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# GET THE THIEF “OUT OF THE BUSINESS”: DIARY OF A THEFT

*Dennis East and William G. Myers*

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Publishing an article about the theft of manuscript material 19 plus years after the incident poses no threat to anyone. We believe it is valuable, however, to publish an account of this theft, which took place in 1979, in order to inform the archival and library communities of the complexity of and difficulty in pursuing, proving, and prosecuting such matters.

Nineteen years after the fact, we have decided to open our original diary. This decision comes from our outrage at the continued thievery of our documentary heritage from our nation’s libraries, archives, and historical societies. If the publication of this diary of a theft helps one administrator, one librarian, or one archivist take the steps necessary to protect their material (books, maps, manuscripts, government records, or anything else), then it will have served its purpose.

## Uncovering the theft

On Sunday, March 27, 1977, the Dennis East household was disturbed by a phone call from a colleague, Frank L. Levstik, state archivist at the Ohio Historical Society (OHS), who reported that another colleague, Carl Albrecht, head of the Natural History Department and an avid philatelist, had attended

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a stamp show in Columbus and witnessed a man he knew offering Northwest Territory covers—the leaf of a document or letter bearing the address, post office stamp, and other postal information—for sale. Albrecht thought that the items being offered came from one of the manuscript collections held by the Archives-Manuscripts Division of the Society. The local stamp show had ended. There was little that could be done at that point, but East called William Myers to alert him to what faced us at work the next day.

### **The diary**

The diary—documenting the events, findings, and activities associated with uncovering and attempting to prosecute this theft—originated from the request of the assistant county prosecutor assigned to the case. As head of the Archives-Library Division at the OHS at the time of the theft, East received the various reports by telephone, in conversations, and in findings obtained by other knowledgeable, dedicated staff members—Gary Arnold, archivist; Virginia Ingram, head of the paper conservation laboratory; Frank L. Levstik, state archivist; and William G. Myers, head of manuscripts. The diary—a compilation of acquired information and some speculation—would, we were told, be extremely helpful if this matter ever went to court.

Presentation of this essay based on the diary necessitated changing the names of people involved in this case. The names and positions of OHS personnel, and certain allies, have been provided. Special recognition needs to be given to the late Charles Ball of Cleveland, Ohio, who unstintingly gave of his time and knowledge of Ohio postal history and philatelic values and who, beyond all measure of devotion, greatly assisted OHS personnel in pursuing this case. To protect the reputations and interests of non-OHS personnel, particularly the dealers and philatelists who cooperated with us, occupational or interest-related names are provided below. The point is that in such a case, it is often necessary to call in experts in their fields as advisors or witnesses. Also, it is advisable—once a theft has been perceived or suspected—to keep a diary detailing every phone call, e-mail message, event, or person related to the entire affair.

For the sake of convenience, Table 1. lists the people involved in our case and how we refer to them in this essay.

### **The collection**

The OHS purchased the Backus-Woodbridge Collection in several

**Table 1. Philatelic dealers, collectors, appraisers**

Appraiser Charles Ball	A manuscript-philatelic appraiser A philatelic collector/postal historian who assisted in uncovering and pursuing the theft
Dealers One, Two, Three Philatelists One, Two, and Three	Philatelic dealers Philatelic collectors (Three was an out-of-state collector)
<b>Attorneys</b> Suspect's attorney County Prosecutor Assistant County Prosecutor	
<b>Researchers</b> Researchers One and Two	
<b>Police Officials</b> Officer-in-Charge  Officers One, Two, and Three	An Ohio State Patrol Officer ini- tially in charge of this case Ohio State Highway Patrol Officers
<b>Suspects</b> Reprobate  Mrs. Reprobate Old Man	The man suspected of taking the philatelic items from OHS. This is the name by which we came to refer to him; it reflects our preju- dice against him. The suspect's wife The man who supposedly sold the philatelic items and old newspapers to Reprobate

installments: a grouping of manuscripts formerly called the Woodbridge-Gallaher Collection in 1935; the James Backus papers in 1944; the Backus-Woodbridge correspondence, originally called the Marietta papers, in 1952; and a fourth grouping, formerly part of the H. E. Matheny Collection of West Virginia, in 1966. The collection, covering the years 1731 to 1894, contains approximately 2,000 items, primarily correspondence and business account books concerning four generations of the Backuses and Woodbridges and their political, legal, military, and land speculation activities in the

Northwest Territory and in Ohio. Harman Blennerhassett, who later became embroiled in the machinations and conspiracy of Aaron Burr, served as a business agent for the merchandising firm operated by Dudley Woodbridge and Dudley Woodbridge Jr. Correspondence to and from him exists in the collection.

