



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:  
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## **Stolen 18<sup>th</sup> Century Pistol Returned to the Mercer Museum After Nearly 50 Years**

**DOYLESTOWN, PA** – The Mercer Museum, operated by the Bucks County Historical Society (BCHS), attended a repatriation ceremony for stolen artifacts at the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia on Friday, December 17, 2021, alongside six museums from the region.

Artifacts stolen nearly half a century ago and recovered as part of a 50-year-old cold case cracked by the FBI in 2019 were returned to the Mercer Museum, American Swedish Historical Museum, Hershey Story Museum, Landis Valley Museum, Museum of the American Revolution, and York County History Center. The items being repatriated include historic firearms from the 18th and 19th centuries, including rifles and pistols, and a Native American silver concho belt.

The recovery of the artifacts was made possible through the efforts of the Federal Bureau of Investigation Art Crime Team - Philadelphia Division, the United States Attorney's Office of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, and the Upper Merion Township Police Department.

The Mercer Museum received a late-18<sup>th</sup> century English flintlock boarding pistol, stolen from their collection nearly 50 years ago. At the time of its disappearance, the pistol was on display in an exhibit case on the third floor of the Mercer Museum in downtown Doylestown. In the 1990s, when reviewing a comprehensive inventory of the Mercer Museum's collection, the pistol could not be located and was officially recorded as "missing".

Originally acquired by the Bucks County Historical Society in 1906, the pistol was among items donated to the museum as belonging to General Augustine Willet by his great-granddaughter, Mrs. Allburger. Willet served as a Captain of militia at the onset of the American Revolution, later being promoted to a Major and Lieutenant Colonel. In 1800, he was commissioned Brigadier General of the Bucks County militia.

The original items donated by Willet's great-granddaughter to the museum in 1906 also included Willet's regimental coat, a rare surviving artifact, likely dating back to the period after the American Revolution.

"In law enforcement, as in any profession, there are good days and bad days. Today, standing here along with our partners, is one of those good days," said Jacqueline Maguire, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Philadelphia Division. "The absence of the items from these museums represented not just a physical or financial loss, but a loss to every visitor, every student, and every researcher who didn't get to see the items over the years and missed out on important pieces of our nation's heritage. The absence of these items was, for so long, a loss to the historical record. The FBI is honored to have helped correct that loss and return these artifacts to the institutions from which they were stolen so long ago."

Thomas Gavin, who was convicted of stealing the artifacts in the 1960s and 1970s, was recently sentenced to one day in prison and various fines. The judge took Gavin's age and declining health into consideration during sentencing.

The Bucks County Historical Society's Vice President of Collections and Interpretation Cory Amsler adds, "To recover an object stolen from a museum is a tremendous thing. But to recognize that the object, once returned, can also help to tell an important and compelling story about a dramatic time period in Bucks County history makes its recovery that much more valuable."

The Mercer Museum wishes to thank the Upper Merion Township Police Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the United States District Attorney's Office of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, for their wide-ranging efforts to pursue justice and ensure the restoral of important historical artifacts to their rightful repositories. The Mercer Museum looks forward to including the pistol in its displays in the future.

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**For additional information or to schedule a media interview, please contact:**

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## **About the Mercer Museum & Fonthill Castle**

The Mercer Museum & Fonthill Castle are operated by the Bucks County Historical Society. It is the mission of the Bucks County Historical Society to educate and engage its many audiences in appreciating the past and to help people find stories and meanings relevant to their lives—both today and in the future.

Located in Doylestown, Bucks County, PA, the Mercer Museum and Fonthill Castle are historic castles celebrating the legacy of Henry Chapman Mercer (1856-1930), American archaeologist, anthropologist, ceramicist and scholar.

The Mercer Museum, one of Bucks County's premier cultural attractions and a Smithsonian affiliate, features both local and national seasonal exhibits as well as a core museum collection of over 50,000 pre-Industrial tools. This permanent collection offers visitors a unique window into pre-Industrial America through sixty different crafts and trades, and is one of the world's most comprehensive portraits of American material culture. The museum also features a research library that is a center for local history related to Bucks County and the surrounding region, with its roots dating back to the founding of the Bucks County Historical Society in 1880.

Fonthill Castle was built between 1908-1912, and was the home to Henry Chapman Mercer. Mercer built Fonthill Castle as his home and as a showplace for his collection of tiles and prints. The castle serves as an early example of reinforced concrete and features forty-four rooms, over two hundred windows, and eighteen fireplaces. Fonthill Castle's interior features Mercer's renowned, hand crafted ceramic tiles designed at the height of the Arts and Crafts movement.

The Mercer Museum is located at 84 South Pine Street, Doylestown, PA, 18901. Fonthill Castle is located at 525 East Court Street in Doylestown, PA, 18901.

The Mercer Museum & Fonthill Castle are open Tuesdays – Sundays from 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. For up-to-date ticket and schedule information, please visit [mercermuseum.org](http://mercermuseum.org).