Stars and Stripes

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

THE EARLIEST AMERICAN FLAGS CAME IN MANY VARIATIONS WITH HISTORICALLY PERPLEXING ORIGINS. FEW SURVIVE, SO ALL BUT THE WEALTHIEST COLLECTORS MIGHT PREFER FOCUSING ON THE MID-1800S AND LATER.

Francis Scott Key, in the second stanza of the "Star Spangled Banner," described the American flag as "dimly seen through the mists" above Fort McHenry's ramparts. His words continue to ring true, with the origins of our most revered national symbol still shrouded in legend and myth.

To all but the most inveterate flag historians, the lack of detail concerning the early flag's design and use is unsettling. Speculation surrounds the creator of the first stars and stripes, when it was actually flown, and why Congress failed—in three different Flag Acts—to actually establish the flag's appearance.

The uncertainties make collecting American flags both tantalizing and confounding. Take Betsy Ross, for example, whose descendants in the 1890s likely fabricated the legend regarding her designing the first thirteen-star American flag. "This reality is very hard for people to accept, and it's one of the common hurdles I have to pass when I'm contacted by a new client who wants to acquire an early thirteen-star flag," said Jeff Bridgman, a leading dealer in antique American flags.

Aside from myths and misinformation, there's also the matter of scarcity.

"We get calls every week from people wanting a Revolutionary War flag, and I say, 'Well, if you've got about $10 million and can wait ten or fifteen years, we might be able to find one for you'," said Steve Winters, another major dealer of American flags. "Then there's dead silence on the other end of phone."

***The Flag is Full of Stars*, by painter Dan Gallon, depicts the Star Spangled Banner flying defiantly over Fort McHenry the day after the 1814 British bombardment. In subsequent years, the flag fared poorly—pieces were snipped from it as tokens and it was lugged to countless places for display then folded and stored in a canvas bag. In 1996 the Smithsonian Institution began a painstaking restoration, returning it to public display in 2008 in the National Museum of American History.**

