the building and in 2006 the Trustees decided to finish the preservation process by moving the building a few feet in a Southerly direction away from the roadway and to place it upon a permanent foundation. The asphalt shingles were replaced by an "old style new wood" roof along with an interior floor and exterior walks constructed of old brick. Also added were necessary lighting and fire and security systems. Now the newly preserved and updated 1870's Hearse House is ready to house and display the 1870's two horsepower hearse.

The Atheneum Society operates the Old Meeting House- which was built in 1793 when a group of dissident Congregationalists broke away from the Wilbraham Church and formed the Methodist Society. The Bruuer family gave them the land with the provision that it "would be returned to them when they were finished with it..." That actually happened in 1830 when they outgrew the space- and the family got the land back with a building upon it- which became a house for rent- and may have been Wilbraham's first multi-family residence! Now a museum of local history, it is open free of charge on the first Sunday of each month from April to December with both permanent and rotating exhibits. For more information call 596.4097.

Revised and updated by Pete Ablondi- 2008