Hidden treasure, a family's quest, and 'The Secret'

By **Billy Baker** Globe Staff, October 25, 2019, 9:20 a.m.

The Krupat family found buried treasure in Boston's North End. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

One afternoon this summer, Jason Krupat went for a run after work. He left his office downtown and, as usual, chose a route that took him along the waterfront in the North End.

He was trying to lose some weight, yes, but those daily runs were also an opportunity for him to clear his head and ponder a puzzle that had remained unsolved since 1982. When unlocked, it would lead to a treasure buried somewhere in North America.

And Krupat and his family had come to believe the clues led to Langone Park in the North End, a sprawling green space with three ball fields, bocce courts, a pool, and a playground. More specifically, they believed the treasure was buried underneath home plate on the softball field.

But as Krupat was jogging along the waterfront that July day, wondering how they might ever convince the city to let them dig up home plate, he saw something happening at Langone Park that sent a panic through his body. The entire park was circled by construction fencing, and crews were tearing the place up for a major renovation.

"I got up the courage to walk onto the site and find the foreman, and I said, 'You're going to think this is crazy, but I think there's buried treasure in this park,' " Krupat recalled. "And I was right — he thought I was crazy."

Josh Gates, host of "Expedition Unknown" at the site with Jason Krupat. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Some explaining was in order. The treasure Krupat sought was the work of a New York publisher named Byron Preiss, who in 1982 released a book titled "The Secret" (no relation to the popular self-help book with the same title).

Preiss's book contained 12 puzzles, each consisting of a cryptic verse that had to be paired with a cryptic painting. If solved correctly, each puzzle would lead to a park in a different North American city — Preiss never said which cities — to a spot where he had buried an ornate ceramic "casque" inside a plexiglass box. Inside each "casque" — the word Preiss used to descibe the ceramic container he buried — was a key that could be exchanged for a jewel valued at about $1,000.

The year after the book was published, three teenagers in Chicago followed Preiss's clues to a box buried in Grant Park in Chicago.

JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

It was another 21 years before the next box was discovered, by two buddies in the Greek Cultural Garden in Cleveland.

The following year, in 2005, Preiss, the only person who knew the exact whereabouts of the treasures, died in a car accident.

