



Accuracy is the Best Policy

March, 2019 by Jeff Bridgman | owner, Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.

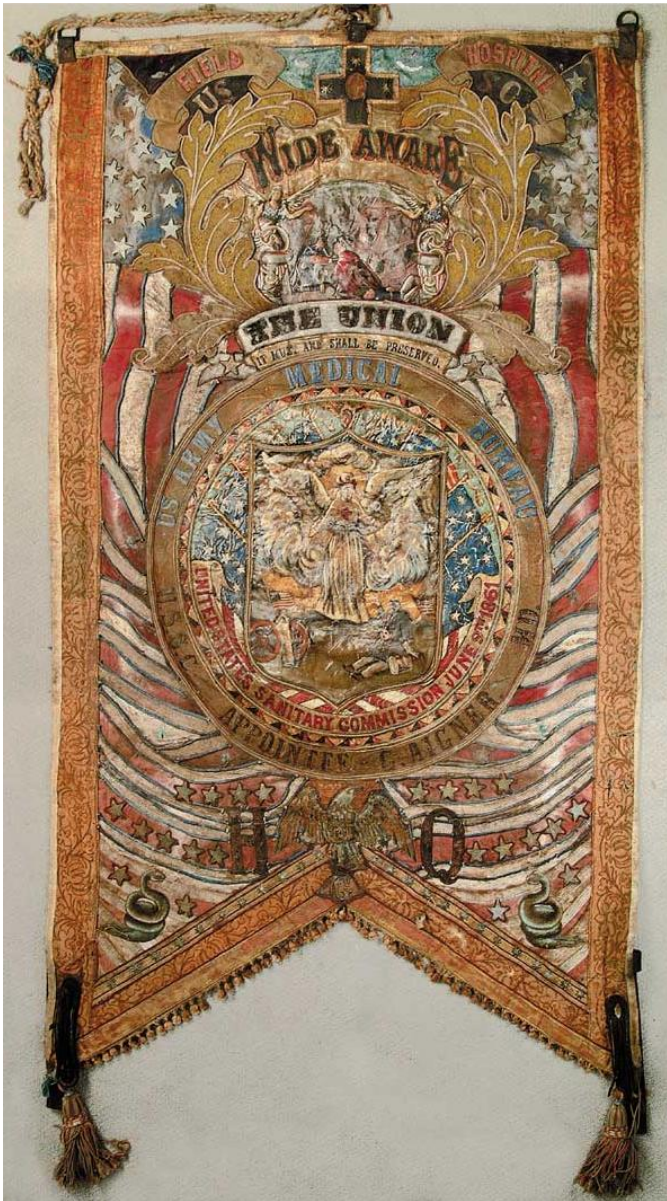
With modern times comes a modern way of selling and collecting. Twenty years ago I was exhibiting at forty antique shows per year and these accounted for most of my revenue. Today I do just six events, four of which are mostly for general advertising and exposure and not for immediate sales. Back then people bought things that they saw in person, loaded them up in their car or truck, and took them home. Today they buy from descriptions, images, and phone calls, followed by the receipt of a box or crate on their doorstep, or else a visit from our friendly delivery team if the location is near enough at hand.

I sell objects within a category of antiques that almost no one understands well at all, in a marketplace full of fakes and misrepresented material. To accomplish this with a buyer that will very likely never see the item in person beforehand, and who doesn't already know me, several things are necessary. First and foremost is confidence in authenticity.

A long time ago I made longevity my primary goal. Looking forward, I decided that if I was going to be selling this stuff 20 to 50 years from now, I better know what I am talking about and my analysis of objects had to be correct. I knew that if people bought once, only to later discover that they got a fake or a misrepresented item, at some point there wouldn't be any people to sell to. There and then I knew that accuracy was the best policy. Images had to be accurate and the very best that we could manage; descriptions had to be thorough; but above anything, authenticity was paramount.

A very high percentage of individual sellers, dealers, and auction houses consistently sell antique flags and related textiles that they inject into the marketplace without proper knowledge. This leaves the buyer with a flash-in-the pan transaction that often looks very attractive and appealing, perhaps due to a seemingly rare and engaging textile at a modest price. The initial excitement burns out quickly, however, when it's discovered that the item was misrepresented, wholly or partly, or an outright fake. Sometimes the very intent of the seller is devious from the outset. Sometimes the seller is relatively ambivalent and is satisfied with 10-20 minutes of

research. Too often, however, problems simply occur because the seller is novice and/or a jack-of-all-trades. The latter issue plagues practically all dealers, collectors, and private sellers when it comes to early flags, who sometimes even pursue extensive research, but just have not handled enough material. These sellers don't grasp what on-line, museum, and textile consultant-aided research cannot reveal. Why? Because none of these sources handle enough flags from which conclusions can be accurately drawn. This is keenly present throughout the auction world, where the outward, public image can be one of prestige, and matter-of-fact authenticity, yet the real goal is to make consignors happy and clear shelves.