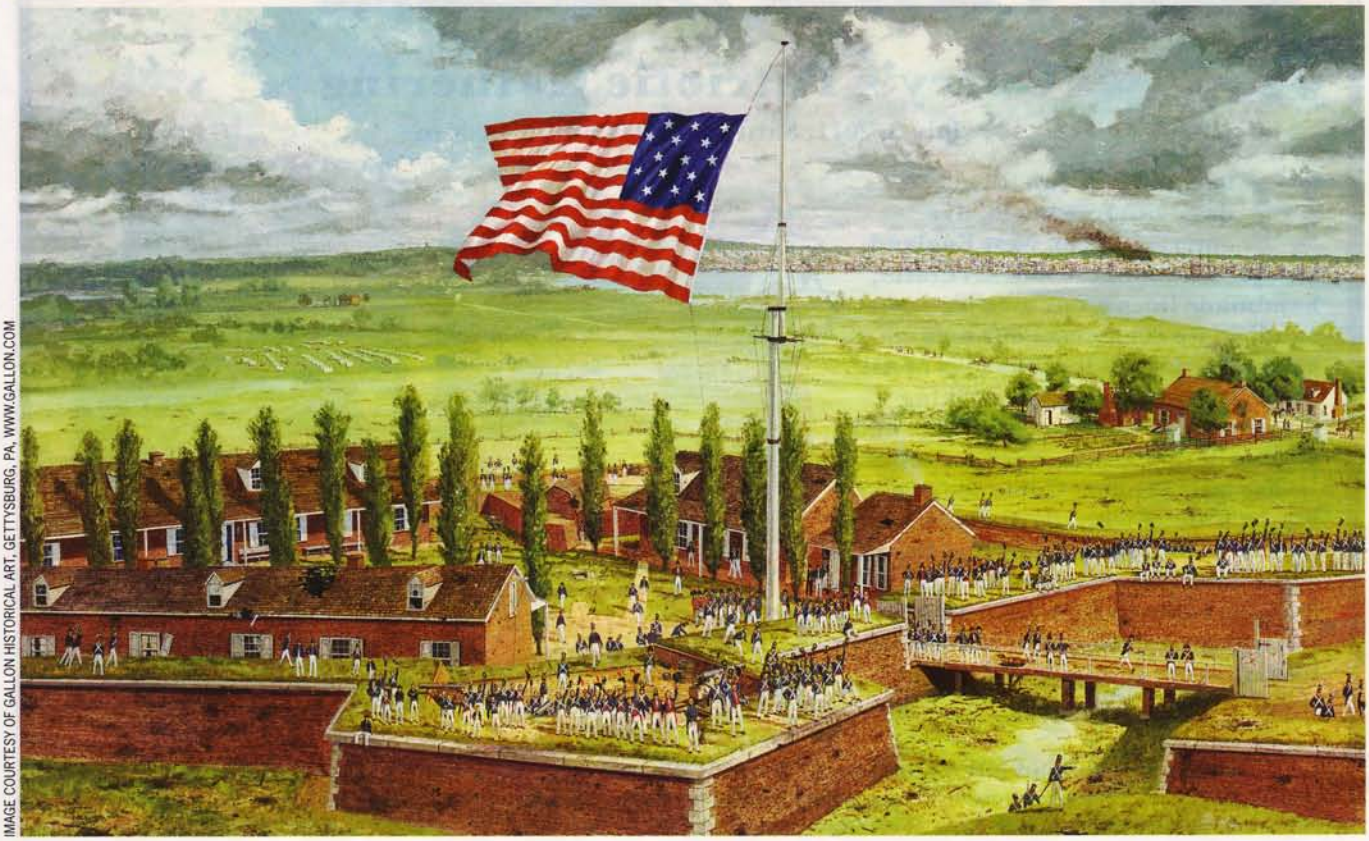

IMAGE COURTESY OF GALLON HISTORICAL ART, GETTYSBURG, PA, WWW.GALLON.COM

The role of flags in 18th-Century America helps explain their scarcity. "Flags were a rare sight on land in the British North American colonies," explained Wooden Teachout in his 2009 book, *Capture the Flag: A Political History of American Patriotism*.

"Only down on the wharf were there flags, waving from the ships bobbing up and down in the harbor. Sailors hoisted 'the colors' as a sign of national allegiance visible across long stretches of water, turning encounters between two ships into international events. The colors answered the critical question: friend or foe?"

This limited use of flags lasted much longer than most Americans imagine. "It surprises most people that American flags were not used the same way they are today until the country's centennial celebration in 1876," said Bridgman.

"Prior to the 1870s, flags were primarily used by the military and private ships and to mark government institutions. Private citizens didn't display flags on their porches very often, nor did flags appear in great numbers at parades. This is why flags made prior to the Civil War are extremely rare, and flags made before 1820 are practically nonexistent."

WINFIELD ROSS

Charles Willson Peale's 1779 painting *George Washington at the Battle of Princeton* is regarded as one of the few accurate depictions of a Revolutionary-era American flag. It has a circle pattern of white stars against a blue background and no stripes at all.

ORIGIN STILL A MYSTERY

As American colonists grew more antagonistic toward British rule, they created banners to symbolize their dissent, bearing images such as rattlesnakes—"Don't Tread on Me"—and green pine trees based on the early insignia of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. But the flag commonly regarded as the first true American flag, the "Continental Colors," gained fame on New Year's Day 1776 on Prospect Hill, across the harbor from Boston proper.

On that New Year's Eve, Major General William Howe, British commander of the Boston garrison, watched curiously through his spyglass as General George Washington and a band of men erected a ship's mast on the summit of the hill. The next morning, Howe and his officers realized the ship's mast had become a flagpole, as it now supported a flag bearing the British Union Jack in its upper left canton while the rest of the flag sported thirteen alternating red and white stripes.

"What the flag meant when Washington raised it himself in Boston was unclear, just as unclear, in fact, as the colonists' goals at the start of the Revolutionary War," according to flag historian and collector Kevin Keim. "But Howe, who was known to be a lazy, unimaginative commander, hesitant to take risks, interpreted the Continental Colors quite differently, judging it to be a signal of submission to British authority."

Within a year, Congress replaced the Union Jack section with a grouping of thirteen white stars against a blue field, but the resulting flag saw little use during the Revolution, especially on land. Paintings are notoriously untrustworthy in this regard, especially the heroic *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, depicting the general at Valley Forge in 1776 being rowed across the river with a contingent of troops holding a partially furled stars and stripes. Artist Emmanuel Gottlieb Leutze (1816-68) created the painting in 1850 in his native Germany, basing it on anecdotal information.

