

Guardian of America's Heirlooms

BY BRIANNA MCCLANE

Is **Kelly Maltagliati** the National Archives' version of Nicolas Cage? Sure, she hasn't stolen the Declaration of Independence to marinate it in lemon juice, but she does track down wrongdoers in order to protect the country's history. This is no *National Treasure*, but as special agent in charge of the Archival Recovery Team, Maltagliati's job is to track down items stolen from the national treasure chest.

Maltagliati, 52, was brought aboard eight years ago to establish the special recovery team at the National Archives and Records Administration, which has had several high-profile cases of pilfered documents in recent years.

One involved Sandy Berger, a former White House national security adviser who pleaded guilty to stealing and destroying documents pertaining to terrorism dating from President Clinton's administration. Another perpetrator was Leslie Waffan, a former chief of audio and film at the Archives who was sentenced in May to 18 months in prison and two years of supervised release for stealing 955 items, including a recording of the 1937 Hindenburg disaster.

And while hunting for the Wright Brothers' airplane patent may not match the "drugs, dead bodies, and fast boats" that Maltagliati experienced in a previous job for the U.S. Customs Service, she is still determined to find that patent.

There's also the chest that Maltagliati's team is on a quest to recover: It's rumored to have been owned by Gideon Welles, secretary of the Navy under President Lincoln, and to hold about 713 documents.

A lot of investigations start with a tip, she says. Some come from archivists, and sometimes a piece is found while browsing on eBay. Or an investigation might start after a stroll through a Civil War show. Maltagliati's objective is to mingle, meet people, and keep an eye out for items that possibly belong to the government. People have approached her at shows to return documents they believe were taken from the Archives.

What drives a person to steal pieces of the past? "They think or believe, for whatever reason, that nobody else looks at this document," Maltagliati says. "They feel they can do it better justice in their collection. That they'll look at it, covet it more than anyone would at the Archives. They keep it for a while, and then they get in a financial difficulty and they sell it."

Recently, passport portraits of celeb-



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rities such as John Wayne and Bill Cosby were discovered in the belongings of a deceased individual and returned to the Archives. Signatures that have been cut out of documents are a common theft that is especially difficult to track down. Sometimes—but rarely—they get lucky and find a signature that fits into the missing square, Maltagliati says.

Archival recovery may be the stuff of a history nerd's dreams, but Maltagliati says she had no interest in the past when she first took the position. History books earned a spot on her reading list after she opened a piece of mail in her office that, to her surprise, contained a pardon from Lincoln. "It's just incredible to me that I'm holding the same document that Abraham Lincoln held," she says. "And I'm like, 'I've got to start learning about this stuff.'"

The Huntsville, Ala., native's career in criminal justice started as a fingerprint technician for a police department. After stints with Customs and the Drug Enforcement Administration, Maltagliati also worked for NASA and the Federal Reserve Board before joining the Archives.

"Bringing people to justice always gives you the feel-good that you're doing a good job and that you're doing something for the taxpayers," she says.

The Partnership for Public Service recognized Maltagliati's work this summer by naming her a finalist for the Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Justice and Law Enforcement Medal. It was announced on Wednesday that the medal will go to Lou Milione and the Operation Relentless Team at DEA.

To Maltagliati, the best thing about her nomination was the press it gave the Archives. She received a call from an individual who saw the announcement of her nomination in the paper and wondered if a document they owned belonged to the Archives.

Her passion for history may have developed over time, but Maltagliati's dedication to her job is evident.

"There is really something to coming in here and holding these items. There's just something about coming to the Archives that you cannot get on the Internet. We're trying to keep those things here," she says. "If they're not here, people can't look at them." ■