

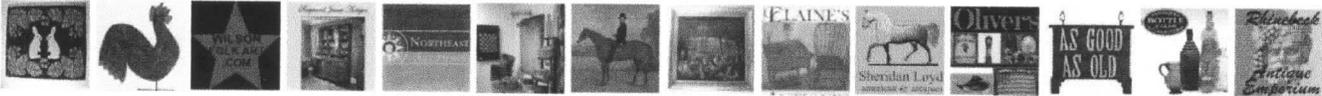


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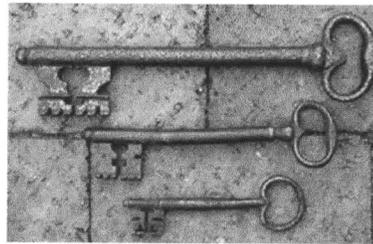


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**The Keys to a Revolution**

**BILL AND LYNDA GRIEVES | JUNE 15TH, 2014**

In June of 1971, while browsing through the *Antique Trader* newspaper, we noticed that the Chicago auction house of Dunning and Bales, Ltd. was offering a collection of 40 torture instruments from the Imperial Castle of Nuremberg. We had become serious collectors of significant locks and keys, and, although there was no mention of items in this specific collecting category, it seemed wise to request an auction catalog.



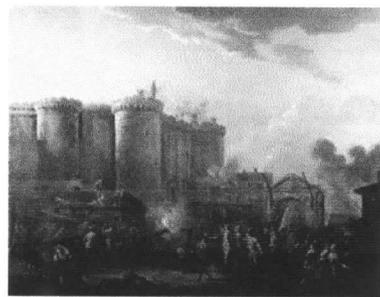
The three Bastille keys.

When the catalog arrived, item number 188 captured our immediate attention: "three keys reputed to have come from the Bastille, these keys have been photographed and written up in the magazine *Apollo*." *Apollo* is the well-respected international art magazine for collectors, founded in 1925. The *Apollo* article had appeared in the November 1940 issue and was written by an English gentleman named Donald Dale.



Jean-Pierre Houel (1735-1813), *Vue d'un cachot de la Bastille à l'instant où l'on délivre les prisonniers, journée du July 14, 1789, à 5 heures du soir* (View of a cell in the Bastille at the moment of releasing prisoners the day of July 14, 1789). Paris. Musée Carnavalet. © Musée Carnavalet Roger-Viollet/ The Image Works.

The Bastille's main construction was begun in the 14th century as a massive castle-like structure consisting of eight towers with walls nearly 80' high and 15' thick at their base. It was complete with moat and drawbridges, and its original purpose was to guard the eastern entrance into the city of Paris during the Hundred Years' War. Over time, however, the Bastille evolved into an infamously legendary prison and had earned the intense hatred of the French people.



Storming the Bastille.

Although this Chicago auction with its keys might simply result in a severe case of wishful thinking, as collectors we could not resist the opportunity to investigate. The first view of the three keys made the trip to Chicago worth all the effort. The unexpected detail was the exceptional length of the largest key, which measured slightly over 10 1/4". After some mild bidding the keys were ours.

It occurred to us that the lack of excitement regarding lot 188 might have been

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because the majority of the people in the audience lacked any serious knowledge of the French Revolution or gave little credence to the possibility that these keys were in fact genuine. If the auction catalog had included a photograph of the largest key with its early 14th-century characteristics, such as the key's medieval trefoil bit design, the bidding would probably have been substantially higher. After securing the winning bid, we realized that a lengthy period of research was about to begin.

#### Dale's Research

With the cooperation of Dunning and Bales, we were able to contact Donald Dale, who had owned these three keys since before World War II. Dale was a collector of anything historically interesting, especially locks and keys. His address was simply The Old House (almost 450 years old), Histon, Cambridge England.

His response to our request for information regarding the Bastille keys came on October 9, 1971, and stated in part that "The Bastille Keys, which were written up in the trade paper, *The Ironmonger*, and *The Observer* just before the war, were purchased from an Antiques Gallery in Fulham Road, a few doors down from no. 135."

