



**WHATELY**  
MASSACHUSETTS

# **WHATELY TOWN SAFE**

## **HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION**



Whately Historical Commission  
March 2020

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Whately's Town leaders spent most of their time together discussing the cost of maintaining the roads that crossed Whately's 20 square miles of land. However, in June 1891, another pressing need had emerged, and Town residents voted at Annual Town Meeting to authorize Selectmen David Ashcraft, Charles E. Bardwell, and Seth B. Crafts to spend up to \$275 (amended downward from \$300 in the article) to purchase a fire-proof safe of "a size...they think advisable." Although no records remain of the negotiation, the Town Report of 1892 notes that a safe was purchased from E.C. Morris & Company of Boston for \$227.60 plus \$17.40 freight paid to the Connecticut River Railroad Company for transport from Hamilton, Ohio, the home of the safe manufacturer, MacNeale & Urban, to Boston. This was a significant commitment of public funds, equivalent, in proportionate terms, to more than \$225,000 in 2019.

When Whately's town offices moved from its historic Town Hall to a modern office facility, the massive Town Safe (66" high x 51" wide x 35" deep) was no longer considered necessary, after 124 years of continuous use to store cash and valuable documents. In 2017, at the request of the Municipal Building Committee and Historical Commission, the Safe was provided a permanent home in the newly renovated Town Hall. (It had been located in the southwest room of the first floor of Town Hall for longer than living memory.) In 2019, Community Preservation Act funding enabled the restoration of the Safe's original hand-painted decoration. That work was completed by Mehlin Conservation of Essex, Massachusetts.

History doesn't tell us how the Whately Selectmen discovered MacNeale & Urban. The Midwest firm's groundbreaking design, renowned for fire protection and burglar-proof construction, featured alternating layers of iron and steel welded together to create the distinctive ziggurat-shaped edges of the eight-inch thick exterior safe doors.



*Fig. 1: Right Interior Door (Before Conservation).*

Combination locks had virtually replaced previously used key locks since their introduction at the London World's Fair in 1860. MacNeale & Urban safes were sold to government and corporate clients around the world (from Calcutta, Melbourne, and Paris to Bangor, Maine and Washington, D.C.). Even the functional interior storage space, which holds plywood dividers and a hanging file rack, includes an elegant feature in the form of golden inlaid exotic wood drawer fronts, which presumably would have been seen only by the users of the Safe.



Fig. 2: Interior Drawer Fronts.

Structure and security are not the only notable features of MacNeale & Urban safes; they are also distinguished by extensive hand-painted decoration.



Fig. 3: Exterior Decoration.

We haven't been able to determine which artists worked on the Whately safe, but we know that safe painting was a recognized profession in central Ohio. For example, Frank J. Martin and Henry Dresman are each identified as "safe painter, MacNeale & Urban," in the 1880 Cincinnati city directory, which lists names and professions of city residents. Martin was apparently promoted, as he appears again as a "foreman painter" in the 1889 directory.

Neither is the role played by E. C. Morris & Company at 57 Sudbury Street in Boston, whose name appears on the interior doors of the Safe, entirely clear. A successor firm, E. C. Morris Safe Company, placed a full column advertisement in the *Boston Globe* of April 16, 1893, which features an illustration that depicts the welded-steel

design of the Whately safe from Ohio, but not its painted decoration, and lists more than fifty customers across New England. Most clients are banks, including some in Athol, Chicopee, Holyoke, and North Adams, but Morris safes were also purchased by the towns of Lewiston, Maine, and Lynn, Massachusetts. By 1897, according to the *Globe*, E.C. Morris had been ruined by "speculation," and all other evidence of the firm and its operations has been lost to the passage of time.

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By the time the Whately Town Safe was taken out of commission in 2015, years of dust, grime, and tobacco smoke had obscured its painted decoration. As a result, the restoration performed by Mehlin Conservation consisted of two distinct phases: cleaning and "in-painting."



Fig. 4: Safe Exterior Midway Through Cleaning.  
(Photo: Lisa Mehlin.)

