6

To Catch a Thief

BY BRITTANY TURNER

Archival theft takes advantage of the public trust to pillage our history. So New York State is offering some ways to thwart it.

istorical records are a hot commodity. Outlets like the TV program "Antiques Roadshow" and eBay on the Web promote the idea that mundane items can yield fortunes by virtue of their age. This broader awareness of valuable historical artifacts has subsequently led to an increased interest in archives and other historical records repositories—but it has also increased archival theft.

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This document bearing the signature of President Chester Alan Arthur is missing from the State Archives.

The issue has gained recent notoriety through increased media coverage of thefts and the resurgence of Hollywood heist films, most notably National Treasure. But repositories at risk for theft recognize that this crime is neither glamorous nor harmless. A thief who steals historical documents does not commit a victimless crime against property; rather, he simultaneously victimizes thousands, undermines historical foundations, and jeopardizes irreplaceable pieces of our collective identity.

Almost all repositories have experienced thefts of historical documents, whether they know it or not. Many remain undetected, leaving thieves unidentified and documents lost. The enormous volume of records maintained by repositories makes it impossible to establish the item-level controls afforded to other types of valuable materials. Equally disturbing are the identities of the thieves themselves. Insiders (employees or volunteers at a repository) are responsible for over half of archival thefts, while authorized researchers usually commit the remainder. These



are, unfortunately, people we know, who commit their crimes quietly over months or even years—as the State Archives realized, having experienced a traumatic incidence of insider theft in 2008.

The obligation to provide public access to historical documents---which is the purpose of archives, as well as the biggest threat to records preservation-magnifies the challenge of theft prevention. Thus the New York State Historical Records Advisory Board (NYSHRAB), aided by a generous grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), has embarked on a project to teach New York's records custodians how to protect their records. "To Preserve and Protect: Security Solutions for New York's Historical Records" offers numerous theft-prevention resources through NYSHRAB's website, www.nyshrab.org. In addition, security expert Mimi Bowling will host a series of nine free workshops across the state on records security, beginning in September 2010 and continuing through spring 2011. The project

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Top, left: Forty-seven of the sixty-seven large folio prints in this rare, nineteenth-century volume about Napoleon's battles in Italy were razorcut and stolen from the Army Museum in Delft, The Netherlands. The theft was discovered in 2003. The thief was the museum's curator, who stole over 1,000 prints and sold them to an antiquarian book dealer. Above: Documents bearing the signatures of George Washington and John Hancock have been stolen from the New York State Archives.

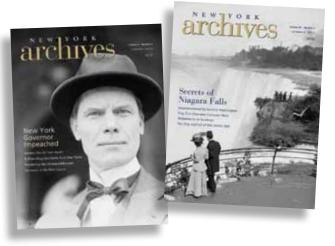
coincides with a public outreach campaign, which will help researchers, collectors, and sellers identify and report government records for sale in the marketplace and hopefully reclaim them.

Yet the greatest defense against archival theft is records users themselves—you, the public. Over the last decade, users have played a primary role in all instances of reported historical records thefts in the U.S. By combining your assistance with these web tools and workshops, we can preserve and protect our heritage for future generations.

If you see an item that may belong in the New York State Archives, please e-mail NYMissingRecords@ mail.nysed.gov, or call (518) 474-6926. ■

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Between the Lines empowers incarcerated people to assist in the development of early literacy skills among their loved ones while also enabling them to participate in important milestones as they serve their sentences. The program not only promotes family literacy, it also strengthens the bond between children and their incarcerated family members, despite the many barriers to contact and communication.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2007, an estimated 1.7 million children had at least one parent in prison.¹ This number swells when expanded to include aunts, uncles, grandparents, and siblings. Between the Lines allows these family members to reach through the prison bars and connect with the children in their lives. It also helps break the cycle of adversity, as poor literacy skills are closely tied to predictors of future challenges, including poverty, school dropout rates, and potential incarceration.² The National Center for Education Statistics found that early literacy skills are significantly more advanced in children who are read to in the home compared to those who rarely participate in family reading activities.

With six readings per year, Between the Lines volunteers visit the Men's Medium Security Facility located in Plain Dealing. The majority of inmates are serving sentences between five and seven years. Project volunteers work with inmates to select an age- and interest-appropriBrittany Turner, Assistant Head Volunteer



ate book and then create an audio recording of the inmate reading the story along with a personalized message. After the readings, the volunteers burn the recordings onto CDs and giftwrap the storybooks, mailing them to the children to coincide with important milestones like Thanksgiving, Christmas and Hanukkah, Valentine's Day, and the beginning and end of the school year. Packages are sent to families across the country, with the greatest concentration in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas.

Between the Lines, a national program established by the Junior League of Portland, was adopted by the Junior League of Shreveport-Bossier in 2012. The program is currently exploring avenues of possible expansion, including military personnel anticipating deployment and the use of video in addition to the audio recordings. The group is also eager to solidify a relationship with the Women's Maximum Security Facility, as women in state prisons are more likely to have minor children than men (62% to 51%).³

¹Glaze, Lauren E. and Maruschak, Laura M. "Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Parents in Prison and their Minor Children." 2008 August. http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf ²Hudson, John. "An Urban Myth that Should be True." <u>The Atlantic</u>. 2014 July 02. http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/07/an-urbanmyth-that-should-be-true/259329/

³ US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2000.



Thank you

Thank you, Delta Kappa Gamma Society International, Alpha Rho Chapter, for your generous donation of 33 books to Between the Lines. Delta Kappa Gamma Society is an honorary society of teachers that supports organizations that foster literacy in children.







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This year, the program has expanded from six readings per year to eight readings per year. In addition to volunteers working with inmates at the Men's Medium Security Facility in Plain Dealing, the program is now also working with the Women's Maximum Security Facility. This expansion further meets the mission of the program, as women in state prisons are more likely to have minor children than men (62% to 51%).1 The majority of inmates are serving sentences between five and seven years. Project volunteers work with inmates to select an age- and interest-appropriate book and then create an audio recording of the inmate reading the story along with a personalized message. After the readings, the volunteers burn the recordings onto CDs and giftware the storybooks, mailing them to the children to coincide with important events like Thanksgiving, Christmas and Hanukkah, Valentine's Day, and the beginning and end of the school year. Packages are sent to families across the country, with the greatest concentration in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas.

In addition to expanding to the Women's facility, the project has begun soliciting feedback from inmates to identify future improvements and better meet the needs of participants. When asked why inmates chose to participate in the program, one female inmate responded, "Because my son is up in Maine and I am so far from him. I want anything I can do to make him feel closer to me." Another respondent indicated that she would like "to send my daughters a [Christ]mas present since I won't be there and I know they'll enjoy my voice." A Bossier City inmate stated, "I'm very excited. I signed up because I think it's a great program. It's awesome that people actually care we are not with our children." An inmate serving her sentence from another state added, "We need more programs like yours. Us as mothers made mistakes by being here so you coming to do this for us really gives us hope."

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