Elaborate Civil War banner made of both new and vintage materials. A fantasy piece.

A wise collector once said, "If an item is at auction, there's a reason no one wants it." That may not be true for every last object out there, but it does account for much of what sells every 36 seconds (given 100 lots or so per hour) at the drop of a hammer. Look carefully at the next catalogue you see. Certain things stand out as extraordinary, but most are mediocre filler at best, intended to round out a sale and get these things off the

hands of the people who don't want them. And with regard to those items that are worthy of serious consideration, one needs to ask what expert the auctioneer or private seller used to authenticate. How did the house or individual discover that these things are righteous without a bonafide expert, not just consulted off the cuff, but thoroughly engaged. Sometimes they have someone to call. Sometimes they make an effort. Sometimes they care a great deal, but simply don't have the ability, time, or resources. Sometimes they care very little or not at all. This makes sorting out bad and less desirable material a difficult task and one in which under-educated sellers become the catalyst to mistakes.



Fake Grant & Colfax campaign flag, brand new and made to deceive, being offered by a dealer..

Just yesterday I received a textile analysis performed on a very expensive flag being sold by a relatively high-end military dealer that specializes in guns and uniforms. I didn't know the dealer at all, but a careful perusal of their offerings and past sales revealed that they have handled what an outsider might perceive as a fair number of flags. Some were absolutely tremendous, but some were absolutely abominable. Herein lies a situation where the risk of hard-earned dollars is real and meaningful, because you have an entity that obviously thinks they possess knowledge, but either doesn't, or is devious, or is simply ambivalent. I have known many sellers over the years that don't care one way or another, buying and selling without regard to authenticity. I have known others that sell both real and fake and perhaps just don't know the difference. Whatever the case may be, such entities are often willing to dabble in very expensive goods, as well as average material. In some cases they know uniforms and guns, but not flags, and try to use their general knowledge of militaria as a front to

show how they can certainly identify the latter. This exemplifies the old adage: "A little bit of knowledge can be dangerous."



Real 48 star flag with contrived damage and lettering, being offered at auction.

The textile expert in this case, hired by a buyer, wrote a report that laid forth the fabrics employed in the flag's manufacture, as well as what threads were used. Generally textile conservators will not authenticate date of manufacture. This is something they learn to stay away from as students and has become common practice throughout the industry. If pushed into a corner by a potential client for mounting and framing, however, they will say certain things, such as: "synthetic dyes were unavailable before 1856," or "this type of thread wasn't available until 1800." This information can be useful, as can fabric content, but it can likewise be misleading when it comes to pinpointing an actual date. In the case of this particular flag, the part conveniently omitted was the date at which they stopped using synthetic dyes, which was, of course, never. So knowing the dye was synthetic meant that it could have been made in the 1860's or the 1870's, or in the year 1900, or in the year 2018. And knowing it was made of wool bunting and was machine-sewn throughout was of much the same value: very little at all. That didn't rule out 1960, or 1860, or any year in-between. The short and long of the lesson to be learned here is that getting a first class textile analysis can sometimes prove nothing. Be aware of extrapolating any date from such a report. Tempting though it may seem, they are of small use to anyone without way more knowledge of flags and are dangerous to those carrying a great weight or desire to prove a date of manufacture without otherwise possessing the actual ability to do so. That was the case here, where the conservator noted the date in which synthetic dyes



27 star parade flag? Actually a scarf. Appeared in a 2019 sale of a leading auction house that has handled hundreds of flags.

became available, which implied that the flag was of the period that the owner desired (1861-65). As it turned out, the flag, being sold for a high five-figure price tag, was made much later and worth a small fraction of the price at best, and even more-so in its present state, un-mounted and unframed. My client won't buy it, but someone certainly will. I see fakes and misrepresented flags almost daily and watch them sell weekly.



35 star Civil War period flag, probably made for reenactor use or historical display.

To properly understand any given category of antiques, there is simply no substitute for holding (first-hand), evaluating, and cross-comparing thousands of objects, from the rarest to the most common, while extensively researching and writing about them. This is what I have had the privilege to do in the field of antique flags. Over the past 20 years, I have been able to physically hold a tremendous number of the most interesting flags extant. Sometimes I have even been so lucky as to have most or all of the premier examples in a particular category physically in front of me at the same time, which can be an amazing experience, as well as an educational one. Holding so much material, while writing, researching, restoring, conserving and framing, has allowed me to attain a level of knowledge about flags that would otherwise impossible to obtain.



