

First history of religion lecture Thursday

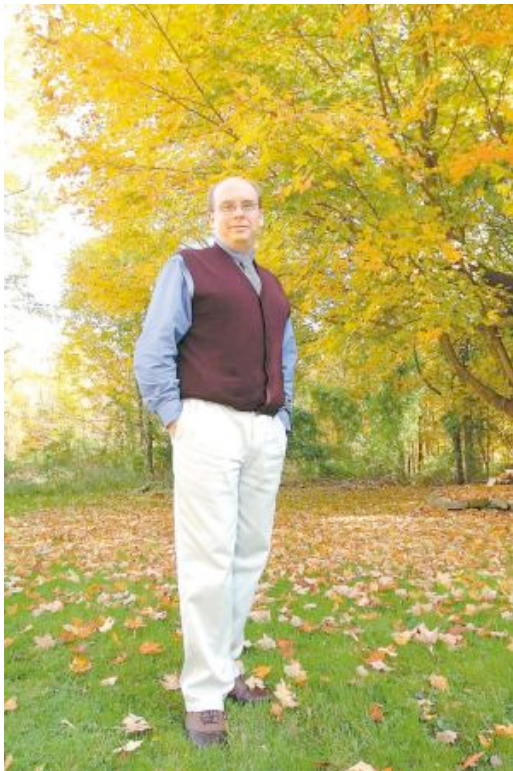
By Susan Tuz
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RIDGEFIELD -- Knowing that an ancestor of American artist Norman Rockwell was one of the founding deacons of Ridgebury Congregational Church is the kind of detail that makes history meaningful for the Rev. John Heeckt.

Heeckt, a historian and pastor of Ridgebury Congregational Church, will give free talks on the history of religious movements in Ridgefield this week and next at Ridgefield Community Center. The first talk, Thursday at 7 p.m., will be about the establishment of religious orders in town before and through the Revolutionary War. The second talk, Nov. 6 at 7 p.m., will deal with religious movements in Ridgefield after the Revolutionary War.

History to me is fascinating, because it's stories about people," Heeckt said. "One of the problems we have in the way history is told is that there is little focus on the regular people who do little things in their lives. "You get a million of those people working toward one goal, and you have a great moment in history." Heeckt plans to bring religious movements' "great moments" in Ridgefield to light in his talks. The First Congregational Church in downtown Ridgefield, established in 1709, was the first church in town. Ridgebury Congregational Church grew from that. "For people in the northern part of town, it took all day to go to the First Congregational Church for service. They had a mountain to cross, animals to care for on their farms before they could leave for church, and they were walking or riding horses," Heeckt said. From mid-November through February, the church allowed these parishioners to meet in Ridgebury for services. When the population of the Ridgebury area grew, a second Congregational church was established in 1736.



The Anglicans followed the Congregationalists into Ridgefield. St. Stephen's Church was formed by New York state residents who came to Ridgefield for services, Heeckt said. "Anglican churches had a hard time finding ordained clergy," he explained. "To become an Anglican minister you had to be ordained by a bishop, and all the bishops were in England. "You would have to go to England to study and be ordained there, which took years. Then you'd have to decide if you would stay in England at a church or return to the wilderness of New England."

Many of the Anglican clergy who came to New England in the 1730s, 1740s and 1750s came as missionaries, he said. In Westchester County, the Anglican Church was better established.

The Rev. John Heeckt's free talks on the history of religious movements in Ridgefield will be Thursday and Nov. 6 at 7 p.m. in Ridgefield Community Center, 316 Main St., Ridgefield. Call (203) 438-5821 for reservations.

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