Further correspondence with Dale indicated that we shared a strong mutual interest in unusual locks and keys, to the extent that a future trip to England sounded like a great idea. Unexpected family responsibilities put our trip on hold for two years. The day we were planning to leave for England, a letter arrived from Mrs. Dale informing us of her husband's death following an extended illness. She hoped, however, that we could still visit with her so that she might share her husband's research. This was an invitation that we readily accepted, and in 1973, with great expectations, we left for England.

Our visit with Mrs. Dale, although very enjoyable, produced limited additional details relating to the authenticity of his keys. Looking back on this trip, it occurred to us that we were enjoying the possibility that these keys were authentic and yet somewhat fearful that further investigation would prove them to be just three very early keys with no association whatsoever to the Bastille.

Sometime after Dale had acquired these keys, Hitler began his heavy bombing raids over London, and consequently Dale's research regarding these keys became more difficult. In one of his letters to the *Observer*, dated August 6, 1939, he wrote "[...the Bastille Keys] came from a family that had other Bastille relics, including a cell door from the Bastille, which I have recently examined and which I understand has been exhibited in Paris on more than one occasion. I do not know whether the keys were exhibited at the same time as the door or not, but I think it highly probable." Later research suggests that this door may have been associated with one of the three "iron cages." If so, this door would probably have required a very large key.

In the *Cambridge Daily News* of April 8, 1960, an article about Dale quoted him as saying, "...he bought three keys which were said to belong to the Bastille." He wrote to a French museum specializing in locks and keys and was told that they were similar to the ones they owned that came from the Bastille. We do not know which museum he contacted. All of Dale's investigations had produced limited confirmation.

#### The Search for Clues

Our next foray in the search for Bastille-related material involved a trip to Mount Vernon, George Washington's home in Virginia. We were anxious to see the Bastille key given by Lafayette to Washington that is now displayed in the main entrance hall at Mount Vernon together with a model of the Bastille. In an attempt to learn more about this key, we were able to meet with the curator, who shared a copy of their only background information—a small booklet titled *The Keys of the Bastille of Paris*, written in 1887 by H.S. Howell of Gault, Ontario, Canada. This is a fascinating account of Howell's five keys, and traces their history and ownership from the storming of the Bastille until they were finally acquired and written about by Howell.

To better understand the following observations, it is necessary to recognize the primary or basic parts of any key, which that include the bow, the shank, and the bit. Keys that share distinct design features in any or all of their basic parts can be, in many cases, accurately identified as to their use in a specific geographical area or in a specific period of time.

The first example of this relationship can be found in the smallest of the three Dale keys, which measures  $5\frac{3}{16}$ " in length and whose surface is slightly more pitted on one side than the other. It shares its unique physical characteristics with four keys unearthed in the 1930s at Jamestown, Virginia, the first English settlement in America, dating from 1607 to 1699. The Jamestown keys are pictured on page 18 in the booklet *New Discoveries at Jamestown*. This smallest Dale key's unique features include an enlarged or swollen center section of the shank together with a raised collar on the end of the shank just above the bit. More important, this smallest Dale key matches in its basic configuration an 8" long Bastille key pictured on the cover and described in *The Keys of the Bastille of Paris*.

The second example in the group of three Dale keys is several inches longer, measuring  $7\frac{1}{8}$ ", and its lightly pitted surface is also more pronounced on one side. Why the pitting on the sides of these smaller keys is not consistent remains unanswered. This middle key is basically a smaller version of the third and largest Dale key. Its shank measures  $7/16$ " in diameter and is both bent and twisted, indicating that a great deal of force was required to distort iron of this dimension. The two half-sections of the bit are also out of line with each other. Could these misalignments have occurred during the demolition of this great citadel?

The largest of the Dale keys weighs very close to one pound and is also the most unusual as well as the most interesting of his three keys. It is rather remarkable that this 645-year-old key has not been lost over time, as has been the case for so many other historical artifacts. The key's entire surface is evenly pitted. Could the rough surface on these keys be the result of much use? Or perhaps they were discarded into the damp environment below one of the Bastille's eight towers. Various cross sections of the shank are slightly out of round and may vary by nearly  $1/16$ " along random points on its length (the average cross section measures approximately  $9/16$ "). How these normally consistent dimensions (along the shank) could vary to any measurable degree defies an explanation as to just how this large key was made. Its 2" long bit would indicate that the key was used in conjunction with a door or lock of considerable thickness. This key's bow is also quite unusual with a measurement of  $2\frac{1}{2}$ ".

