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Guarding the Map Room: Understanding Theft & Increasing Security in Archives

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Introduction

In 1963, after decades of increased thefts and security failures in libraries and archives nationwide, the American Library Association published a report on the protection of libraries and their resources.¹ Though a long time coming, the highly anticipated report “failed to give much attention to the actual concerns regarding theft.”² Librarians, archivists, and others in the field were left to fend for themselves.

Finally, in 1987, the Security Committee of the ACRL RBMS (Association of College and Research Libraries—Rare Book and Manuscripts Section) began collecting information on all reported thefts within libraries, archives, museums, and special collections. The report, which began as a single page, quickly grew over the next decade. The results of the Committee’s work helped bring much-needed attention to the issue of library and archival security.

This attention has resulted in the development of detailed security guidelines that have been openly supported by the Society of American Archivists. The ACRL/RBMS Guidelines Regarding Security and Theft in Special Collections, formally approved by SAA in 1993, and Gregor Trinkaus-Randall’s *Protecting Your Collections: A Manual of Archival Security*, published by SAA in 1995, provide recommendations and establish security standards for institutions to follow.^{3, 4} They both call for detailed security plans, a greater awareness of vulnerabilities, and active engagement in stolen item recovery.

Knowing the Biblioklept

In order to best understand the vulnerabilities of archives to theft, we must first look at the thieves themselves. Two significant works on the subject, *Notes on Bibliokleptomania* by Lawrence S. Thompson and *Rare Books and Manuscripts Thefts* by John Jenkins, provide insight into the behavior of these biblioklepts.^{5, 6} Thompson discusses two types of book thieves: criminals and bibliomaniacs. While the former steals from need or greed, the latter may be “private individuals acquiring the books...for their own collections.”⁷

Thompson’s warnings about the different types of biblio-criminal are echoed in Jenkins’ work.⁸ Jenkins, then President of the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America, outlined the “nature of the book thief” and divided them into five categories:

(1) the kleptomaniac, who cannot keep himself from stealing; (2) the thief who steals for his own personal use; (3) the thief who steals in anger; (4) the casual thief; and (5) the thief who steals for profit.⁹

He explains the different scenarios in which a thief may arise. From a “janitor [who] discovers rare documents left on shelves” (casual thief) to someone who “harbors a real or imagined grievance against the institution” (thief who steals in anger), Jenkins provides insight on each type of

thief.¹⁰ Insight, he hopes, that will make them easier to catch or stop.

Jenkins then sets his sights on the institutions themselves, outlining common weaknesses in security. One of the primary areas of concern for Jenkins is the risk to unbound materials. This is especially of concern when it comes to maps, etchings, and drawings. The smaller and more compact an item, the easier it is to secret away. A practiced thief can enter an institution with a concealed knife or razor blade and slice numerous pages out of books or manuscripts, put the pages in their pocket, and leave unnoticed. These smaller items are not only much easier to sneak out, but prove much harder to track down once they've been taken. While books and other large items might be marked or branded in some way (allowing them to be tracked back to their home institution) leaves of maps or loose maps are not often marked in a clear manner.

For those thieves who steal for profit, it is often less conspicuous and more economically viable to take portions of a book rather than the whole. Since individual maps are harder to trace, they can be passed along to buyers without detailed provenance or valid authentication. For a casual buyer who is looking for a beautiful or old image to decorate an office or home library, the question of where a map comes from is not of great concern. Online sales through sites such as eBay allow thieves to unload stolen items anonymously and without buyers knowing (or caring) about the history of the items.

Two recent cases of theft by employees at the National Archives branches in New York and Philadelphia demonstrate just how easy and lucrative it is to sell online.¹¹ In both cases, the employees stole letters and other loose materials from their archives and posted them for sale online. These sales netted tens of thousands of dollars for the thieves. Though archives are not first and foremost concerned with the monetary value of their items, it is important for institutions to think financially when it comes to security—to think like thieves.

