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# Treasure Facts

HOW-TO GUIDE FOR TREASURE HUNTERS - FROM THE PUBLISHER OF LOST TREASURE

Documented Treasure Caches – Complete With Authors' TIPS ON HOW TO Start Your Hunt

## Lost Treasure Treasure Cache

*cache (kaesh) n. a hiding place for treasure*

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By Marc Starr



*The assembled set.*

# How Treasures Become Lost

**M**y friend, Christie, is an antiques dealer in St. Petersburg, Florida. One morning not so very long ago, she and her husband went to an estate sale at the home of a woman who had just died in her late eighties.

The woman's son was handling the sale, and he was making it plain to everyone within hearing that he felt terribly inconvenienced by his mother's death. He had actually had to rearrange his schedule in order to rush down there from the big city and clean up the mess she'd left for him.

*Assayed in 1786-7.*



## How Treasures Become Lost



*Sterling (92.5% Silver).*

*Tax paid to George III.*



*Assayed in London pre-1822.*

It had taken him hours, he was saying, to dump the contents of his mother's life into the hundreds of cardboard boxes stacked along every wall in this condo.

"Twenty bucks a box," he said. "Ten a box if it's still here at 9 a.m."

By this point, Christie's radar was turned up to full strength. She began rapidly moving around the condo, scanning open boxes at high speed.

In the dining room, she spotted one cardboard box crammed full of silverplate bowls and a tea set. She slowed down ever so slightly.

Her first glance told her that the bowls were valueless, but the tea set started setting off alarm bells in her mind.

Maintaining her best poker

face, she casually picked up the box and continued her high-speed scan. No other boxes caught her eye.

Christie found her husband, Bert, in the next room. "We have to leave," she whispered to him. "But, honey, we just got here," he replied.

She gave him the sort of stare usually reserved for turning people into stone, and then whispered more urgently, "We have to leave NOW!! Go crank the car. I'll be right behind you."

She waited a few seconds, and then walked towards the front door, where the son was in the midst of urging a real estate agent to get the condo sold as quickly as possible.

Christie walked into this discussion, a \$20 bill extended in front of her. The son looked at her long enough to confirm that she had only one box under her other arm, took the 20, and dismissed her from his thoughts.

Moments later, Christie, her husband and their car were well out of line of sight of the estate sale. Her hands began

*Hand-made pieces are often left rough underneath.*



## How Treasures Become Lost

to shake as she used a magnifier to examine what she'd just bought. The bowls, as she'd expected, were valueless silverplate.

But not so the teapot, trivet, creamer and sugar basket. From the hammer patterns on the undersides of the pieces, it was instantly obvious that these had been hand made.

Then she found the hallmarks. British, without question. Sterling, courtesy of the left-facing lion passant mark. Assayed in London, courtesy of the leopard's head mark.

It was at this point that she inhaled all of the oxygen out of their van. The leopard had a crown on its head. The leopard hadn't worn a crown on London silver since 1821.

She didn't have her reference book in the van, so she couldn't immediately narrow down the precise years

from the date letter marks, but she strongly encouraged her husband to drive towards that book.

The creamer and sugar turned out to have been made in 1792. The teapot and trivet were a bit older, having been made a year before we began writing our Constitution.

Each of the pieces bore another mark, a silhouette of a man with a ponytail, affirming that the London silversmith had paid the appropriate amount of tax...to the government of King George III.

And the son from the big city up north had just sold these treasures as estate sale junk for \$20.

Did Christie feel remorse? No. Nor did she feel like a lottery winner. Rather, she felt like someone who had just pulled drowning kittens from a river.

The son had owned these items just long enough to try to trash them. Had Christie not seen these things for what they were, they'd probably have gone to a landfill by early afternoon.

Here's where Christie is a little different from most dealers: because she planned well for retirement, she doesn't need such windfalls in order to make ends meet.

