

# Report on Louisville's Antique Safe

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April 2007

The research of Louisville's antique safe suggests an episode of PBS' *History Detectives*. At this time, some direction and planning for the future, along with the possibility of restoration and research funding, should be considered.

## **Background**

Louisville residents have become very familiar with the City's antique safe, since it has been located behind the desk in the lobby of City Hall for many years. Until recently, it was used as a working safe that was locked by staff members at the end of the day. Staff members working at the desk have said that visitors to City Hall would often comment on the safe, its intricate locks on the safe doors, and the oval paintings of mountain scenes on the inside of the two exterior doors. The safe appears to be very old.

In 2005, word was received that the City intended to eventually move the safe to the Historical Museum. It was then ascertained that the safe is too large to fit in any of the doors of the historical buildings of the Museum. Because of this initial barrier, it was not ascertained whether there would be adequate structural support for the safe at the Museum (a potentially major barrier) or whether there would be enough space for it inside any of the buildings.

With the remodeling of City Hall in late 2006, the safe lost its spot in City Hall and was moved out to City shops on Empire Road. Several people heard that the City might be planning to sell the safe. It was generally being referred to as a "Mosler" safe. Several staff members as well as members of the public have expressed their concern about the future of the safe. The safe is still located at City shops.

The safe is about 59" high, 44.25" wide, and 35.25" deep (or approx. 36.5" deep if one includes the handles on the front door). It is extremely heavy and difficult to move. (It is generally believed that such safes, which were advertised to be fireproof, were made with concrete in the walls.) There are numbers inside that appear to be a serial number. The back and the top of the safe could not be examined in its current location and there was not enough room to fully open the doors. The name "Mosler" was not seen.

The exterior has many unwanted paint marks, possibly from room painting that was done around it over the years. These marks are on top of black exterior sides with gold decorative paint that appears to be original. What appear to be bullet holes on the front are actually stickers that someone stuck on. The safe's most appealing and

interesting features are the beautiful landscape paintings on the inside of the outermost doors as well as the fact that there are three separate doors to get through, each with a combination lock, to get all the way inside. On Louisville's safe, however, for whatever reason, only the outer door needs to be unlocked in order to gain access all the way inside.

Fortunately, because City staff members were using the safe for City business until recently, the combination is still known and the safe can be opened.

### **Research of the History of Louisville's Safe**

Minutes of old handwritten Town Council minutes, which date back to 1894 and are currently being stored by the City Clerk's Office in the basement of the Police Station, reveal that Louisville likely purchased the safe in 1895. (This time period is consistent with other information learned about the safe and there is no evidence that the town ever had more than one safe.) It was on January 29, 1895 that two council members were appointed "to look into the prices of a safe for the town." At its meeting two weeks later, the Council voted "that the Report of committee on safe be accepted . . . and said committee be allowed as a limit to purchase safe the sum of one hundred dollars." Unfortunately, it was soon after that the town clerk stopped itemizing monthly expenditures for the town, so there is no record of how much was actually paid for the safe, when the purchase took place, or from whom it was purchased.

The earliest recollection of the safe by a current resident is that of Helen Caranci, who remembers working with the safe when she began working for the town in 1943 at the age of 19. It was used to lock up important papers and money.

According to Fred McNulty (now in his 80s), he worked for the town and was responsible for moving the safe from the old Town Hall when it was located at the very southwest corner of Main and Spruce to the new building that was built farther back on the same site. (It was later remodeled to make the two-story City Hall building that stands there today.) He moved it by himself using a "little Ford tractor" with a back hoe on it. He remembered it being extremely heavy, but said that he does not know anything else about the history of the safe. Based on research of Museum records, this move likely came in 1957.

Conceivably, the safe was previously housed in the Town Hall that was located just south of the Austin-Niehoff House on Main Street. That building served as the Town Hall beginning in about 1902.

City Clerk Nancy Varra provided valuable information about the safe. When she began working at the City Hall in 1973, the front doors had the original black paint with gold circular designs, similar to what is still on the sides of the safe. Ms. Varra stated that the doors also might have had the name of a bank or a company, which suggests that Louisville may have purchased the safe second hand. (Paintings on the front doors of

safes were common, based on a review of photos of antique safes.) She also recalls hearing that the safe might have been purchased from a mining company.

When City Hall was changed and renovated in 1980, with only the police department section remaining from the 1957 building, the safe was moved around the building on its wheels depending on what part was being worked on. It was covered with a tarp and exposed to the elements for a time.

It was at around this time that Ms. Varra recalls that the City painted over the two front doors, which is why today the paint on the safe's front doors appears to be different, more of a dull gray, from that on its sides, which is shinier black with decorative gold paint. On the front near the left castor there is an area that appears to show different original paint underneath the dull gray paint.

When research was begun to try to ascertain the original manufacture date of Louisville's safe, the Butler County (Ohio) Historical Society was contacted because the Mosler Safe Company was located in Hamilton, Butler County, Ohio. The Society's staff recommended getting in touch with an expert on Mosler antique safes, Maurice Jones, who has a website called SafeSearch Online.