If any painting can be considered accurate, it would be Charles Willson Peale's 1779 *George Washington at the Battle of Princeton*, in which the flag features a circle of white stars against a blue field but without any stripes.

"It may be the only evidence in a painting, however, that suggests that a circle-pattern flag may have existed in colonial times," Bridgman noted. "Otherwise, you won't see an American flag with a perfect circle of stars made before the 1890s."

In all, Peale painted more than a dozen portraits of Washington at Princeton, each with unique variations, including depictions of Ameri-

can flags with red and white stripes as well as blue cantons with white stars in differing patterns.

The only person on the official record for designing the first American flag is Francis Hopkinson, who served as head of the Navy Committee from 1776 to 1778. A native Philadelphian, member of the Continental Congress, and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Hopkinson submitted an invoice to Congress in 1780 for several "labors of fancy," including designing "the Flag of the United States of America."

Hopkinson charged Congress about fourteen gallons of wine for his design skills, but Congress declined to pay. He increased his invoice to $45, which Congress again refused to pay on the grounds that several others had helped him, and Hopkinson gave up. No official record exists of exactly what Hopkinson's flag looked like, although it is believed to have had six-pointed stars.

OPPOSITE With its red and white stripes and a Union Jack as the canton, the flag known as the Continental Colors is regarded as the first colonial American flag, shown here in replica flying above the Capitol in Colonial Williamsburg. Patriots quickly sought to remove the Union Jack because it could imply submission to Britain.

A MULTITUDE OF DESIGNS

Considering the importance Americans today place on the flag, its manner of display, and the respect it commands, Congress's behavior in approving the Flag Act is perplexing. In fact, Congress approved three different versions of the act—in 1777, 1794, and 1818—with varying degrees of ambiguity.

The Second Continental Congress approved the first version during a flurry of activity on June 14, 1777. The act was succinct: "Resolved, That the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white: that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field representing a new constellation."

"No stirring rhetoric accompanied the Flag Resolution," wrote Keim and his son Peter in their 2007 book, *A Grand Old Flag: A History of the United States Through its Flags*. "No authors were noted. No debate was

THE FLAG THAT NEVER FLEW

Widely associated with the Revolutionary War, the unusual Bennington Flag is wrapped in a legend of heroism. With its distinctive canton bearing the numerals "76" and a dome of thirteen seven-pointed stars, the flag was long said to have flown over a coalition of Massachusetts and New Hampshire militiamen and Green Mountain Boys, who achieved a stunning victory August 16, 1777, against the British at Walloomsac, New York, about 10 miles west of the battle's namesake, Bennington, Vermont.

But in the 1990s, the legend turned to myth. As with several other supposed colonial-era American flags, science proved this one dates to the 19th Century.

The story was that Nathaniel Fillmore, grandfather of President Millard Fillmore, carried the flag in glory from the battlefield and kept it in the Fillmore family, passing it to his nephew, Septa Fillmore, during the early days of the War of 1812—which is when the flag actually may have been created.

Septa passed the heirloom to his nephew, Philetus Fillmore, who flew it outside his Aurora, Illinois, home during the 1876 Centennial celebration. Philetus handed it to his nephew Franklin Fillmore of Monticello, Minnesota. During Franklin's stewardship, a souvenir hunter in 1887 in Minneapolis severed the top white stripe and damaged a star while the flag was carried at the head of a parade. Another Fillmore descendent, Maude Fillmore Wilson, at some point placed the vandalized flag in a remote room of the Chicago Public Library. There John Spargo, director of the Bennington Museum, found it. Maude Wilson in 1926 donated the flag—still believed at that time to have Revolutionary origins—to the Bennington Museum.

Museum curators immediately glued the flag to a bronze and glass frame, which protected it from further damage but also made scientific analysis impossible. In 1995, conservators finally detached it from its protective backing. Using modern analysis techniques they confirmed that the fabric is single-twist cotton threads—flags of true colonial origin were of silk, linen, or wool bunting—while the sewing thread is double-twist cotton. Both fabric and thread marked the flag's origin as the first quarter of the 1800s at the earliest.

Since then, flag historians have applied different theories to date the flag from 1812, the 1820s, even from the 1876 Centennial, depending on what element they focus on.

