

**APPLICATION FOR  
STATE SCENIC HIGHWAY DESIGNATION  
ROUTE 148 - FERRY ROAD  
and  
ROUTE SR431 - GEER HILL ROAD  
TOWN OF LYME**

Under the provisions of Connecticut General Statute Sections 13b-31c-1 to 13b-31c-5 inclusive, the Planning Commission of the Town of Lyme hereby requests designation of approximately 2 miles of Route 148, also known as Ferry Road, as a State Scenic Road. Scenic Road designation is requested for that portion of Ferry Road beginning at the intersection with State Route 82 and continuing westward across the Connecticut River on the Chester/Hadlyme ferry to the ferry landing on the Chester shore. State Scenic Road designation is also requested for approximately 0.3 miles of Geer Hill Road (SR431) from its intersection with Route 148 north to the Lyme-East Haddam Town line.

Geer Hill Road is contextually part of the settlement area clustered around the ferry landing. At the East Haddam line, SR431 becomes River Road. It is believed that separate efforts are being made within East Haddam to submit an independent application for State Scenic Road designation for River Road. .

- *In this report, descriptions and road distances on Route 148 are referenced from a point of origin at the intersection of Route 148 and route 82 and assume the traveler is driving west. Descriptions and distances on SG431 are referenced from the intersection of SR431 with Route 148 to the East Haddam town line and assume the traveler is driving north. This is chosen for convenience only. Both roads are equally scenic from either direction.*

**GENERAL DESCRIPTION**

Route 148, also known as Ferry Road, begins at “Hadlyme Four Corners”, a four way intersection with Route 82. This intersection is marked by a flashing red traffic light, the only control light within the Town of Lyme. At this intersection, Brush Hill Road, a local road, also joins 82 and 148. From the Four Corners, Ferry Road winds generally westward through an area of spectacular natural features and significant, well preserved cultural resources, ending at the

Hadlyme Ferry Landing Historic District. Along its 1.75 mile distance, Ferry Road passes by stone walls, steep ledges, historic homes, open fields, and dramatic views across the marshes and waters of Whalebone Cove on the Connecticut River. At times, osprey and even bald eagles can be seen over the marshes. At the intersection with Geer Hill Road, the traveler can turn right and follow the signs a short distance to the entrance to Gillette Castle State Park, or can continue straight to the Chester/Hadlyme Ferry landing. (The characteristics of Geer Hill Road are described below, following the discussion of Route 148.) At the ferry landing, from May through November, travelers can take the brief trip across the Connecticut River on the second oldest continuously operating ferry in the United States, in operation since 1769. The view of the Connecticut River from the parking area next to the ferry landing is marvelous.

**KEY:** *Numbers in parentheses refer to the series of photographs submitted as part of this application. The numbers on each picture refer to their position in sequence (F1 through F72, and G1 through G4), the direction toward which the picture is taken (North, East, etc.), and the distance from point of origin at Route 82 (Ferry Road) and Ferry Road (Geer Hill Road).*

## **ROUTE 148 - FERRY ROAD**

Route 148 turns off of Route 82 at the four-way stop known as “Hadlyme Four Corners” (as shown in Photograph F1W0 - Ferry Road, Photograph 1, looking west at mile zero). The Hadlyme Store is located on the northwest corner of the intersection (F3W0). The building contains the only post office remaining in the in the Town of Lyme , the last of the six which once marked Lyme’s small population centers. Both the store and the post office serve a communal function as a place for daily neighborhood chats.

### **HADLYME**

The town of Lyme was founded in 1665 as a farming, forestry, fishing and shipbuilding river trading center. Hadlyme Four Corners was a natural location for a village to form, at the crossroads of the early major inland east-west route from Norwich down to New Haven. The Hadlyme Ferry, reached from Hadlyme Four Corners by what is now Route 148, was a vital landing point connecting

highway traffic with the river traffic of the day. The Chester Hadlyme Ferry, originally known as Warner's Ferry, started operation in 1769. River and highway traffic meeting at the ferry landing area generated trading, shipbuilding, and customs and tax collections. Between Hadlyme Four Corners and the ferry landing and along Geer Hill Road, an impressive group of eighteenth century houses and other buildings demonstrate the importance of the highway-river link. By 1742, the population of Hadlyme was sufficient to support its own church congregation, and the Hadlyme Society was formed under the leadership of its minister, Harvard graduate Grindel Rawson. In 1945, the Society had only 11 members, but by 1776, the membership had increased to 173 members.

