

Brooks Free Library
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From: Virginia A. Hewitt, Library Director
To: Community Preservation Committee
Subject: Status Report on Brooks Free Library Projects for Your Sept. 9, 2021 Meeting
Encl: 1. MUNIS report dated 3.23.22
2. Skylight Studio's Conservation Treatment Report
Date: March 31, 2022

The Library has one open Community Preservation Act project - Article 31 of the May 2015 ATM (Org/Object Code: 80271292/ 615031) for the Conservation of the Rogers Groups statues. We are delighted to report that project is now complete, all invoices have been paid and a balance of \$270 remains and can be returned to the Community Preservation Act funds.

Background Information on the Rogers Groups collection

Brooks Free Library's collection of Rogers Groups sculptures is among the oldest and most treasured artifacts in the Town's cultural heritage. In 1881 Harwich philanthropist Pliny Nickerson donated 40 Rogers Groups to Brooks Free Library to celebrate the opening of the Town's first public library. John Rogers created these clay and plaster statues, which generally standing one to three feet tall and depict literary and historical scenes, the Civil War and everyday life from 1859 to 1892. Known as the "People's Sculptor," Rogers' works were highly prized at the time and have become increasingly valuable.

The original collection was added to over time and eventually the Library owned 69 sculptures. Only 80 Rogers Groups were mass-produced and cast in plaster, so at one time our collection was thought to be the largest collection outside of New York City and was perhaps the largest public collection.

That changed on March 31, 1976, several weeks after a Boston Globe article on collectors' increasing interest in Rogers Groups, when 56 Rogers Groups were stolen from our collection. Thieves broke in to the Library, tore down the drapes to wrap up the statues and vanished into the night. Despite a lengthy investigation by local authorities and the FBI, the theft was never solved. Local rumors have long held that the thieves were unable to sell such a large, identifiable collection, so they squirreled the statues away in attics and basements where they still remain. The Library was left with 13 Rogers Groups after the theft and 12 more were added to the collection through donations and purchases in the next two decades, giving us a total of 25 statues.

In September 2013, however, a volunteer at the Treasure Chest discovered a Rogers Groups statue, Checkers Up At The Farm, in a box that had been donated. Tucked under the arm of one of the players was a rolled up newspaper clipping about the theft, so it was clear that this

was someone's method of anonymously returning the stolen statue to the Library. A long-time Trustee and I were able to visit the statue at the Police Dept. and confirm that Checkers Up At The Farm was indeed one of pieces in our collection that had been stolen. We were instructed to keep the return of the statue confidential as the detectives hoped fresh leads would lead to the recovery of additional statues.

Reviewing materials regarding the theft and old photographs in our files during the fall of 2013 made me realize our collection was in poor condition. Most of the statues owned prior to the theft were in better shape than the ones acquired afterwards, but all were in need of restoration, with varying amounts of chipping, cracking, peeling and flaking paint, so I began preparing a request for the next funding cycle for Community Preservation Act funds.

We submitted our project request in the fall of 2014 for the May 2015 Annual Town Meeting seeking \$23,000 for the services of a professional conservator to evaluate the collection and create a Conservation Treatment Plan and the funds to do the work. I noted that we owned 26 statues in the application but I wasn't yet able to reveal that #26 was a stolen statue that had been returned. Prior to Town Meeting I received approval from the Police Dept. to reveal the return of a stolen statue, so when speaking in favor of our CPC article I was able to publicly announce to the return of Checkers Up At The Farm on Town Meeting floor.

The statute of limitations on the theft has long since passed and the thieves themselves may have passed on, so if the rumors were true about stolen statues still being hidden in attics and basements the only thing preventing their return is fear of embarrassment or damaging a friend or loved one's reputation. With the permission of the Police Dept. we made it clear in the announcement at Town Meeting and the publicity that followed that we would welcome the anonymous return of any of the stolen statues, asking that they be left in a covered location, protected from the elements, and that we be notified in some way of where to find them. Unfortunately, there have been no more returns of our stolen Rogers Groups but we remain hopeful that will occur.

History of This Project

This project was approved at the May 2015 Town Meeting, with funds being available as of July 1, 2016. In hindsight, my excitement at the return of the stolen statue led me to submit an application for the conservation work prematurely, as my primary focus at the time and over the next few years was the massive preservation project of the exterior of the Library also funded by CPC. My involvement in that project was reduced when the project got underway and was managed by the DPW Facilities Manager, and I was able to return my focus to this project. I then ran into another roadblock – the difficulty of government procurement process for art conservation work. Careful, detailed specifications are extremely important since quality in art is relative and subject to individual judgement. Inexperienced conservators or those whose work is not of high enough quality can easily damage a piece, repairing a chip incorrectly or layering too much paint, for example. I also had to be cognizant of financial constraints, since we did not have unlimited funds. The need for an understanding of art conservation was a challenge I hadn't originally anticipated.