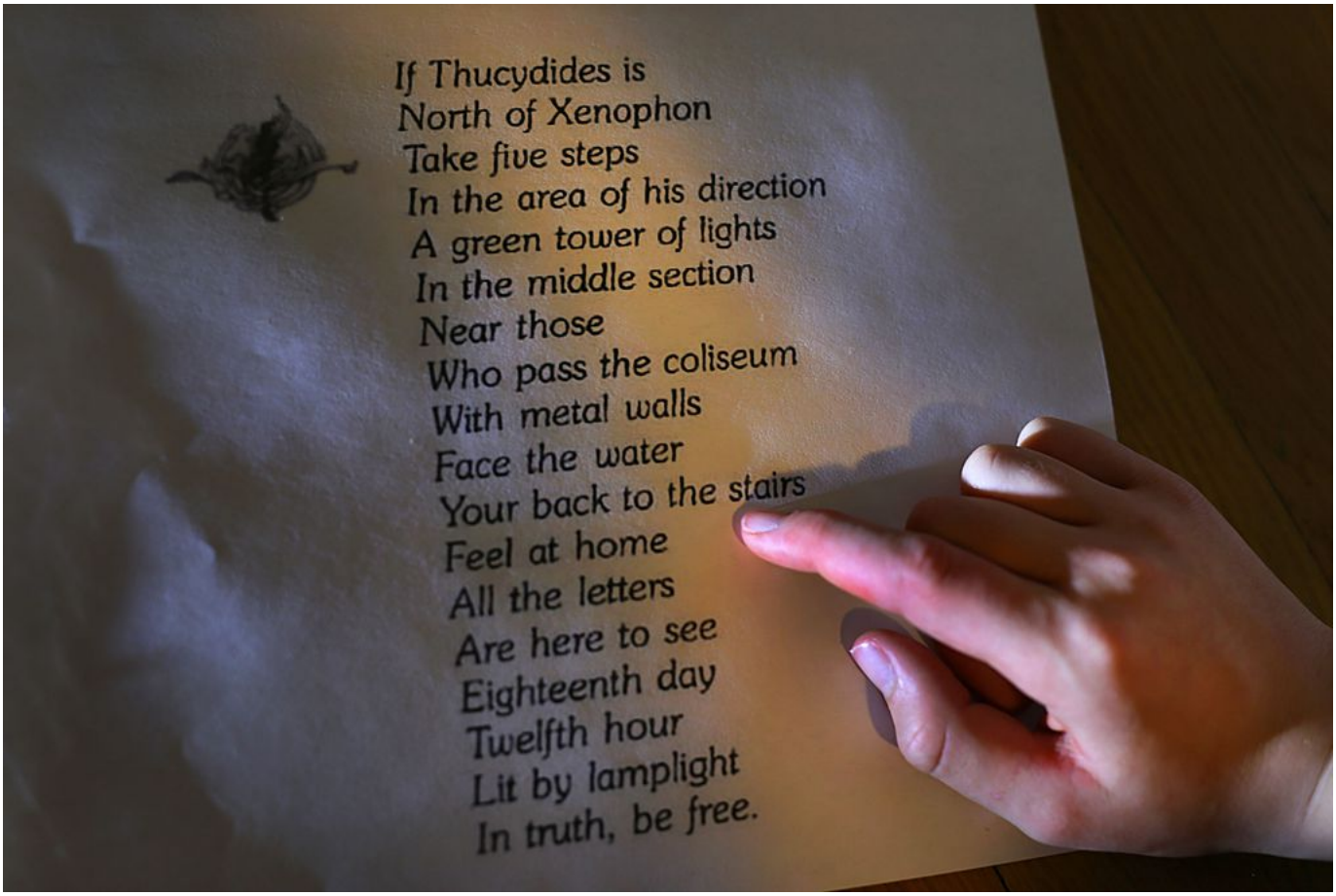
No other boxes were ever found. Interest in "The Secret" faded, and the book went out of print.

Then early last year, "Expedition Unknown," a television show on the Discovery Channel, did a special on "The Secret" that set off a new frenzy of treasure hunters.

"I've been making travel adventure shows for 10 years, and I've never seen anything like the reaction to that show," said Josh Gates, the show's host, who is a Tufts grad and a native of Manchester-by-the-Sea. "So many people contacted me, and a lot of them were from the Boston area because it's long been believed that one of them was hidden there."

The Krupat children, 12-year-old Molly and 10-year-old Jack, saw the episode and called their parents into the room, knowing this would be right up their father's alley. Jason Krupat makes his living as a puzzle and game designer. Soon, the family began making weekend trips into the city to work on what had come to be known as "the Boston verse."

If Thucydides is/North of Xenophon/Take five steps/In the area of his direction/A green tower of lights/In the middle section/Near those/Who pass the coliseum/With metal walls/Face the water/Your back to the stairs/Feel at home/All the letters/Are here to see/Eighteenth day/Twelfth hour/Lit by lamplight/In truth be free.



Jack Krupat, 10, pointed to lines from "The Secret." JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

The names Thucydides and Xenophon are engraved on the facade of the main branch of the Boston Public Library in Copley Square, so it has long been assumed that the solution to this verse began there. Where it went after that has been the source of wild speculation over the years, with most theories focusing in the area around Fenway Park, believing it fit the "coliseum," "green tower of lights" in "the middle section" of the city.

The Krupats chased that hypothesis, as well as others – there's a very active Internet message board devoted to theories about "The Secret" – but ultimately began to believe that the clues pointed to the North End.

