

300-year-old headstone returned

By **Matt Rocheleau** Globe Correspondent, March 8, 2013, 12:00 a.m.



The headstone of Mary Paine, who died Dec. 31, 1713, at 15 months old, was discovered by Roland McCandlish during a 1955 tour of Copp's Hill Burying Ground in the North End of Boston. OLD NORTH CHURCH

Mary Paine died on New Year's Eve in 1713. At 15 months old, she had barely lived. But because of Roland McCandlish, Mary's headstone saw the world.

In 1955, the then-20-year-old sailor snatched it from a tool shed at Copp's Hill Burying Ground in the North End of Boston and took it back to his ship, docked at the Charlestown Navy Yard.

From there, the vessel visited exotic ports of call, from Greenland to Haiti to Puerto Rico.

When he returned home to California for good, he used the stone as a small but cherished table.

“I never thought of it as a tombstone; I thought of it as Mary,” McCandlish, now 79, said by phone Thursday. “She had, through me, the life she never had. She was a part of my life.”

Last week, Mary Paine’s headstone came home to Boston — via UPS.

McCandlish, in declining health and thinking about a headstone of his own, decided it was time to send the headstone back. He packaged it up, along with a photo of himself as a young sailor holding the stone, and a letter explaining the tale of its travels.

He mistakenly sent it to Old North Church, near Copp’s Hill, because he thought he had taken the stone from there. The Rev. Stephen T. Ayers, vicar at the historic church, was surprised when he opened the heavy package.

“We have offbeat things happening every once in a while because we’re so prominent, but nothing like getting a headstone in the mail,” Ayers said Thursday.

It was all a bit of a mystery: The letter wasn’t signed, and the packaging had no return address.

Ayers did not expect to hear from the sender. But a few days later, McCandlish — who lives in La Quinta, Calif. — called.

The stone has been turned over to the city, which will keep it for now in the gravestone fragment collection at the Archives Building in West Roxbury. In the next several months, city officials will reset the stone in the cemetery where Mary Paine was buried 300 years ago.

Copp’s Hill, founded in 1659, is Boston’s second-oldest burying ground.

City officials do not plan to take any action against McCandlish.

“We’re just happy that he returned it,” said Kelly Thomas, director of the Historic Burying Grounds Initiative. “If that gravestone could talk, I’d love to hear the stories. It’s been places that I haven’t been.”

Thomas said the slate stone is in good condition, and records confirm it belongs at Copp’s. The headstone of Mary’s mother, also named Mary, sits in the cemetery.

McCandlish said parting with the relic was not easy. They’d made memories together.

He recalled when his Navy captain found the headstone stashed in a filing cabinet on the ship and called McCandlish into his office to explain. The captain laughed at his story.

“He reacted differently than others might,” McCandlish said. “He put it in the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet and said, ‘We’ll call it our dead file.’ ”

When McCandlish was in college at the University of California Santa Barbara, he and his friends would gather around the distinctive coffee table and “toast to Mary.”

He called the stone a “security blanket” for him. And he credited the stone for helping him find his eventual calling, working as an English teacher for 28 years. “I owe a lot to Mary,” he said. “She taught me a lot. She got me interested in literature and history.”

All these years later, he is not regretful about what some people might consider a disrespectful, even macabre, act.

The headstone “had been thrown at the back of a wooden shed when I found it. From my point of view, I rescued it.”

“Mary’s gravestone is probably the most traveled in history,” he said. “But, now it’s time to get Mary back home.”

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mjrochele@gmail.com.

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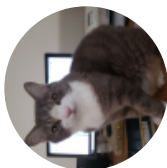
3/08/13 - 3:00AM

Why was he poking around a wooden shed, and how can he claim it was tossed there? Perhaps it was to be repaired and reset. Yes, thank you for returning a historical artifact that you stole, but don't pretend you gave it and the person it honors a "better" life because you stuffed it into a filing cabinet and used it with college drinking buddies. Thankfully, not every sailor was a thief, and residents and tourists still have the chance to see unplundered pieces of history.

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3/08/13 - 5:36AM

If it salves an old man's guilty conscience to paint this a an act of preservation, I guess we can cut him some slack, and give him absolution, but the fact remains this is nothing but a tale of thievery, albeit one with a happy ending.

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3/08/13 - 2:42PM

I know, but if he had any character at all, this idiot would have admitted he was wrong and apologized profusely.

What gets me is that he spent an entire LIFETIME with that tomb guilt

What gets me is that he spent an entire life time with that tomb, gave it free. What a moron.

