

Sheldon Swope, Terre Haute jeweler, built the Swope Block in 1901 as a commercial building. The six retail spaces on the first floor housed many financial institutions during the next century, notably the Morris Plan and Indiana Savings and Loan. These continued to be on the main floor of the Swope Block after the museum opened on the second floor in 1942. When the financial institutions moved out of the Swope Block in the last century, their safes remained behind, four of them: two locked and two open.

What mysteries are inside the locked safes? On August 21, 2025, we answered the question. Jed Vicars, owner of Wabash Valley Lock and Key, became the Swope's official safecracker. As far as we know, he was *the first safecracker in the Swope Block's 124-year-old history*. The Swope Art Museum, which now uses the entire building, is undergoing a large renovation with a new elevator shaft and fire stairs being built to serve four floors, a new education area, new art storage, and upgrades to HVAC, plumbing and lighting. So, the basement safes cried to be opened! Jed brought his tools and his strength to open. The first one, which served Indiana Savings and Loan for decades, was empty except for one coat hanger from Herm Rassel Men's Clothing, which was located on the alley in the Swope block for many years, and some fluorescent bulbs.

Then on to the second safe, which served Morris Plan for many years before it moved to Ninth and Wabash in the mid 1990s. Using a hammer, pry bar and his knowledge of locks, Jed got it open also and inside....

Two pieces of paper. One a receipt for some certificates ordered in the 1970s by longtime MP President Bob Moore. The other, a note with "Bacardi, \$5.05" written on it. So maybe there was a basement speakeasy there in the prohibition era? Well, probably not.

The Swope Art Museum occupies the Swope Block, a 1901 Italian Renaissance-style commercial building on South 7th Street in downtown Terre Haute. Sheldon Swope, a diamond merchant, bequeathed his fortune to create the museum, and the building's second floor was gutted and rebuilt as an Art Deco-style gallery in 1942 (swope.org.) In 2025 the museum opened two century-old safes that had been sealed for decades. The safes contained nothing, and a safe-cracker speculated that someone might have robbed them. However, there is no historical record that the Swope Block or the museum was robbed; contemporary news reports about the opening only describe the safes as empty and make no mention of a theft.

Robbery history in Terre Haute

While we are confident that Jed was the first safecracker in the Swope Block's history, Terre Haute and the surrounding Wabash Valley did experience a series of robberies and criminal violence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This lawless environment likely fuels speculation about what else might have happened.

- **Gang violence during Prohibition.** Terre Haute was notorious for vice during the 1920s–1930s. An Indiana Public Media article notes that the city lay on the corridor

between Chicago and St. Louis and was a hotspot for gangsters like John Dillinger and Al Capone. Prohibition-era corruption led to “literally gun battles in the streets” and a large gambling ring that collected millions in bets. [ipm.org](http://ipm.org/ipm.org).

- **1930 Citizens Bank of Clinton robbery (near Terre Haute).** Herman “Baron” Lamm’s gang robbed the Citizens Bank of Clinton (about 15 miles north of Terre Haute) on 16 December 1930. The Weekly View reports that the gang forced employees and customers to lie on the floor, pistol-whipped the assistant cashier when he couldn’t open a time-lock, and escaped with about \$15,567. Hundreds of citizens and law-enforcement officers pursued them, leading to a gun battle that killed a deputy and several gang members. [weeklyview.net](http://weeklyview.net/weeklyview.net). The article notes that Clinton barber C.E. VanSickle was one of “thousands of Indiana citizens organized to help police fight a growing number of bank robberies”(weeklyview.net), illustrating the prevalence of such crimes.
- **1934 attempted robbery of the State Bank of West Terre Haute.** According to a local history article, John Dillinger’s gang planned to rob this bank in January 1934. Terre Haute police set a trap by having bank president Charles Ray carry a decoy package while officers followed. Miscommunication allowed the gang’s car to escape, and Dillinger allegedly joked he would never rob a bank in Terre Haute because he would “get railroaded” with [source](#)
- **1936 armed-robbery killing of a sheriff’s chief deputy.** The Vigo County Sheriff’s Office records that on 16 July 1936 two men robbed a couple at gunpoint in Taylorville. Chief Deputy Joseph Paul Mankin pursued the robbers near the Wabash River Bridge and was fatally shot. The suspects were later captured; one received life imprisonment and the other was executed (vigosheriff.in.gov.)
- **Reeves gang and other 19th-century crimes.** In the late 1800s, the Reeves brothers, who had lived in Terre Haute, formed a gang that robbed stores, houses, barns and travelers across southern Indiana. Their father had previously been tried for counterfeiting. This gang and other criminals contributed to the city’s long-standing reputation for lawlessness.

Conclusion

No documentation supports the idea that the Swope Art Museum’s safes were robbed. Instead, the empty safes likely reflect that they were no longer used for valuables once the building transitioned from commercial offices to an art museum. The **widespread robberies and gang activity** around Terre Haute in the early 20th century provide context for why some people might imagine a heist, but there is **no evidence** linking those crimes to the museum.