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# Mystery of body in cellar probed

## Archaeologist to examine site

By **Cindy Gillis**  
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WATERTOWN — The state archaeologist, the man who just might have the tools to uncover the mystery of Levi Peck, is expected to visit the deceased's rumored final resting place on Nova Scotia Hill Road today.

Archaeologist Nicholas Bellantoni, whose every move likely will be recorded by a phalanx of news media, will be asked to determine if the remains of Levi Peck — or just his gravestone — have been resting in the basement of a 249-year-old farmhouse for nearly 200 years.

Prospect resident Christina Francisco, whose family recently bought the property across from Veterans Memorial Park, said she believes the time-worn headstone embedded in her basement floor is the only sign of Levi Peck anyone will find in the vacant house.

Despite her skeptic status, Francisco said the Levi Peck saga has driven home what a strong sense of history the Zuraitis family farmhouse boasts. Now, she and her husband, Pedro, are having second thoughts about destroying the 10-room house.

"It's made us think twice," Christina Francisco said. "Maybe we could restore it a little bit and open it to the public. We could preserve it for Watertown."

Francisco said the owners, including her cousin, Armando Rodrigues, want to subdivide the 23-acre parcel and build up to a dozen houses.

But first, there is the matter of Levi Peck.



**Tom Kabelka** *Republican-American*

*Christina Francisco, whose family recently bought this 249-year-old farmhouse on Nova Scotia Hill Road in Watertown, says the saga*

*over a possible grave in the cellar has given her and her husband second thoughts about destroying the house.*

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Francisco said the tombstone, which reveals that Peck died in 1802, at age 55, is part of the cement floor of the farmhouse. But little else is known. Town Historian Florence Crowell said she has been unable to find any record of Peck's death in town records.

Crowell said, as she heard the story, Peck was a farmhand who died while working at the Nova Scotia Hill Road farm and was buried in the basement. It was common practice years ago to bury the deceased in the cellar until the ground outside softened, in the spring, for a proper burial.

Crowell was drawn into the story a little more than a week ago by a relative of Alice and the late Joseph Zuraitis. Pedro Francisco and Rodrigues bought the property from the Zuraitis estate last month.

Bellantoni has become the latest player in trying to

solve the mystery, Christine Francisco said, because of state statute sec. 10-388.

The state regulation reads: "Any person who knows or reasonably believes that any human burials or human skeletal remains are being or about to be disturbed, destroyed, defaced, removed or exposed shall immediately notify the chief medical examiner and state archaeologist of such fact."

Bellantoni, who works from the University of Connecticut, could not be reached for comment late Thursday.

Francisco, who was surprised by the attention the story of Levi Peck has garnered, is handling the onslaught of public and media interest with grace. Even her 6-year-old son, Joseph, is getting used to the attention. He tells everyone he meets that there is a dead body in the basement of one of his houses.

"He's been having a ball," Francisco said.

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