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3/08/13 - 5:45AM

I wonder how he'd feel if someone stole his mother's gravestone and made a coffee table out of it. Sounds like he's now anticipating "a gravestone of his own.". He'd better hope that passers by have more conscience than he did. If this was supposed to be a Feel-Good story, it certainly is not. The taking and keeping of the stone is way bigger than the returning.

[Like \(8\)](#)[Dislike \(1\)](#)[Reply](#)[Report](#)[Ignore](#)[tommyd1022](#)

3/08/13 - 5:48AM

Agreed...Not a feel-good. Why don't we just rummage around some of the MFA storage areas and rescue a Monet? He taught English for 28 years? Hmmmm.... great... he actually was in contact with impressionable children.

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3/08/13 - 6:14AM

Something still wrong and a bit mentally unbalanced with this guy, his commander at the time, and his friends and family later ...

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**MarieOnCape**

3/08/13 - 6:26AM

Yes, I had some things, stereo, microwave, etc., "rescued" from Place place on the Cape too. Even got the chance for a pleasant trip to far off and exotic

Barnstable County Courthouse to testify. The thoughtfulness of the rescuers remains with me as a reminder of how pleasant people can be.

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**oldclown**

3/08/13 - 7:09AM

Robbing antiquities is a serious offense and a cute story doesn't justify or excuse criminal behavior.

I realize the culprit is 70 years old now, but not beyond being summoned to a Boston court house and assigned some community service.

I work with an organization that is active in preserving and restoring these burying grounds.

The expense of re-seating this stone is not insignificant.

The person responsible for the theft should also bear some of the cost of the restoration.

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**my10sense**

3/08/13 - 9:32AM

The stone wasn't set when he found it.

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**redglare2**

A modest proposal for the hardliners: Why not just flog the man in City Hall Plaza?

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[Show all 3 replies](#)**22much**

3/08/13 - 7:12AM

It seems everyone here thinks the Elgin Marbles should go home, too. I don't condone his actions, but I accept his restitution and appology...the bankers won't give you that.

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**IntownGuy**

3/08/13 - 8:09AM

The Elgin Marbles should be returned.

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**geezer1945**

3/08/13 - 9:35AM

Since the Greeks and Turks were blowing the place up at the time, the British were right to get the "Elgin" Marbles out of there. Maybe they're safe back in Athens now. The British Museum is full of other people's stuff. Interesting dilemma.

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lovebostoninvt

3/08/13 - 7:16AM



Other than his error at the time, what difference does it really make? The girl saw the world! She had someone that cared. What more could she have asked?

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roxanna

3/08/13 - 7:40AM

What more could she have asked??. ARE YOU KIDDING?? Of course, beyond the obvious: --that she could have asked for a full life, which she didn't get--- she could have asked not to lie in an unmarked grave for sixty years, because of the crassness and thoughtlessness of such a selfish person. Flippant and meant to be funny, i presume, to say that "She saw the world" is just as crass.

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CheckEngineLight

3/08/13 - 8:44AM

I am trying to think, but not too hard on a snowy day, about some of the crazy and stupid things I did when I was a novice in this world. I can't think of anyone I know who either disturbed a grave yard or actually would think of taking a grave marker or headstone. As kids we used to hide across from the local mortuary and wait for the delivery van to bring in a shipment of caskets. That was enough to "creep" us out for weeks. I don't understand this gentleman taking a grave marker, in the first place. But, then posing for photos with the stone and finally using it as a coffee table totally escapes me.

On a positive note, I hope returning this marker gives him peace.

[Like \(3\)](#)[Dislike \(0\)](#)[Reply](#)[Report](#)[Ignore](#)**bnixon**

3/08/13 - 9:04AM

A positive is that this headstone missed decades of corrosive acid rain helping to preserve it.

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3/08/13 - 9:31AM

Interesting comments and much more negative than I expected.

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**BillH524**

3/08/13 - 10:58AM

From the story I get a sense that Mr. McCandlish had an ethereal connection with Mary's tombstone and the long forgotten sole it represented. Certainly it didn't start out as such but I am willing to forgive (or at least put aside) the initial act of thievery and give Mr. McCandlish some respect for doing the right thing and returning Mary's tombstone. Others may feel differently but if some future sailor finds my long forgotten and neglected tombstone in a shed and takes it on a 50+ year odyssey I'd probably look down and smile. As the saying goes, in heaven there is no beer...

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[Like \(3\)](#)[Dislike \(0\)](#)[Reply](#)[Report](#)[Ignore](#)**CheckEngineLight**

3/08/13 - 2:50PM

Bill, you and the others make some great points. I might retreat!

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3/08/13 - 12:48PM

OK. I'll admit it: I loved this story.

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