



PHOTO BY JAMES CARBONE

Theft of such rims is considered grand larceny.

Suffolk cops learn the wheel deal

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Bling is no bargain.

That's the lesson Suffolk cops will learn after officers inadvertently lowballed the cost of some stolen high-end car tire rims, a type of spinning road jewelry that can run into the high five figures.

The result: dozens of rim removals were misclassified as a misdemeanor rather than a grand larceny — a felony carrying a stiff jail sentence. While police said the mistakes wouldn't affect investigations, they could complicate matters when and if suspects came to court, even lightening an eventual sentence.

"I don't think a lot of officers were aware what some of this stuff costs," said Deputy Insp. William Neubauer of the Major Crimes Bureau.

The department's review this year of hundreds of such thefts was sparked by the February arrests of the "rim reapers."

In Suffolk District Attorney Thomas Spota's announcement of the felony indictment, he accused a five-man ring of stealing more than \$250,000 in wheels from Mercedes-Benzes, Cadillac Escalades, and other flashy rides.

After at least one larceny connected to the group was found to have been misreported, the police's review of 367 thefts between October 2008 and last July showed that a quarter of 99 reported petty larcenies should likely have been listed as grand larcenies. According to state law, theft of property worth \$1,000 or more is a felony; the class E charge carries a maximum prison sentence of 4 years.

"We don't think it's a systemic problem, but it's a mistake and we're fixing it," Neubauer said.

A new training CD prepared by police academy instructors and to be distributed to all commands includes photos of nice chrome, tips on price, and a reminder about crime classification and property values.

With more than 22,000 larcenies reported in the county last year, police said the rim issue had a negligible impact on overall crime statistics. There are no plans to redo paperwork on the misclassified cases unless an arrest is made.

Neubauer said reports of rim thefts in the county "have fallen off the cliff" since the arrests of the rim reapers.

All five, including the alleged ringleader, Darren Scales, 24, of Mastic, have pleaded not guilty to counts of grand larceny and other charges. The cases are pending.

Judge's ruling is

About the relic

The gold tablet was discovered in the city of Ashur, now known as Qual'at Serouat, Iraq, in 1913 by German archaeologist Walter Andrae. The tablet was buried in the foundation of the Ishta Temple, from the reign of Assyrian King Tukulti-Ninurta I, who ruled from 1243 to 1207 BC. The archaeologists sent the tablet to the Berlin museum, with a protracted stay in Portugal during World War I, in 1926. It went missing in 1945 after the museum was looted. A German scholar reported seeing the tablet with a New York dealer in 1954.

SOURCES: COURT DOCUMENTS AND EXPERT REPORT FILED BY ECKART FRAHM, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ASSYRIOLOGY AT YALE UNIVERSITY.

About the owner

Riven Flamenbaum was born in 1911 in Poland and sent to Auschwitz around 1940 or 1941. He survived four years in the concentration camp and sold black-market goods in Berlin after World War II ended. He collected gold and silver coins and pieces to finance his move to America and acquired the tablet in a barter trade. Flamenbaum came to New York in 1949, where he ran a liquor store on Canal Street in Manhattan. He died in 2003 in Great Neck, leaving the tablet and the rest of his estate to his three children, Israel, Helen and Hannah.

SOURCE: STEVEN SCHLESSINGER, LAWYER FOR HELEN AND HANNAH FLAMENBAUM

NOW ONLINE

Watch our video as Hannah Flamenbaum's attorney describes the case.
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Attorney Steven Schlessinger holds the ancient Assyrian gold tablet.

PHOTO BY HOWARD SCHNAPP