As a result, she can afford to take pleasure in saving a deserving person from a bad mistake.

Had this son given off even the slightest hint of looking lost in the aftermath of his mother's death, she would have told him not to sell that box. But his behavior spelled out loud and clear that he didn't care about anything in what had been his own mother's life. That made it easy.

Christie chose sides, and she chose to side with the tea set. From the moment the items caught her attention in the box on the floor, she decided that she

had to make certain they made it safely into the hands of someone who would protect them. And that son was definitely not such a person.

At first, Christie kept the pieces in her store, carefully wrapped and out of sight behind the desk. That's where they were when she revealed them to me about a month after the estate sale. As she told me at the time, she just had to show someone.

She'd wanted very much to display them openly for sale, but was afraid they'd attract thieves. Since her store's main focus was large furniture, shoplifting had not 'til then been a major concern.

After another month of worrying about it, she decided that some things are better protected by being moved on than by being kept. She contacted a specialist based in London, who put the tea set up for private auction among collectors of Georgian silver.

Two weeks later, via heavily insured courier service, the pieces were conveyed into the hands of someone who was able to enjoy them openly.

But back to that condo in St. Petersburg, the question begs to be asked, "Who had been the last person in that chain of ownership who knew what the items were and, more importantly, cared?" Certainly it wasn't the son, but how about his mother?

She could have been the one who bought them, and known what they really were. But it could just as easily have been her husband, or maybe one of their parents (or great-grandparents) who was the last to know, and everybody down to, but not including, the son was simply holding them for sentiment's sake.

What a tragedy for that family, which may well have been the direct line descendants of the wedded couple who com-

missioned the making of the pieces 10 generations earlier, only to eventually forget their history.

Now ask yourself, "Who among my heirs understands what treasures I've accumulated and, more importantly, cares?"

Does this sound familiar, "You wouldn't believe the junk he drags into this house, Joyce." Or maybe, "Yeah, my mom collects old stuff. I dunno why."

That cold chill rising along your spine right now is trying to tell you something. Your treasure is teetering on the edge of becoming lost.

The first step in avoiding this is to clearly identify your treasures. The son from the big city looked at his mother's tea set long enough to confirm that the capitalized letters STERLING were nowhere to be found.

To his limited experience, then, the pieces couldn't possibly be valuable. He had no idea that the pieces were all but screaming "Sterling!" at him, only by way of pictograms of a left-facing lion.

If the last knowledgeable owner had left a note inside the teapot identifying it as 200-year-old sterling, that son probably still would have sold the set, but at least would have sold it for more than \$20.

The second step is harder. You've got to find heirs who will appreciate the items. If your children or grandchildren are still young, raise them to cherish old things as you do.

Be guided by your own childhood: the family heirlooms you cherish most are the ones you were allowed to use (or at least gently touch) when you were growing up.

They're the things that keep you connected with those who are no longer with you.

On the other hand, if your heirs are already grown, you should by now have a pretty good idea which of them will cherish your treasures, and which of them will behave like the son from the big city.

The third step is to declare who should receive what. If you're ready to pass along any of your treasures now, go ahead and do so.

This includes selling treasures too vulnerable to risk handing down. Christie sold the tea set because it was the safest thing to do, both for her and for the pieces.

Among the things you aren't ready to let go just yet, add a destination name to the identification: "Sterling teapot, London 1786-7, for Megan." In addition, write down the history of the piece

as far as you know it:

"Dear Megan, this teapot has been used by every generation of your mother's father's mother's family since before George Washington was President."

Most importantly, the next time Megan visits you, let her help you serve tea using that teapot. Otherwise, if you don't provide her with the history and the connection, it will have neither monetary nor sentimental value in her eyes. And that's how treasures become lost.

Most of the things we collect have the ability to long outlive us. It is our job as collectors to make sure that the treasures we steward make it safely into the hands of stewards yet to come.

### Sources:

Author's personal experience. **TF**