



Episode 804, Story 2: Andrew Jackson's Mouth

Elyse Luray: Our next case investigates what this fragment of wood can tell us about a daring 19th century act of vandalism against a national symbol. July 1834, the citizens of Boston swell with pride. Sheltered in the Charlestown navy yard is a hero from the war of 1812. Boston-built and battle tested, U.S.S. Constitution – Old Ironsides – defeated four British ships during America's second War of Independence. The frigate represents the pride of the city...and of the nation ...but on the morning of July 3rd, Boston wakes to shocking news: vandals have attacked Old Ironsides. The figurehead of President Jackson attached to the ship's bow has been decapitated. And the head...vanishes. More than 175 years later, a body part from that tumultuous night may have surfaced in the trunk of a stranger's car.

P. J. Whelan: I've been wondering what the secret of this mouth is for 30 years. But his lips are sealed.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray, and I've come to Bethlehem, Connecticut, to meet P. J. Whelan and find out about her strange object. So you have a box for me?

P. J. Whelan: I do have a box. And inside is a mouth.

Elyse: Oh, you really do have a mouth.

P. J. Whelan: I do have a mouth.

Elyse: What's the story behind this?

P. J. Whelan: About 30 years ago, my dad who was an avid collector was approached by a man who had a car full of collectibles. And the gentleman told him that this was actually the mouth of Andrew Jackson and it was part of the original masthead on the U.S.S. Constitution.

Elyse: The famous ship?

P. J. Whelan: Old Ironsides, yes.



Elyse: P. J. says her father couldn't pass up the opportunity to own what might be a piece of this celebrated frigate, so he made the trade.

Elyse: What exactly do you want me to find out?

P. J. Whelan: I would really like to know if this is the original mouth of the original masthead of the U.S.S. Constitution.

Elyse: Do you have anything else for me to go on?

P. J. Whelan: Only some old newspaper clippings that talk about a night in the 1800s when sailors supposedly rowed out to the ship and chopped this mouth off the masthead.

Elyse: If you don't mind I'd love to sit here and just look through some of these old newspapers and do an evaluation. And then I'll start.

P. J. Whelan: That would be great.

Elyse: All right. I'll see you soon.

P. J. Whelan: thank you.

Elyse: This is definitely one of the stranger investigations. I mean it really is a mouth. It looks hand carved. It's very light. The wood is probably pine, which would have been used during that time period. It has great patina. It's been painted and the patina is still very shiny. And it doesn't look very weathered to me. It actually looks like it's in pretty good shape. There is a label on the back. Now, I don't really like to look at labels for authenticity. Anybody could put a label on any object, and I say that all the time. But it is a good reference point. And this says, "Part of Fig", which I'm assuming is figure. "Frigate Constitution, cut off in Boston Harbor" I guess that says 1830. Okay the newspaper article is January 9th, 1977. So it's much, much later. It's an article about figureheads, and how these carved wooden sculptures adorned ships from the 16th to 20th centuries. The account says that in the 1830's, U.S.S. Constitution was being restored in the



Boston Navy Yard. Originally, the plan had been to restore a figurehead of Hercules – the same figurehead Constitution had carried from her launching. Ahhh... listen to this. “Then in 1834 the politically minded people of Boston demanded a likeness of General Andrew Jackson.” Ok, so I know that Andrew Jackson was definitely on Constitution. But I don’t know if this was a part of it. I think the best place for me to start is the scene of the crime. U.S.S. Constitution earned her nickname “Old Ironsides” during the war of 1812, because British cannonballs seemed to bounce off her oak hull, as if she were made of iron. In anticipation of the celebration of the war’s bicentennial, she is undergoing a major overhaul, but still welcomes visitors...firing her cannons every evening. Well, there certainly isn’t a figurehead on the ship now, there’s just a scroll there. I’m meeting Margherita Desy, official historian for U.S.S. Constitution. She has been a keeper of Constitution’s history for more than a decade.

Margherita Desy: Welcome aboard, Elyse, U.S.S. Constitution.

Elyse: Wow, she’s beautiful.

Margherita Desy: Thank you very much.

Elyse: Unbelievable. So, I have this piece and the people that own it believe that it might be part of a figurehead of Andrew Jackson that adorned this ship. Do you know of that story?

