

Cemetery turns up secrets of the 1700s

Grave sites of family give insight into past

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GRISWOLD, Conn. — Because of a twist of archeological fate and a minor mistake on an old map, H. David Geer's sand-and-gravel crew stumbled onto a bit of 1700s rural America two years ago.

A tiny and long forgotten farm family cemetery — 28 bodies representing generations of a family called the Waltons — had suddenly re-emerged in the 20th century.

The bodies, some turned to dust by 2½ centuries, others preserved to the braided hair on a 15-year-old girl, were given thoroughly modern treatment. Samples were taken for DNA analysis and X-ray studies in Washington.

In Connecticut, the state archaeologist studied church and land records and sought out descendants, as required by a law intended mainly to protect and respect Indian grave sites and artifacts.

On Wednesday, the Waltons were returned to the earth, as their descendants from as far away as California, Nevada and Maryland gathered on a stony hillside to watch a pastor from the church where the Waltons had worshiped intone a liturgy of recommittal as old as the remains.

"Walking around where an ancestor walked 300 years ago is awe-inspiring, and a little frightening, really," said Robert Walton, a retired computer operator from Bethesda, Md., who learned a few months ago that he had had relatives in Connecticut at one time.

The Waltons of Griswold pulled up stakes in the 1830s for the fertile farmland of Ohio.



The Rev. Michael W. Beynon officiates reburial services for 25 members of the Walton family, who lived in Griswold, Conn., from 1690 to 1830, and three others unidentified.

Associated Press

But farming was still in their blood. Descendants from Oklahoma and Minnesota, recounting histories at graveside, said they had grown up on farms.

Archaeologists say the Walton cemetery is an important discovery partly because of the unusual interplay of science and history it offers. Many old cemetery finds, notably the Negroes Burial Ground being excavated at a construction site in lower Manhattan, offer no hope of establishing identities for the remains. Records were poor or nonexistent, especially among enslaved and impoverished people.

Here in eastern Connecticut, however, the New England habit of minding everyone else's business — even among apparently humble families like the Waltons — produced a gold mine.

Church records, marriage records and land deeds, which can be traced from the 1600s in many old towns like Griswold, have led State Archaeologist Nicholas F. Bellantoni to assign tentative identities to two bodies. They may well have been the patriarch and matriarch of the clan, Lawrence and Jamima Walton.

Both died sometime in the 1750s, around the time that the family purchased a small piece of land from a wealthy old sea captain, Stephen Johnson. The bill

of sale said that the family had been using the land for a cemetery for years, and that the sale would simply make it legal.

The scientific investigation, conducted mainly at the National Museum of Health and Medicine and the Smithsonian Institution, have already produced a portrait of Revolutionary era farm life that was in many cases as brutal and short as it was thought to be.

Of the 28 bodies that have been found, half are from children 13 or younger. In one area, seven children were buried in a cluster, perhaps the victims of measles, which swept through the town in 1759, or smallpox, which arrived in 1790, affecting a whole generation of Waltons.

The scientists have also found evidence of the dread of disease that haunted families in the days before modern medicine. The body of a 55-year-old had been mutilated about 10 years after his death, apparently to prevent the illness that may have killed him, tuberculosis, from stalking his family.

Paul S. Sledzik, curator of the anatomical collection at the National Museum, said the DNA taken from the samples would be matched against a sample from Jeanne Church Abrams, a seventh-generation direct descendant of Lawrence Walton.