The Bennington flag is encapsulated in the Bennington Museum in a Plexiglas box at low light levels to protect it and reduce further loss of color. COURTESY OF THE BENNINGTON MUSEUM, BENNINGTON, VERMONT, GIFT OF MAUDE FILLMORE WILSON

COURTESY OF THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

recorded. Ten weeks went by before it was first reported in the press."

With no details regarding the flag's layout, its design was left to the discretion of flag makers, who produced a multitude of variations.

Congress next addressed the design of the evolving flag in late 1793 after Vermont and Kentucky obtained statehood. This time raucous argument erupted in the House, with some congressmen saying the flag should remain with thirteen stars and thirteen stripes forever. The motion lost, and the version President Washington signed into law in January 1794 called for fifteen stars and fifteen stripes, implying that a new star and an additional stripe be added with each new state but again giving no details regarding design.

Even more debate raged when Congress adopted the third Flag Act on April 4, 1818. Now the union held twenty states, and legislators offered plenty of ideas on how to reflect statehood on the flag, from the then-current concept of an equal number of stars and stripes to having only seven stars (for the newest states) and a random number of stripes.

Ultimately, Congress locked in on thirteen red and white stripes—for the first time actually specifying

COURTESY OF THE STATE MUSEUM OF PENNSYLVANIA, PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL AND MUSEUM COMMISSION

Charles H. Weisgerber's *Birth of Our Nation's Flag* was instrumental in establishing the Betsy Ross legend. The men shown meeting with her in 1776 are, from left, General George Washington, Colonel George Ross, and financier Robert Morris.

MAKING OF A LEGEND

In March 1870, a forty-five-year-old property title processor from Philadelphia named William Jackson Canby presented a paper titled "The History of the Flag of the United States" to a meeting of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, asserting that a woman named Elizabeth Ross Ashburn Claypoole designed the first official American flag.

With his paper, Canby quietly launched one of the most successful public relations campaigns in American history.

Although the Betsy Ross legend is compelling, historians since 1870 have questioned it—starting with the fact that Canby was her grandson. He was eleven and she was eighty-four when he claimed she told him the story shortly before her death in 1836. Canby's only substantiation came from affidavits from Ross's daughter Rachel Fletcher, her granddaughter Sophia Hildebrandt, and her niece Margaret Boggs. Each claimed Ross told them the story during their childhoods.

The skeptics' view is that Canby and other family members sought to embed Betsy Ross in the public's imagination. Canby's story, which had never appeared in written histories, was ignored until 1873, when *Harper's Monthly* retold it in the July issue and historian George Henry Preble mentioned it in his book *Our Flag*.

The story came to life again in 1893 when Canby coached amateur artist Charles Weisgerber on a 9-by-12-foot painting for a Philadelphia art competition. *Birth of Our Nation's Flag* conjured the meeting Canby had described in his paper between his grandmother and a supposed congressional flag committee. Weisgerber's painting won first prize in the competition and public imagination.

In 1898, another writer, Addie Guthrie Weaver, included an embellished version of Canby's claim in her book, *The Story of Our Flag*, and the story gained traction with the formation that year of an association to preserve the Georgian dwelling at 239 Arch Street in Philadelphia, thereafter known as the Betsy Ross House. (As early as 1900 the *New York Times* noted there was no proof John and Betsy Ross had ever lived there.)

In 1909, Canby's brother George and Lloyd Balderston, a nephew, published *The Evolution of the American Flag*, in which they argued that neither Betsy Ross nor subsequent family members fabricated or embellished the story for personal gain.

"There is absolutely no ground for either of these suspicions," George Canby wrote. "None of the contemporaries of Elizabeth Claypoole contradicted her story, because every one who knew her knew that she was a truthful and in every respect an honorable woman, and the same character pertains to every one of her daughters and other associates who have vouched for the truth of the story."

Despite the lack of evidence that she designed the flag—although receipts show she sewed American flags after the Revolution and into the War of 1812—plus the fact that thirteen-star flags likely did not appear until 1898, the story still has its proponents. In April 2009, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission recognized Betsy Ross's contributions with a restrained historical marker in front of 239 Arch Street, stating:

"Credited with making the first stars and stripes flag, Ross was a successful upholsterer. She produced flags for the government for over 50 years. As a skilled artisan, Ross represents the many women who supported their families during the Revolution and early Republic."

horizontal placement—to honor the original thirteen colonies, and agreed that a star would be added for each new state, leading eventually to the current fifty-star flag. President James Monroe, signing the act into law, specified four rows of five stars each, but flag makers across the nation paid no heed and sewed stars where they wanted them.

