

The Sturbridge Historical Commission is charged by statute as the local authority to determine the significance of local historic assets. Its goal is to assist in the preservation of those assets, including but not limited to individual buildings, historic sites, open areas, artifacts, documents, and other real and personal property.

The annual town meeting approved an article put forward by the Community Preservation Committee and the Historical Commission to continue digitization and preservation of approximately half of the significant town documents contained in the Tillyer Papers. This project complements the unique “Mind of the Town” effort, which digitized and interpreted more than 5,000 pages of town meeting records from 1738 through 1945, both preserving and making them available to the general public—students, genealogists, and just the curious-- for the first time. When we began this latter project in 2005, Sturbridge was *the* Massachusetts pioneer in the use of this technology as a technique for both preserving and improving access to historic documents. It is gratifying to see neighboring towns following suit.

Now, we are continuing with the Tillyer collection, named for the local family who donated more than 3,000 town-related documents to Old Sturbridge Village in 1968. This eclectic collection includes petitions to the Selectmen for aid from the sick and elderly, apprenticeship contracts as a way to care for “paupers” and orphans, records of publicly-funded medical care for the indigent, even transients, and other social issues which were local, not state or federal, responsibilities from the 1730s through the mid-19th century. We are profoundly grateful that the meeting continues its generous support of this unique effort of historic preservation, and glad to report that this portion of the Tillyer Papers is now available in complete digital and sample print formats as part of the Joshua Hyde Library’s strong local history collection. While the delicate originals remain safely and professionally conserved in the Village research library, these digital documents provide the town with a new window into its past.

Several years ago, in one of our most visible programs, the Commission began to create bronze interpretive markers explaining the historic significance of key places in town, including the Common, the North Cemetery, the Center School and Old Burying Ground, and the Snellville School, now the Senior Center. Over time, more interpretive signs were added. One, in front of the Publick House, commemorates 19th-century “downtown Sturbridge”. Another, on the former Heins property, highlights the influence of the Worcester-Stafford Turnpike on the town’s economic development. When the renovated Town Hall opened, the third marker was mounted next to the main entrance, tracing the evolution of the building as the first and, to date, the only secular center of Sturbridge government. Funding for all came from Community Preservation Act monies designated specifically for historic preservation. As the occasion warrants, we hope to extend this highly visible interpretive program in the future.

The Commission continues to assist individuals seeking information about the town's past, its properties, and their ancestors. Requests come every month from university professors, amateur genealogists, high school students, engineers, and historical re-enactors. This year, we've helped both local residents and people from as far away as California, Texas, and even Italy to discover their Sturbridge heritage. That we are not a full-time research bureau is a point which sometimes must be gently emphasized. Rather, in most cases it is our practice to direct individuals toward the resources which may hold the answers they seek, so that they may ferret out the information themselves.

Also, we have over time developed an excellent working relationship within town government, and provide advice and assistance to boards and committees when requested. Because we are an advisory board, other town entities must request our input. Most take advantage of what expertise we can offer.

Because of the resignations of valuable members Doug Quigley in 2011 and Diane Trapasso in 2012, the Commission has been under strength in the some time, and occasionally making a quorum has been a challenge. Fortunately, we have been recently joined by Richard Volpe and Sandra Fallon, increasing our numbers to the authorized five. As always, the town should take particular note of Joe Ouellette's extensive and thoughtful contributions as the Commission's representative to the Community Preservation Committee.

The Sturbridge Historical Commission meets in the Town Hall at 7 p.m. on the third Wednesday of each month.