

Old Ship in need of repairs

Major fundraising campaign being launched



Courtesy Photo

From left, Jane Malme, chairman of the Friends of the Old Ship Meeting House; Elaine Gomez, co-chair of Old Ship's fundraising drive; Tom Willson, chairman of Old Ship's Building Committee.

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Hingham — Just as some fruits and vegetables must be planted in fall for their harvest to be most bountiful, a couple of signs recently were planted on the grounds of the Old Ship Meeting House in the hopes their presence might result in a grand bounty for the venerable structure rising behind them.

One bright green, the other deep red, they are telling the world that Old Ship has been awarded substantial federal and state matching grants that will go toward vital repairs to the 329-year-old building. In total, \$350,000, these grants are worth more than money. They demonstrate Old Ship's importance as an American historical site, and they can provide inspiration to those both seeking and giving funds to match the grants.

Hingham's pride and long-recognized nationally as one of the country's most valuable Colonial buildings, Old Ship doesn't look its age, until one begins to peer beneath its pretty ochre-colored clapboards and above its handsome box pews. Such was the job of conservators and engineers who crawled into nooks and crannies, scaled overhead timbers, examined closely windows and wiring, finally coming up with a to-do list that amounts to roughly \$750,000.

Chief among the necessities are new electrical, fire alarm and sprinkler systems. Add to that, asbestos removal, structural repairs, plastering, painting and window preservation, and one can understand why Old Ship will have to be closed for several months next spring and summer while the work is being done. This is not a matter of should the work be done now, but of it having to be done now if the Meeting House is to stand for another three centuries.

Recently, on a morning so warm the birds were silent, a few people contemplated the shimmering Meeting House and the grant signs that presaged hope for a successful campaign. These folks were representing only the latest effort to preserve an icon of American history.

Tom Willson, chairman of Old Ship's Building Committee, whose members secured the grants, reminded the gathering that: "This is part of a continuing effort. Major projects to restore and maintain the building were undertaken – twice in the 1700s – then, in the 1860s, and, last, in the 1930s."

Elaine Gomez, co-chair of the congregation's campaign, concurred: "We're simply a link in a very long chain."

The long hiatus between the '30s restoration and today naturally has resulted in urgent problems with the building's safety and strength. Certainly, that was recognized by the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service when those federal agencies decided to award Old Ship a \$300,000 Save America's Treasures grant, a prestigious grant given only to sites they deem of such "cultural and historical significance that they (actually) illustrate, interpret and are associated with our nation's great events, ideas and individuals."

In addition, the Massachusetts Preservation Fund has awarded Old Ship a \$50,000 matching grant.

While parishioners realize their responsibilities as a congregation that has existed continuously since Hingham was founded in 1635, they understand that the Meeting House also belongs to the greater community of Hingham, for which – until 1780 – it not only served as a church but as a gathering place for all civic activities.

For that reason, the fundraising effort is twofold, one undertaken by Old Ship's congregation, the other being run by The Friends of the Old Ship Meeting House (through the Friendship Fund), in its role as a nonsectarian fundraising organization for Old Ship.

To launch this great appeal, a celebration of the Meeting House will be held after Sunday services on Oct. 3, when knowledgeable folks will conduct a grand tour of the beautiful, ancient structure and tales will be told about its amazing odyssey through American history.

Looking ahead to the task of continuing what was begun in 1681, Jane Malme, chairman of The Friends, commented, "It's our turn now. We in Hingham are so fortunate to be able to take care of this extraordinary building, so that it might be passed on to future generations."

Special tours and events will be offered throughout the year. For more information about these events and to donate, please telephone the Old Ship office, 781-749-1679, or visit the Friendship Funds website, www.oldshipfriends.org.