Those Who Steal

While the impetus for book thieves may change from person to person, map thieves tend to share a common obsession, even mania, for the material they are pilfering. Miles Harvey describes the subculture surrounding maps as “an obsession both surreal and sublime.”¹² This nearly compulsive behavior, coupled with the goal of finding items that are “the most valuable...and the easiest to steal,”¹³ makes map thieves among the most determined and destructive of criminals:

When no one was looking [Bland] would proceed to take out a single-edged razor blade...He could put the razor under his fingers so that you never really saw it. You just saw him take his hand and go down from the top of the page to the bottom. It would appear to be nothing unusual—maybe like he was just scanning text. But he would actually be cutting out the page. The whole operation would take just a matter of seconds.¹⁴

Thus was the modus operandi of Gilbert Bland, the “most prolific cartographic criminal in American history.”¹⁵ Once the maps were cut out, Bland would slip them into his coat or hide them among his notes, return the books to the unsuspecting staff, and walk out the front door. During a three-year period, Bland stole more than 250 rare and antique maps worth an estimated half-million dollars.¹⁶ Once he had the maps in his possession, Bland would turn around and sell them out of his Florida-based store:

As Antique Maps & Collectibles sent out catalogs and advertised in international trade magazines, word began to spread that a little store in south Florida had an incredible supply

of low- to mid-end maps. Some dealers grew a little suspicious of Bland's ability to find multiple copies of relatively scarce pieces. Others were beginning to raise eyebrows over what one dealer called Bland's "ridiculously low prices."¹⁷

The reason for the low prices and impressive catalog soon became clear: Bland was stealing his merchandise. As his store became more successful, the demands from his clients increased. If a rare map were wanted, Bland would find a way to get it. When he was finally caught, Bland had a notebook on him that contained a list of maps that he planned on stealing as well as a list of institutions from which to take them. This "hit list" proved to be Bland's undoing, turning him from profitable map dealer to convicted felon.

A similar tale of dealer-turned-thief comes to us from Martha's Vineyard. It was there that E. Forbes Smiley III developed into a top-tier map dealer with a solid reputation for helping to build some of the largest private map collections in the world.¹⁸ Two of the collections that he helped construct were eventually donated, becoming the foundations for the Lawrence H. Slaughter collection at the New York Public Library and the Norman B. Leventhal collection at the Boston Public Library.¹⁹

Smiley took advantage of his long-standing reputation in the map business, and used his experience and charms to access materials in libraries and archives. During an eight-year spree, Smiley stole nearly 100 maps valued at more than \$3 million from six highly regarded institutions (including the Boston Public Library, Harvard, Yale, and the British Library).²⁰ Smiley was caught red-handed at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University when he accidentally dropped an X-Acto knife—his weapon of choice for cutting maps out of books.²¹ At the time he was caught, Smiley was in possession of seven stolen maps valued at nearly \$900,000.²²

While the economic impact of Smiley's crimes is certainly evident, the greater damage came from the loss of cultural heritage and historical value. David Ferriero, then CEO of NYPL's Research Libraries, appeared at Smiley's sentencing to convince the judge of just this fact:

I am here today to talk about the actions of a thief—a thief who assaulted history, betrayed personal trust, and caused irreparable loss of treasures whose value to future scholarship now will never be known.²³

Unfortunately for the future Archivist of the United States, and for Smiley's other victims, the judge handed down a sentence of just 42 months for the crimes. He was released from prison in January, 2010.²⁴

Recommendations for Improving Security

If people like Bland and Smiley are out there, what is your archives to do? As recommended by the ACRL/RBMS Guidelines, the first steps should be to conduct a security assessment of your institution and create of a formal security policy.²⁵ These measures will not prevent theft, but will put your institution in a better position to curtail it in the future. Being aware of the security weaknesses (and strengths) of your archives is essential to protecting your collections. As part of the security assessment, a Security Officer should be appointed and charged with planning and overseeing all security programs.

There are a variety of things that archives can do to address more immediate security needs. The

first, and probably most daunting, of these tasks is a careful assessment of collection materials. Whether this means a shelf read or collection inventory, the institution must know what it has in order to know when something is missing. A careful assessment of what material is in the archives can make thefts more apparent and easier to handle if they should occur. As part of this assessment, careful attention should be paid to the most vulnerable items within collections. This includes the loose/unbound items that Jenkins' warns about, and that thieves find so attractive. A list of maps, drawings, etchings, and significant letters should be created and the items periodically spot-checked to ensure that they are safe.

When pulling research materials for patrons, archives staff should be aware of maps and other items that might be targets of theft. Inspecting items as they go out to patrons and verifying when they come back can offer an immediate "check" of the materials. A simple count of the materials will provide an extra level of security within the research room. A box or folder going out to a researcher with three rare maps should come back with three rare maps. Everett C. Wilkie recommends an even faster and more hi-tech version of this step be taken:

A method of detection that is effective, accurate, and relatively inexpensive is offered by weighing materials when they are issued to a reader and then reweighing them when they are returned...Appropriate scales are easy to use, give clear indications if something has been removed from or added to a volume or folder, are extremely sensitive, and present few practical problems.²⁶

Wilkie used Gilbert Bland's thefts as examples of how significant weighing materials can be. While a staff member may not have the time to flip through an entire atlas, he/she could weigh the book and notice a difference in the weight if something is missing. Three single maps that Bland removed from atlases weighed between 0.64 oz. and 1.6 oz., an amount significant enough to be noticed had scales been in place at the time of theft.²⁷ While Wilkie's suggestion may not be feasible in all archives, the reasoning behind it is sound. No matter the method, an examination of materials both before and after they are given to researchers should be done. Though this may slow down the retrieval process, the few extra minutes of inconvenience will be worthwhile for your institution.