Fortunately, the contents of the Backus-Woodbridge Collection, having been acquired over several years between 1935 and 1966, had a detailed inventory. A penciled number had been assigned to each document in the collection. Documents in each folder were also placed in chronological order and undated documents were placed at the end of each folder. Such marking of one's collection—both the visible and the “invisible” type—are recommended, the first to deter theft, the second for identification in the recovery of stolen materials.

The personal, family, and business correspondence in the first three boxes of the Backus-Woodbridge Collection was the focal point of the thief's activity. The material in question covered the period 1773 to 1865, with emphasis on 1790 to 1816. Staff at the OHS, perhaps to reduce researcher-induced wear and tear on this significant early Ohio material, to make the material readily available to others, and to provide security for the collection, micro-filmed the first three boxes of the collection in 1961. Access to these three boxes was limited to the microfilm. This restriction on research use was publicly stated in the collection finding aid. We were unable to determine how Reprobate gained access to the original documents in the first three boxes. We presumed, because of his interest in only the philatelic aspects of the material and postal history, that Reprobate prevailed upon someone to permit him to review the original documents.

As this incident unfolded, we initially discovered that 13 covers or address leaves dating between 1797 and 1810 with various Northwest Territory, Mississippi Territory, and early Ohio statehood period postal markings had been removed from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection. Our original list of missing items included the following, offered here to illustrate the nature of the material that was stolen:

*Marietta*, (Ohio), postmark, May 29, 1797, Elijah Backus to Dudley Woodbridge; September 11, 1797, Dudley Woodbridge to James Backus; June 11, 1798, N. Backus to James Backus; September 26, 1799, W. Backus to James Backus; January 7, 1802, N. Backus to “Dear Br.”; all of these items

were missing the address leaf, while the original document remained in the collection.

**Zanesville**, (Ohio), postmark, September 26, 1808, Dudley Woodbridge to James Backus. Entire document missing.

**Athens**, (Ohio), postmark, June 12, 1813. Address leaf missing but the original document remained.

**Delaware**, (Ohio), postmark, January 16, 1816, Delaware way, war rate. Entire document missing.

**Port Gibson, Mississippi Territory**, postmark, January 19, February 20, October 4, 1810, Harman Blennerhassett to Dudley Woodbridge. All three documents missing.

### **Tracking reprobate**

Upon learning the name of the person suspected of possessing and selling address leaves (covers) and documents from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection, staff began searching the registration forms, daily log sheets, and call slips. This theft occurred years before the automation of the researcher registration process. Consequently, staff members invested hours and hours searching registration forms, the daily log, and call slips and comparing signatures and writing/printing styles.

Our investigation ultimately revealed that Reprobate and his wife had registered as researchers in the summer of 1974 and that over the next 18 months they visited the reading room 11 times—eight by Reprobate, one by his wife, and two together. The greatest period of visitation by Reprobate was April and May 1976, a few months before the Cincinnati stamp show at which he offered items for sale and before the revision of our researcher registration procedures and forms. Our review disclosed that Reprobate entered false and incorrect information when completing the daily log sheets:

- On five occasions he used his real name but provided a different pass number. The numbers either were assigned to other researchers, which a search of the registration forms revealed, or were nonexistent pass numbers.
- On one occasion he registered using only an initial for his first name after erasing the correct first letter of his first name and writing another initial. The erasure is clearly visible on the daily log form.
- On another occasion his last name is almost unreadable and he used a non-assigned pass number.

- One time we believe he signed in using Ball's name and a non-assigned pass number.

- Seven other daily log entries appear to be in Reprobate's handwriting, and in each instance either a pass number assigned to another researcher or a non-assigned pass number was used.

- All visits by Reprobate's wife, either alone or with her husband, record the correct signature and pass number. We had no evidence that Reprobate's wife was either involved in the theft or perhaps even knew of her husband's possible involvement.

### **Covering up the theft**

At the time, the various installments of the Backus-Woodbridge Collection were processed into a unified collection, all of the correspondence and legal and financial documents were placed in chronological order within folders and each consecutively numbered in pencil. Many of the items in the collection included information of interest to a philatelist/postal historian either on the obverse of a letter or document or on the last page of a multipage document. Almost all of the documents had been folded several times, the postal information recorded on the exposed leaf or section—usually with no writing on the verso—and sealed, sometimes with wax.

