**Record-Journal**

**COLUMN: Last person convicted of witchcraft in N.E. buried in Wallingford**

June 17, 2016 07:32PM

In the frenzied, overbooked, live-in- the-moment existence that most of us live today, there seems to be little time to reflect on history. And the history of our local community is further relegated to a quick, cursory overview in middle school. And that’s a shame, because community history provides a valuable perspective on how we got to the present that can better help us map out the future of Wallingford.

Last Monday, that perspective came alive for me as I was treated to a fascinating tour of the Center Street Cemetery that occupies a significant section of downtown Wallingford. My guide was Bob Devaney, who has served as its superintendent for forty — yes, forty — years. His devotion to and reverence for this historic plot of land in our town center was evident from the first minute we began at the entrance on South Orchard Street when Bob said to me: “ When you cross this plane, you are entering into the history of Wallingford. Here in this cemetery, we are protecting the history of Wallingford.”

These ten acres have been an integral part of our community since its founding in 1670. This column cannot even begin to convey all of the intriguing details Bob related to me of what is contained within the walls of this place. Here is just a sampling:

• The geology of this part of town is evident every time a grave is dug. The valley through which Wallingford’s Route 5 runs is an ancient riverbed. It is a sand plain, and Bob encounters sand and fossilized fresh water clams within six feet of the surface.

• The cemetery is home to one of what may be only two mother-daughter graves in the entire country.

• Eagle Scout projects have renewed Grand Army of the Republic markers for veterans, installed posts to indicate the gravesites of early settlers, and made other improvements that highlight other aspects of the cemetery.

• The composition of the grave markers themselves illuminates history. The oldest are of fieldstone — rocks taken right out of farmer’s fields. Then came brownstone, followed by soapstone. Then “steel,” a type of granite from Vermont, became the material of choice. Some of the headstones are slate. Why? Because it was used as ballast for ships from England and was dumped in Boston, making it cheap and plentiful. There are even some hollow markers called Zinkies that were purchased from Sears!

• There are a dozen actual full-size stone tables spread throughout. There was a time in the 1700s that it was customary for families to come to the cemetery on a Sunday to remember a family member buried there. They would actually have a lunch there and perhaps spend the afternoon, hence the need for a table.

• Annually, a Yale art school professor holds a class where one of the very old, very gnarled trees is used as a pencil-drawing subject for his students.

• In its earliest days, the Wallingford cemetery was also the burial ground for Cheshire (until around 1780), Durham, North Branford, North Haven, parts of Meriden and, of course, Yalesville.

• The names of many of our streets, roads, parks and schools are those of early settlers and notable contributors to our town buried here.

• The last person in New England to have been convicted of witchcraft, Winifred Benham, is buried here.

Besides being a fascinating reflection of Wallingford history, the Center Street Cemetery continues to build history. There are 3,000 gravesites still available to add to the 9-10,000 that are already lovingly, passionately and proudly cared for by Bob and his assistant Whitey Pinette.

I was leaving, I asked how others might be privileged to be escorted through this iconic setting and be enthralled as I was. His answer was classic Bob Devaney: “Have them call me. I’ll do tours for groups of people that are interested.”

I urge you to take him up on his generous offer.

Stephen Knight, editorial writer, is a former Wallingford town councilor.