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NEWS

New details of soldiers' remains found in Ridgefield revealed as research continues

Jarret Liotta
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New details of the Battle of Ridgefield and the remains of soldiers found in town were revealed at an event Friday, April 30, 2022.
By Jarret Liotta

RIDGEFIELD — The evolution of history — and the magic of discovery — were highlighted Friday evening in a forum presented by the Ridgefield Historical Society to kick-off the weekend-long celebration of the 245th anniversary of the Battle of Ridgefield.

Hundreds attended a panel program at East Ridge Middle School discussing the skeletal remains of what are believed to have been four men who fell in the historic Main Street battle between the British and American troops on April 27, 1777.

"It's brought it to a whole new level this year," Nancy Rowe, executive director, said of the celebration.

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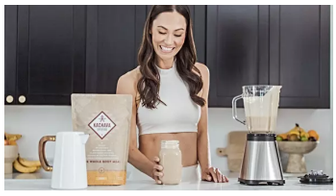

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State archaeologists and researchers from various universities are continuing to investigate the remains that were found in December, 2019, while work was being done in the basement of a historic home near Main Street.

"This all starts as a criminal investigation," said Nick Bellantoni, Connecticut state archaeologist emeritus, telling how his office was contacted after the state medical examiner determined that the remains of the first individual found at the end of 2019 were determined to be over 100 years old.

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Noted to be a very large man for that time, measuring just under six-feet tall, he was found laid out with his head to the west and his feet pointing directly east — the ceremonial custom in Christian burials of that time period.

Further investigation found a second skeleton, then a third and fourth, indicating burial that was likely fast and relatively unceremonious, without the use of caskets. As they were all adult men, researchers saw it was unlikely that it was a family plot but instead the burial of fallen from the nearby battle.

"They were hastily, it looks like, buried," said Bellantoni, who gave great praise to the homeowners who allowed the research and excavation work to take place over two months in the middle of winter.

"We were blessed with some wonderful, really extremely cooperative property owners," he said, who understood the significance of this discovery.

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Along with the remains, 37 brass alloy buttons and two made of pewter were also discovered, most likely from waist coats or jackets, but not detailed enough to exactly identify with which side these men were fighting.

"Any individual fully dressed would have a large potential for a lot of buttons," noted Sarah Sportman, current Connecticut state archaeologist, especially men of that period.

One button in particular, however, known as Button 32, turned out to not be a button at all, but a finial — or connecting knob — from the base of a gun powder horn, indicating that these men were engaged in fighting.

"I think there's a lot of potential here to learn a lot of cool information," she said, as analyses move forward in areas that will include genetic, radiographic, osteological and dental analyses, not to mention genetics.

Over the next year or so of research, she said, scientists and scholars could potentially determine who the men were related to, from where they came, and details about their lives.

"The lab procedures themselves are time-consuming," she said, but the work is underway, thanks in part to a sizable grant that came through the American Battlefield Protection Program.

Grant money will also be used to conduct further research in town over the next two years to determine more about the battlefield itself.

"This is a large battlefield that probably in no way can be completed within the grant cycle," said David Naumec, historian and field researcher with Heritage Consultants.

He said future work through the ABPP will hopefully include education components related to expanding the history and story of the Battle of Ridgefield for the town.

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“For historians and archaeologists, it’s a moment of incredible discovery,” said Walter Woodward, Connecticut state historian, who emceed the presentation.

“In Connecticut, the Battle of Ridgefield is arguably ... one of the most important moments,” he said.

Along with Kevin McBride, archaeologist and field researcher with Heritage Consultants, the program included local historian and author Keith Jones, who wrote the book Farmers Against the Crown about the battle itself.

“Every Ridgefielder knows the story ... You can’t buy a house in town without learning this,” he said.

Given this new discovery, however, Jones said that a great deal more about it may soon come to light.

Written By
Jarret Liotta

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