The thief removed the philatelic/postal information by separating the address portion from the main document page and then, where necessary and possible, renumbering the remainder to maintain the consecutive numbering. Sometimes the thief erased a penciled number on the preceding and following documents and renumbered documents in an attempt to maintain the sequence. Upon close examination, we discovered documents on which erasure of the penciled number was evident and out of chronological and/or numerical sequence. The thief tried to cover up his actions so that a cursory review of the numerical ordering would not indicate that anything was amiss. To cover his tracks, the thief separated segments from other documents and renumbered them. We were sometimes left with mismatched sheets (part of one letter joined numerically but not textually to part of another), unattached fragments of which we could not learn their original number, items out of chronological order, misnumbered items, single items separated to create the appearance of two items, and the like. The removal and renumbering of the documents was so skillfully completed that had a staff member taken time to

compare a folder's contents with the original inventory or the numerical order after a researcher used a box or folder, it is unlikely that irregularities would have been apparent.

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Following is a series of entries from the diary East kept of the entire affair.

**28 March.** Carl Albrecht related to Frank Levstik, William Myers, and East that he and two other philatelists, Ball and Dealer One, had attended the stamp show on Sunday and they witnessed Reprobate offering items for sale that they thought came from the Society's Backus-Woodbridge Collection. Albrecht informed us that Ball had used the collection the previous year in assisting with a postal history project and that he was certain the items being offered for sale came from our collection. Acting on the information provided by Albrecht, East telephoned Ball and learned that Ball had used the collection in 1976 and had made some electrostatic copies of the territorial covers dating before 1800 to share with a colleague who was doing research on post offices in the Northwest Territory; also Ball told East that his colleague, Dealer One, had found an exact match to a cover from the collection offered for sale by Reprobate at a Cincinnati stamp show in the fall of 1976; Dealer One, who also had copies of the copies made by Ball, had speculated that five or six items from that same collection may have been offered for sale at the Cincinnati show. Ball said the covers offered for sale in Cincinnati and the electrostatic copies he made matched perfectly on the following points: post office of origin, the rate, the date, the sender, and the receiver. Ball also repeated that Dealer Three had said that Reprobate had offered these items for sale at the Cincinnati show. And Ball told East that Reprobate was a known philatelic collector who specialized in "Delaware way" covers and that he believed the man taught school in central Ohio. Ball related that Reprobate had told him he had acquired the territorial covers from an Old Man whom he had met in the Westerville Public Library one day; Reprobate had told Ball that an Old Man had a grocery sack full of old documents and that Reprobate purchased those that interested him.

Ball said that Dealer One had been told the same story by Reprobate and that a Dealer Two had handled/purchased at least one of the suspected territorial covers.

East related Ball's information to Myers and Arnold. We agreed to begin

searching the registration forms all researchers had to complete for the names of Reprobate, Ball, and Dealers One and Two to see if and when they had registered at the Society and to check the call slips researchers used when requesting materials to determine all the users of the Backus-Woodbridge Collection over the past few years.

East and Myers went to the office of Thomas H. Smith, director of the Ohio Historical Society, to report on what we knew about the entire situation. We agreed that the state highway patrol should be apprised of the matter as the Society was partially supported by state funding. Dr. Smith contacted the highway patrol.

[Note: Fortunately the registration forms that all researchers visiting the Archives-Manuscripts Division and Library Division had to complete, as well as the call slips submitted by researchers to staff to retrieve material from the closed stacks, had been retained. We discovered that the pre-1974–75 call slips had been destroyed.]

**31 March.** Called Ball to have him search the electrostatic copies from the collection that he had so that we could match up dates of items that he had found in the collection the previous year with what remained in the collection and what Reprobate had reportedly offered for sale at the various stamp shows in 1976 and 1977. Found one item, Marietta, September 26, 1799, that matched our holdings and which Reprobate had sold Dealer Two, who, in turn, sold it to Dealer Three at the Columbus stamp show for \$875. Ball related that Dealer One had mentioned purchasing a Marietta, February 4, 1807, cover with the left corner torn off, from Reprobate at the Cincinnati show in 1976 and that Reprobate promised to send Dealer One electrostatic copies of some Harman Blennerhassett covers in his possession.

[Note: We determined that the Marietta 1807 item was missing from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection. OHS staff used this information from Ball to continue searching and to look for missing/damaged Blennerhassett letters from the material.]

That evening, around 5:30 p.m., East met with the Director of the Ohio Historical Society and an Ohio State Highway Patrol Officer to report our suspicions about the theft and to share our findings to that point. After reviewing what we knew and what steps we were taking to uncover more evidence linking Reprobate to the theft of Society material, it was agreed that an officer would be assigned to meet with us the next day.

[Note: The bulk of this meeting was spent explaining the nature and value of philatelic material to the officer. He had difficulty understanding that the address leaf or cover from these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century documents had historical and monetary value and that people actually collected them.]

**1 April.** Officer-in-Charge from the Ohio State Highway Patrol met with us and we again explained the entire situation, as we knew it at the time, to him.

Arnold, Myers, and Levstik continued working in the Rare Book Room combing through registration forms and call slips and comparing what remained in the Backus-Woodbridge Collection with what we believed Reprobate had offered for sale at the two stamp shows.