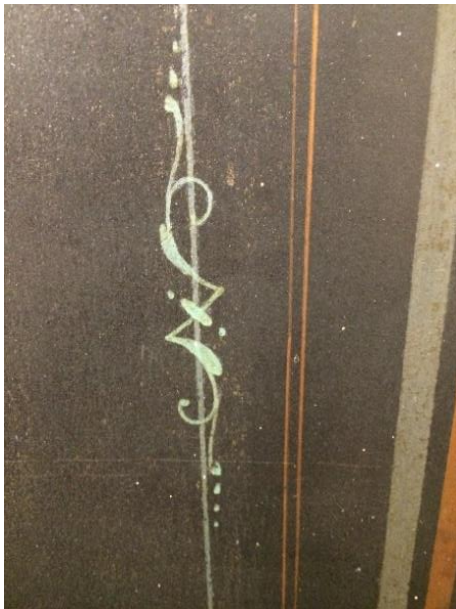
Conservator Lisa Mehlin comments, "It's always a challenge to decide how much cleaning to do and how much inpainting. Because the safe had a layer of heavy grime over a hardened oil resin varnish, it was not possible to clean the entire safe in the amount of time available. I cleaned the most important decorative elements (the



paintings, gilding and filigree) and then I inpainted old damages selectively so those elements would read more clearly. Some condition issues, like wear and tear from many years of use, I left as is, as the safe should not look new, but rather like something that has been used by the town for many years, as it indeed has been."

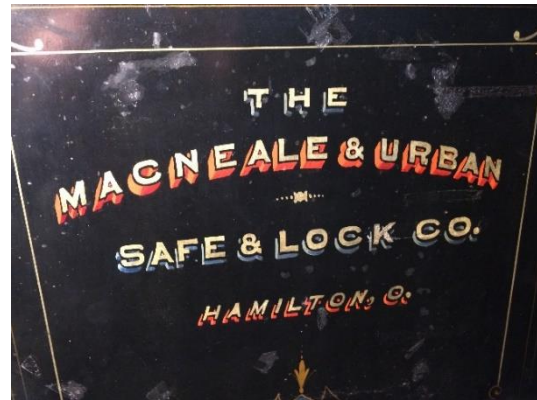
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The Whately Safe's decoration includes three landscape paintings, on the exterior and interior surfaces of the exterior safe door, and elaborate stylized decoration on all exterior walls, both sides of the exterior door, and the interior door.



*Fig. 5: Decorative Flourish.*

Careful cleaning has revealed the details of the lettering on the Town Safe, each section of which uses a different combination of three colors.



*Fig. 6: Interior Safe Door.*

The lettering appears to draw upon the popular "Egyptian" font of the mid-nineteenth century, characterized by the shadow-box format used on the Town Safe.



*Fig. 7: Detail, Interior Safe Door.*

The decorative painted flourishes and geometric lines on the Whately Town Safe, however, refer to yet another artistic tradition that reaches back to the frescoes of Pompeii and recurs across Europe from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, particularly in murals and wallpaper in the villas of the wealthy.



Figure 8: Villa Farnesina, Wall Fresco, Pompeiian Styles (Wikimedia).

The double bands of gold and green that frame the doors and walls of the Safe, as well as the landscape scenes, are reminiscent of Pompeiian wall paintings, as are the fantastic filigreed borders and stylized, jewel-like images throughout. (Their bright coloration is augmented by the use of 18 ct. gold paint.)



Figure 9: Brumidi, Senate Office Building Ceiling Fresco (Blog: Architect of the Capitol).

Such neo-classical references were popular in nineteenth-century America, as for example in Constantino Brumidi's 1856 wall and ceiling frescoes in the United States Capitol, whose brilliant palate and elegant decoration is similar to that of the Whately Safe.

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Two of the landscapes that appear on the Whately Safe's exterior door and the left interior door, appear to have been painted by the same artist, as they share similar brushwork, a high, panoramic point of view, and attention to naturalistic detail.



Fig. 10: Landscape, Exterior Door.



Fig. 11: Detail, Exterior Door.





*Fig. 12: Landscape, Left Interior Door.*

It was common in the nineteenth century for paintings by renowned artists, both European and American, to be reproduced as engravings and disseminated widely, often as illustrations in popular magazines. The Whately painter may have been influenced by the Hudson River School's careful attention to clouds and foliage (see Fig. 13, John F. Kensett) and New England's Luminists (see Fig. 14, Fitz Hugh Lane), who often included a tiny human figure gazing across the landscape in their paintings, like the one (Fig. 15) on the left interior door of the Whately Safe.