I contacted Francis Miller, the highly regarded conservator used by the John Rogers Studio and Museum, operated by the New Canaan Historical Society (John Roger's hometown) to work on their Rogers Groups statues. Mr. Miller gave generously of his time, educating me on art conservation and helping me to clarify what we wanted done. Our original objective had

been to have the entire collection re-painted in the same gray color used by the Harwich Women's Club when they repainted the collection in the 1950's, so that the entire collection would have the same uniform finish it had before the theft. Mr. Miller was extremely complementary of the work done by the Women's Club when he later conducted site visits, but he informed me re-painting the statues isn't generally done as additional paint layers obscure fine details. Instead we should be looking to have the finish repaired and stabilized where needed. It became clear we were looking for conservation work and not restoration work. Using this information I prepared the specifications for contracting for the work.

Phase I - Assessment of the Collection and preparation of a Conservation Treatment Plan.

- In 2018 I contracted with Francis Miller for \$3150 for preparation of the Conservation Treatment Plan. The plan was completed in March 2019. As I previously reported, the plan recommended that 3 of the 26 statues not be included in the conservation project because they needed extensive work.
 - We had duplicate of one work so it was recommended we include the one that required very little work and not the one needing extensive work.
 - One of the three not included in the conservation work is Parting Promise. This statue was broken when it was dropped during the 1976 theft and it left behind in the parking lot during the 1976 theft. (Both arms of one of the figures are missing.) That damage is part its history, and also our history, so while those who restore art would advocate for it to be repaired if we had the funds, others advise it should be left as so the piece retains its history.
- The Conservation Treatment Plan detailed the work needed on each piece, providing the specifications needed for the request for quotes to do the conservation work.

Phase II : Conservation Work

- On Sept. 26, 2019 we awarded a contract for the conservation treatment on 23 Rogers Groups statues to Skylight Studios of Woburn, MA for \$ 19,580. The conservators who worked on our collection have Masters of Fine Arts degrees in Sculpture, decades of experience and excellent reputations.
- A fine arts moving company picked up the sculptures on Dec. 12, 2019 and transported them to the conservator's studio in Woburn, MA.
- The conservation work was to be completed and the statues returned to us in September 2020. That work was delayed by the pandemic due to occupancy restrictions in the conservator's studio and other impacts of the pandemic. We kept in touch with the conservator during the delay and agreed on a new completion date of October 15, 2021.
- On Oct. 13, 2021 the collection was returned to us from the conservator's studio in Woburn, delivered to the Library by Clarks Fine Art Services, a company that specializes in the transportation of fine art.
- In Nov. 2021 we received the Conservation Treatment Report from the conservator, a comprehensive 49-page report with a detailed description of the conservation work

performed. The report is attached to this status update and also available online at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OHID06RKifryLQq5u4mT_Xy3fbAy_AA/view?usp=sharing.

- The Conservation Treatment Report contains Before and After photos but of the detail may not be readily apparent since the photos are smaller and only show the front of the pieces, so I'd like to highlight one so you will be better able to see what was done.

Checkers Up At The Farm

We currently have two Checkers Up At The Farm in our collection. One is a darker gold color with a shiny finish, an unusual treatment for Rogers Groups. It was acquired by the Library in the years after the 1976 theft. The second statue, and more dear to our hearts, is the one that was discovered in a donated box at the Treasure Chest in 2013. The poor condition of the statue lent credence to the rumors that the stolen statues were hidden in local attics and basements. The surface was grimy, with dirt, dust or other materials in crevices, folds in the clothing, rolled up sleeves, etc.

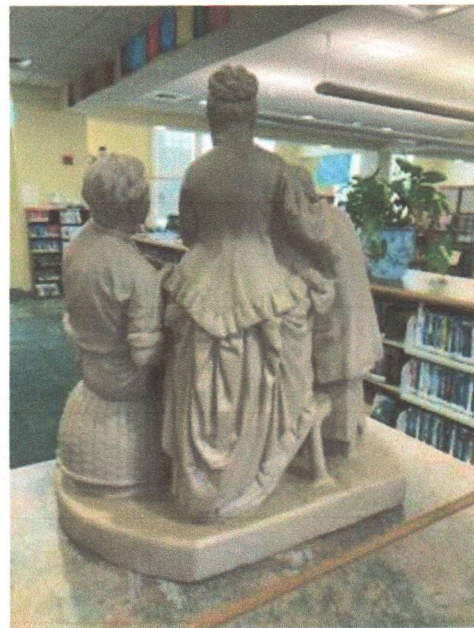
The photo below was taken in the Police Dept. conference room following the statue's return. Note the areas of chipped, cracked and missing paint, particularly obvious in this photo on the legs of the checkers players.