Arnold and Myers listed six documents suspected of having been altered by the removal of the address leaf/cover and turned the documents over to Virginia Ingram, the senior paper conservator, so she could examine them to try to determine if they had been cut or torn.

[Note: Arnold carefully checked each document in the collection for the time period prior to 1800 and selected specific letters and items where he believed the cover-address leaf may have been removed. He initially selected six documents and turned them over to Ingram.]

Later in the afternoon, Ingram informed East, Myers, and Arnold that it just was not possible to determine if the six documents from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection had been cut or torn or how recently they might have been cut or torn.

Officer-in-Charge visited and picked up the list of items we believed were missing from the collection, Ingram's reports, copies of the researcher registration forms, the daily researcher sign-in sheets, the call slips, and copies of the letters and documents from which the address leaf was suspected to be missing.

Received a letter from Ball in which he enclosed three examples of Reprobate's signature plus electrostatic copies of copies of three address leaves which Dealer One had purchased from Reprobate. Dealer One personally owned one leaf (February 4, 1807) and had sold one each to Dealers Two (September 26, 1799) and Three (August 12, 1797). Dealer Two, in turn, sold the September 26, 1799, cover to Philatelist Two of Cleveland on March 17, 1977, for \$800.

Ingram submitted her report on five more documents Arnold had selected from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection for examination. Again, she could not determine if or when they had been cut or torn.

**7 April.** Officer-in-Charge picked up Ingram's April 4 report on the five documents as well as copies of the letter and material sent by Ball to East on April 4.

**12 April.** East submitted a memo to the file and attached a copy of a letter written by Dealer Two to Ball in which the dealer had offered two covers, August 21, 1797, and Marietta, September 26, 1799, for sale. The 1797 item was the one purchased by Philatelist Two, the Cleveland collector. Myers, Arnold, and East agreed that both covers had been in the Backus-Woodbridge Collection.

**13 April.** Myers wrote East that he had contacted the editor of *The Papers of Aaron Burr* project at the New York Historical Society to determine if a former OHS staff member had sent copies of any Harman Blennerhassett documents from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection to the project. Earlier, copies of two single vertical file manuscript items signed by Aaron Burr had been forwarded to the Burr Papers project. We hoped, in contacting the Burr papers editor, to learn whether the Harman Blennerhassett items Reprobate had reportedly offered for sale had come from our holdings. Myers learned later that day that no Blennerhassett documents from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection had been sent to the Burr Papers project by OHS staff.

**19 April.** An Archives-Manuscripts Division staff member reported to East that Researcher One, a scholar we had identified from our registration forms and call slips as a user of the Backus-Woodbridge Collection, called to say that he had neither made any notes nor made copies of the three Harman Blennerhassett items from that collection.

[Note: This closed another avenue to us for proving ownership of the Blennerhassett letters.]

**22 April.** We removed all items from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection that had been examined by Ingram, placed them in mylar sleeves, and secured them. The assistant county prosecutor suggested that we separate these items and have them appraised by a knowledgeable philatelic dealer/collector so a determination of the value of the loss to the Society could be made. Ball assisted us in identifying five individuals active in postal history-philately that [sic] he believed qualified to make the appraisal.

We checked our registration forms and found that only one of the five potential appraisers had registered to use the Archives-Library. One appraiser was known to Myers and we agreed to contact him to determine if he would do the appraisal for us.

Arnold completed his review of the call slips and reported that a staff member and an outside researcher had used the Backus-Woodbridge Collection in the last couple of years, but they had not used the first four boxes from which items were suspected of being sold/offered for sale. The only known users of the material in the first four boxes of the collection over the past two years were Ball and Reprobate.

**30 April.** Ball sent his own independent monetary evaluation of the items believed missing from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection, noting that he had originally made a mistake in dating one cover and that he now appraised it at \$1,250 rather than the lower value he originally listed. The item was a Zanesville cover from 1802, not 1808 as he had originally noted.

**2 May.** Myers met with The Appraiser to show him the items to be appraised and to establish his schedule and procedures for the review.

**6 May.** The Appraiser delivered his appraisal to Myers, placing a value in excess of \$7,000 on all of the items.

**24 May.** East made notes for the file on Dealer One's letter of May 6, 1977, to the Society's director explaining that he had delivered a talk at the Columbus Philatelic Club some time ago and at that meeting Reprobate had shown him six items which were now listed as missing from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection. Ball called East regarding Dealer One's letter of May 6, a carbon of which he had received from Dealer Three. East contacted the assistant county prosecutor with this new information.

East contacted Officer-in-Charge at the highway patrol; learned that Officer-in-Charge was slated to have surgery and that Officer Two would replace him.