Past the Hadlyme Store at the intersection with Route 82, Route 148 becomes a narrow, winding, tree-lined two lane road (F6 through F10). From Spring through Fall, the trees form a shady corridor lined with older houses, stone walls, and open fields.

Where Ferry Road (Route 148) crosses Joshuatown Road, about seven tenths of a mile from Hadlyme Four Corners, a small settlement area includes a grouping of both older and newer homes (F16 through F20). The Hadlyme Public Hall (F20), built in 1912, is located on the north west corner of Route 148 and Joshuatown Road. The construction of the Public Hall, on land donated by Herbert Luther, was part of an effort by the newly-formed Hadlyme Board of Trade to establish an active center of commerce. The Hall included a stage, banquet hall, kitchen and dressing rooms, and hosted numerous plays and dances. The Hall Association continues to maintain the Hall, in a modern vein, to host numerous community activities at the facility.

Just past the Hadlyme Public Hall, Ferry Road crosses Whalebone Creek as it enters Whalebone Cove (F23 through F27). There is a fine view of Whalebone Creek looking south from the bridge (F25).

After crossing Whalebone Creek, a road sign (F28) indicates a sharp bend in the road. Around the bend, the road provides an open view of Whalebone Cove on the left. For the next .4 mile, the view of Whalebone Cove is impressive (F29 through F46). Looking across the freshwater marshes and open water, the bluffs on the south side of the Cove provide a dramatic backdrop (F29 and F30). From certain angles, as the road winds around the north shore of the Cove, the hills on the other side of the Connecticut River are visible in the distant background (F32 and F33). Whalebone Cove is an exceptional area for birdwatching. Bald Eagles nest in the bluffs above the Cove and osprey are often seen. Photographs F39 and F40 show an osprey perched atop a telephone pole along Ferry Road.

## WHALEBONE COVE

Whalebone Cove is located where Whalebone Creek and Roaring Brook come together just before entering the mainstem of the lower Connecticut River. The Cove is one of the most unspoiled freshwater areas along the Connecticut. The Cove is sheltered from the River by high bedrock cliffs on either side of its mouth. Whalebone Cove was once well known for its large hemlocks, but many of the hemlock trees have been lost to the hemlock woolly adelgid, an invasive non-native insect that is destroying many of the hemlocks of the lower Connecticut River valley. The Cove is especially prized for its large stands of wild rice, an annual grass which grows up to fifteen feet in height. In the Cove's extensive freshwater wetlands, other dominant wetlands plants include cattails and bulrushes, as well as large areas of submerged aquatic vegetation. Upland vegetation includes dogwoods, alder, ash, sycamores, red maples and wild grapes, as well as hemlocks.

The diversity of ecosystems within Whalebone Cove make it an ideal location for fish and waterfowl. The range of birds found in Whalebone Cove is outstanding. Herons, egrets and songbirds abound. Ospreys nest in the Cove and Bald Eagles often winter in the Cove. (See Photograph Numbers 39 and 40.) Route 148 provides outstanding views of the Cove and its tributary streams. Much of Whalebone Cove is protected open space. Several large tracts are owned by The Nature Conservancy.

As a note of cultural interest, well-known author Dominic Dunne lives along this stretch of Ferry Road (F37).

After crossing the northern edge of Whalebone Cove, Ferry road passes the Cove Cemetery (F47 and 50).. Although there are several family cemeteries in Hadlyme, Cove Cemetery is the oldest church cemetery in the area. Within the graveyard, memorials date to the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. This well-maintained property is still an active cemetery..

Photograph F51 shows the sign at the intersection of Ferry Road (Route 148) with Geer Hill Road. Photograph 52 shows the view north on Geer Hill road from Ferry Road. From this intersection to the town line between Lyme and East Haddam is a distance of about three tenths of a mile. Geer Hill Road is contextually integrated with Ferry Road. Properties fronting on Geer Hill road in Lyme are part of the Hadlyme Historic District. The Reynolds House (F53), built in 1760 for Samuel Brooks and his wife, is located on the north west side of the intersection of Ferry Road and Geer Hill Road. The house has been virtually unaltered but carefully maintained since 1937. Geer Hill Road will be discussed in greater detail in a later section of this report.

