

Former resident sues to claim Alaska moon rocks

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In this undated photo provided by attorney by Daniel P. Harris, pieces of moon rock and an Alaska flag from the 1969 Apollo 11 mission presented to the state by President Richard Nixon are shown encased in acrylic glass. Alaska officials are contesting a lawsuit filed by a former resident who claims he rescued the moon rocks from a garbage heap 38 years ago. (AP Photo/Courtesy Daniel P. Harris)

(AP) -- The mystery of Alaska's missing moon rocks has been solved. Getting them back to a state museum likely will depend on a judge.

Alaska officials are contesting a lawsuit filed by a former resident who

claims he rescued the moon rocks from a garbage heap 38 years ago.

Coleman Anderson, who now lives in Texas, sued for formal title to the rocks in December. If he doesn't receive title, he's asking to be compensated for finding and returning the rocks, which are valued by collectors.

State officials, meanwhile, contend the moon rocks were stolen from a state museum following a fire. They have filed a counterclaim disputing Anderson's story and seeking return of the rocks.

"Factually, that never happened," said Assistant Attorney General Stephen Slotnick, of Anderson's account.

The moon rocks reached Earth in July 1969 with the return of [Apollo 11](#), the first manned lunar landing, when [Neil Armstrong](#) uttered, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," as the world watched in fascination.

President [Richard Nixon](#) presented each state and 136 countries with moon rocks celebrating the achievement. Gov. Keith Miller accepted Alaska's. The small stones were encased in acrylic glass and mounted on a plaque of walnut. An Alaska flag that also went to the moon was part of the display.

The moon rocks were shown around Alaska and on display at the Alaska Transportation Museum in Anchorage when an arsonist torched the building Sept. 6, 1973.

According to Anderson's lawsuit, filed by Seattle attorney Daniel P. Harris, recovery efforts concluded days after the fire and remaining debris was declared garbage.

The lawsuit claims Anderson, then 17, the stepson of museum curator Phil Redden, entered the "debris area" as crews removed garbage, discovered the moon rocks plaque covered by a layer of melted materials and took it home. The lawsuit claims Anderson became owner of the plaque because the state had abandoned it.

"The day Coleman left there, with the permission of his father and others there, he left with the moon rocks and a bunch of plastic model airplanes," Harris said. "This is what was in the garbage. He didn't pick these things up because he thought they would be valuable, he just thought that they were cool."

Steve Henrikson, curator of collections at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau, heard about the missing moon rocks his first week on the job 21 years ago.

"I never imagined that someone would be suing us for ownership of something that admittedly, right in the lawsuit, it says he went onto our property and took our moon rock out of the ashes of our museum," Henrikson said.

Anderson's story, he said, "does not correspond with what our documentation shows." The fire burned paper, cardboard and wood, but witnesses afterward saw the moon rocks plaque intact in its glass display case. Later, the display case was broken and the moon rocks and plaque removed, state officials said.

Henrikson said also that salvaging had not concluded within days of the fire.

"It took us a couple years for us to clear the site of all the aircraft and other artifacts that were on it," he said. "The building was not totally destroyed. They continued to use it for storage and they, frankly, did not

have any other place to take a lot of those things."

Slotnick was more blunt in writing the state's response. He accused Anderson of "unlawful conduct" that "has caused the state harm, forcing the state to expend time and money in conducting its investigation and search for the missing moon rocks and plaque, and depriving the state of the use of the moon rocks and plaque for over 37 years."

Harris contends no one in 1973 thought the moon rocks were worth anything.

"The state never filed a police report, never filed an insurance claim," he said. "They thought that they had no value, which everyone else thought back then, and that they were thrown out, that they knew they had thrown them out in the trash, but they thought they had been taken away to the dump."

Anderson, a vessel captain who appeared in early episodes of the Discovery Channel's "Deadliest Catch," has the moon rocks outside the country, Harris said. In the last couple of years Anderson learned from news accounts that the rocks were valuable and decided he eventually would like to sell them. He didn't want a dispute over ownership, Harris said, so he went to court. Ideally, Alaska would buy them back, Harris said. Anderson would even offer Alaska a discount.

One way to establish their value, Harris said, and to give the state a discount would be to conduct an auction and let Alaska pay 80 cents on the dollar versus other bidders.

Harris likes Anderson's chances, in court, given that his client appears to be the only witness to how the moon rocks departed state custody.

"I would argue the state of Alaska is prohibiting themselves from getting

the [moon rocks](#) back, because all they have to do is pay far less than they're worth, and they would get them back." Harris said.

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