East made arrangements with Officer Two to attend the upcoming stamp show in Dayton with another highway patrol officer to determine if Reprobate was offering our missing items for sale.

**9 June.** East drove to the Highway patrol post in Dayton and met Officer Three. We went to the stamp show and met Ball, who pointed out Reprobate to us. Ball approached Reprobate, while the officer and East stood at a

distance, and asked him if the previously offered covers-address leaves were still for sale. Reprobate informed Ball that the items were being considered for purchase by another individual and that he could not offer them to Ball at this time. Reprobate also told Ball that he did not have the items with him at the show.

Trooper [sic] Three and East left the stamp show shortly thereafter. On the way out of the building East spoke with Dealer Two and asked him if he could ascertain from Reprobate if the previously offered items were still for sale.

**11 June.** Myers submitted notes to East on a conversation with Ball in which another Ohio philatelic collector told Ball that another person had contacted him about the theft of the items. This collector had, in turn, told another person in Ohio about the theft and then this person had contacted Dealer Three. Dealer Three called Ball to report on how the story about the theft was circulating and that people interested in philately were seeking information as to what was happening or going to happen. Dealer Three had contacted Ball because people knew Dealer Three had handled/sold some of the items reported as missing.

Dealer Three told Ball that he had sold a Detroit cover to an out-of-state collector, Philatelist Three, and a Port Gibson, Mississippi Territory, cover and two Kaskaskia, Illinois, covers to other collectors. Dealer Three also said that Philatelist One also knew all the details of the theft, Reprobate's involvement, and the procedures we were following at the Society. Dealer Three reported that Philatelist Three had learned the details from Officer One's father, who worked for Philatelist One. East informed the assistant county prosecutor of the foregoing information.

[Note: The staff involved in this investigation were quite surprised to learn that the officer in charge of this case was talking freely about the theft, the suspect, and the evidence we were gathering and that interested parties in the state knew the details of the matter.]

Ball called East and informed him of a conversation with Dealer Two, who had approached Reprobate at the Dayton stamp show about availability of the territorial covers. Reprobate told Dealer Two that there were still three covers left but that he had a lead on a person interested in purchasing all three, and that if the sale did not materialize to the person he would make them available to Dealer Two. Reprobate expected the sale of the items to the other person to be completed quite soon.

**14 June.** East reported on the events at the Dayton stamp show and the conversation with Ball to the assistant county prosecutor and Myers. The assistant county prosecutor stated his belief that something needed to be done and soon before Reprobate sold the items to another person. He indicated that we might try to obtain a warrant to search Reprobate's home.

East followed up with Dealer Two, who reported that Reprobate had told him that he obtained the covers-address leaves from an Old Man whom he had met at the Westerville Public Library. Reprobate said that he purchased a bag filled with old newspapers, covers, and other documents.

**20 June.** Ball called to say he had talked with Dealer Three on June 19 and that the dealer reported he still retained control over one item he had purchased from Reprobate last spring, but that he had sent it to a dealer in California for auction; that he purchased a Port Gibson, Mississippi Territory, cover from Reprobate, and that he might have his records regarding the transaction. Dealer Three also reported that he had purchased a Marietta cover from Reprobate and sold it to Philatelist Three, who lived out of state. Ball also reported that Dealer Three had offered to cooperate to the fullest in pursuing and resolving this matter.

The assistant prosecuting attorney reported that the State Highway Patrol had terminated all investigation, but indicated he might be able to use the local police force. He thought they might assist as they considered the entire issue to be a state matter. He also said that a State Highway Patrol Officer had told him that he would explore having the continuing involvement of that agency. And he indicated the plan might be to go to the grand jury and, if that happened, the Ohio State Highway Patrol might be involved.

**21 June.** Myers, Assistant County Prosecutor, an officer from the Franklin County Sheriff's Department, and East went to the town where Reprobate lived. The assistant county prosecutor had an appointment with a local judge to request a warrant to search Reprobate's home. The judge (somewhat surprisingly to the assistant county prosecutor) granted the warrant on the basis of the evidence, especially the statements of philatelic dealers who had done business with Reprobate and reported that sales of some of the missing items by Reprobate were pending.

The assistant county prosecutor and the sheriff's deputy went to Reprobate's house, executed the search warrant, and obtained five items which were on our missing documents list. The assistant county prosecutor reported

that Reprobate volunteered to show us other items in a safe deposit box at a local bank.

**22 June.** All of us met Reprobate, his wife, and his attorney at the local Columbus bank. Reprobate and his attorney brought out four address leaves (not entire letters) encapsulated in plastic. They were postmarked Marietta, July 16, 1801, and September 24, 1802; and Philadelphia, May 10, 1796, and May 21, 1796. Only the Marietta item of 1802 was on our missing items list. Reprobate and his attorney agreed that we could take all four items to try to determine if any of them came from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection. Back at the Society, an examination of the four items from Reprobate's safe deposit box revealed that all four had been detached from documents in the Backus-Woodbridge Collection.

