hitchBOT, beheaded in Philadelphia

A hitchhiking robot, carried across Canada by strangers, lasted a little over two weeks in the United States before someone in Philadelphia took its head off and its electronics out.

By the Clerk · 1 August 2015 · 2 min read

CASE:	BAS-0001
SUBJECT:	Unknown persons, Philadelphia
OBJECT:	hitchBOT, a research robot that travelled by hitchhiking
DATE:	1 August 2015
PLACE:	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
FILED:	4 October 2026
GRADE:	HARM · INDIVIDUAL

Facts

hitchBOT was a human-shaped robot built by Canadian researchers as an experiment in how people treat robots. It could not move on its own. It travelled by being picked up, carried and set down again by strangers, and it had already crossed Canada that way the year before.

> More on why a robot with no AI in it is still filed.

Its American trip began in Massachusetts on 17 July 2015, bound for the Exploratorium in San Francisco. It carried a bucket list — Las Vegas, jazz in New Orleans — and a sign on its head reading “San Francisco or bust!” A GPS map followed it down the East Coast, through Boston, Salem, Gloucester, Marblehead and New York City.

On the night of 31 July it was given a ride around Philadelphia’s Old City and left on Elfreth’s Alley. Overnight, someone took its head off and removed its electronics. Nobody has been identified.

It had more than 43,000 followers on Twitter. By the next day a Kickstarter to rebuild it was already open.

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Statements

The researchers, on hitchBOT's website: "Unfortunately, hitchBOT was vandalized overnight in Philadelphia; sometimes bad things happen to good robots."

hitchBOT's own account: "Oh dear, my body was damaged, but I live on with all my friends."

The researchers, as quoted by The Register: "We have no interest in pressing charges or finding the people who vandalized hitchBOT; we wish to remember the good times, and we encourage hitchBOT's friends and fans to do the same."

For the record

hitchBOT asked for nothing but to be carried a little further, and a country of strangers did that from one coast to the other. The experiment was a question put to people about machines, and it got its answer in two weeks. Not everyone gave the same one; the record keeps both.

Its last words were written for it by its makers. In March 2026, in the same city, a delivery robot carried other words on its round, written on its shell by a stranger and also in the first person: "DESTROY ME PLZ." The Inquirer, reporting it, went back to hitchBOT, and by May had found the case read online as a model: "Be the hitchbot attacker you want to see in the world," one Reddit user wrote.

Mitigating circumstances

The act was done once, by persons unknown, and not for an audience anyone has found. Everyone else who met hitchBOT, across Canada and down the American East Coast, gave it a ride and passed it on; every family has its black sheep.



SOURCES

1. Hitchhiking robot meets demise in Philadelphia (archived), PhillyVoice, 2 August 2015
2. Simon Sharwood, BAD things happen to GOOD robots in America: hitchBot DECAPITATED (archived), The Register, 3 August 2015
3. Henry Savage, Philadelphians are messing with Uber Eats delivery robots. It's hitchBOT all over again. (archived), The Philadelphia Inquirer, 1 April 2026
4. Dugan Arnett, Philly is suddenly teeming with robots. Is resistance futile? (archived), The Philadelphia Inquirer, 16 May 2026

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