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Volunteer Bill Coverdale pulls the ground penetrating radar across a grid laid out in the Old Albany Road Cemetery in Old Deerfield looking for unmarked graves with State Soil Scientist Deborah Surabian, reading the radar images, and Aaron Miller, the Chair of the Western Chapter of the Massachusetts Archeology Society.

Scientists look for unknown graves at Albany Road cemetery

By KATHLEEN McKIERNAN

Recorder Staff

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OLD DEERFIELD — Could there be undiscovered burials deep in the earth of the Old Albany Road Cemetery? And what is hidden within the large dirt mound at the historic cemetery's corner?

This week, a team of soil scientists and archeologists scoured the historic burial ground off Albany Road with ground-penetrating radar equipment in the hopes of answering those questions.

The scientists hoped to find more undiscovered grave stones in addition to the 264 above-ground stones already identified. The team is also curious to find what is hidden within the mound at the edge of the cemetery. The suspicion is it is a mass grave of the British settlers slain in the historic 1704 attack on Deerfield by French and Indian forces.

The project is free for Deerfield.

It was organized by the Connecticut State Archeologists Office and the federal Department of Agriculture as part of an ongoing project to study historic grave sites.

With the two groups Wednesday was Dr. Aaron Miller and Todd Kmetz of the western chapter of the Massachusetts Archeological Society. Kmetz is also a member of the Deerfield Historical Commission.

The cemetery was chosen because of its history, Kmetz explained. The cemetery was commissioned in 1696, making it the oldest in town and potentially contains Native American or African American slave burials.

There could be unmarked graves or burials originally marked with wooden monuments, Miller said.

“This is the oldest in town,” Kmetz said. “It has the most mystery.”

The study is important to learning more of the history of the town, Miller said.

Viewing the data collection, Elizabeth “Betty” Hollingsworth, a member of the Historical Commission, noted the study is “important because what we’ll learn is disclosing things we didn’t know.”

“A lot of questions will be answered,” Hollingsworth said.

The scientists zeroed in on the open spaces of the cemetery.

“We want to find out if the open areas have grave shafts in them,” Kmetz said. “We picked out the areas we believed might contain unmarked graves.”

Using ground-penetrating radar equipment, the federal soil scientists repeatedly ran the small detector over the ground, which had been marked by a grid of orange flags. What they looked for is whether there is a linear pattern on three or more transverse lines.

Deborah Surabian, a federal soil scientist based in Tolland, Conn, said her team looks for changes in the pattern of the soil. Typically, natural soil is in horizontal layers. But if there is a break, it can represent a grave site.

By noontime, the scientists had already detected differences between the soil layers as shown by the radar screen, Surabian said.

The problem is the radar detects objects, but it doesn’t identify.

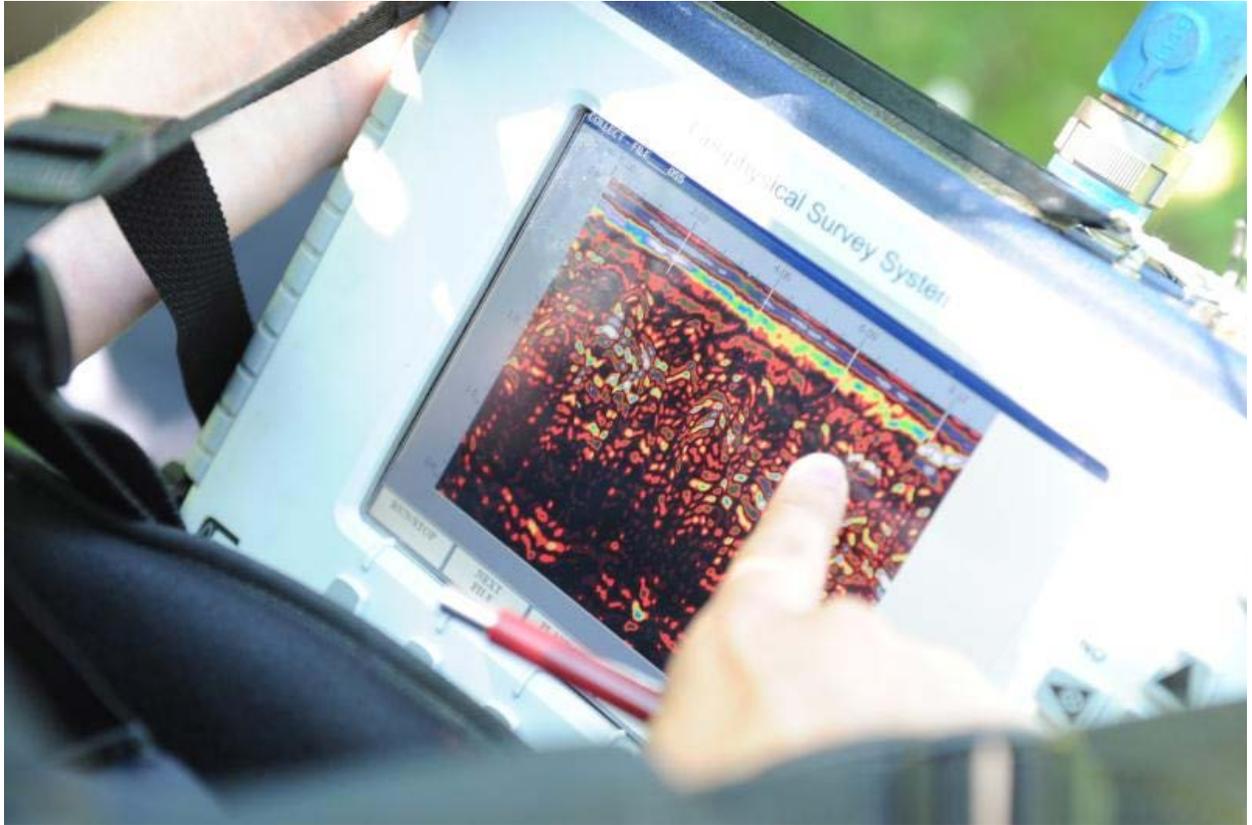
That is where the federal Department of Agriculture soil scientists come in.

Jim Doolittle from the federal Department of Agriculture will analyze the radar results and provide a report in two to three weeks.

Doolittle believed the crew would find something.

“I feel confident we will find features that represent graves,” said Doolittle.

**You can reach Kathleen McKiernan at:
kmckiernan@recorder.com
or 413-772-0261 ext. 268.**



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Ground-penetrating radar images of Old Albany Road Cemetery in Deerfield can be seen on this monitor.