[Note: We were, of course, pleased to have recaptured some of the missing items and we felt confident that finding them with Reprobate and being able to match them exactly with documents remaining in the collection bolstered our evidence and case immeasurably.]

**28 June.** We turned over the four items taken from Reprobate's safe deposit box to the sheriff's office.

Reprobate's attorney came forward with an Athens, June 12, 1813, leaf and turned it over to the sheriff's office. This item was on our missing list and Myers retrieved it from a deputy sheriff so we could examine it. We confirmed that the item came from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection.

**29 June.** East received a copy of a letter from Dealer Two to Ball, including copies of the three covers that he withdrew from auction in California, plus copies of other covers he suspected may have been taken from the Society.

**11 July.** Myers and Ball went to the assistant county prosecutor's office to discuss the status of the investigation and to review all of the items retrieved and/or suspected of being missing.

**13 July.** East contacted the head of an Ohio college library which housed numerous Northwest Territory and early Ohio statehood manuscript collections to determine if Reprobate had ever used the library's collections. We wanted to alert this library of our situation and we hoped to learn whether some of the items found in Reprobate's home or safe deposit box may have come from that library's collections. Later in the day, the librarian informed East that they had no record of either Reprobate or his wife ever registering or using any of their collections.

Myers reported the following from the assistant county prosecutor: 1) that we deliver the letters and statement of Dealers One and Two to the Highway Patrol; 2) that Reprobate's attorney would not submit his client to any handwriting analysis so long as that analysis was completed by the Highway Patrol or local police; and 3) that Director Smith and those of us involved in this case were to meet with him and the county prosecutor soon to determine what action(s) to take.

**16 July.** East received a letter from Dealer Three explaining how seven items, which we believed had been separated from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection, had come into his possession and how he subsequently disposed of them. The letter contained electrostatic copies of the items he was retaining in his safe until the case was completed and he was instructed what to do with them. [Three items were from Kaskaskia, two were from Marietta, one was from Port Gibson, and the last was from Detroit. Most (at least five) had been purchased directly from Reprobate. Dealer Three had sold one of the Marietta items to Philatelist Three.] His letter indicated that he paid \$1,000 for the Port Gibson, Detroit, and Marietta items.

His letter expressed the hope that Philatelist Three would cooperate and that Dealer Three could buy one of the items back and then, upon instructions from someone, return it to the Ohio Historical Society.

Dealer Three appeared at East's office. He was in town to attend the Columbus Stamp Show on July 16 and 17. We discussed his letter and his views on the matter. Most important, he delivered six of the seven covers mentioned in his letter. Only a Marietta 1807 cover remained with Philatelist Three. East gave Dealer Three a receipt for the six items.

**18 July.** The assistant county prosecutor sent copies of the formal statements he took from Dealers One and Two regarding this entire matter and their dealings with Reprobate.

**19 July.** Dealer Three sent a copy of the letter he sent to Philatelist Three requesting the return of the Marietta cover and offering to give him a full refund of his money. Myers wrote Dealer Three saying that we had forwarded a copy of the signed receipt for the items he turned over to East on 16 July to the assistant county prosecutor and Myers returned the mylar sleeves in which Dealer Three had delivered the six items.

**21 July.** East received a copy of Dealer Three's letter to the assistant county prosecutor explaining how he acquired the covers.

**12 August.** East received a carbon of a letter from Dealer Three to Philatelist Three, the out-of-state collector, referring to their negotiations for a Chillicothe cover and exploring the possibility of making arrangements to “trade” for the Marietta cover sold to Philatelist Three.

**16 August.** Director Smith, Myers, and East met with the county prosecutor and the assistant county prosecutor. The decision was made to take this case before the grand jury.

**18 August.** East received a carbon of the receipt for the seven covers retrieved from the assistant prosecutor’s property room.

**31 August.** Assistant county prosecutor visited the Society to review the circumstances of this case with Myers, Ball, and East. We focused our review on the handwriting evident on the registration forms and call slips, the altering of pass numbers and use of incorrect pass numbers by Reprobate, and the statements of the dealers who had done business with Reprobate.

**2 September.** The assistant county prosecutor visited the Society to meet with the senior conservator Ingram. She showed him how to match up paper chain lines, stain marks, and watermarks from the separated/stolen address covers with those in the original documents in the Backus-Woodbridge Collection.

The assistant county prosecutor met again with Myers, Ball, and East to discuss the case and the presenting of information to the grand jury.

