

LAST WORD SOCIETY

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The First Mail Bomb?

REFERENCE: Burnett B, Golubovs P. The first mail bomb? *J Forensic Sci* 2000;45(4):935–936.

ABSTRACT: A news item in the newspaper, the *Evening Star, for the Country*, October 18, 1833, probably is the first report of a mail bomb in the United States. It is also likely to be the first defusing of a mail bomb. The device appeared to be extraordinarily sophisticated and would have likely worked had it not been for suspicions of the recipient of the bomb.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, mail bomb, nineteenth century, horse pistol, flintlock

The following was published in New York City's the *Evening Star, for the Country*, October 18, 1833:

“Gunpowder Plot.—The following most foul and diabolical affair we copy from the *Journal of Commerce*. Every police officer in this city and every magistrate should be on the alert to discover the perpetrator of this shocking attempt at murder.

Powder Plot.—About four months ago, Edward Wilcox, Esq. of Westerly, Rhode Island, late Lt. Governor of that state, received by a sloop from New York, a leather trunk, with a label attached, stating that it came from a relative in this city. Something, however, excited the suspicions of Mr. Wilcox that it was not a friendly present, and cautiously raising the lid a very little, he discovered cords within, so situated as to strengthen his suspicions. He therefore set the trunk aside, until more should be known. A few days later some young men determined to open it. They cut the cords carefully and opened the trunk, when it was found to contain two horse-pistols, with the muzzles buried in upwards of *thirty pounds of powder*. The cords were attached to the triggers in such a manner that if the lid had been raised a few inches, the whole would have exploded, and dreadful must have been the effect. The pistols have been sent to this city, the hope of tracing out the murderous villain, who, to gratify his malice against an individual, would not only have taken his life, but in all probability the lives of a whole family.”

This is likely not only the first report of a mail bomb but also the first defusing of a mail bomb. The account certainly poses interesting questions. For instance, how did Mr. Wilcox recognize that the trunk was “not a friendly present?” We find it extraordinary that Mr. Wilcox was aware of a potential for bodily harm from the trunk so that he exercised caution while opening it. Perhaps there were other such instances of “mail” bombs known at that time.

By noting that “young men” opened the trunk, it is apparent that local police were not involved in discovering the nature of suspicious packages. Perhaps in 1833 young men were considered a foolhardy lot willing to take risks. It must have been recognized that the cords represented part of a trigger mechanism, and the persons defusing the bomb knew that they should place minimal tension on the cords while cutting.

Generically, the term “horse pistol” pertains to a long barreled handgun with a flintlock firing mechanism. (The percussion-cap horse pistol was introduced circa 1840–41 and many firearms originally configured with flintlock mechanisms were “converted” to the percussion system (1)). This type of pistol was carried by military cavalymen and civilians and was designed to deliver a larger caliber projectile with a greater muzzle velocity at a greater effective range than that of a standard pistol of this period. The horse pistol was held and fired with one hand, leaving the other hand free for either wielding a saber or holding onto the reins.

The flintlock firing mechanism is activated when the trigger is pulled. This disengages the spring-driven hammer from the full-cocked position and causes the flint, which is sandwiched in a piece of leather in the jaws of the hammer, to strike the steel frizzen. Simultaneous with the flint striking the frizzen, the frizzen-covered flash pan is struck. The fine grain powder in the flash pan ignites and via the touchhole in the weapon's barrel, the powder inside the barrel is set off. In the 1833 mail bomb, the 30-lb charge in the leather trunk adds a third stage to the explosion train.

A rapid and energetic raising of the trunk lid could easily have fired the pistols. Even the cautious opening of the trunk could have fired the pistols, if there were less slack in the cords. Jostling during the transportation of the luggage did not fire the pistols, suggesting that the sears on the mechanism were not worn and that the perpetrator carefully designed the internal configuration to preclude the movement of any objects which could ensnare the cords and cause a premature firing of one or both of the weapons.

The pistols would have had to be mounted in such a manner as to allow free movement of their hammers and be secured enough so that jostling of the trunk during shipment would not dislodge them. This suggests sophisticated mounts for the pistols. The perpetrator would have had to have access to tools to fashion such

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Received 5 Aug. 1999; and in revised form 11 Oct. 1999; accepted 18 Oct. 1999.

mounts or he had someone construct the mounts for him. How the perpetrator armed the bomb (by attachment of the cords to the trunk lid) or if he accessed the bomb mechanism through a part of the trunk other than the top of the trunk will likely never be known. However, by having the cords loose so that they could be observed with the partially open lid of the trunk suggests the cords were tied to the lid through the top and not via one of the sides or the bottom. If they were tied from another opening into the trunk, the cords would likely have been tight enough so as not to allow even a partial opening of the lid without initiating the explosion.

If the bomb had gone off, the explosion of 30 lb of black powder would have spread parts of the trunk and the pistols over a wide area. Any investigating authority would probably have had difficulty recognizing the cause of the explosion.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks go to Marie Louise Stokes and Carol Stokes for providing us the means to discover the described *Evening Star, for The Country* article.

Reference

1. Flayderman N. Flayderman's guide to antique American firearms. 7th Ed. Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 1998.

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