

Digging up dirt about the Leather Man

BY SAM COOPER REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

WATERBURY — His bones lie undisturbed in Ossining Cemetery — for now.

However, work above ground researching the life of the Leather Man is yielding new information about the mysterious wanderer from 19th-century New England.

Later this month, researchers will exhume the Leather Man from his New York grave and relocate his remains to a central location in the cemetery. Their arguments for the project have been twofold: The grave site is feet from a busy road, causing concern for public safety, and historians would like to know more about the nomad's identity.

For the uninitiated, the Leather Man was a curious figure in local history who for years meticulously walked a 365-mile loop between the Hudson and Connecticut rivers every 34 days, sleeping in caves and surviving off the hospitality of residents. He wore a 60-pound leather suit made from scraps collected along his journey, and was known as a friendly, if not overly quiet, tramp.

The Leather Man died of cancer in a cave in Scarborough, N.Y., in 1889, and was buried in nearby Ossining Cemetery.

Recently an old map of the cemetery has been found by the Ossining Historical Society that pinpoints exactly where the Leather Man was buried, said Dan DeLuca, author of "The Old Leather Man: Historical Accounts of a Connecticut and New York Legend," and a member of the research team exhuming the man's remains.

Previously, DeLuca had identified an area around the grave marker where he believed the body would be found.

However, it was a section of the cemetery reserved for paupers, and researchers believed the remains may have migrated over time. DeLuca said the recently discovered map indicates the team was in the right area, but he said the Leather Man's grave marker isn't oriented in the right direction.

"It appears we found the exact location where he was buried," DeLuca said. "It will save time and allow us not to disturb other remains which may be buried nearby."

According to court documents used to obtain legal permission for the project, Connecticut state Archeologist Nicholas Bellantoni and his team will examine the

Leather Man's bones to learn his stature, age and life pathology. If his skull can be found, the court documents state, it will be transported to Quinnipiac University, or a licensed facility, for a CT scan.

Researchers would also like to find a molar or large bone fragment, from which they could extract DNA, as well as a "stable carbon isotope," which could indicate the man's diet early in life. That test, researchers believe, could determine whether the Leather Man grew up in America or Europe.

Afterwards, all but the bone fragment would be reburied.

Meanwhile, DeLuca said, he has been delving through newspaper archives since his first book was published and has more than doubled his research. He said he has been working to identify the Leather Man's shelters and caves using historical records and journal entries. He said a recent technological advancement is aiding him: an iPad.

Using the device's GPS system, DeLuca said he has been pinpointing exact locations, which he hopes to put into a new book. He said his next book will include more maps, as well as previously forgotten newspaper accounts.