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PECK: Expert lays odds against basement burial

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Is Levi Peck buried in basement?

State archaeologist studies odd marker

By Cindy Gillis

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WATERTOWN — The state archaeologist, called upon Friday to determine if nearly 200-year-old human remains are buried in a Watertown farmhouse, will begin next week gently probing the soil in the house's basement for clues.

Archaeologist Nicholas F. Bellantoni on Friday morning examined the headstone of Levi Peck, which dates to 1802, and conferred with the owners of the Nova Scotia Hill property. Bellantoni then outlined a plan to determine if Peck is buried in the basement of the 10-room house.

"I would probably say, 70 percent, that he's not there," Bellantoni said, noting that leaves a 30 percent probability that Peck is buried at the house. "We've seen enough things in Connecticut, so anything is possible."

Bellantoni and archaeologist David Poirier of the state Historical Commission contributed a possible theory, now one of several, to Peck's death and the grave marker in the basement's cement floor.

Please turn to 6A, PECK

The headstone appears to represent the remains of Peck, who died May 26, 1802, at the age of 55. But Bellantoni said Ruth Shapleigh-Brown of the Connecticut Gravestone Network told him she uncovered a June 1802 copy of the Litchfield Monitor that reported the death of Mrs. Levi Peck on May 26, 1802.

The gravestone network is dedicated to the preservation of headstones and is sometimes called upon to research long-ago deaths to reunite grave markers and burial sites.

Bellantoni and Poirier said the newspaper could be in error. Mrs. Peck's remains could be buried in the basement or the headstone might have been incorrectly engraved to indicate Mr. Peck's death and, as a result, discarded.

The mystery of Levi Peck surfaced last week when a relative of the late Joseph Zuraitis told Town Historian Florence Crowell about the supposed farmhand buried in the basement for nearly two centuries.

Zuraitis' brother, Daniel, said he believed Levi Peck was a member of a Watertown family. Crowell has searched town records for some documentation of Peck's life or death, but to no avail.

Once the research and speculation began, Prospect residents Christina and Pedro Francisco and Naugatuck resident Armando Rodrigues, who bought the house last month from the Zuraitis estate, began fielding calls from historians, the media and the generally curious.

"It kind of threw us for a loop," Rodrigues said Friday. "We didn't know we were going to be famous. We're kind of private people."

The owners said they did not know of Peck when they bought the house and 23 acres with the intention of demolishing the farmhouse and building a dozen new houses and creating a quiet cul-de-sac. The first to tell them the news was Town Planner Mary Greene.

Greene on Thursday said the house was on the market for about three years and she had heard about Peck from several people, including someone who was interested in the farmhouse as a bed and breakfast.

Rodrigues said he and Pedro Francisco searched for the marker last week, finally finding it beneath the chimney, imbedded in the floor and covered with odd-sized boards.

The approximately 2½-foot-long marker is in the floor of a brick cubby-hole beneath the chimney in the basement.

Brick pillars and cinder blocks support the chimney, leaving about a 4-foot-wide opening that allows someone to crouch beneath the chimney and view the headstone.

A small window was installed into each of the brick walls, allowing someone to peek into the interior, which includes the headstone.

"It's a very weird spot," Rodrigues said.

The peculiar location beneath the chimney leads the owners and Poirier to suspect that only the Peck headstone, and not a member of the Peck family, is in the 249-year-old farmhouse. With a full basement to choose from, why would someone bury a body in such a difficult-to-reach spot, Poirier wondered.

Bellantoni said speculation will give way to science on Friday, when he will return to Watertown to begin sifting through the soil beneath the gravestone. The process will include scraping soil and digging into it with a corkscrew-type tool, about an inch in diameter, designed to bring soil samples to the surface.

The archaeologist will be looking for changes in soil coloration, which might indicate that the area had once been dug up to place a coffin and then filled, or more tangible signs, such as nails from a coffin or skeletal remains. If remains are found, the work will halt to allow time to decide how to properly handle them. The usual method would be to remove them, test to determine the age and identity of the deceased, and then move the remains to a cemetery.

"We'll do it in a respectful and archaeological way," Bellantoni said.

Although Bellantoni often is called upon to pinpoint or identify remains, he said the Watertown case is unique.

"We have seen burials under churches, but we've never seen one under a house," he said. "Hopefully, by the end of next week, we should be able to say 'yes, he's there' or 'no, he's not.'"