

# Iconoclast in New England

By Lisa Lacher

Ask Joseph D. Thornton Jr., CLI, to name his biggest achievement and he'll probably tell how he recovered a valuable Rodin sculpture stolen from the estate of multimillionaire Charles Shipman Payson.

It began when Thornton met Payson's caretaker, Sam Bexon, while investigating the 1976 murder of Payson's sister, Anne Payson Holt. Bexon asked Thornton to be on the lookout for the sculpture.

By coincidence, Thornton was meeting a client in an unrelated criminal case at a parking lot when a sleek Jaguar drove in. Thornton asked his client who was driving the sports car.

"He told me the guy's name and said he deals in stolen merchandise," Thornton recalled. "I mentioned I was looking for some sculpture and my client's eyes lit up.

"Sure enough, it turned out the other fellow had wrapped the sculpture in plastic bags and buried it in a swamp because it was too 'hot' to move. I asked my client if he thought the guy would want to part with the sculpture. He said he didn't know, but he'd find out."

Within a week of his talk with Bexon, Thornton arranged for Payson to buy back three of his four stolen Rodin statues for a fraction of their value.

The state police and the FBI had been searching for the sculpture, too, but failed to find it, Thornton said, because their motive was prosecution. "My motive," he said, "was recovering the object."

Law enforcement authorities pressured Thornton to identify his client, but Thornton would not. He later refused to testify about his client's identity when subpoenaed before a federal grand jury, although he did cooperate on other aspects of the government investigation.

"I wasn't going to violate my confidence," Thornton said. "How many statues am I going to recover if I spill



**Name:** Joseph D. Thornton Jr., CLI  
**Born:** April 19, 1949 in Portland, Maine

**Firm:** Lawyers Investigating Service  
**Education:** Bachelor's degree in English and philosophy, Boston College; attended the University of Maine School of Law  
**Experience:** Worked 18 months for another investigator, then founded his own investigative business in 1975

**Specialties:** Criminal defense, personal injury cases, missing persons investigations and custody cases

**Joined NALI:** 1986

**Hobbies:** Sailing, snow skiing and golf (won the NALI tournament at Keystone in June and took first place in the Lake Tahoe tournament in 1987 with Larry Poss)

my guts to a federal grand jury?"

The thief was brought to justice a year later when he was arrested on another charge and confessed to the art theft as well.

"I think the interest of society was well-served," Thornton said. "The Rodin would still be rotting in a swamp if

Payson had not decided to go outside law enforcement circles."

It wasn't the first time Thornton had worked outside law enforcement channels to reach a goal.

In 1974, after dropping out of law school, Thornton applied for a private investigator's license. At that time, Maine was issuing licenses only to applicants 18 or older who had not been convicted of a felony and had served one year as a law enforcement officer.

Thornton managed to convince the governor's executive council, which controlled the licensing, that his two years of law school and experience working for another investigator made him at least as qualified as a rookie cop to become a private investigator.

After obtaining his license, Thornton opened Lawyers Investigating Service. Today, the firm has grown to employ two additional investigators and an office manager.

When he's not working, Thornton enjoys golfing, sailing and snow skiing with his wife, Sarah, a practicing attorney, and their children, Katherine Mary, 8, and Sean Joseph, 6.

As he looks back over his career, Thornton is pleased with his decision to drop law school and pursue a career in legal investigation.

"I never enjoyed sitting behind a desk," he said. "This allows me to get out in the field and talk with people. . . . Lawyering involves a lot of dull research and bag-carrying. It's less exciting than private investigating as a daily pursuit.

"I have absolutely no regrets. I enjoy the work I do on a daily basis after nearly 15 years. In another 15 years, I'll be ready to start writing good detective fiction."

Thornton, who holds a bachelor's degree in English and philosophy from Boston College, prides himself on his investigative reports. "I try to make them entertaining," he said, "as well as informative."

He is computerizing his case files, which encompass 30 homicides.

"There's a lot of good material for a book like [Chicago attorney Scott Turow's best-selling] 'Presumed Innocent,'" he said. "In fact, I think I have the fertile source of several novels."