



## *Crime at the Smithsonian Institution*

*Recent events, such as the arrest of contract parking lot attendants at the National Air and Space Museum's (NASM) Udvar-Hazy Center, may seem unique, but crimes have occurred at the Smithsonian since its earliest years. The attraction of valuable artifacts, disputes between people, and mental illness have all contributed to the steady drumbeat of CSI. Fortunately, these events occur less often than in the general population. This overview will describe the types of crimes that have taken place at the Smithsonian and provide notable examples of each.*

### ***Crimes against Property***

Even before the Smithsonian was founded, the U.S. national collections were subject to theft. In 1840, the Imaum of Muscat (now Oman) sent gifts to President Martin Van Buren, including a box of pearls and a gold-mounted sword. The President sent the gifts to the National Institute Gallery at the Patent Office to place on display. Additional foreign gifts of gems and precious metals followed. These treasures proved too tempting to a local gang of thieves, who repeatedly stole items and used them to barter the freedom of an arrested gang member. In disgust, the Commissioner of Patents had the valuables deposited at the U.S. Treasury.

These valuables did not come to the Smithsonian in the 1858 transfer of the national collections from the Patent Office. In



*Museum in the Patent Office Building, 1856, SI Archives*

1874, when Secretary Joseph Henry was asked to take custody of them, he refused, citing several robberies, including an attack on a Smithsonian night watchman by a thug with a vial of chloroform, pistol, and Bowie knife. Secretary Henry would only accept the valuables if the government provided a safe for storing valuables with a dedicated watchman. In the 1860s, the Castle

had a box for contributions to the Washington Monument construction. The box was the target of repeated break-ins.

At that time, the grounds around the Castle were not prime real estate. A fetid canal cut the Castle off from downtown Washington, and the trip to the bridge took one near the red-light district located by the railroad yards. Secretary Spencer Baird finally accepted the valuables in 1887 when cases with electrical alarms were installed in the new U.S. National Museum building, now known as the Arts and Industries Building (AIB).

For many years, security relied on the watchmen and alarms for buildings and cases. In the late 1960s, Smithsonian staff created the first Security Committee, led by World War II veterans who had worked in military security. They were



*Watchmen for the National Museum, c. 1900, SI Archives*

concerned about the safety of the museums during civil rights and anti-war demonstrations. Much to their dismay, Secretary S. Dillon Ripley held training sessions on how to welcome demonstrators to the museums in an attempt to reach new audiences. The Security Committee established ID badges, property passes for removing property from museums, and “battle bills” with steps to follow in situations such as bomb threats.

Despite these precautions, there was an unprecedented amount of theft in Smithsonian facilities over the 1970s and 1980s. Among the high-profile crimes was the 1981 theft at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) of four objects, including a set of George Washington’s false teeth. That same year, two men attempted to sell a historic machine gun that had been stored at NASM’s Garber

Facility. And in 1982, stamps worth \$21,000 were stolen from the NMAH.

In some cases, the thefts were “inside jobs” by Smithsonian staff or volunteers. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were a series of thefts by the guard force, which had been infiltrated by a ring of ex-cons. In addition to a good bit of office equipment, one of the stolen items was a Charles Wilkes medal in the NMAH that was melted down and never recovered. Another guard was arrested and charged with stealing two swords, two gold medals, and a snuffbox from NMAH exhibits; two other men were also charged with receiving the stolen goods. The sword was returned to the Smithsonian, minus its gold-and-diamond-encrusted hilt. Also returned were a cigarette box, the silver pen used to sign the Treaty of Paris, and frames of political buttons.

In 1979, a volunteer was caught stealing a shark’s tooth and fish fossil worth \$10,300 from the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH). Rigorous background checks were instituted in response to these “inside jobs.” Nevertheless, one of the game wardens at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) was discovered assisting poachers hunting on Barro Colorado Island in the 1990s.

Smithsonian security officers have also thwarted several thefts. In 1975, a noted German mineralogist stole minerals from the NMNH Mineral Hall. A new guard noted that the elderly man seemed to spend an unusually long time in the hall, and seemed more focused on the actual cases than the minerals. Kept under observation all day, the man was seen removing several specimens, and was arrested as he left the museum.

Security guards again were called into action on September 19, 1981, when an ex-clerk



*Museum clerk who aided arresting officers, SI Archives*

with the Smithsonian museum shops attempted to steal more than \$2,500 from the NMNH shop. The armed thief walked in on shop employees, and took money out of the register drawers. As he left, staff pushed a security button and Smithsonian security guards apprehended the thief at the museum's exit.

