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Reuniting History: GW Helps Identify a Copy of the Bill of Rights

By Greg Licamele

More than 200 years ago, US Vice President John Adams was among those who signed the 14 handwritten copies of the Bill of Rights. During the Civil War, a Union soldier stole North Carolina's copy and it had been missing ever since. That is, until three years ago. Charlene Bickford and GW's First Federal Congress Project (FFCP) staff members were stunned when five unidentified individuals came to her L Street office with the historic document mounted and framed.

But those visitors left without a trace.

Two weeks ago, the FBI finally collected the original document during a sting operation in Philadelphia, where the Bill of Rights was being shopped for sale to the Constitution Center. Soon after FFCP confirmed to the Constitution Center that it was the North Carolina document, the sellers withdrew their offer. The center called the Pennsylvania governor, who then called the North Carolina governor. They decided to contact the FBI and conduct an elaborate sting operation.

Signed in 1789, the Bill of Rights contains the first 10 amendments to the US Constitution and guarantees such rights as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the right to a speedy public trial.

In order to verify where this Bill of Rights was from (four are missing), the Constitution Center contacted FFCP earlier this year to conduct handwriting evaluations, led by Helen Veit, an FFCP associate editor.

Samples of documents sent to the North Carolina governor during the 1800s, as well as pictures of the missing Bill of Rights, helped the identification process, Bickford says.

"After comparing the [writing] on the back of the Bill of Rights with the sample dockets sent, as well as [writing] on North Carolina documents in our files, [Veit] immediately said this was North Carolina's copy," says Bickford, FFCP director. "The pattern of the [writing], as well as virtually exact matches of words like 'the' and 'of' and of capital letters, served to make us confident.

"For example," Bickford adds, "this particular clerk writes 'the' with a very tall, thin 't,' a tall, thin loopless 'h', and crosses both letters."

That visit three years ago loomed large in Bickford's mind.

During that meeting in 2000, the five people, two of whom were armed, removed an original Bill of Rights from a cardboard box, replete with an ornate frame. Bickford says the four men and one woman wanted a positive identification and some history about the original 14 copies.

"They acted like they did not know that the document belonged to North Carolina, but we now know that this was not the case," Bickford explains. "After being frustrated by their lack of candor, my colleagues fled the room, while I continued to encourage them to determine what state it belonged to and work with that state to see that it was returned to



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its collections. Eventually they walked out, leaving us with no information about where to find them.”

Now that the priceless piece of American history will return to Raleigh, Bickford hopes it will not be hidden from the public. “It is our hope that North Carolina will take the risk of displaying this document, rather than succumbing to the temptation of locking it away in a vault somewhere.”

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