



NEWS RELEASE

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February 4, 2009

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Emily Dickinson Museum Begins Hedge Restoration Project Early February; Public Information Meeting about Initiative Slated for Feb. 7

AMHERST, Mass—In its continuing efforts to maintain the most historically accurate landmark possible, the Emily Dickinson Museum will replace its hemlock hedge and reconstruct the fences, gates and gateposts spanning the southern border of the Dickinson property starting the week of Feb. 9. The project—which will restore a significant landscape feature to how it appeared during the poet’s lifetime—will be discussed at a public informational meeting on Saturday, Feb. 7, at 3 p.m., at the Dickinson Homestead at 280 Main St. Neighbors, members of the local community and Emily Dickinson enthusiasts are warmly encouraged to attend.

“Our goal as a historical site first and foremost is to bring back the Dickinson homes and grounds to their appearance during the period the Emily Dickinson lived and wrote here,” said Jane Wald, executive director of the museum. “The natural world and this landscape were vitally important to the Dickinson family, and we want our patrons to be able to see and imagine how it looked when they lived here.” She added that the restoration of the hedges serves a practical purpose as well; in 2008, a certified arborist confirmed the presence of wooly adelgid and hemlock scale, two infestations that have caused many of the once-beautiful trees to die.

According to Wald, removal of the existing hemlocks will take approximately two weeks. The stone steps in front of the Homestead leading down to the street will be reset on a concrete foundation and the granite coping wall adjacent to the sidewalk will be rebuilt. Following that masonry work, fences, gate posts and pedestrian gates reproduced from elements still in the museum’s collection will be installed. The final step will be planting of about 200 young hemlocks to form the new hedge behind the fence.

To complete the work, the museum has engaged C.L. Frank, a Northampton-based tree contractor, and Wright Builders, a local general contractor, to complete the landscape restoration project. Martha Lyon of Northampton is the landscape architect.

The 900-foot-long hemlock hedge was originally planted in the 1860s, a few years after an extensive renovation of the family Homestead and construction of The Evergreens next door for Austin and Susan Dickinson. According to contemporary views of Amherst and scattered documentary clues, the fences were probably already in place at the time the hedge was planted. The original design intent for the latter was to allow a clear view from the homes across the Dickinson meadow toward the center of town, while shielding the gardens from casual view by passersby; the hedge was carefully maintained by the Dickinsons at a height of 6 to 10 feet until the end of the 19th century. Since then, however, the fences have been removed and the hemlocks have grown to heights of 30 to 50 feet, and the overgrown hedge blocks any views of the Dickinson houses on their elevated terraces or from the houses to the landscape beyond.

“This project will revive the houses’ 19th century setting,” commented landscape architect Martha Lyon. “The museum is fortunate to have many historic photographs showing the design, layout and height of the fence, gates and hedge, and several pieces of the fence and gates remain in the museum collection. Because of this, the contractor will be able to reconstruct the edge with great accuracy, and in so doing, adhere to the National Park Service’s preservation standards.”

The \$275,000 project, which is funded entirely through private contributions, grows out of a master plan for stewardship of the Dickinson property prepared by consulting preservation architectural firm Mesick Cohen Wilson Baker Architects LLC of Albany, N.Y., and accepted by the museum’s Board of Governors in 2006. The plan made numerous recommendations for immediate and long-term measures to preserve and restore the historic structures and grounds, and the museum has been systematically addressing these recommendations in priority order since adopting the master plan. The landscape portion of the Master Plan was funded by a Town of Amherst Community Preservation Act grant of \$15,000 in 2005.

“The re-creation of the original hemlock hedge and picket fence is essential to the restoration of the Dickinson family compound to their appearance and function in Emily Dickinson’s time, said Kent W. Faerber, chair of the Museum’s Board of Governors. “The project has been meticulously and professionally crafted to achieve that goal within the limits of funds donated for this work. We are particularly pleased that, of all the projects in our pipeline, this one will be of the most visible benefit to the residents of the Town, opening up the vista of Main Street to the 19th century appearance that was so prominent a feature of Amherst’s daily life.”

The Emily Dickinson Museum, comprising the Dickinson Homestead and The Evergreens, is devoted to the story and legacy of poet Emily Dickinson and her family. Both properties are owned by the Trustees of Amherst College. The museum is overseen by a separate Board of Governors charged with raising its operating and capital funds. The Dickinson Homestead was the birthplace and residence of the poet (1830-1886). The Evergreens was the 1856 home of the poet’s brother and sister-in-law, Austin and Susan Dickinson.

The Emily Dickinson Museum is located at 280 Main St. in Amherst, Mass. The official museum Web site is at www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org. Beginning March 1, hours are Wednesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; the museum is closed on major holidays.

Historic photos of the hedge available upon request.

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