We discovered two interesting details that appear on both Washington's key and Dale's largest key. They share a version of the trefoil in their bit design, and both display a circular groove cut around the bit end of the shank. It would appear that the early locksmiths of the Bastille favored this trefoil design for their larger keys.

Because of its size, design, and condition, this largest of the three Dale keys was probably in use from the earliest days in the Bastille's history. Of all the known Bastille keys, this specific example seems to embody all the mystery, romance, intrigue, and cruelty of this particular period. It is tempting to romanticize a relationship involving this key with stories such as the man in the iron mask. If such possibilities seem too remote or unlikely, what other less sinister purpose could a key this size have served?

Exceptionally large medieval keys of similar length can be seen in a variety of situations such as very early paintings, leaded church windows, tapestries, and book illustrations. The keys are usually being held symbolically in the hands of saints, angels, royalty, and other notable figures. A dozen or so examples can be seen in a French book about keys, *Clefs* by Gabriele Mandel, published in 1992 and again in 2001.

According to *A True and Minute ACCOUNT of the Destruction of the Bastille*, written in 1796 by a former prisoner, Jean Jaques [sic] Calet, who had been held in the Bastille for upward of 20 years, "...there are nearly 400 keys which are mostly in the hands of the different keepers." This number would suggest that the largest of the Dale keys was probably one of numerous other unusually large keys in use those many centuries ago. The relative rarity of a key this size may be indicated, however, by the 27 Bastille keys on display in the French National Archives, none of which approaches  $10\frac{1}{4}$ " in length.

July 14, 1789: If only the citizen/patriot Pierre-François Palloy could step out from the pages of this pivotal point in French history! With his intense fervor for any and all material things relating to the revolution, he alone could identify this key and the part it played in the functioning of this ancient fortress. Not only was the contractor Palloy instrumental in the taking and dismantling of the Bastille, he also was the major force in the celebration of its demise for as long as he could perpetuate the enthusiasm for this historic event. At his own expense he

distributed throughout France countless models of the Bastille that were carved from its own building stones. One wonders if this exceptionally large key was at one time in the hands of Palloy, since he was the major collector of all souvenirs during and after the Bastille's destruction.

#### The Climax

Our European trip in 1986 included a brief stop in Paris, where we were able to visit the Carnavalet Museum. Unfortunately, we were unable to discuss our search for information with any knowledgeable individual because of a holiday. Our research was again put on hold because of professional and family obligations.

Early in 2001 we began to plan a longer trip to France that would include more time in Paris with the hope that we would finally be able to get some definitive information regarding our keys. The first step was to make contact with the curator at the Archives Nationales in Paris, who, we hoped, would be able to assist us. Our request for help put us in contact with Estelle Dietrich, who was very receptive to our research objectives. Over the next several months we sent numerous pieces of information and photographs to Dietrich. As our trip drew closer, we made arrangements for an appointment with her.

On a beautiful morning in early September, we arrived at the Archives Nationales in the Hotel de Soubise. Upon entering Dietrich's office, we were pleased to find some of the 27 Bastille keys in their collection displayed on a table. The most exciting discovery was, however, two keys in this group that, except for size, were perfect matches for our largest key. We were granted the unexpected permission to handle and photograph these treasures. Later we would tour their fascinating archives and see the rest of their keys as well as a number of priceless documents pertaining to the Bastille and its destruction.

The high point in our visit came when we were given several pages of information titled *Localisation des clefs de la Bastille* (Location of the keys from the Bastille). Page one listed keys located in Paris and London. Page two listed those in États-Unis d'Amérique. Listed first on this page was Mount Vernon, second was George Washington's Masonic National Memorial, and third were Lynda and Bill Grieves. What an amazing climax to a very exciting day! Our many years of sporadic research and travel had finally come to a perfect ending.

The irony of our story reveals itself when one realizes that if Donald Dale had simply been able to cross the channel in the early days of his research, he undoubtedly would have discovered the Bastille keys in the Archives Nationales in Paris—several of which, except for size, are virtually identical to his own.

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Originally published in the July 2014 issue of *Maine Antique Digest*. © 2014 Maine Antique Digest