

Nancy Ward statue: update on recent events and status of historic art sculpture

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 23, 2008)

At the end of a previous article on the Nancy Ward Statue published on May 23, 2006, I thanked Congressman Wamp's Oak Ridge staff member, Gina Broome, for her help. Soon after, I received significant help from Senator Lamar Alexander's office and from then Anderson County District Attorney Jim Ramsey. The Senator contacted the FBI's Art Theft Unit who in turn contacted me. Jim Ramsey helped on at least three occasions when he took the action necessary to put me in contact with appropriate individuals who were able to help or provide information. I also want to thank our state representative Jim Hackworth for making contacts for me in Nashville.

However, the statue's return has been a frustratingly slow and laborious process and it is STILL NOT RETURNED. In May of 2006, it was in Maine and in the possession of the antique dealers there. It is now in Massachusetts, in the possession of yet another art and antique dealer. He has invested \$40,000 for a one-half interest in the stolen statue. Much has happened in the almost two years I have been working the return of the stolen statue. I was asked by the FBI and US Attorney General's office to stop publicizing the statue and to let them work the issue. I did that. Now, I am no longer bound by their constraints. So, I am going to let you know what has happened in the past several months and where we are now.

For those of you who might have missed the first article giving the history of this Nancy Ward "traveling statue" a brief review might help. Nancy Ward, Cherokee Beloved Woman, lived from 1738 to 1822 and was highly respected by both settlers and Cherokee alike who lived in what is now East Tennessee. In approximately 1906, James Abraham Walker created a lifelike sculpture of Nancy Ward thinking to put it on her grave as a marker. However, the statue was placed on his niece's grave in the Arnwine Cemetery in Grainger County where it stood for over 70 years. In the early 1980's it was stolen from the cemetery. I photographed the statue in 1976 and created a web site <http://smithdray.tripod.com/nancyward-index-5.html> that includes the story of the Nancy Ward Statue's history and theft. In February 2006 the statue resurfaced when it appeared in an art and antique show in New York City. What follows is an account of activity since locating the statue.

Imagine my surprise when late in the evening of February 18, 2006 I received an e-mail from a descendent of Nancy Ward living in Birmingham, Alabama who was aware of my Nancy Ward web page, telling me that the Nancy Ward Statue had been shown at an art and antique show and that a photograph of the statue was on page 158 of the January-February issue of Antiques and Fine Art magazine. He also told me the name of the art and antique dealers who had shown the statue and said they were scheduled to be in Nashville the following weekend.

Well, I jumped for joy as I had been searching for this statue for over 23 years! I began immediately to contact others with whom I had corresponded regarding the statue. One of the first contacts was a direct descendent of Maggie Farmer, the lady on whose grave the statue had stood for over 70 years. I also contacted a descendent of James Abraham Walker - the person who created the statue, who replied almost immediately stating that the Nancy Ward statue was also featured in the New York Times and sent a link to that article with a photo of the statue to me. So, before going to bed I was sure the statue being talked about was the real thing.

I also sent an e-mail message to a member of the Tennessee Environment and Conservation Department with whom I had corresponded regarding the state of Tennessee's efforts to purchase the Nancy Ward statue from Maggie Farmer's descendants for several years prior to the statue being stolen. She had been most helpful in providing copies of several letters that had been exchanged mostly during the 1970's.

The very next morning I went to Books-A-Million and bought the magazine with the photo of the statue on page 158. I also called the FBI and told them the story. Just a few weeks earlier I had contacted the FBI in an attempt to place the statue on a database they maintain of stolen art. I was told I needed a police report before it could be placed in that database. I did not have such a report and was in the process of contacting the Grainger County Sheriff to see if such a report existed.

On my way to Nashville the following Friday (February 24, 2006) I again called the FBI telling them that I intended to talk to the people who had the statue and asking for advice regarding what I should say. The advice given was to just learn what I could and get back with them.

Nancy Ward statue: update on recent events and status of historic art sculpture

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 23, 2008)

So, I dropped Fanny off at Opry Mills to shop and went to the Opryland Hotel and found the antique show - that hotel a huge place, you know. Their booth was easy to locate and as soon as I walked up they seemed to know something was unusual about me. I guess I did not appear interested in their antiques or something. Not knowing what else to do, I introduced myself by saying, "Hi, I'm Ray Smith" and immediately both of them said, "So you are THE Ray Smith with the Nancy Ward web page?" I said, "Yes, that's right." At that point I knew they knew the story of the statue, so I asked them how they came to have the statue.

It seems they purchased it from a friend who had bought it from a lady whose father had kept it in her barn. She was settling his estate after his death and sold the statue. He had lived in Morristown, Tennessee since the early 1980's and had moved to Maine to be near his daughter during the last years of his life, bringing the statue with him.