Dealers have played both positive and negative roles in the theft of museum objects. In 1980, the FBI announced that a gold-and-diamond snuffbox made for Catherine the Great, stolen from the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) in 1979, had been stripped of its diamonds and melted down in 1980.

The snuffbox's fate was uncovered during the FBI's "Operation Greenthumb" investigation into Washington, D.C.–area gold and silver dealers who allegedly bought stolen items. Only 25 diamonds were recovered from the more than 200 that had been encrusted on the stolen box.



*Thomas Moran's Valley of Cuernavaca, 1903, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum*

In 1985, the FBI announced the arrest of a suspect in the theft of four Civil War documents from a display in the National Portrait Gallery (NPG). Three of the four documents were recovered when a dealer notified the Smithsonian that the thief had tried to sell them. From 1990 to 1994, a NASM curator stole \$24,000 of patches and memorabilia. A dealer alerted the Smithsonian that the curator was offering exceedingly rare items for sale. After being placed under observation and caught in the act, he pleaded guilty to the thefts. In 1995, Thomas Moran's *Valley of Cuernavaca*, which had disappeared from the SAAM collection 20 years earlier, was returned. The Adam A. Weschler & Son auction house received the painting on consignment and, while performing a routine check on its provenance, discovered it was stolen.

Objects are most in danger when in transit or out of their normal storage location. In January of 1865, a fire badly damaged the Castle. While some object collections and documents were destroyed by

flames, many library books and personal belongings were stolen when dragged outside for safekeeping. Guards were soon posted, but not before many items disappeared.

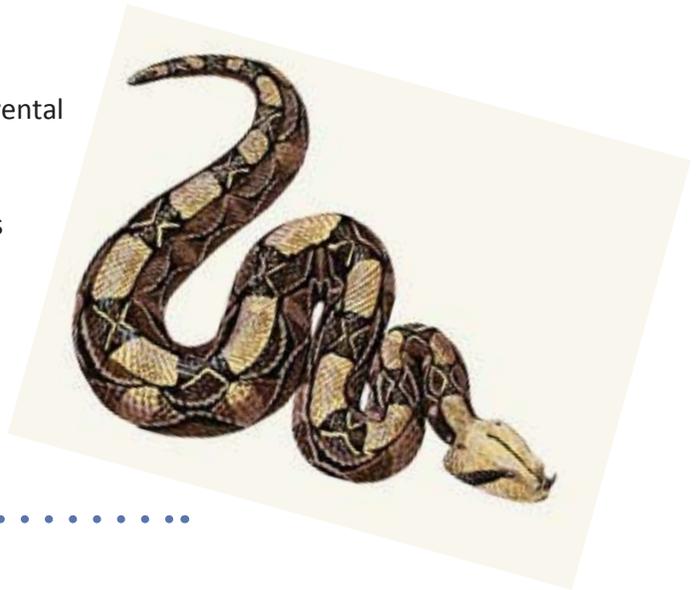
In 1978, the Collier Aviation Trophy, normally on display at the NASM, disappeared from the National Aviation Club's meeting at the Mayflower Hotel. And in December 1984, Connie Carpenter presented her 1984 Olympic Games bicycle-racing outfit to the NMAH. Before it could be transported back to the museum, however,

*Fire in the Castle, retouched photo by Alexander Gardner, SI Archives*



the outfit was stolen from the trunk of a curator's rental car in Oakland, California.

The National Zoological Park (NZIP) has had unique problems with crimes against animals, such as boys throwing rocks at flamingos' legs. One of the most dangerous thefts was of two Gabon vipers from the Zoo in 1983. A 16-year-old boy fascinated by reptiles was critically injured when he smashed a display case one night, placed the vipers in a plastic bag, and was bitten by the poisonous snakes.



### ***Destruction of Property***

Deranged individuals have, on occasion, attempted to destroy museum property. As early as 1857, a museum keeper reported that a man tried to break the Andrew Jackson sarcophagus at the National Museum. In 1969, Lampros Marines smashed a case in the NMNH Reptile Exhibit and used a butcher knife to decapitate the reticulated python and king cobra and stab the Komodo dragon.



*Taxidermist Edgar Laybourne working on model of a reticulated python, 1960s, SI Archives*

### ***Misappropriation of Property***

In the 1970s, a scientist at the new Whipple Observatory in Arizona found a creative way to get the equipment he needed. He requested excess GSA property that he did not need and then traded it for the machinery he actually wanted. Although he

never personally profited and all the equipment was used for observatory work, it was a violation of Federal property management laws. Despite Smithsonian attempts to negotiate a plea deal without prison time, the scientist served several years in prison. Under Secretary James Bradley felt that Smithsonian management had failed this employee by not providing proper oversight and subsequently created the Office of the Inspector General to identify and correct problems internally before something like that could happen again.