Fake 33 star, Civil War era flag with "Union" overprint that I bought at auction many years ago at auction, near the beginning of my career. The same forger produced numerous flags and ran them through sales in New York and New England.

I also view thousands of images, of course, which, if not quite of the same value, adds yet another layer of information. Previous to my involvement in high level flags, I also bought and collected quilts, at one point stocking 80 at any given time, with regular turnover, plus samplers, show towels, hooked and sheared rugs, coverlets, embroideries, Native American beadwork, and other cloth objects. These things I continue to deal in today and my 30-year tenure in closely-related specialties has proved invaluable to my education. When



Fake Stars & Bars Confederate flag, supposed to be that of a Georgia unit, being offered at auction. This maker has literally produced many hundreds if not thousands of flags.

information from these sources is combined with an ever-changing inventory of approximately 2,500 flags and banners, most of them 19th century, a unique level of understanding is possible and the risk of mistakes becomes slim to non-existent.

On the surface, one may not guess that the geography of where one lives and works is applicable to experience. Living in the Northeast for all of my life, however, offered its own advantages. Being based in Pennsylvania, while exhibiting at no less than 1,400 antique shows, provided countless opportunities for lengthy examination and discussion. The same is true of going to sales, shops, and interacting with some of the best pickers, dealers, and collectors in America. This is something flag aficionados, novices and experts alike, simply cannot achieve if located in, say, Alabama, Iowa, California, or Texas. In other parts of America, the possibility simply isn't there for significant exposure to such a plethora of early things on a daily basis. One can read, view pictures on line, and buy a few flags, but that simply doesn't cut it. Acquiring and comparing 200 flags isn't enough, let alone 50 or 10. This is why auctioneers, dealers, museums, conservators, and collectors--even advanced ones--repeatedly make mistakes, especially in locations far-flung from where most Americans lived and made things during the 18th and 19th centuries.



29 star flag being sold as period to when our nation had that many states, being offered by a private owner.

When it comes to conservation mounting and framing, experience and accuracy are almost as important as authenticity. Antiques, on the whole, require significant investment, and while some are easy to display while maintaining their integrity, flags most certainly are not. Most are fragile and stretch when someone attempts to



13 stars in the 3rd Maryland pattern, a modern reproduction. Being misdated is a problem throughout 13 star flags, which have been made throughout American history from 177 to the present. This one, however, is actually new or very close to new, probably made to deceive and being offered at auction.

secure them to a background for framing, sagging on their own weight over time and enduring environmental changes. Most have creases and folds that are difficult to remove. Many are misshapen by humidity, heat, and time, to say nothing of the effects of having been flown. The larger and more fragile they are, and the more complex they are to deal with, the more difficult they are to mount as well as display.

If coercing an antique flag to be square, flat, and attractive seems straight-forward enough on the surface, one must consider that a typical American national flag, with individually cut stars and stripes that are pieced-and-sewn together, have fabrics that are often all different, with various weaves and structures, treated with different dyes and agents. As these are stitched by individuals with various skill levels, with various hands and equipment and in varying climates,

usually employing 11 horizontal seams at minimum, very little is what you might call perfectly straight or square. Imagine flying this outdoors and what the effect of the sun, wind, rain, and other elements might then be. Each stitch pinches the fabric, while various styles and types of stitching draw fabrics in one direction or



Fake 1876 centennial flag being offered at auction by an antique gallery that also sells privately.

another. Cloth cut on the bias stretches very differently than that cut with the warp or weft. Now add 150 years of heat, humidity, folding, etcetera, and the result is often anything but flat, neat and orderly.

For nearly 20 years we have orchestrated and executed thousands of conservation and framing projects for early flags and related textiles. From fragile, silk examples, shredded into hundreds of pieces, to 14-foot, outdoor-use flags, stretched and torn by time, to patriotic quilts, hooked rugs, and delicate, two-sided political banners with applied fringe, we know how to preserve and maintain the integrity of these wonderful objects. We also know the best moldings, underlay fabrics and backgrounds to use, and when and how to mount them to make them look even more amazing than they already are.

As prices continue to rise--some quite sharply--the percentage of fakes and misinterpreted objects follows on a parallel course. That plus mishandling of these venerable treasures of America's past, creates many reasons for concern. But when you take extensive, first-hand exposure and skill in identification, add extensive research, plus experience in preservation, and you combine them with a dealer seriously committed to longevity and accuracy, the result is a unique level of confidence unobtainable from other sources in this narrow niche of the antiques marketplace.



Fake "Bonnie Blue" flag.



Fake Civil War period guidon of the 6th Pennsylvania Cavalry.