Arnold reported finding records indicating that the Ohio Historical Society had filmed typescripts of letters from the Woodbridge-Gallaher Papers (the previous title given to the Backus-Woodbridge Collection) for an out-of-state repository in 1961. He telephoned the head of an out-of-state repository to request a reel of the microfilm containing typescript letters of Harman Blennerhassett and Woodbridge correspondence (February 20, 1810, and June 21, 1810). We were still trying to document the existence of the Blennerhassett letters in the collection.

**9 September.** Arnold received the microfilm from the out-of-state repository. Myers and Arnold reviewed the microfilm and located the transcripts of the two Harman Blennerhassett letters involved in this case. We informed the assistant county prosecutor of the microfilm and he requested copies of the typescripts of the Blennerhassett letters.

### The end result

In the end, Reprobate went free. The assistant county prosecutor presented all of our evidence to a grand jury. In the end, the grand jury declined to return an indictment against Reprobate. The assistant county prosecutor told us that the grand jury believed Reprobate's story of having purchased the items from the Old Man at a local public library. In the grand jury's opinion, Reprobate's story seemed entirely plausible. Since Reprobate claimed to have paid cash for the items and did not secure a receipt for his purchase, the case boiled down to his word against ours. The evidence we produced as to altered signatures, falsified researcher registration numbers, the matching of watermarks and paper chain lines between the items recovered from Reprobate and the documents left in the Backus-Woodbridge Collection, and statements of the dealers who purchased purloined Backus-Woodbridge items from Reprobate, and other evidence proved to be of no value.

No formal handwriting analysis was ever done. Because we lacked the required print and script specimens in Reprobate's hand, the analysis of the handwriting by the prosecutor's expert proved inconclusive. As a result, the prosecutor offered neither evidence nor testimony on this point to the grand jury. Those of us involved in this case came to believe that the failure to match conclusively Reprobate's handwriting on the researcher form, daily log sheets, and call slips and to introduce the results to the grand jury contributed immeasurably to the negative outcome.

We recovered five of the known missing items as a result of the search warrant executed at Reprobate's home and six through the cooperation of Dealer Three. Five other items, not on our original missing items list, came from Reprobate's bank deposit box and attorney. These 16 items were returned to the Backus-Woodbridge Collection.

Three postal covers from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection were neither returned nor located: one cover remained with Philatelist Three, the out-of-state collector, and the other two never surfaced. One of the items was a Delaware way cover with a war rate marking. The philatelic dealers and collectors who assisted us in this case told us that Reprobate specialized in collecting Delaware way covers. We speculated that Reprobate kept this cover, not bringing it to the attention of either the law enforcement officers who visited his home, the officials, or his attorney who recovered items from his security box at his bank. Without the aid

of the collectors and dealers, we would not have recovered items and been able to pursue this case to the grand jury. As soon as the dealers became aware of the possibility that they had purchased and/or resold stolen items, they came forward and cooperated fully. The cooperation and assistance of the late postal historian and philatelist Charles Ball was particularly outstanding in all phases of this matter.

The words of one dealer who wanted this case fully prosecuted reflect the views of all of the dealers with whom we worked. In a letter to the prosecuting attorney, the dealer wrote:

While I have no knowledge of the laws, I can simply state that I urge your department to prosecute to the fullest extent of the law.

Granted, you may get *all* the missing papers back to The Ohio Historical Society, which is basically what is desired, but what happens to the philatelic hobby?

If the thief can be convicted then he would be banned from all the philatelic national societies and barred from attending all philatelic functions around the world.

The hobby of stamp collecting has been riddled with frauds, cheats and thieves, for generations. Why not deter the persons interested in defrauding stamp collectors and robbing future generations of historical information?

The suspect's attorney wishes to not sully the good name of the person involved. Whoopee; what about bank robbers and child molesters? I am sure they prefer not to have their names made public, too!

... I haven't even touched upon the thousands of dollars I have lost, to date, on these transactions. However, I will pursue any legal means to recover my monies [sic] and, I hope, get the thief "out of the business."

Pursuit of the 1807 Marietta cover in possession of the out-of-state collector, Philatelist Three, continued into the 1980s, but he never relinquished the cover. Dealer Three, who sold the cover to Philatelist Three, wrote several times offering to reimburse him. East and Myers wrote Philatelist Three as well, asking that the item be returned to the Society. Philatelist Three declined all entreaties. Recently, lawyers representing Philatelist Three's family informed the Ohio Historical Society that Philatelist Three had died and

that the family, having found the letters requesting the return of the cover, wished to explore returning it.