Mr. Jones, upon seeing photos of Louisville's safe, reading its description, and consulting with other experts, stated that he believes that Louisville's safe is not a Mosler safe. The words on the combination lock on the right front door say "Hall's Safe & Lock Co Cincinnati O," which he believes indicates that it was made by Hall's and not Mosler. (The two brands of safes do resemble one another, based on photos available on the Internet.) He also referred to it as a "record safe." Unfortunately, he was not able to give a possible year of manufacture. Consistent with the information (learned later) that the front doors were painted over in 1980, Mr. Jones also stated that he could tell from photos of the safe that there are original paintings on the exterior front doors which have been painted over.

The Cincinnati Historical Society Library was contacted to see if it has records of Hall's Safe & Lock Co. Information provided from business directories at this library show that the company used the name Hall's Safe & Lock Co. between 1868 and 1892, when it merged with two other firms and changed its name. This is a strong indication that Louisville's safe was made between 1868 and 1892.

Diebold, Inc. eventually acquired both the Mosler Safe Company and Herring Hall Marvin (the corporate successor to Hall's Safe & Lock Co.), but in the course of this research, it was ascertained that Diebold does not have manufacturing records relating to antique safes made by either of these companies.

## **Research into the Safe's Paintings**

In addition to the original paintings on the front doors of the safe that have been covered over, there are two oval oil paintings of landscape scenes on the interiors of the two front doors. They appear to be unsigned.

Internet research offers a tantalizing possibility that should be further investigated. Famed artist R.F. Outcalt, who is widely considered to be the Father of the Comic Strip, is stated in several sources as having been a painter of landscape scenes on safes for Hall's Safe & Lock Co. in Cincinnati in the early 1880s, following his completion of art school in Cincinnati. This information is relevant because the two interior paintings on Louisville's safe are both of landscapes and the safe appears to have been manufactured by Hall's Safe & Lock Co. before 1892 when the company changed its name.

There are websites devoted to Outcalt and his famous cartoon drawings of "The Yellow Kid," "Buster Brown," and other characters he drew for newspapers beginning in around 1895 (and his comic art is highly collectable), but no additional information has been found on the Internet regarding the paintings he did on safes for Hall's Safe & Lock Co. It is also not known how many artists were employed by Hall's.

## **Recommendations**

The safe has historic value for Louisville, and because its residents became familiar with it while it stood open in a public location at City Hall, many residents have expressed an interest in having it be displayed again.

As part of the decision making process, it would be of value to determine more of its history and ascertain just what it is that the City has, which is the procedure that would have been followed if the safe could have been accepted and displayed at the Historical Museum.

At this time, some direction is needed with the following possible objectives in mind:

- Continued research of the safe's age and confirmation of the manufacturer. If it is correct that it was made by Hall's Safe & Lock Co. and not the Mosler Safe Company, the fact that Hall's stopped existing under that name in 1892 indicates that the safe was made before that.
- An investigation of the additional paintings under what appears to be newer paint on the front doors as well as general restoration of the safe, including removing unwanted newer paint marks. Art restorers in the Denver metro area could be approached for estimates. Anything revealed under the newer paint on the front doors could give clues as to both the age and the origin of the safe.

- An investigation of who painted the two paintings of mountain scenes, possibly by retaining an art expert. The possibility that artist R.F. Outcault painted them should be further considered. If additional paintings are found under the paint on the front doors, then these should also be studied. The Denver Art Museum might be a resource for locating such an expert.
- Inquiries of other organizations that have had occasion to research and restore antique safes. For example, Internet research revealed that conservators have worked on restoring old safes that had oil paintings, including at least one safe made by Hall's Safe & Lock Co., as part of the California State Capitol Restoration Project. It would be of value to learn what they did.

If the safe is to be displayed and shared with the public, it should be done in a way that involves keeping people from being able to touch it, for safety and preservation reasons; in a way that can reveal yet offer protection for its paintings; and with adequate space and structural support. Another issue is whether the doors would have to be welded open in order to keep children from climbing in, if it is concluded that that is a possibility. A generally held goal of artifact preservation is to not substantially change an artifact unless it is to restore it to its original form, so it would be important to explore ways of accomplishing the safety goals without permanently altering the safe.

Until the safe is moved from its current location, there should be instructions to City employees at City shops to the effect that the safe is a valuable historic artifact that should be kept protected, and its surface should not be used for storage.

**Addendum to Report on Louisville's Antique Safe  
Including Condition Statement, Proposal for Conservation Treatment  
& Cost Estimate**

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October 7, 2008

**Condition Statement:**

The safe has a frontal double door with brass handles which are approximately 6" in diameter. The face of the doors and the outside molding has been repainted with what appears to be several layers of "common" emulsion-type wall paint (estimate): the exposed layer is brown which covers a pale yellow and possibly a white layer under which there appears to be a pale turquoise layer. Testing indicates that these layers are tenaciously bound to the safe's original surface; depending on the age of these layers, they could certainly be lead-containing.

