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Secretary of the Commonwealth

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**SWANSEA FRIENDS MEETINGHOUSE, SOMERSET, APPROVED FOR NOMINATION TO THE  
NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**

Secretary of the Commonwealth William Francis Galvin is pleased to announce that the Massachusetts Historical Commission approved the Swansea Friends Meetinghouse in Somerset for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places at its December 11, 2013, meeting. The nomination will be submitted to the National Register of Historic Places at the National Park Service in Washington, DC, for final consideration and designation.

“The Massachusetts Historical Commission is dedicated to preserving the Commonwealth’s rich historic, architectural, archaeological, and cultural resources,” Secretary Galvin said. “Inclusion of the Swansea Friends Meetinghouse and Cemetery in the National Register will help to protect a rare surviving example of Quaker meetinghouse architecture and a landmark in the religious history of Massachusetts.”

The Swansea Friends Meetinghouse and Cemetery property, 223 Prospect Street, is less than one acre in size. The meetinghouse is a two-story, wood-frame building of domestic scale with painted, wood-shingle siding. The modest, unornamented exterior is consistent with the enduring plain style favored by the Society of Friends, or Quakers. The Swansea Friends Meetinghouse is one of only nineteen existing Quaker meetinghouses inventoried in the state of Massachusetts, although there had been many more in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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Containing evidence of its earliest construction phase (1702), the Swansea Friends Meetinghouse is the oldest building in this group, and evolved through at least two historic stages of enlargement and renovation, in 1746 and 1889. The 1702 plan, with an interior free of a pulpit or religious iconography, reflected the Friends' rejection of established modes of Christian worship. The 1746 enlargement reflected not only the growth of the Quaker population, but also the Swansea Meeting's increased status in the Quaker community in Massachusetts. The 1889 renovation made the interior more church-like, reflecting changes in the Quaker faith as it became more evangelical and oriented toward mainstream Christian religious practice.

The cemetery on the meetinghouse grounds is enclosed on three sides by stone walls. It appears to have lost a number of grave markers due to age and erosion, although it is possible that earlier graves were unmarked. The primary concentration of headstones is in the northwest corner of the burial ground, another small group is aligned in the center of the cemetery, and there are a number of fallen stones in the southwest corner of the property. Grave markers are simple, small slabs with arched tops, typical of the Quaker taste.

Membership at the Swansea Friends Meetinghouse declined significantly in the 1960s, as younger generations moved away from the area. By the 1970s, there were fewer than twenty-five members; though they were aging, they were committed to maintaining the building and keeping the meeting active. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, only three members remained. These surviving Friends conveyed the property to the Town of Somerset in 2010, with the expectation that the meetinghouse would be preserved and reused for an appropriate purpose. The town commissioned a conditions assessment at that time, and is currently evaluating use plans, including a proposed community center and a museum of the history of the Society of Friends in the region. The Somerset Department of Public Works currently cares for both the building and the cemetery.

The Swansea Friends Meetinghouse property is one of 10 historic resources around the Commonwealth approved for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places by the Massachusetts Historical Commission at this meeting.

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Secretary Galvin serves as Chairman of the 17-member board, which meets regularly and considers historic resources eligible for the National Register four times a year.

The National Register is the nation's official listing of significant historic resources. In Massachusetts, there are over 70,000 properties listed in the National Register. The Massachusetts Historical Commission has been administering the National Register of Historic Places program in Massachusetts since 1966.

The Massachusetts Historical Commission is the office of the State Historic Preservation Officer and the State Archaeologist. It was established in 1963 to identify, evaluate, and protect important historical and archaeological assets of the Commonwealth. Visit our website to learn more about the Commission's programs ([www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc](http://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc)).

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