

THE ALEXANDRIA PROJECT :

Chapter 4: Beware of Geeks Bearing Trapdoors

Andrew Updegrove

The complete Alexandria Project can be found on line [here](#)



Back in his cube, Frank powered up his computer and reflected on what he'd just learned, which was both not much and a lot. Not much, in that he still had no idea who was behind the attack, or what he was trying to accomplish. But a lot because the only people targeted besides himself were George and Rick, and because one directory had been affected. That meant that what had hit the Library of Congress was no virus unleashed against Web sites generally, bent



on spreading random mayhem. Instead, it was obviously an attack targeted just at their department. And once it had made its way through the LoC firewall, the attack must have been manually controlled rather than automated.

Whoever was behind the exploit also must have been exactly what he was looking for, and had figured out where to find it. That suggested the cracker had managed to acquire some degree of inside knowledge, or at least that he had been willing and able to spend a lot of time roaming around inside the firewall figuring out what might be of interest. Frank hoped it was the latter, since the former meant that an employee was either directly behind the attack, or had leaked information to whoever was.

But it was bad enough if the mysterious visitor had acted without inside help, since Frank didn't yet know how he had gotten in. That almost didn't matter, though, since by now the attacker would have created a trapdoor he could use to come and go as he pleased. Maybe as early as tonight he'd open the hatch and start creeping through the servers again. So there must be two vulnerabilities to track down and close, rather than only one – the vulnerability the intruder had exploited to get in to begin with, and the custom one he would then have created.

All that was pretty standard stuff. The really weird bit revolved around the animated screen that he and George, and now obviously Rick, had seen when they looked for their security project files. What the hell was the name "Alexandria Project" all about? Did it refer to Alexandria Virginia? No reason to think so; there must be tens, if not hundreds, of cities and towns with that name. And anyway, why was the message in Greek – *ancient* Greek, no less?

Frank typed "Alexandria Project" into Google to see what would pop up. [50,100 hits](#). Hmm. It looked like he'd need to somehow narrow his search a bit, didn't it?

Still, Frank noticed that most of the hits on the screen page referred to projects that involved data. Well, Duh! he thought. Frank was no history buff, but even he had heard of the library of Alexandria, and knew that it was supposed to have been the greatest repository of knowledge in the ancient world. Apparently, all of the founders of these projects had decided to use the same historical metaphor to identify their activity. That seemed promising. After all, the LoC was the largest collection of printed matter in the modern world. Maybe this was a start.

The only other fact he knew (or thought he knew, anyway) about the Library of Alexandria was that it had been destroyed by fire. Well, that seemed to lock it down – the name on the screen he'd seen, the flames...but what about the Greek letters? Why not hieroglyphics, if he was right in remembering that Alexandria was in Egypt?



Frank moved to the Wikipedia, and typed in "Library of Alexandria." The summary didn't help:

The Royal Library of Alexandria, or Ancient Library of Alexandria, in Alexandria, Egypt, was probably the largest, and certainly the most famous, of the libraries of the ancient world. It flourished under the patronage of the Ptolemaic dynasty, and functioned as a major center of scholarship, at least until the time of Rome's conquest of Egypt, and probably for many centuries thereafter....

Plutarch (AD 46–120) wrote that during his visit to Alexandria in 48 BC, Julius Caesar might have accidentally burned the library when he set fire to his own ships to frustrate Achilles' attempt to limit his ability to communicate by sea.....

OK, so he could understand if the intruder had used Latin instead of hieroglyphics, but he still didn't get Greek. Frank tried "Alexandria" next, and there he found what he was looking for:

...In ancient times, Alexandria was one of the most famous cities in the world. It was founded around a small pharaonic town c. 331 BC by Alexander the Great...Alexandria was known because of its lighthouse (Pharos), one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient

World; its library (the largest library in the ancient world); and the Catacombs of Kom el Shoqafa, one of the Seven Wonders of the Middle Ages...

Okay, so there was the answer to the language question. Frank recalled that Alexander the Great was Greek, well Macedonian, but close enough – he spoke Greek. The Alexandria entry also suggested that the tall building on the screen probably was a lighthouse, as he had suspected. Now Frank was getting somewhere – assuming that he wasn't being led down the garden path just the way the intruder intended.

Frank kept reading, learning that the king that founded the library wasn't just another Egyptian pharaoh, but the founder of the Greek lineage of monarchs that took control of Egypt after it was conquered by Alexander. When Alexander died, Frank read, it hadn't taken long for the generals to start fighting over the late conqueror's empire. Ptolemy, one of Alexander's most trusted generals, had been content to vie for less than the entire known world, and lucky enough to secure Egypt as his own. Unlike some of the other generals, he also lived long enough – another forty years – to consolidate his position, and pass his new kingdom on to his descendants, who ruled until Rome eventually took over the neighborhood.



Frank mused. Well, he could now be pretty sure that it was the Library of Alexandria that was being alluded to on the contribution screen. But how to make use of that knowledge? Were the clues meant to lead him on, or astray? If the latter, he hoped the intruder might have been too clever by half. After all, he had learned something about how the cracker's mind worked, what kinds of things he knew that interested him. Maybe more, if Frank set his mind to it.

He drummed his fingers for awhile. Well. Clearly he wasn't going to solve a mystery like this all in one morning. Time to think about getting some work done.

To his surprise, Frank realized that half the morning had already passed while he was noodling around the Web. When he opened his email, he found that George had sent another message to all staff. Once again, the subject line was, "What is the Alexandria Project?" (this time, with only initial capital letters) It read as follows:

Everybody,

I've received some interesting guesses in response to my weekend email question, but none of you got it right. So here it is: the Alexandria Project is what I've decided to call the security project we're undertaking between now and the end of February.

As you may know, the Library of Alexandria was the greatest library of the ancient world – until it was destroyed by fire. Today, the LoC is the greatest library of the modern world, and we're increasingly

moving towards a digital, rather than a paper world. We can't any more allow the LoC's digital holdings to be compromised by hackers than we can allow the books in our stacks to be destroyed by fire.

Our new code name captures the importance of this project, and I'm expecting all of you to cooperate fully with Rick and his team as we push forward.

George

Nice cover, thought Frank. With one message, George had explained away his weekend trick email. And if any more files disappeared and others saw the same "contribution" screen, George could pass it off as some kind of test without people becoming concerned. George had probably sold that line to Rick already.

Not for nothing, you're the boss, Frank thought appreciatively. Tom West would be proud.

Read the [next chapter](#)

Read the [last chapter](#)

[Email this chapter](#) to a friend

Follow Frank's Further Adventures [here](#) and on 

Copyright 2010 Andrew Updegrove

Sign up for a [free subscription](#) to **Standards Today** at

At <http://www.consortiuminfo.org/subscribe/2.php?addentry=1>