### **New procedures: registration forms, daily log, and call slips**

The theft from the Backus-Woodbridge Collection took place between 1974 and the spring of 1976. During this period the Society stationed a security guard at the entrance to the reading room to assist with registering researchers and checking patron belongings as they left the reading room. Obviously the procedures and practices called for at the time of the theft were not rigorously followed by the staff. It could be argued that even with the rigid enforcement of the practices and procedures, Reprobate could have managed to hide his thievery from the staff and exit the building with the covers and letters. We believe the previous loose, somewhat informal procedures actually allowed Reprobate to work freely and to enter a variety of signatures, printed names, and researcher registration numbers on registration forms, daily log sheets, and call slips. We believe slipshod security and lack of attention to procedures facilitated Reprobate's thievery.

After September 1976, when East assumed the duties as chief of the Archives-Manuscripts Division at OHS, new researcher registration procedures were initiated with the aid of William Myers, Frank L. Levstik, Gary Arnold, and the cooperation of the head of the library division. At that time, the Archives-Manuscripts and Library Divisions shared a reading room and separate staff provided reference assistance to researchers. The Archives-Manuscripts Division provided secretarial assistance to both divisions and oversaw the registration of new researchers and the daily signing-in and signing-out of visitors. People visiting to use materials were asked to complete a registration form and present identification, preferably a photo ID such as a driver's license, and to sign the daily log sheets noting their pass number and their time of entry to the reading room. Researchers also were required to log out when they left the reading room. In the reading room researchers had to complete a call slip, again providing their signature and pass number, for all material they wanted to use.

After the Backus-Woodbridge theft, we redoubled our efforts to educate everyone who worked at the Society (archivists, librarians, security staff, etc.) about the importance of having complete forms prepared by the researcher, checking photo identification, and requiring signatures and pass numbers on

sign-in/sign-out forms and call slips. We also adopted a permanent-retention practice for the forms and call slips. And we conducted sessions with the Society's security guards who continued to assist with patron registration in the reading room on how to search patron notebooks and briefcases. We also showed them the many types of historical documents that researchers might take from the reading room.

### Lessons for the future

That the keepers of the manuscript, rare book, and special collections contained in libraries and archives have to be ever vigilant in safeguarding our documentary and printed heritage seems obvious. The increasing willingness of some institutions victimized by thieves to go public with the news and to prosecute suspected thieves and defacers, and to use whatever channels are available for announcing thefts, bodes well for the future. The practice of adopting the RBMS *Guidelines* concerning theft cannot be overemphasized. Administrators and trustees must be educated as to their responsibilities, and perhaps their liability, for the protection of special collections. Of the holy trinity—collecting, preserving, and making accessible precious books, manuscripts, and other special materials—preservation takes precedence. Once collected, the item must be preserved to make it available, and that process involves the item's physical safeguarding. Experience should teach us this fundamental precept.

The theft experience recounted here prompts the reiteration of some of the recommendations of the ACRL RBMS *Guidelines* as well as additional suggestions.

- ♦ Establish strict researcher registration procedures and have staff trained to be able to explain and justify the need for signed registration forms, photographic identification, signed daily log-in/log-out forms, and signed and dated call slips with the pass number recorded. You must get serious about security!
- ♦ Make certain your registration procedures require the researcher to provide both print and script samples of their printing and writing.
- ♦ Train staff and security personnel to take the time to identify researchers and validate the information they provide on their registration and supplementary log sheets and call slips.

- Adopt a practice of permanent records retention for registration forms, daily log-in/log-out sheets, and call slips. Do not dispose of them!

- Make certain the researcher registration procedures are consistently and impartially applied to all researchers. Train staff not to show favoritism to frequent, friendly, and familiar researchers.

- Train staff to be aware of how thieves work and provide articles and information about other thefts.

- Contact law enforcement officials to review your registration and security procedures and to learn what evidence/proof attorneys need to prosecute a theft.

- Establish simple, straightforward procedures for staff to follow when they suspect a theft has occurred or after a theft has taken place.

- Start an educational/public relations campaign to provide information sheets or simple brochures in the research area(s), explaining the importance of security to your patrons and asking their cooperation and assistance.

- Publicize in your reading room/research area, if appropriate, that your institution has been victimized by a manuscript thief and that the registration and monitoring procedures are the result of someone else's dishonesty, not the current patron's.

- Find out about, learn, and teach the staff about the local or state shoplifting laws and their application to libraries and archives.

- Separate extremely valuable items into a special secured area, preferably a vault. Make electrostatic copies of the items and place them in the collection. Make the originals available to scholars only when absolutely necessary, and under careful monitoring.

- Train staff to be polite and cordial to researchers while being ever mindful that even the most outwardly friendly or professional person could be a thief. It is indeed a sad commentary on our times when people with established reputations and sound credentials have engaged in thievery. Remember, Reprobate was an educated professional person.

- Be ever vigilant in protecting our irreplaceable documentary and literary heritage.