Margherita Desy: Yes I do. Yes the ship did carry a figurehead of Andrew Jackson. It was placed aboard the ship in 1834 as part of a major restoration of Constitution. Part of the restoration involved putting a new figurehead on the bow of the ship. Andrew Jackson was President at the time that the ship entered dry dock in 1833. And he was actually a very popular President. Commodore Jesse Duncan Elliott is the person who oversees the restoration of Constitution. And he thought it would be probably a politically correct thing to do to put a figurehead of Jackson on the bow of the ship.

Elyse: However, President Jackson’s populist politics were seen as favoring western interests. This earned him enemies, especially in the maritime cities of the northeast, such as Boston. Regardless, Elliott pressed ahead with his plan.



Margherita Desy: So he hired Laban Beecher who was a ship carver here in Boston to carve really quite a large figure. The Andrew Jackson figure is about 10 to 12 feet tall because Constitution is a big ship.

Elyse: Wow. And what happens? Margherita says that the best way for me to find out more is to talk to curator Sarah Watkins just across the navy yard in the archives of the U.S.S. Constitution museum. Sarah confirms that Commodore Elliot's choice of President Jackson for their beloved Old Ironsides was met with near unanimous hostility from the people of Boston, who took to the streets in protest.

Sarah Watkins: Well, first, I have a reproduction of a handbill from a period book. It's a handbill that was distributed on the streets and the title is "Freemen Awake or the Constitution will Sink." "It is in fact that the old glory President has issued special orders for a colossal figure of this royal self in roman costume to be placed as a figure head on Old Ironsides." And it ends with a call to action. "For god's sake, save the ship from foul disgrace." It was seen as a desecration on an almost sacred ship.

Elyse: Huh, and why is that?

Sarah Watkins: Well, number one, Andrew Jackson is the President of the United States who closes the bank, the Second Bank of the United States.

Elyse: Sarah explains that, in the winter of 1833, Jackson had removed federal deposits from the Second Bank of the United States. Jackson viewed that private institution as an unconstitutional concentration of financial power. But removing funds from the bank shut down the flow of credit to businesses, angering Boston merchants. On July 2nd 1834, one Cape Cod sailor, named Samuel Dewey, decided to take action.

Elyse: So what happened that night?

Sarah Watkins: Well it was a dark and stormy night and our daredevil, Samuel Dewey, stealthfully rows across Boston harbor and reaches Constitution undetected. He shimmyes up nearly 25 feet in the air with his saw and attempts to behead this figurehead, but reaches an obstruction, an



actual rod that's attaching the figure to the ship. And so instead of cutting at the neck, he actually had to cut right below the nose. And succeeded in severing it there.

Elyse: So that means that the mouth was still attached to the ship.

Sarah Watkins: Exactly.

Elyse: So what happens to Constitution?

Sarah Watkins: Well, Constitution's beheaded figure is draped in canvas, and the ship sails to New York to have a New York carver replace the damage.

Elyse: And what does Dewey do with the head?

Sarah Watkins: Well, Dewey soaking wet and elated rows back to shore and hides his prize in his mother's shed. And eventually he actually tries to take the head to Washington, D.C., and return it to Andrew Jackson himself. Jackson, unfortunately, is ill, and not able to receive him, so instead with navy property, he actually returns it to the Secretary of the Navy, Dickerson.

Elyse: So he becomes this hero.

Sarah Watkins: Dewey was known for this for the rest of his life.

Elyse: Sarah says that after the attack, the mostly decapitated President, Constitution – and possibly our mouth – sailed out of Boston for safer waters in New York harbor. Here's a picture of the severed head. The book calls it the Beecher cranium, after the Boston sculptor who made it. It's tiny, it's in black and white. So unfortunately I can't tell if the patinas are the same. Stylistically, they look pretty similar. But, unfortunately, it says here "the Beecher cranium, present whereabouts unknown." It seems the head Dewey had severed went missing long after he returned it to the navy. And what happened to the damaged remains of the figurehead when Old Ironsides got to New York? I'm enlisting the help of New York art historian and author Ralph Sessions. He's an expert on ship carvings from the 19th century, and has written on this figurehead specifically. Do you think that this piece could have been part of the figurehead?



Ralph Sessions: If this actually were the original mouth, it would be historically very important, but I'm skeptical.

Elyse: Official navy correspondence from the period indicates that the repairs preserved the existing mouth.