Photographs F54, F55 and F56 show several views of the Prowell House, located on the south side of Ferry Road as it approaches the Ferry Landing. This typical Greek Revival house was built by the Comstock family at turn of nineteenth century. The Comstock Shipyard along the Connecticut River and the Comstock Sawmill at the head of Whalebone Cove were active businesses in the area in the early 1800s. The original house has been well-maintained, altered slightly, and added to in rear over past two centuries. Up the hill behind the house are the remains of an original tobacco barn built and used when house was farmhouse.

Photographs F57 and F58 show two views of the William Spencer House, built about 1805 as wedding present for William and his bride by his father Isaac from plans of Isaac's house. Now owned by William Horwath, this frame house is in excellent condition, with fine detailing throughout. From the road in front of the William Spencer House, Photographs F59 and F60 show the view of the ferry landing itself.

Across from the William Spencer House is one of the earliest houses built in the area (F61).. The first house on the north side of Ferry road east of the landing, this house is known as the Shoe house or the Engberg House after its contemporary owners.

### **ISAAC SPENCER HOUSE AT THE FERRY LANDING**

Shown in Photographs F62, F64 and F65, the Isaac Spencer House (circa 1780) is located off the southeast corner of the ferry slip, adjacent to Spencer's toll accounts office on the riverfront. Isaac Spencer, together with his sons Austin and William, established a shipyard at the landing, which was later taken over by Henry Comstock in 1820. On the bank just above the ferry landing, the Comstocks constructed ships for the brownstone trade until 1888, including two of the largest three - masted schooners built on the Connecticut River.

Dr. Alice Hamilton, the first female professor at Harvard Medical School, summered with her sisters in the Spencer House. Dr. Hamilton retired there in 1945 and was often visited by her sister, Edith Hamilton, president of Bryn Mawr College and author of several books on Greek mythology. Dr, Hamilton was posthumously honored in 1995 by issuance of a stamp recognizing her pioneering research in occupational diseases. The Hamilton sisters are buried at Cove Cemetery.

Photograph F64 shows the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Counting House, adjacent to the landing. The balcony of the structure is constructed around a large ash tree.

This building served as a collection point for ferry tolls, a shipyard commissary, and a general store, last operated by Gershom Simpson in the 1920s.

The land on the north side of the ferry landing is owned by the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection and the Connecticut Department of Transportation. A small parking area serves a trail which heads uphill to Gillette Castle from the ferry. (F66 and F67).

### **CONNECTICUT RIVER GATEWAY COMMISSION**

Along Hamburg Cove, Route 156 passes through the Lower Connecticut River Conservation Zone, established by the Connecticut General Assembly in 1973. CGS Section 25-102a et sec. finds “that the lower Connecticut River and the towns abutting the river possess unique scenic, ecological, scientific and historic value contributing to public enjoyment, inspiration and scientific study” and “that it is the public interest to protect such values and to “prevent deterioration of the natural and traditional river scene for the enjoyment of present and future generations of Connecticut citizens...”. The 1973 legislation established the Connecticut River Gateway Commission, giving it authority to recommend and acquire land for preservation and to adopt land use standards to protect the visual character of the river and its shorelands. This State Act was passed in response to an effort to create a national park along the Lower Connecticut River. Many local residents opposed federal involvement, and the state response was seen as a means to achieve some of the federal goals through local efforts. Designation of Route 156 in Lyme, particularly in the vicinity of Hamburg Cove, furthers the purpose of the Lower Connecticut River Conservation Zone..

### **GILLETTE CASTLE STATE PARK**

Between 1914 and 1919, actor William H. Gillette oversaw the construction of a 24-room, cobbled-stone castle on the hill above the ferry landing. This house, inspired by a Norman fortress, is characterized by its incomparable architecture and unusual site development. William Gillette was best known for his internationally acclaimed role as Sherlock Holmes. He also wrote 20 plays and built a model steam engine for Pratt and Whitney. He was the son of a U.S. Senator and a descendent of Tomas Hooker. He was encouraged to become an

actor by his friend Mark Twain. Gillette ferried his numerous guests to and from New York City on his 140 foot houseboat, the Aunt Polly. He often took visitors for rides on his 3 mile long model railroad loop. The remains of Gillette's dock pilings are visible at low tide north of the ferry landing.

