

A Look Back – The Great Weathervane Heist

Controversy invites theft, and one of the more fascinating chapters in the Barn's 25 years is written



March 15, 2012

As faculty member Kevin Jordan and his team of historic preservation students transformed two old barns from Gloucester, R.I., into *the Barn* at Roger Williams in the early 1980s – see feature in the Spring 2012 issue of [RWU Magazine](#) – the new performing arts center featured a picturesque cupola at its apex, but not the weathervane you might expect to see atop.

The original, it turns out, had been stolen by helicopter in the early 1970s when the barns sat in Gloucester. According to Jordan, the age and the scarcity of historic weathervanes prompted a wave of thefts in the late 1960s and '70s:

“People would rent a helicopter for \$200 an hour, head out to rural areas and steal 50, 60, 70 weathervanes at a time. They could be worth anywhere from \$5,000 to \$50,000 each at the time.”

After the Barn's debut on campus, Jordan came across an unused weathervane that depicted Metacomet, the Wampanoag sachem who played a major role in King Philip's War. Jordan and his students repaired it and placed it in the Barn; with helicopter thefts in mind, they took extra care to install a collar below roof level so the weathervane couldn't be lifted from above.

Reaction to the weathervane was not universally positive – questions about the appropriateness of its depiction of Metacomet caused a controversy that attracted media attention and with the unexpected exposure, the risk of theft grew. One night in 1987, between midnight and 5 a.m., someone broke into the building, scaled the cupola and stole the weathervane.

“The collar was secured with three different kinds of screws so you couldn't go up with just one screwdriver,” Jordan says. “So they knew enough to have the right equipment – I don't know how they got their information, but clearly they were well prepared.”

Jordan worked with a state trooper from upstate New York who had developed a particular expertise in the disappearance of weathervanes. They identified a vehicle type that was reported on campus that evening, but the trooper assured Jordan that the weathervane was long gone.

“Most of them steal the weathervanes for collectors,” Jordan says. “Or they hope that it gets cleansed over time and they can put it on the market again. Every now and again a similar one pops up at an auction, but there are only three of this identical weathervane in existence.”

At this point, it seems unlikely that the weathervane will ever resurface. If it does, however, Jordan will know it’s his – inside the tin weathervane sits a note with the date he installed it in the Barn and information on the repairs his students completed.

“Always leave a note!” he says. “Those of us who work in preservation love to find notes like that when we work on a project today – someday in the future, I know someone will enjoy finding this note, too.”

<http://pdq.rwu.edu/news/look-back-%E2%80%93-great-weathervane-heist>