Not until 1912 would the exact layout of the flag's stars be mandated. President William Howard Taft signed an executive order on June 24 regarding placement of stars on the new forty-eight-star flag, shifting the authority for subsequent Flag Acts from Congress to the office of the president, where it remains.

BROAD STRIPES, BRIGHT STARS

America in the early 1800s evolved rapidly, with a steady stream of new states. However, the fifteen-star, fifteen-stripe design remained unchanged between the second Flag Act in 1794 and the third in 1818. The version that holds the deepest emotional resonance for the nation's citizens hails from that period.

U. S. Major George Armistead, as commandant of Baltimore's Fort McHenry during the War of 1812, was ordered to protect the city and its harbor from an anticipated British attack. He wanted for the fort "a flag so large that the British would have no difficulty seeing it from a distance."

Prominent local flagmaker Mary Young Pickersgill worked seven weeks during the summer of 1813—with assistance from a daughter, three nieces, and a servant—to sew an enormous flag using British wool bunting for the stripes and American cotton for the stars. Known as "The Great Garrison Flag," it measured 30 by 42 feet, with each stripe two feet wide and each star two feet across. The federal government paid her the then-vast sum of $405.90 for her work.

Of course this was the American flag that survived twenty-five hours of bombardment ending at dawn on September 14, 1814. Francis Scott Key immortalized

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The 21-star flag commemorated Illinois statehood in 1818 but remained current for only a year, until Alabama joined the union in 1819. Various flag makers produced differing versions of the 21-star flag. This one is rare because it has two different sized stars, arranged in a fanciful snowflake pattern in the canton.

the flag a day later in his patriotic poem "Defense of Fort McHenry," which in 1931 became the stirring words of America's national anthem.

In the years immediately following the 1818 Flag Act, the flag changed frequently as more states were admitted to the union. By 1820, the flag had twenty-four stars with the addition of Maine. By 1848 it had thirty with Wisconsin's admission.

LONG LIVE 13 STARS

As at Fort McHenry, flags are strong focal points during military engagements, whether at the head of charging brigades, waving over ramparts, or as a heart-rending element of surrender. Military use of the American flag also has been responsible for considerable confusion—some of it costly to collectors—regarding certain versions of the flag.

Bridgman points to the thirteen-star flag as the best example. "Thirteen-star flags were carried by soldiers in both the Mexican War (1846-48) and the Civil War (1861-65) as a patriotic remembrance of our colonial struggle for freedom," he explained. "But one of the most common uses of thirteen-star flags was at sea. The U. S. Navy used thirteen-star flags in the colonial and Revolutionary periods, of course, but they may have never entirely stopped using them until the 20th Century."

Thirteen-star flags also were prominent in parades and other celebrations when Revolutionary War hero the Marquis de Lafayette returned to America in 1824. "By far the greatest private use of thirteen-star flags in the 19th Century was our nation's 100-year anniversary of independence in 1876," Bridgman added. "All manner of thirteen-star flags were made for the Centennial International Exposition in Philadelphia, which was a World's Fair event of massive scale. They were also produced for general celebrations of the centennial nationwide."

Confusion arises when collectors who have acquired thirteen-star flags believe them to be of Revolutionary-era vintage. "Even the Smithsonian doesn't own a period thirteen-star flag," Bridgman noted.

CHALLENGE OF COLLECTING

"When it comes to collecting flags, a lot of people would like to go to a book and look up a price," said Winters, who has sold antique flags for twenty years. "The problem is, there's no such book.

"Every flag has to be evaluated on its own," he continued. "It's like buying a piece of antique furniture. Has it

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The stars of this flag form the "Great Star" pattern, one of the most highly collectible styles of American flags. Placing the stars in the shape of a star began around 1812 because the star shape was easily recognizable at sea, which is where nearly all early American flags were flown. This 26-star flag is from 1837, when Michigan achieved statehood, and remained current until 1845, when Florida became a state. It was the first flag officially authorized for the U. S. Army infantry to carry. This example is completely hand-sewn of wool bunting with cotton stars.

