

Does monument hide time capsule?

By Frank Juliano
STAFF WRITER

MILFORD — A round, light spot and a shadowy square on an X-ray of a 19th-century monument here may indicate a long-lost time capsule has been detected.

Or, it may not.

History buffs concluded after an examination Tuesday morning that the only way to know for sure is to open the sandstone obelisk in the Milford Cemetery.

And that will take some doing, everyone agreed.

The cemetery's board of directors would have to approve the project, said Raymond Scholl, the cemetery superintendent, and to do that "we'd need someone to accept the liability and to be responsible for the restoration." The program from the 1852 dedication of what was called the Soldier's Monument, in the southwest corner of the old burying grounds, mentions that newspapers and documents were sealed in it.

Since the monument commemorates the 46 Continental Army soldiers who died of smallpox after being abandoned here by the British, as well as the local merchant who cared for them, those documents could resolve a mystery, historian Gary Gianotti said.

Some accounts say the men were buried side by side in a long trench, others that the mass grave surrounds

the monument.

Contemporary accounts of the dedication say that Lt. Gov. Charles Hobby Pond "stood over the remains" as he spoke.

A small knot of history buffs backed away Tuesday as Peter Massey, a forensics professor at the University of New Haven, used a portable X-ray machine to scan the monument. Then they alternately surged forward to examine the gray-tone images on the screen of Massey's laptop.

"We're not talking about a time capsule in the sense that we mean it today," City Historian Richard Platt said. "These were people who, early on, thought gravestones were vanity."

But Gianotti, who has found sunken cannons off the Atlantic Coast and determined that the skull of one of the smallpox victims is at the University of Connecticut, wasn't so sure. "The oldest time capsule I'm aware of was buried in 1902, but documents from this era (1852) would still be in very good shape, especially if they were sealed," he said.

Tom Beirne, who is helping to arrange a burial with full military honors for the skull later this fall, said he'd like to settle the question of where the smallpox victims are buried.

"These were American soldiers and war veterans," he said. "They'd be entitled to be buried in Arlington."





BRIAN A. POUNDS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Soldiers Monument at Milford Cemetery, above, was erected in 1852 in honor of 46 Revolutionary War soldiers, former captives of the British, who died of smallpox in Milford after being left on a sand bar by a British ship. Below, Gary Gianotti, left, of Milford, and Peter Massey, of the University of New Haven, discuss the X-ray image of the monument.