The next photo shows this statue after the conservation treatment. Note the smooth finish. Work was such high quality that it appeared to me to have been completely re-painted, but it was not. A thorough cleaning was done, which makes the statue appear a lighter tan color, and the defects in the finish were repaired. It's now on display in the central portion on the main floor of the Library (DVDs area).



The next photos show the back of this statue before and after treatment.



Conclusion

With the receipt of the Conservation Treatment Report, the conservator's work was finished. On January 21, 2022 the invoice for \$19,580.00 was paid and a check was issued to Skylight Studios.

This project is now complete. The remaining balance of \$270.00, shown in the attached MUNIS report, is to be returned to the CPC.

Thank you very much for authorizing the Community Preservation Act funding to conserve this wonderful collection, which is so much a part of the Town's history. I want to also personally thank you for your forbearance while I learned what I needed to know to properly contract for this work. I proceeded slowly and cautiously not because I de-valued the importance of the project, but because I cared so much about the results. I wanted to ensure the right work was done, in the right manner, so the quality of each piece and the collection as a whole was maintained. I am happy to report to you that objective was achieved.

The collection looks beautiful and is once again something townspeople can take pride in. Many visitors have been in specifically to see the collection since it was returned in October. The Library is protected by a modern security alarm system so the Trustees felt it's important to continue to display the collection around the Library for residents and visitors to enjoy, rather than keeping the statues behind locked doors.

Thank you again for approving the funding for this project.

Respectfully submitted,

Virginia A. Hewitt
Library Director

03/23/2022 12:24
ghewitt

TOWN OF HARWICH - LIVE DATA
G/L ACCOUNT - MASTER INQUIRY

P 1
glactinq

Org code: 80271292 CPC-WARRANT ARTICLES
Object code: 615031 ATM 15 # 31 RODGERS SCULPTURES
Project code:

Type: E
Status: A
Budgetary: Y

Fund 8027 CPC/LAND BANK TRUST FUND
FUNCTION 0 UNDEFINED
DEPT/SCH LOC 000 UNDEFINED
DOE 0000 UNDEFINED
GRADE 000 UNDEFINED
SUBJECT 000 UNDEFINED
OPEN 0 UNDEFINED
CATEGORY 2 EXPENSE

Full description: ATM 15 # 31 Rogers Sculptures Short desc: ATM 15 #31
Reference Acct: Auto-encumber? (Y/N) N

----- CURRENT YEAR MONTHLY AMOUNTS -----				
PER	ACTUAL	ENCUMBRANCE	BUD TRANSFER	BUDGET
00	.00	.00	.00	.00
01	.00	.00	19,850.00	19,850.00
02	.00	.00	.00	.00
03	.00	.00	.00	.00
04	.00	.00	.00	.00
05	.00	.00	.00	.00
06	.00	.00	.00	.00
07	19,580.00	.00	.00	.00
08	.00	.00	.00	.00
09	.00	.00	.00	.00
10	.00	.00	.00	.00
11	.00	.00	.00	.00
12	.00	.00	.00	.00
13	.00	.00	.00	.00
Tot:	19,580.00	.00	19,850.00	19,850.00

----- CURRENT YEAR TOTAL AMOUNTS -----			
Actual (Memo)	19,580.00	Original Budget	.00
Encumbrances	.00	Budget Tranfr In	19,850.00
Requisitions	.00	Budget Tranfr Out	.00
Total	19,580.00	Carry Fwd Budget	.00
Available Budget	270.00	Carry Fwd Bud Tfr	.00
Percent Used	98.64	Revised Budget	19,850.00
Inceptn to SOY	.00	Inceptn Orig Bud	.00
		Inceptn Revsd Bud	.00
Encumb-Last Yr	.00	REQUEST	.00
Actual-Last Yr	.00	TOWN ADMIN	.00
Estim-Actual	.00	SELECTMEN	.00
		FIN COMM	.00
		VOTED	.00

check to skylight studios issues 1.21.22

Balance being returned to CPC is \$270.00