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Old Levi has place in history well dug

Headstone now in town museum

By Cindy Gillis
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WATERTOWN — Levi Peck, whose errant grave marker created a media sensation and led to an archaeological dig in the basement of a Watertown house, has claimed a place in history 197 years after his death.

The source of Peck's new-found fame now can be seen at the Watertown Historical Society Museum in the form of a 2.5-foot-long marble slab that reads:

Mr. Levi Peck
died May 26th
1802.
Aged 55 years.

"He got more fame when he was dead than, probably, when he was alive," said Armand Rodrigues, an owner of the house once thought of as Levi Peck's final resting place.

On Friday, State Archaeologist Nicholas F. Bellantoni, after digging in the basement of Rodrigues' vacant Nova Scotia Hill Road farmhouse, concluded that the cellar was the resting place of Peck's gravestone — but not Peck himself.

Rodrigues and his co-owner cousins, Christina and Pedro Francisco, know something about Levi Peck's fame, having shared it with the deceased for nearly three weeks. Rodrigues and Pedro Francisco bought the house and 23 acres with plans to demolish the farmhouse, put in a road and build about a dozen new homes.

They said they were unaware of the grave marker cemented into the basement floor when they bought the property last month from the estate of Joseph Zuraitis. Then a granddaughter-in-law of Zuraitis told Town Historian Florence Crowell and the media about Levi Peck's headstone.

And soon the new owners were fielding calls from historians, the media and the generally curious. Despite their desire to maintain their privacy, they opted to pursue the truth of

LEVI: Watertown museum now houses old headstone

Continued from Page One

maintained their good humor and good manners as they operated generators and guided tours for archaeologists, historians, the media, volunteers from the Friends of the Office of State Archaeology and gravestone experts.

They've considered honoring Peck in their new subdivision. "We've been passing around Peck Lane but I doubt it," Christina Francisco said. "We're going to try to forget this episode."

Crowell has yet to find Peck's burial site, but she has located ample information about the life of a Levi Peck whose dates of birth and death roughly fit that of this Levi Peck.

A Levi Peck was born June 23, 1748, in Litchfield, according to records at the Mormon library in Utah. The Barbour Book for Litchfield records eight children born to Thomas and Sarah (Smith) Peck, the sixth of whom was Levi, born in 1748.

And a book of Litchfield history reports that a Levi Peck was wounded in the shoulder in April 1777, during the time of the Revolutionary War.

Levi Peck's death is recorded in probate records that detail the way in which his estate, valued at \$9, was divided up among heirs that included Linus, Simon, Polly and Wealthy. Gifts of a single chair, a single spoon, bibles, a saddle and a sickle were bequeathed to Peck's family members.

But it is Peck's death, not his life, for which he will be remembered.

On Friday, Peck's celebrity status

IF YOU GO

The grave marker of Levi Peck has been donated to the Watertown Historical Society Museum by the owners of the farmhouse in which it — but not the remains of the deceased — rested for decades. The museum, on the second floor of the Watertown Fire District building, is open Wednesdays from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., or by appointment. Donations are welcome.

drew two area teenagers to the house on Nova Scotia Hill Road. As Bellantoni sought clues to Peck's burial, Ryan Slaiby, 14, and Craig Allen, 13, kept a vigil from across the road.

Slaiby, of Watertown, saw news of the dig on television, telephoned his friend in Thomaston at 6:30 a.m. and convinced him to join him outside the farmhouse. "I told him 'it's history in the making and it would be kind of cool to watch,'" Slaiby said. "Nothing happens much around here."

Alice Zuraitis, the 85-year-old widow of Joseph, kept tabs on the commotion from her nearby home. The mere mention of Peck's name elicited a burst of laughter from Zuraitis, who grew up in the family farmhouse when she was Alice Yokubaitis.

Later, she would tease her grandchildren, saying if they misbehaved they'd be sent to visit Levi Peck in the basement. "It was a big joke."

And soon the new owners were fielding calls from historians, the media and the generally curious. Despite their desire to maintain their privacy, they opted to pursue the truth of Levi Peck's burial and keep the public informed of events as they unfolded.

"We're small developers," Rodrigues said. "We just want to make a little future for our families."

Although the intrusion was unwelcome, the owners of the farmhouse

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