

# A stranger in basement slows demolition plans

By Cindy Gillis  
© 1999 Republican-American

## WATERTOWN

In life, Levi Peck probably knew a small group of people — friends, relatives, neighbors. But in death, Levi Peck is rapidly moving toward celebrity status as the man whose remains may or may not be buried in a basement on Nova Scotia Hill Road.

And Prospect resident Christina Francisco, whose family recently bought the rumored resting place of Levi Peck, is more anxious than most people to dig up the facts of Peck's life and death, particularly of his death in 1802.

"That's the question, where is he resting?" Francisco said Wednesday evening.

Francisco said his tombstone, which reveals that Levi Peck died in 1802, at age 55, is embedded in the cement floor of the 249-year-old farmhouse at 555 Nova Scotia Hill Road. But she does not believe that

Peck's remains are buried beneath the cellar floor.

"There is no death certificate," Francisco said. "There's no substantial paperwork to prove it."

Francisco said she was blissfully unaware of the name Levi Peck until just after her husband, Pedro, and cousin, Armando Rodrigues, bought the land from the estate of Joseph Zuraitis on July 14. Now Peck is rarely far from her thoughts as she calls "anybody and everybody" to track down his remains before a wrecking ball is due to demolish the Nova Scotia Hill Road farmhouse.

Town Historian Florence Crowell said the saga of Levi Peck surfaced this week when she received a telephone call from the late Joseph Zuraitis' granddaughter-in-law that piqued her well-known, natural curiosity.

Crowell said, as she heard the

Please turn to 15A, GRAVE

Rep Aug 12, 1999



The cellar of this 249-year-old farmhouse at 555 Nova Scotia Hill Road in Watertown may be the final resting place of Levi Peck —

Tom Kabelka *Republican-American* or maybe not. A headstone found embedded in the basement floor says he died in 1802. The new owner wants to know the truth.

# GRAVE: Tombstone slows plans to raze old farmhouse

Continued from Page One

story, Peck was a farmhand who died while working at the Nova Scotia Hill Road farm and was buried in the basement. "Years ago, men would travel around the country and stop at a farmhouse and ask for work," she said.

It also was common practice years ago to bury the deceased in the cellar until the ground outside softened, in the spring, for a proper burial. "Evidently, they never dug him up," Crowell said.

Francisco is not so quick to accept that theory. The Hickcox Funeral Home, at the request of the town, recently inspected the grave marker and determined that it is weathered, indicating it was moved into the basement from outside, Francisco said. And it appears Peck died in the spring or summer, disputing the temporary-burial theory, she added.

The town became embroiled in the mystery when Francisco and Rodrigues applied for permission to demolish the 10-room house

across the road from Veterans Memorial Park. Francisco said her family wants to subdivide the 23-acre parcel and build up to a dozen houses.

The demolition request triggered a 60-day waiting period to determine the building's historic value.

Crowell said Watertown Historical Society representatives determined, before word of Levi Peck, that it has none. "We decided it wasn't worth saving," she said.

Joseph and Alice Zuraitis lived on the property, inherited from Alice Zuraitis' parents, for a quarter century, until Joseph's death several years ago, said town resident Daniel Zuraitis. Daniel Zuraitis, Joseph's brother, this week said he remembers hearing that Levi Peck was buried in the basement, but he thought Peck was a relative of a former owner.

The cellar, Zuraitis said, was used for the cold storage of vegetables and fruits.

It was usually dark and Zuraitis said he doesn't remember lingering down there long

enough to read any headstones. "I hadn't heard anything about this for 20 years," he said Tuesday.

Building Inspector Richard Fusco, charged with issuing a demolition permit, is taking a wait-and-see approach.

"Let's see, the last time I was involved with a body buried in a basement was ... never," he said. "I'm waiting for someone to say this is a fact, now what do we do?"

But facts are in short supply.

Crowell said she has searched town death records and found no record of Levi Peck. Francisco said she is searching death records statewide and also hopes to research cemetery records.

"If we can prove that he's buried somewhere, and he's not buried in my basement, then we're OK," Francisco said.

If not, a funeral home will be secured to investigate and, if necessary, exhume any remains, she said.

"At this point, I feel like I know him," Francisco said. "I'd like to get to the bottom of this."