Bangs Hallet House burglary stuns, unites Yarmouth community

By Karyn Bober Kuhn and Bob Snell

Yarmouth suffered a great historical loss late Thursday, July 21, when two men forced their way into the Captain Bangs Hallet House in Yarmouth Port, tied up the caretaker, and robbed the museum of nearly $100,000 worth of antiques that cataloged local history.

Yet the Historical Society of Old Yarmouth (HSOY), proprietors of the museum, are determined not to let the incident change the group's conception of the museum as a living part of the Cape community.

"This is an ongoing and thriving museum," Jean Gardner, HSOY president, said July 24, during the society's annual open house at the Hallet House, which went on despite the crime. "This museum is going to serve generations and we're not going to stop for anyone." The museum will remain open to the public as it has for years, and the educational programs begun there this fall will continue.

Stolen was a 200-piece scrimshaw collection, on permanent loan to HSOY from the New England Society for the Preservation of Antiquities; several paintings of local sea captains and their wives; several vases; a rare 13th century Chinese plate; and a silver-plated teapot containing about $100 in cash.

Two portraits of Yarmouth seafarer Captain Bangs Hallet were stolen, as well as one of his wife Anna and one each of Captains Asa Eldredge and Howes Baker. The scrimshaw stolen was from the collection of the Bray family of Yarmouth Port and included rare and valuable black scrimshaw as well as everyday items such as clothes pins and knives.

Yarmouth Police detectives immediately began a wide ranging investigation into the robbery. Three days later, Police Detective Steve Xiarchos said he feels "chances are good" that the two male suspects will be caught and some of the stolen items recovered. In addition to local police, Barnstable County Sheriff's Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have been called to assist in the investigation.

Using brochure to steal

Thursday, July 21, at about 10 pm, as Hallet House caretaker Laila Bean prepared to retire for the evening, she opened the back door to bolt it. As she did, two men who were waiting outside, one wearing a mask, grabbed her. Quickly, before she could get a good look at the two, they blindfolded her, put her in a chair, and tied her at the wrists and ankles with heavy duty tape.

For approximately the next 20 minutes the two went through the house, often reading from a brochure issued by HSOY, available to visitors, which details all items in the house. They periodically asked Bean where they could find particular pieces.

When the robbers left, they told Bean to remain still for half an hour after they left. She managed to free herself in about 10 minutes and called the police immediately. She then called Gardner, who in turn alerted other society members, including Laura Ware of Yarmouth Port, who came and took Bean to spend the rest of the night with her.

Although she is more optimistic now, Gardner said the incident initially nearly devastated her. She found it difficult to believe that all the work and effort of the society members could be so badly rocked by the greed of a few.

Although the society is insured for the stolen items, Gardner says the money will be of little consequence.

"Insurance doesn't replace history," she noted wryly.

"Something good will come of this"

And insurance doesn't ease Laila Bean's mind, either. The 63-year-old caretaker still has purple bruises on her wrists and ankles from where she was tied. She says that she was indeed frightened during the robbery, but is no longer scared.

"I was praying when I was tied up," she says. "I was praying that if this was going to be my last day, to make it be quick."

In retrospect she had little to fear from the robbers as they left her unharmed. Now, she says she is not afraid to stay in the house and will remain as long as her services are needed. Always an optimist, Bean says she's sure something good will come out of the experience.

"Maybe I won't be so outgoing, maybe I'll be more cautious and maybe I'll be a little more compassionate to other victims (of crime)," she said.

Hired this past fall, Bean has been outgoing in her
Police sketch of suspect "in museum two days before theft acting very suspicious"

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Gardner, during which Yarmouth school children learn duties, leading a series of educational programs at the museum, during which Yarmouth school children learn their history firsthand.

Gardner agrees with Bean's optimism. Some good things have already come out of the robbery experience. The outpouring of community support has renewed her faith in people. Already, people have called to offer to help regain or replace the stolen items.

The success of the museum's July 24 open house seemed to back Gardner up. Over 550 people—hundreds more than ever—attended the day-long festivities at the Yarmouth Port museum. Despite faint murmurs about the robbery, guests participated in planned activities, which included tours of the facility, refreshments and musical entertainment provided by local youngsters.

Yarmouth artist Heather Bragington-Smith offered to lend his own maritime paintings to the open house to lend his own maritime paintings to the museum. She hopes the event will encourage residents to buy the first anniversary of the theft. With all the communication in the dealership community, Gardner hopes to make the items very difficult to sell.

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