Ralph Sessions: We have some letters. And actually I have a copy of one in the navy department that essentially says that "no more is wanted than that so much of the figurehead as has been removed should be restored."

Elyse: So this could not be part of the original figurehead, because according to the documentation they just replaced the cranium.

Ralph Sessions: Yes, that would mean that. However, in thinking about it since you contacted me, it's also true that from a carving point of view, it would be easier for a ship carver to cut off the rest of the head at the neck and carve the entire piece. In which case this would have been cut off in New York and then the new head would be affixed.

Elyse: Did the New York team create an entire new head for the President? If so, what happened to the damaged mouth? Where do you think I should take it from here?

Ralph Sessions: Well there certainly is a way you could investigate it further.

Elyse: What's that?

Ralph Sessions: Because the figurehead is now at the Museum of the City of New York. It's on exhibition, in fact. The original piece with the replaced head.

Elyse: Ralph is being a little coy, but he says that, while I'm there, I should ask the museum about another object they have in storage that could help me solve the case. I'm meeting Dr. Sarah Henry, Chief Curator and Deputy Director of the Museum of the City of New York. She's arranged for me to take a close look at Andrew in the gallery. So this is him.



Dr. Sarah Henry: Yeah, here is Andrew Jackson.

Elyse: He's huge.

Dr. Henry: Yes, in all his glory. This is the original body the Beecher body, and, the replacement head.

Elyse: So I have this piece and if you don't mind, I wanted to make a comparison to see if our mouth could have been attached to that head.

Dr. Henry: Okay.

Elyse: It's clear that our mouth never belonged to this head. And Ralph's speculation appears on target – the New York repair team gave the President an entirely new head. Sarah doesn't know what happened to Jackson's mouth, but she has a surprise. Incredibly, the head that Dewey cut – and which had long been missing from the navy property lockers – has been found.

Dr. Henry: It's actually downstairs in our brand new collections storage center. So if you'd like to take a look we could go down.

Elyse: I'd love to see it. Sarah says that, after Dewey handed it off, Jackson's head – the so-called 'Beecher cranium' – remained in the family of the Secretary of the Navy for generations. At one point, they emigrated to France, and its whereabouts were then unknown for more than fifty years.

Dr. Henry: It was tracked down by a curator from the Museum of the City of New York in the 1990's.

Elyse: Well how did she do that?



Dr. Henry: Well she went and looked up, she knew the married name of the family member it had gotten down to and she went and looked up everybody with that last name in Paris and called everybody.

Elyse: She's like a History Detective.

Dr. Henry: Well she was, she was a History Detective.

Dr. Henry: So, there it is.

Elyse: All right, this is the moment of truth. Let's check it out.

Dr. Henry: Okay.

Elyse: This mystery has been around for a long time, but it was a hard one to crack. It wasn't until I went to the Museum of the City of New York, where I was able to find some answers, and I think you might want to take a look at some of this footage.

Elyse: Well the first thing I notice is that the patina is the same. And it's to scale. I mean the mouth and the chin aren't bigger or smaller. It's definitely to scale as it should be. So that's a good sign. Now let's see if it matches.

Dr. Henry: Let's see if it fits that together, okay?

Elyse: You got it?

Dr. Henry: Come, on, Andy.

Elyse: Okay, here we go.

Dr. Henry: Let's see. Look at that!

Elyse: Yep, it's a match! So after 150 years, they're finally together.



Dr. Henry: Together again.

Elyse: Oh, P. J.'s going to be thrilled.

P. J. Whelan: Oh my gosh. Absolutely amazing. I'm speechless. I really can't believe that it's actually real.

Elyse: So your dad's trade really was for a treasure. What are you going to do with it?

P. J. Whelan: It's always been in the back of my mind that he could be reunited with Andrew. That to me is the fitting end to the story, is that Andrew gets his mouth back and history gets back an important piece of the puzzle.

Elyse: Samuel Dewey – the Bostonian who decapitated the figurehead – slipped from public view after that fateful night in 1834. Despite becoming a gem seeker, and discovering both the largest known American diamond and ruby at the time, he died poor, at the age of 93, in a tenement house. U.S.S. Constitution never fired her cannons in battle again. Upon returning to the U.S. in 1855 from her final voyage around the world, Old Ironsides was readied for her new role as a stationary school ship for the naval academy. Today, the oldest commissioned warship still afloat continues to serve as an historic ship, welcoming aboard half a million visitors each year.