The "eighteenth day," "twelfth hour," "lit by lamplight" seemed to refer to Paul Revere's famous "midnight ride" on April 18, 1775, which began when he rowed from his home in the North End to Charlestown to borrow a horse. Many historians believe he shoved off near what is now Langone Park.

The Krupats, with host Josh Gates, at the North End site. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

There were also clues in the painting that accompanied the verse. The Krupats thought that the face of the woman in the image looks very similar to that of the Christopher Columbus statue in the North End.

But most convincing was that right across the street from Langone Park is Copp's Hill Terrace, a small park that features large granite steps. If you "face the water" with "your back to the stairs," the Krupats figured out, you were looking straight at "home" plate of the softball field.

It sounded plausible. But so have many other theories that have gone nowhere, so the Krupats were not about to dig up home plate.

The discovery of the construction project meant they might not have to. Or it meant that the casque was about to be destroyed and lost forever.

The night he spoke to the foreman, Jason Krupat wrote a long e-mail to Wes Construction Corp., the contractor, explaining "The Secret" and his home plate theory.

He never got a reply, but word spread around the construction site about the guy claiming there was a buried treasure in the park, a ceramic box encased in plexiglass.

Months passed, and then one day in early October, a construction worker named Mitch Cunningham was operating an excavator in the area around home plate when he felt the metal bucket crack something. When he got out and inspected, he found shards of plexiglass, as well as a few pieces of ornate ceramic. He put the pieces aside, and they were taken to the company's headquarters in Halifax.

The following day, the company dug out Krupat's e-mail and contacted him.

Krupat says he immediately ran out of his office, hopped in an Uber, and rushed to Halifax. When he got a look at the ceramic – including one that featured a sundial identical to the two casques that had already been discovered – he called his wife, Colleen Brownell-Krupat, and told her the news.

They had solved it.

Last Thursday, the Krupats returned to the site to continue searching. They were trailed by Josh Gates and the crew from "Expedition Unknown" — which will release a special on the Boston find Wednesday on the Discovery Channel — and were assisted, once again, by Cunningham and his excavator.

As Cunningham dragged the excavator's teeth through the soil, the Krupats followed closely, looking for anything out of the ordinary. Over the course of the day, they found more pieces of the ceramic casque, as well as the all-important key.

It was a jubilant day, until unexpected visitors arrived. A woman appeared outside the construction fence and started yelling to the crew, saying she lived nearby and was working on solving the riddle. She clearly recognized Gates from television, and pleaded for someone to tell her if they'd found the casque. The crew stayed mum. Things got quiet. No one seemed to know what to do.

Soon two men joined the woman outside the fence, each of them dressed in fluorescent construction jackets, and minutes later they tried to come onto the dig site before being turned away by a producer.

"When Byron Preiss buried these things, he often disguised himself as a construction worker, so they're carrying on a tradition," Gates said, flabbergasted at what was transpiring.

But the Krupats had already gathered enough of the casque to claim the reward, and so on Tuesday they went to New York, to a ceremony at the Brooklyn Historical Society, where Preiss's widow, Sandi Mendelson, and their two daughters presented the Krupats with a green gemstone known as a peridot.

The ceremony served as a reunion of sorts for everyone involved in the long story of "The Secret." The men who found the casques in Chicago and Cleveland were also in attendance, as was the artist who made the original paintings.

"It was emotional," Krupat said. "It was a special event. I told my kids that this was like something out of a novel. We exchanged a buried treasure for a jewel."

"I didn't think we were ever going to find anything," Colleen Brownell-Krupat said. "It was just about enjoying the process and spending time with the family. I'm still shocked we were able to solve it."

The Krupats are also a bit sad that it's all over.

But there are still nine casques out there, nine more puzzles to be solved, and they plan to start working on one of those soon.