Well, I had to ask, "How much do you want for the statue?" And was amazed to hear, "\$165,000!" After a bit more small talk I left to pick up Fanny and tell her what I had learned. She laughed and said that a mutual friend of ours had offered to help me purchase the statue and return it to Tennessee and we just couldn't wait to tell him the amount he would have to pay to help return the statue. I called the FBI agent and let them know what I had learned. The advise given was that I should seek to identify the victim of the crime of the theft of the statue and seek a police report. Well, I knew the victim, but did not know about any police report at that time.

Next I contacted Maggie Farmer's descendent, David Alexander, to let him know what had transpired and to tell him that he needed to come forward as the victim. He agreed. I also contacted the Tennessee Environment and Conservation ranger who immediately began searching for the police report and any more evidence she could find. She located the police report and sent it to me.

Over the next several weeks I contacted everyone I could think of who might be able to help. Law enforcement offices, state and federal legislative offices, and all other agencies I could think of. Each contact initially showed interest but almost all eventually produced little real action.

Maggie Farmer's descendent asked me to take him and his wife to visit the Arnwine Cemetery which I did and was delighted to see his appreciation for the trip. Getting there is not easy unless you know the area, so I met him at I-75 and took him there. A photograph accompanying this article shows the Arnwine Cemetery when the Nancy Ward Statue was standing among other grave markers and was still on Maggie Farmer's grave.

Jim Ramsey has continually assisted me in making contacts and most recently has suggested the governor might be interested in helping get this historic statue returned to Tennessee. It seems that all efforts that have been made thus far have failed to return the statue. The Tennessee criminal investigator turned the effort over to the Maine police who attempted to gain access to the antique shop to see the statue and was refused entry. The Attorney General of Grainger County has advised Maggie Farmer's descendent that he should pursue a civil action to prove ownership of the statue and that he should obtain the services of a civil lawyer.

Also in the weeks following the initial publicity about the statue, the FBI contacted David Alexander (the descendent of Maggie Farmer, on whose grave the statue stood and thus the "victim") and also contacted me as a direct result of Senator Lamar Alexander's office asking them to do so. I was assured they were going to help and would be working with David directly.

The FBI worked with David, first through the Ohio office where David lives and then through the Maine office. The FBI and the U.S. Attorney General's offices were working together and were considering where the case should be worked. Eventually, the case was transferred to Knoxville, Tennessee. When the case got to Knoxville's FBI and the U.S. Attorney General's office, an FBI agent was assigned to the case and interviewed many of the individuals I had contacted.

He talked to the man who transported the statue from Morristown, TN to Maine, who is someone who knows much of the history of the statue's travels. He could tell them about the original theft and the sale to an Indian artifact collector in Morristown, TN who, in turn, sold it to the father of the lady in Maine. She, at his death, sold

Nancy Ward statue: update on recent events and status of historic art sculpture

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 23, 2008)

the statue to a "picker" who evidently placed the statue on consignment with the art and antique shop in Maine who showed it in New York City. He has since sold half interest in the statue to an antique dealer located near Boston, Mass. The statue remains there as the issue of how to address the theft and the resulting investments by various individuals is being determined.

I am afraid my initial concern has proven to be fact. The statue saga is not over yet. While I was able to get some attention brought to the statue, the civil action being suggested seems the only hope we have of getting the statue brought back to Tennessee.

The East Tennessee Historical Society, of which I am a board member, has taken interest in seeing the return of the statue to Tennessee. One of the board members has donated the services of his law firm to compile the details of the case and to recommend action for the board. David Alexander, the victim, continues to seek the return of the statue to Tennessee.

The story of the travels of the historic Nancy Ward Statue continues to evolve. I hope to be able to write the conclusion one day that documents the return of the statue to Tennessee, the making of replicas to place on both Nancy Ward's and Maggie Farmer's graves as well as the placing of one in the Museum of Appalachia. Remember that John Rice Irwin started me on this trail some 30 plus years ago.

I again want to thank all those in public office who have helped thus far: Congressman Zach Wamp, Senator Lamar Alexander, then District Attorney Jim Ramsey and State Representative Jim Hackworth. I also want to thank the many members of the FBI and U. S. Attorney's General who have devoted time and effort to this case. I am convinced that a way will be found for the statue's return to where it belongs. It is a very historic and significant piece of art work that should be on display for those who appreciate that history. I hope that resolution can be attained soon.



Nancy Ward Statue in the Arnwine Cemetery - 1976

Nancy Ward statue: update on recent events and status of historic art sculpture

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 23, 2008)



Nancy Ward Statue with my son, Mike, taken in 1976 when he was nine years old