The interior of the doors each have a small (approximately 12" x 16") landscape paintings; the painting of the left (proper right) door depicts a mountain scene with a cabin, a lake and two men in a boat, the painting on the right (proper left) depicts a mountain landscape with a lake, two men in a boat and a tree and rock outcropping on the right. Both works exhibit some local cracking and lifting which should be consolidated. The left painting has minor, scattered losses and a scratch on the lower left; the right painting has 8-10 small (1/4"-diameter being the largest) flake losses in the center, left region and some minor surface scratches. Both works appear to carry a discolored varnish layer which testing indicates could be safely reduced to restore the artist's original tonal relationships.

The rest of the door is painted with white enamel-type paint (estimate) with black, stenciled border decorations. The white layer has become slightly transparent: on the right door an original stencil decoration is evident. There are deep abrasions on the central portion of the white layer which appear to be the result of the inner door handles hitting the inside of the outer doors when the safe was repeatedly opened over the years. Near the middle center of the white paint area there is some local cracking and lifting of this layer. There are some flake losses and a significant grime layer, particularly in areas that have been routinely handled.

The outer door opens up to a second set of double doors, approximately 4" thick that have a similar decorative cream-colored layer with black stenciling and brass handles. The right (proper left) door carries the combination lock which is in

operating condition. This layer, too, has surface grime, local cracking and “evidence-of-use” loss.

The inner doors open to smaller, interior doors which open up to the safe compartment which now carries a plywood shelf unit which does not appear to be original. Both sets of interior doors appear to have an underlying decorative layer with a black base and possibly some color decoration and gilt decoration.

The top of the safe is in very poor condition. It has large deposits of a hard, putty-type adhesive which indicates that something was adhered to its top at some time in the past. The top is extremely dirty. Testing indicates that removal of the putty would result in extensive loss of the original, black paint layer.

The sides of the safe have six recessed panels. The surface carry what appears to be an original black painted layer with painted gold border decoration. It was not possible to determine if the gold layer is gilding or has a metallic component. There are a variety of paint, putty and or spackle accretions and the doors have a significant accumulation of grime.

### **Recommendations and Treatment Options:**

It is known that the city of Louisville acquired the safe second-hand. The safe evidently underwent a complete campaign of decorative repainting, possibly at the time of acquisition. Repeated repainting of the face of the safe is unfortunate but not readily reversible. A complete restoration of the safe would erase important, historic evidence of use and is not recommended. The safe will no longer be used but it is intended to have it exhibited in a municipal facility. Therefore, it is recommended that the most aesthetically pleasing aspects be open for public view, namely the interior paintings and decorative interior doors. This would serve the purpose of eliminating the need for a costly, and possibly unsatisfactory, restoration of original surfaces on the outside doors.

Preservation of original surfaces must include stabilization of all paint layers. Once this is accomplished the surfaces can be cleaned to a desirable extent. This could range from vacuuming and broad surface cleaning of the top of the safe to a more precise swab cleaning of interior surfaces. The paintings would aesthetically benefit from varnish reduction, revarnishing, filling and inpainting. Their relatively good condition warrants such treatment.

The door paint (white or cream-colored areas with some black decorative stenciling) would benefit from surface cleaning to make these surfaces exhibitable. Restoration of “evidence of use” losses will not be undertaken. Selective filling and inpainting of the flake losses will present a more continuous surface but the extent of such restoration is optional. It is understood that treatment of the landscape paintings is desirable, therefore, the following options for treatment progress from a simple stabilization treatment with full conservation of the landscape paintings to a more extensive aesthetic treatment which can be undertaken as the budget allows.

**Proposal for Treatment and Cost Estimate:**

**Option #1: Stabilize only and surface clean (does not include removal of all accretions):**

- Document the condition of the safe with additional digital photographs and written reports.
- Consolidate loose, lifting, flaking and cracked paint with an appropriate adhesive.
- Vacuum loose grime and debris, overall.
- Reduce grime and selected accretions to a desirable extent.

**Cost Estimate: \$2760.00 - \$4025.00 (plus travel and preparation time)**

**Option #2: Additional costs for treatment of the interior landscape paintings and more removal of foreign accretions on surfaces:**

- Reduce grime and reduce discolored varnish on the interior landscape paintings to the extent safely possible.
- Apply a reversible varnish coating to the landscape paintings and locally varnish other surfaces as appropriate.
- Fill and inpaint losses on the landscape paintings with reversible materials.
- Further reduce surface accretions

**Additional Costs for Option #2 : \$1666.00 - \$1955.00**

**Total Option #1 and #2: \$4426.00 - \$5980.00**

**Option #3: Additional costs for selected cosmetic integration of losses on door surfaces:**

- Inpaint selected losses on the safe doors to enhance the presentation surface. ("Evidence of use" losses will not be compensated.)

**Additional Costs for Option #3: \$920.00 - \$1380.00**

**Total Option #1, #2 & #3: \$5346.00 - \$7360.00**

*Note: Treatment estimates include treatment, preparation and travel time.*

**Camilla J. Van Vooren  
Conservator of Paintings**