Another step that archives can take (and most already do) is to establish regulations that disallow patrons to bring any bags, jackets, loose clothing, or even notebooks into secure areas of the archives. This would cut down on the number of places a thief can hide stolen goods. In addition, a thorough inspection of the patron and their property after they leave research areas and reading rooms would allow archives to ensure (as much as possible) that nothing is being removed. Looking through a researcher's pockets, notes, and other personal items is not out of line, especially if such rules are made known to patrons upon their arrival. These policies should not be limited to just visitors, but employees as well. As is evident from the recent NARA thefts, there should be no assumptions about or special privileges for staff members. The same security restrictions that your archive applies to patrons should be applied to employees.

Conclusion

Making simple and straightforward adjustments to security at your archives may seem obvious, but they are effective. However, no matter how many new policies and procedures are put in place, there is nothing to guarantee that your institution will not be susceptible to theft. Despite the lessons learned from the cases of Gilbert Bland, E. Forbes Smiley, and others, archives still face the threat of theft. Updated security policies, tighter security checks, and patron screenings can certainly go a long way to helping diminish that threat. As John Jenkins stated: "Good security is no

more or less than courtesy combined with common sense.”²⁸

¹ Edward M. Johnson, Ed., *Protecting the Library and Its Resources* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1963).

² Kristin M. Janus, “Securing Our History,” *Library & Archival Security* 17, no. 1 (2011): 5.

³ “ACRL/RBMS Guidelines Regarding Security and Theft in Special Collections,” *Society of American Archivists*, last modified May 2012, <http://www2.archivists.org/standards/acrlrbms-guidelinesregarding-security-and-theft-in-special-collections>

⁴ Gregor Trinkaus-Randall, *Protecting Your Collections: A Manual of Archival Security* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1995).

⁵ Lawrence Thompson, *Bibliokleptomania* (New York: Peacock Press, 1968).

⁶ John Jenkins, *Rare Books and Manuscript Thefts* (New York: Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America, 1982).

⁷ Thompson, *Bibliokleptomania*, 5.

⁸ Jenkins, *Rare Books and Manuscripts Thefts*, 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Ross Griffiths and Andrew Krol, “Insider Theft: Reviews and Recommendations from the Archive and Library Professional Literature,” *Library & Archival Security* 22, no. 1 (2009): 8-9.

¹² Miles Harvey, *The Island of Lost Maps: A True Story of Cartographic Crime* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000), xxi.

¹³ Jenkins, *Rare Books and Manuscripts Thefts*, 12.

¹⁴ Harvey, *Island of Lost Maps*, 101.

¹⁵ Harvey, *Island of Lost Maps*, 172.

¹⁶ Miles Harvey, “Mr. Bland's Evil Plot to Control the World,” *Outside* 22, no. 6 (June 1997). <http://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/Mr--Bland-s-Evil-Plot-to-Control-the-World.html>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ William Finnegan, “A Theft in the Library,” *New Yorker*, October 17, 2005.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Andrew Albanese, “Map Dealer Admits Thefts,” *Library Journal* (August 2006): 17.

- ²¹ "The Case of the Missing Maps," Federal Bureau of Investigations, last modified September 28, 2006, <http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2006/september/maps092806>
- ²² John Christoffersen, "Collector pleads guilty; admits stealing rare maps," Associated Press (New Haven, CT), June 22, 2006.
- ²³ Norman Oder, "Map Thief Gets 42 Months," *Library Journal* (November 2006): 14.
- ²⁴ JBD, "Smiley Release Date Set," *PhiloBiblos*, September 12, 2009, <http://philobiblos.blogspot.com/2009/09/smiley-release-date-set.html>
- ²⁵ "ACRL/RBMS Guidelines Regarding Security and Theft in Special Collections."
- ²⁶ Wilkie, Everett C., "Weighing Materials in Rare Book and Manuscript Libraries as a Security Measure Against Theft and Vandalism," *RBM* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 147.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.
- ²⁸ Jenkins, *Rare Books and Manuscripts Thefts*, 20.
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