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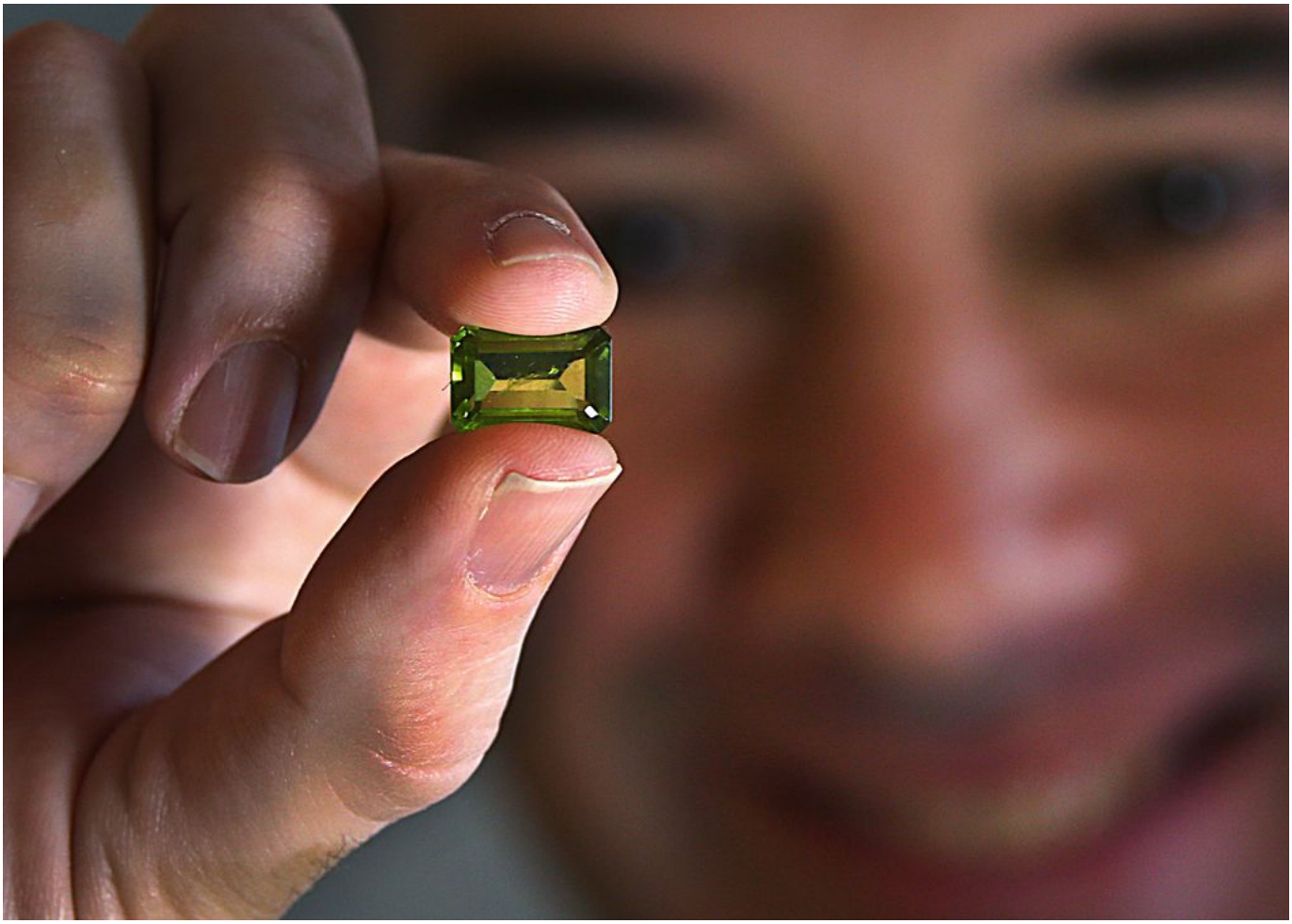

Jason Krupat held the peridot stone. John Tlumacki/Globe Staff

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