### ***Financial Crimes***

Secretary Samuel P. Langley had a trusted assistant who streamlined processes. When a suspicious Richard Rathbun served as Acting Secretary in 1905, he checked the books. The assistant, who by then had assumed the joint position of Accountant and Disbursement Clerk, was convicted for having embezzled some \$60,000 of the Smithsonian's endowment and \$7,000 in Federal appropriations. As a result, fiscal processes were tightened up.

In the 1980s, the manager of the Zoo's exhibits department wrote contracts to a former employee for signs that were never received, and the two simply split the proceeds of the contracts. Suspicious colleagues contacted the Inspector General, who contacted the FBI and the perpetrators were caught and prosecuted. And just recently, the parking lot attendants at the Udvar-Hazy Center were skimming parking fees until arrested by the FBI. Interestingly, in all three cases of embezzlement, the perpetrators were caught after suspicious staff reported their concerns.

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### Crimes Against People

There have been many assaults of individuals on the National Mall, especially after dark. On at least three occasions, NMNH staff members have attacked colleagues in their office areas. In the 1930s, an eccentric aide in the geology division (and who actually lived in the museum) attacked a colleague, who took refuge atop a table. In the 1970s, an anthropology department staffer attacked his supervisor. In the 1980s a staff member assaulted a colleague after a dispute over a travel voucher and was then retired on disability. The Smithsonian Employee Assistance Program and Ombudsman try to stave off such crises today.

Other crimes against people have included sexual assaults against children, a problem that can occur whenever unsupervised children are allowed to wander unsupervised in public places. In the 1850s, Secretary Henry fired a taxidermist and banished him from the city when he was caught molesting a young boy in the men's room. Sexual harassment was a more prevalent practice before the 1980s, when Smithsonian-wide sexual harassment training began.

Perhaps the best-known

offender in the first half of the 20th century was a NMNH Curator of Mollusks. The curator, who studied marine organisms that burrowed in the sand along the shore, also liked to feel women's derrieres. When he did so to a visiting college student, she climbed out a window and stood screaming on the ledge. The curator was admonished and, because of his interest in both studying bottom-dwelling mollusks and touching women's bottoms, nicknamed "the Bottom Sampler."



The "Bottom Sampler" at a 1927 Mollusks Exhibit for the Board of Regents, SI Archives

Other sexual harassment crimes have included a facilities worker's installation of a camera in the women's restroom at a Smithsonian Environmental Research Center facility.



Insanity Plea for Slayer, Washington Post, March 28, 1907

Murders have been rare—but they have occurred. The first occurred in 1907 when an artist from Philadelphia fatally shot an artist in his office at the National Museum. Although the assailant had a history of mental illness, the attack was not random. Claiming that he had been molested previously by the victim, the killer showed no remorse and said that he had committed the crime to protect other young children the same fate. He was acquitted on the basis of insanity and committed to the Government Hospital for the Insane.

In 1979, an Associates volunteer was beaten to death while walking to the Metro at 10:30 p.m. after a puppet-making class in the AIB. In 1993, a NASM food contractor employee was fatally shot in the kitchen following a personal dispute with a NASM

security officer, who was charged with second-degree murder while armed.

The recent death at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden is not without precedent. A security officer shot and killed himself at the Renwick Gallery in 1978. He was turning in his revolver and ammunition at the end of his shift, however, and so it wasn't clear whether the shooting was intentional or accidental.

There also have been two deaths due to big cats at the Zoo. In 1958, a young girl was decapitated by a lion while visiting the zoo with her grandfather. Zoo director Ted Reed refused to euthanize the lion and turned public outcry into the creation of Friends of the National Zoo, which focused on securing renovation funding. And in March of 1995, a woman with a history of mental illness was killed when she entered the lion enclosure at night.



*Officer Darryl King at the National Air and Space Museum*

The Smithsonian has experienced many of the crimes found in normal urban life. Personal disputes, theft of property and money, and even murders are not unusual events in human affairs. However, some, like the theft of the Gabon vipers, are unique to the Smithsonian. Crimes have been perpetrated

by the full range of the Smithsonian community—administrators, curators, researchers, security officers, volunteers, and visitors.

The Smithsonian Office of Protective Services has grown from a single watchman to a large and professionally trained organization. Background checks are now conducted on all staff, resident researchers, and volunteers. Programs are in place to assist individuals with personal problems and all staff are trained in emergency procedures.

The crime rate is low at the Smithsonian, so it seems shocking when it does occur. History, however, tells us that, because the Smithsonian is an urban organization of human beings, crime has been part of the Institution since its founding.

*Pamela M. Henson  
Institutional History Division  
Smithsonian Institution Archives*

