



Anatomy of a heist: It was history that was stolen

Low-value items taken at Old Library Museum in New Castle, but ...

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"Indifference to history is more than just ignorance. It's a form of ingratitude."
— David McCullough, 1776

The fabric of the mile-square island of New Castle on the coast of New Hampshire consists of threads of history. From the early settlement in 1623 to the present day evidence of the past is ever present. Unwittingly someone attacked that fabric recently by breaking into the "Old Library Museum," the home of the New Castle Historical Society (NCHS). The museum reflects the efforts of local citizens to publicly display items that had been safely secured in the town's vault or in private possession.



Old Library Museum, Main Street, New Castle, NH. (Bill Drew photo)

A thief cut himself on the side window he broke to gain entrance. Some low-value items were collected and removed. Considerable damage was done by the droppings of blood on other items that were not taken.

The initial reaction is one of shock; The "Old Library Museum?" "Why?" "Here in New Castle?" "What was taken?" In the past Police Chief James Murphy has expressed the need to be ever vigilant of our surroundings. The experience this past year of the shameful use of abandoned Fort Stark in providing a haven for illicit drug use and the placement of graffiti showing anger, frustration, and resentment is a case in point. "Yes," as the chief points out, "here in New Castle, the Fort Stark situation has been out of sight, out of mind, yet the ever-

present threat of vandalism, robbery, drug deals gone bad and even discovery of a dead body is not beyond the realm of possibility."

On the night of April 4th/5th, a group of museum pieces that were on display were removed. The bulk of the items related to Wentworth Hotel memorabilia. A dish, tray and glasses commemorating celebrations of the history of New Castle and the hotel are among the missing. A dress worn by the owner of the hotel has been splattered with blood.



One of the items taken was a Knights of Pythias ceremonial sword, shown as it sat on the seat of a highly decorated chair used by the same organization (Courtesy of NCHS, Jim Cerny photo)

A sword donated by the town and used by the local Knights of Pythias group one hundred years ago, a cannon ball, and the monitor of the newly acquired Dell computer system were also taken. The value of the items, if sold for cash, is rather small in comparison with the cleanup costs and the "take" involving the affront of the citizens of New Castle and supporters of their museum of history. These items along with the whole collection are passports to history.

Take the cannonball for instance. It's a spherical object made of iron, about 5 inches in diameter. It has a few indentations and markings on it. It was dredged up off the shore of Fort Stark by local fisherman and town resident, Damon Frampton, and he in turn donated it to the Museum. What's it worth?



Cannonball (Courtesy of NCHS, Jim Cerny photo)

As a link to history, one thoughtful noted town historian and humorist conjectured, "that perhaps a good story should be made to go with it — That Captain John Smith fired it in anger at a bunch of Indians in war canoes and thereby dispersed them when he was surveying ye olde coast in 1614, that it has been guarded jealously by flounders and sculpins until disturbed by Damon Frampton." Where and how it got there tickles the imagination. What's the real story? Perhaps there is some truth to his conjecture. Then again, maybe it arrived during the Revolutionary War or the War of 1812? Objects like these conjure up visions of the past.

The Society after receiving the initial shock began to feel remorse that more hadn't been done to secure the contents of the building. Upon reflection, one person expressed, "when someone is determined to steal something; they will pursue all avenues to assure success." President of the Society Rodney Rowland says, "The people of New Castle and the supporters of the museum have been very open and giving. The formerly abandoned building required a considerable amount of funding to rehabilitate it to its present condition. Somebody breaking into our 'joint effort,' is a kind to trampling on the personal lives of everyone

involved. It cuts to the heart."

Rowland continues, "The thief cut the phone wires which included the alarm's connection to the world. But that should have set off an internal alarm if we'd had the alarm on. Whether anyone would have heard it is hard to say but it likely would have scared off the thief." He went on to say, "We could have the alarm mounted outside the building, but that gets into a question of neighbors and whether they'd be bothered by false alarms. A cell phone can be added to the system so that if the normal wires are cut the cell phone automatically calls out ... but what of the cost?" The Board of Directors is now taking steps to improve security against further intrusions.



Rodney Rowland (Jim Cerny photo)



One NCHS board member humorously depicted a suggested improved security measure by placing a picture of the head of the author, also a board member, onto a photograph.

As to identifying and locating the perpetrator, Chief Murphy gave a general report to citizens prior to a recent presentation by J. Dennis Robinson at the Old Library Museum, on April 17. "At this point in the investigation, I am not at liberty to disclose details, but various citizens, area police departments, the N.H. State Police and antique dealers have been extremely helpful in assisting us in the solving of this crime. It's a working case, and we hope for the best."

What's the motivation in this case? Many residents have come forward with theories. Experienced in watching CSI and other television "who did it." shows, the support Chief Murphy has receive is immense. Theory "A" is a thief in need of cash and figures that some easily-carried small articles that are old can be sold to an antique dealer or second hand store or maybe on eBay to some unsuspecting individual in search of a treasure. If he is in need of cash, he is looking for a quick turnover. In this case the outlets are few and very limited, particularly with the publicity surrounding the items. Somebody in Michigan doesn't care too much about an anniversary plate from 1976 of the Wentworth Hotel here in New Hampshire unless they feel they can turn it over and make some money. Since there was no vandalism or trashing of the museum, the

motive seems to be an economic one.

Theory "B": The individual involved in the actual robbery is doing it for money put up by someone else. How does someone know what to take unless the collection is viewed? Items appearing to have some value could be listed. Perhaps the taking of the computer monitor was an afterthought as it was in a physical position of being seen on the way out the door. At this point, who knows? Everybody has an opinion.

The Society moves on. The crime is in the hands of the police. Repairs and the cleaning up of the mess created, dealt with. A review of security measures continues. It comes back to an economic situation of how much to spend as a value of protection. President Rowland says "Alternatives will be part of a post-mortem at upcoming NCHS meetings." Already, the "tightened" security situation is having its effect.



New Castle Police Chief James Murphy (Jim Cerny photo)



With security measures tightened up, NCHS Board members arriving for a monthly meeting sit on the steps of the museum waiting for someone to help them gain entry. The solution is the arrival of the person at the lower left with a key. (Bill Drew photo)

So what's the "take?" Is it that of a few items of minimal dollar value?

It's said, "The past is history. The present is the making of history." - Ken Burns.

The community seems resolved to accept and repair the damage, improve the security of items in the collection, and get on with touching the past.

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