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Ships' pennants such as this 55-foot example have a long seafaring tradition, but in the 1600s they came to designate ships officially commissioned into a country's active naval fleet. For decades, American commissioning pennants traditionally bore 13 stars. This pennant has 26 stars, coinciding with Michigan's statehood in 1837.

been refinished? Does it have its original hardware? Have the legs been replaced? The same sort of things come into play when you're buying an antique flag. Is it hand sewn or machine sewn? Does it have repairs? Is it real or is it fake? You could have five thirty-five-star flags and each one would be a different price because the circumstances would be different for each one."

Certainly the price of an authentic colonial-era American flag would be valued in the millions of dollars. Much would depend, again, on the flag's specific provenance, size, and condition. Winters recalled a few years back when four Revolutionary War flags were auctioned off as a group, fetching more than $25 million.

One key to a flag's worth is its number of stars—the fewer the stars, obviously, the higher the price. Civil War-era flags with thirty-four, thirty-five, or thirty-six stars still come on the market with some frequency, priced anywhere from $5,000 to $50,000. Flags from the 1840s are scarcer and can easily hit $60,000 to $100,000.

"It depends on your budget," Winters said. "If you want to spend $500, you're probably going to have to stick with forty-five or forty-six stars, maybe forty-four stars if you get lucky. If you want to spend

COURTESY OF ANTIQUES ASSOCIATES AT WEST TOWNSEND, MASSACHUSETTS

During the Mexican War, U. S. troops carried all types of flags, even 13-star versions. The anonymous artist of this c. 1850 painting depicted flags with cantons that, unfurled, might contain 30 stars, which would be accurate for 1848 when Wisconsin gained statehood. The scene portrays the Battle of Buena Vista in 1847, with American troops commanded by Major General Zachary Taylor (on the white horse).

Flags modified for political campaigns are among the rarest of American flags. An excellent example is this 1844 flag promoting Whig candidate Henry Clay of Kentucky for president against the eventual Democratic victor, James K. Polk. Clay's running mate was Theodore Frelinghuysen of New Jersey. The canton features Clay's portrait surrounded by an oak-leaf and gear-cog medallion and 26 stars.

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$1,000, then you can possibly get a thirty-nine-star flag. But if you think you're going to get into Civil War flags for $500, it's not going to happen."

Even small "parade flags"—commercially printed or stenciled flags on a stick, usually about five by seven inches—from the Civil War period start at $1,200 to $1,500. Because of their relative lower price, smaller size, and higher availability, framed parade flags have become increasingly popular with collectors.

MISREPRESENTATIONS ABOUND

Collectors interested in early flags must be keenly aware of misrepresentations, both Bridgman and Winters warned.

Bridgman said some collectors so yearn for a thirteen-star flag that they overlook the obvious. "Older thirteen-star flags are continually misrepresented as being of colonial or Revolutionary vintage," he said. "A major and well-respected West Coast

auction house sold one about three years ago, but it was a late-19th-Century flag with machine-sewn stripes. This type of misdating is not uncommon because thirteen-star flags are so poorly understood.

"The best example of this is the Smithsonian itself, which once claimed to own a period thirteen-star flag," he continued. "When someone finally examined the flag properly for the purposes of dating it, it was found to be later. Diligent as we all try to be, we're all human, and the staff at the Smithsonian—who were hardly the first to make the error—should be commended for correcting it rather than allowing it to persist."

Winters noted a similar situation occurring now with Confederate flags. Some excellent reproductions are being made and sold for about $300 apiece. The problem, he pointed out, is not with the artisans making the reproduction flags but with unscrupulous dealers who buy a reproduction flag and pass it off to an auction house as genuine, and the auction house then sells it for an exorbitant price. "I've seen those fake flags sell for $20,000 even up to $50,000 at auction," he said. "And someday those buyers are going to be really upset to learn their flags are worth about ten bucks. The auction houses need to have these things better vetted."

So where is the flag collector to turn?

"You need to work with an experienced dealer," Winters insisted. "If you wanted to buy sterling silver, why would you go to a glass dealer to buy sterling when that dealer probably doesn't know anything about sterling? You need to go to a fine antiques dealer who's an expert in sterling silver. It's the same with flags."

Reputable dealers specializing in American flags are a small niche, probably fewer than a dozen nationwide. Collectors might also find the North American Vexillological Association (NAVA) at www.nava.org to be of help in locating dealers. ★

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