*Fig. 13: John F. Kensett, Landing at Sabbath-Day Point, 1853 (National Gallery of Art).*

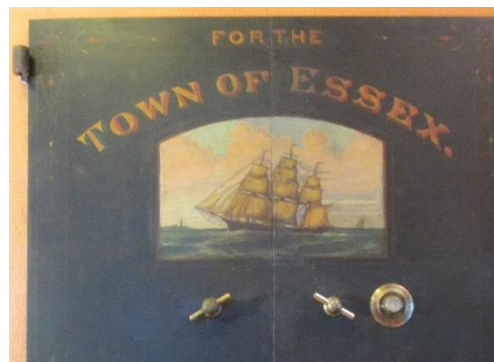


*Fig. 14: Fitz Hugh Lane, Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay, 1862 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org).*



*Fig. 15: Detail, Left Interior Door.*

We believe that Whately's location on the Connecticut River determined the choice of views, as these two Whately landscapes depict generalized river views, while another extant MacNeale & Urban safe in coastal Essex displays an idealized seascape on its exterior. (The Essex boat works did not build three-masted vessels.)



*Fig. 16: Essex Town Safe. (Photo: Lisa Mehlin.)*

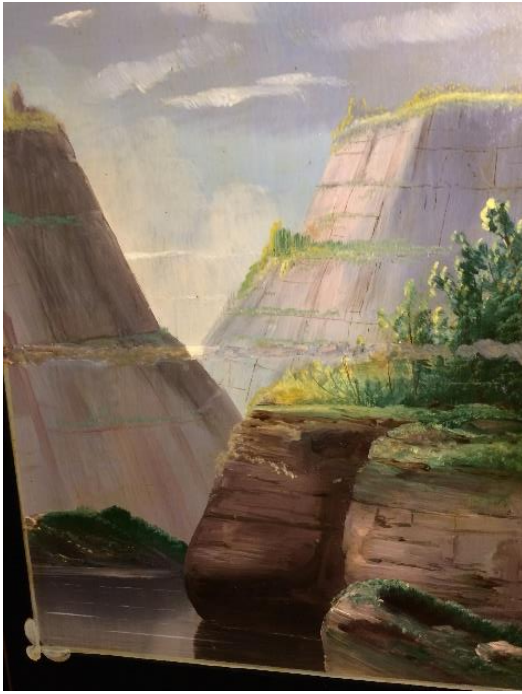


Fig.17: Landscape, Right Interior Door.

The third scene (Fig. 17) appears to have been painted by a different hand. It is reminiscent of Kensett's *Bash-Bish Falls* (Fig. 18) in form and composition, but the large rock outcroppings in the lower right appear to be based on direct observation of the Connecticut River Valley landscape.

The artist depicts formations consisting of Arkose, a sedimentary sandstone that can be seen locally at Mount Sugarloaf in nearby Deerfield. The horizontal layers seen best on the rocks in the lower right are the result of extreme rain events occurring at intervals over centuries that washed debris off the mountains to the east and west of the Connecticut River in layers into an ancient lakebed, which was later eroded by the last continental glacier and the River. Arkose is not found in central Ohio, where

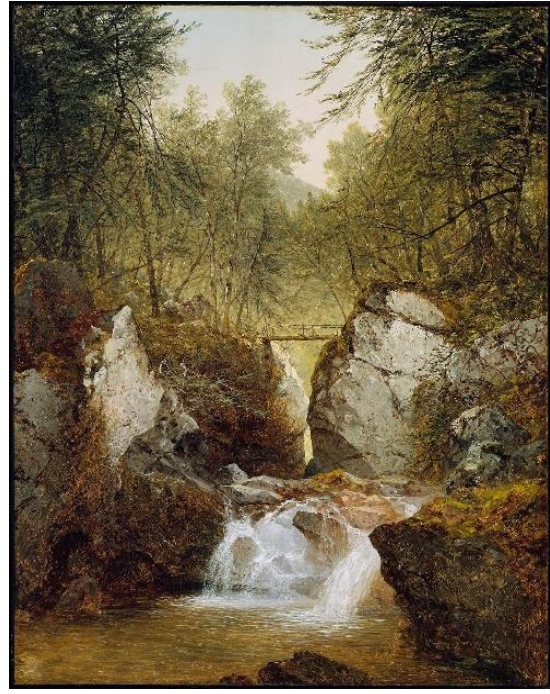


Fig. 18: Kensett, *Bish-Bash Falls, Massachusetts*, 1872 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org).

the sedimentary rock consists primarily of fossil-bearing shale.

Given this important geological evidence, we believe that the decoration of the Whately Safe may have been a collaborative effort: designed and decorated in Ohio by the MacNeale & Urban safe painters, with space reserved for Massachusetts artists to render the three framed landscapes, now revealed by careful cleaning.

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The choice that the Whately Selectmen of 1891 made to meet the Town's security needs by purchasing the elegant and luxurious Town Safe seems to go against the prevailing image of New England frugality above all. Their tangible legacy is a fascinating example of American taste and craftsmanship of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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