Cemetery Tour for the 350 Jubilee

By Devin Leith-Yessian, Record-Journal June 20, 2022

WALLINGFORD — The lives of residents who shaped the growth of Wallingford were recognized during a tour of the Center Street Cemetery on Monday morning. Well over 100 people joined the volunteers who maintain the historic downtown cemetery and representatives of local historical groups for the walk-through, stopping around the graves of local legends like Lyman Hall, Moses Y. Beach, Abraham Doolittle and the Rev. Samuel Whittlesey.

Bob Beaumont, vice president of the cemetery association, said the tour, part of the town’s jubilee celebration, was meant to teach residents and descendants of those interred about the town’s history.

“If you don’t understand history, you don't get to understand why things are the way they are today,” he said.

Cemetery superintendent Bob Devaney, who also serves as co-chair of the Wallingford 350+2 Jubilee planning committee, led the tour. He explained the difficulty in maintaining some of the centuries old markers, the earliest of which are often fieldstone with names etched into them. In many cases, families have since purchased monuments to go alongside the rudimentary stones, detailing the legacy of their forebears.

Continuing his own tradition of portraying historical figures, Mayor William W. Dickinson Jr. took on the persona of a pirate who protected ships hauling rice Lyman Hall grew in Georgia from British warships. He recounted Hall’s upbringing in Wallingford, his career as a pastor and physician and his move to Georgia to build a rice plantation.

Dickinson noted Hall was instrumental in representing Georgia in the Continental Congress and pushing the southern states to support the revolution, resulting in the British burning his property and driving him into hiding.

During the presentation of Lyman Hall’s life, a descendant explained how the Center Street Cemetery acquired the stone placed atop the monument from Hall’s original grave on his plantation in Burke County, Georgia. When Hall was reinterred to Augusta, Georgia, officials contacted Connecticut state government to offer the stone. State officials deferred to Wallingford, which had the stone brought by train and paraded through town before being installed in the cemetery.

A more recent addition to the tour is the grave of William Smith, a Wallingford resident who was among the first volunteers to join the Massachusetts 54th Infantry Regiment, which was the second African American unit raised for the Civil War. He fought at the battle of Fort Wagner, which was depicted in the 1989 movie “Glory.”

After the war, he returned to Wallingford and made a living trapping and hunting along the Quinnipiac River. He formed a fife and drum corps, the Dreadnaughts, and marched in parades, including past jubilee celebrations. Devaney became aware of Smith’s legacy when he had a conversation with a group of descendants who visited his grave to play the drums in tribute.

"I learn something new in here every single day. Every single day there's an encapsulated history of this place," Devaney said.