The Gillette Castle property has been undergoing substantial renovations over the past several years, and is scheduled to reopen to the public this Spring (2003).

### **HADLYME FERRY HISTORIC DISTRICT**

The Hadlyme Ferry Historic District encompasses about twenty properties at the Connecticut River end of Ferry Road and up Geer Hill. The Historic District was established in the late 1980s, as an outgrowth of the Hadlyme Ferry Association. The Hadlyme Ferry Association, formed prior to 1940, was active in the effort to save Gillette Castle and its original one hundred and fifteen acres from development when that property came on the market in 1943. The option to purchase the Gillette property was acquired by Association members and turned over to the State, which eventually took title to the whole property.

The historic district extends eastward from the Connecticut River, along both sides of Ferry Road (Route 148), to the bridge over Whalebone Cove, and on both sides of Geer Hill Road from the Ferry Road intersection to town boundary with east Haddam. All buildings within the district are now residences. Two thirds of the homes were built in the 17th and 18th centuries. Recent construction is limited, and has taken the form of good reproductions of "colonial design".

Photographs F69 through F72 show the Ferry Landing. Photograph F69 shows the ferry loading for the trip to the Chester shore, and F70 shows the ferry Selden III in transit across the Connecticut River.

The Lyme Planning Commission requests that the Chester-Hadlyme Ferry itself be included as part of the State Scenic Road designation. The Ferry is an active part of Route 148, which continues beyond the ferry landing on the Chester side of the Connecticut River to the west. The ferry is an important part of the scenic and historic character of the route.

### **CHESTER-HADLYME FERRY**

The Chester Hadlyme Ferry, which began service in 1769, was originally operated by Jonathan Warner, who owned the land on both sides of the Connecticut River. Warner's Ferry, as it was called back then, connected King's Highway in Fort Hill, Parish of Chester, to the Norwich Road in Lyme. The ferry was often used throughout the Revolutionary War to transport needed supplies across the river.

The original ferry was pushed across the river using long poles. A steam-powered barge began to serve the ferry crossing in 1879. The ferry was named the Chester Hadlyme Ferry in 1882, while it was operated by the Town of Chester. In 1917, the ferry was turned over to the Connecticut Department of Transportation.

The present ferry, the Selden III was built in 1949. It is an open self-propelled craft, 65 feet long and 30 feet wide. The vessel can accommodate 8 or nine cars and 49 passengers. The Selden III provides a convenient, direct link between Chester and Hadlyme at Route 148.

-text quoted from the Chester-Hadlyme Ferry website:  
<http://www.dot.ct.us/bureau/ap/app/chest.html>

### **GEER HILL ROAD - SR431, Lyme**

Less than one quarter mile from the ferry landing dock, heading east toward Route 82, Ferry Road forks. The north branch of the fork is Geer Hill Road. As previously noted, the properties within Lyme fronting on Geer Hill Road are part of the Hadlyme Ferry Historic District.

Photograph F53 shows the Reynolds House, built in 1760, located on the corner of Geer Hill Road and Ferry Road.

Further along Geer Hill Road, Photograph GH1 shows the Hunt House, a recently-constructed reproduction of a typical Connecticut 18<sup>th</sup> Century saltbox.

Photograph GH2 shows a rural Greek Revival house on Geer Hill Road, built at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century by the prosperous Geer family, and now owned by the Powers family. The house was occupied by seven generations of Geers, until it was sold in 1952. The house has been expanded from its turn of the century core to its present size.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

Photographs: Lyme Planner Frank Skwarek has prepared a series of 76 photographs taken along Route 148 and Geer Hill Road in the Fall and early Winter of 2002. Taken as a whole, these photos provide a visual tour of Route 148 driving west from the intersection with Route 82 at Hadlyme Four Corners to the Chester-Hadlyme Ferry Landing at the Connecticut River, and northward on Geer Hill road to the East Haddam town line.

Map: A topographic map of the proposed scenic road with mileage segments indicated is part of this report. The map should be used in conjunction with the above mentioned photographs.