



The HUNT for Buried Treasure

Could it be in Lafayette Park?

BY MAURA HURLEY

BURIED TREASURE IN LAFAYETTE PARK? Friends of Lafayette Park were taken aback when an Englishman named Ben Glover posted the possibility on the group's Facebook page last June, just as a complete renovation of the park was getting underway. "This is slightly off-the-wall," he wrote, "but for some time I've wondered if Lafayette Park might be the site of one of the ceramic 'fairy casques' buried as part of an unsolved 1982 treasure hunt."

Glover suggested the makeover of the park offered an opportunity to test his theory. "I noticed that the place is currently undergoing renovation, and wondered if this might be a good time to ask people if they might like to try looking for this thing," he wrote. "It's finders keepers."

The Facebook posting contained links to images of specific areas of the park and a trail of clues Glover had followed that led him to suspect that treasure was buried in Lafayette Park.

It's a story that goes back to 1982 when Byron Preiss, a well-known New York publisher, secretly — some say in the dead of night — buried 12 small ceramic casques in 11 locations in the United States and one place in Canada. A year later Preiss published *The Secret: A Treasure Hunt*, a now out-of-print book containing clues to the whereabouts of the treasure.

Finding the casques required treasure seekers to match a confounding set of fanciful images and obscure verses

contained in the book. The reward: the unearthed casque, designed especially for Preiss by a New York artist, and a gem, kept by Preiss in a New York safe deposit box.

It only took a year for a trio of Chicago-area teenagers to locate a casque in the city's lakefront Grant Park. Their digging attracted the attention of passerby, but luckily not the police, according to an article in the *Chicago Tribune*.

In 2004, New Jersey lawyer Brian Zinn found a casque in the Cleveland Cultural Gardens after searching for more than two decades. "This is the craziest thing I've ever done," Zinn told the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.

The teens and Zinn both got to keep the casques and later Preiss handed over the gems: two sapphires worth at the time approximately \$1,000 each.

Then, in 2005, Preiss died in a traffic accident at age 53. No one knows what happened to the gems. But surprisingly, even without the gems, the treasure hunt continued.

No casques have been found since the Cleveland unearthing. But treasure hunters are still looking in cities across the country, although their numbers have dwindled to a handful of stalwarts. Today dogged searchers exchange information online and use Google to zoom in on possible sites and research the arcane references found in the verses.

An online site — quest4treasure.co.uk — contains more than 17,000 postings about the search in a forum



Lafayette Park reopens June 8

A year and \$10 million later, Lafayette Park will reopen to the public on Saturday, June 8. The festivities begin at 10 a.m. with a children's play day in the new worthy-of-Disneyland nature-themed playground, which was funded by \$600,000 in donations from local residents. A ribbon-cutting at 11 a.m. will be followed by a neighborhood picnic with bluegrass music and tours of the park. For more information, visit friendsoflafayettepark.org.

called "The Secret." Ben Glover, who posts on the site as White Rabbit, is one of the most active members on Quest4Treasure.

Glover says most searchers agree that Preiss buried a casque in San Francisco. Their certainty is based on an interpretation of the first image in the book, which features a dark-haired woman in a long serpent-decorated robe standing in front of a forboding-looking mountainous form and beside a small table containing a clock.

According to Glover, hidden in this image, as in most of the others, are numbers that reveal the latitude and longitude of the casque's location, approximately 37 degrees north and 122 degrees west in the case of San Francisco.

In the image, he said, the latitude number is revealed at the bottom of the woman's right sleeve, where her index finger is dividing the decorative boxes into sets of three and seven, or 37. The Roman numerals on the edging of the robe's serpent design add up to 122, the correct longitude, he said.

But where in San Francisco's 49 square miles is the casque?

"My favorite location is Lafayette Park," Glover wrote, "based on image one and my interpretation of verse six."

His reasoning goes like this: The first five lines of verse six — *Of all the romances retold/Men of tales and tunes/Cruel and bold/Seen here/By eyes of old* — paraphrase

the introduction to *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson. At first, he thought the lines could refer to the Robert Louis Stevenson memorial fountain in Chinatown's Portsmouth Square.

But then he discovered clues that prompted him to change his thinking and turn his attention to Lafayette Park. The following three lines, he thinks, refer to the Emancipation Proclamation, which the anti-slavery crusader Cassius Marcellus Clay helped draft: *Harken to the words/Freedom at the birth of a century/Or May 1913.*

The cryptic reference to Clay leads Glover to think of Clay Street, which going west from Chinatown intersects with Lafayette Park at Gough Street.

And the park has tennis courts. Several lines in the verse, he thinks, could refer to them. In the lines *Between two arms extended/Below the bar that binds*, Glover speculates that "two arms extended" could imply two tennis players and "the bar that binds" could stand for the fence surrounding the courts.

But his favorite clue for the tennis courts are the lines *Or on the eighth a scene/Where law defended*, with "eighth," he says, possibly standing for Octavia Street and "Where law defended" referring to one of the tennis courts.

And he thinks the last line, *White house close at hand*, could be a reference to 1925 Gough Street, the tony cooperative apartment building set inside the park on the east side.

Sensible people might find all this completely

unbelievable and, truth be told, other members of the "The Secret" forum on Quest4Treasure don't buy the Lafayette Park connection.

A member who posts under the name Malted Falcon completely discounts the park as a location. Instead he has focused his search on Golden Gate Park, according to Glover, and more recently the Presidio.

Glover — who lives in Dorset in the U.K. and has never visited San Francisco — conducts his searches entirely online. Glover said Malted Falcon is the only forum member who lives in San Francisco. Perhaps he could shed more light on why he has discarded the idea of Lafayette Park as a location, but unfortunately Malted Falcon was not reachable for an interview.

So the hunt for the San Francisco casque goes on. One might think that all the digging during the yearlong renovation of Lafayette Park would have discovered — or destroyed — the casque if it were actually there.

Sam Martin, one of the landscapers with Bauman Construction, the company renovating the park, said that nothing of note turned up during their excavations. "The only things we saw were rocks, dirt and bottles," he said.

Lynne Newhouse Segal, president of the Friends of Lafayette Park, said the park's formerly secluded spots and wild overgrown areas no longer exist.

"The wilderness is gone," she said, "replaced by areas designed specifically for children, dogs and picnics. I think the days of buried treasure are probably over."

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