

The New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/1995/11/23/business/chronicle-058670.html>

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Published: November 23, 1995

When MARIA COOPER JANIS, Gary Cooper's daughter, took one of his prized possessions -- a letter by George Washington -- to be appraised recently, she was shocked to learn that it was stolen property.

"The letter, which was written by a scribe and signed by Washington, was given to my father as a gift, I guess in the mid- to late 1940's, and I have no idea why or by whom," she said yesterday. "For many years, it was hanging on a wall in the library of our home in Beverly Hills."

When Mrs. Janis and her mother, Veronica Cooper Converse, moved to New York from California in 1961, they packed the letter away, and Mrs. Janis did not come across it again until this year.

"I took it to Christie's thinking of perhaps putting it up for auction," she said. "In doing a check on it, they discovered that it had been stolen along with other items from the Massachusetts state archives."

Now she is returning the letter (appraised, by the way, at \$24,000). "It certainly belongs with its rightful owners," she said.