

## Antiques

### Flags of Our Forefathers: A Pennsylvania antiques dealer unfurls America's Past

Published in Robb Report Magazine, July 2007

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Much of what we believe about the American flag and its history is not true, or so claims Jeff Bridgman, an antiques dealer in the rural Pennsylvania town of Dillsburg, near Gettysburg, who specializes in vintage examples of Old Glory. He says, for example, that Betsy Ross probably did not create the first American flag, and that Francis Hopkinson, a New Jersey signer of the Declaration of Independence, is a likelier candidate because in 1780 he billed the government for designing the flag and other patriotic emblems.

Flag designers of the 19th century took liberties with Hopkinson's template, notes Bridgman. They sometimes laid out the stars in various patterns, including forming them into medallions or a larger star. President William Howard Taft squelched this artistic freedom in 1912, when he issued an order specifying the flag's proportions and how its stars should be arranged. As for the antique 13-star flags that still exist, very few were made prior to 1795, when the star count was increased to 15. Many, says Bridgman, were made in 1876, to mark the national centennial. "People know surprisingly little," Bridgman says. "They're not taught much about the flag."

We are taught to treat the flag in a reverential manner that evidently was not always practiced. Bridgman's stock of at least 500 antique flags includes an 1876 parade flag, a disposable type made of paper, which displayed an advertisement in its stripes: "Don't cook in warm weather. Use Wilson Packing Co.'s cooked corned beef, ham or tongue, in 2, 4 or 6 pound cans." The practice of placing ads on the American flag was outlawed in 1905. "It's shocking today, but at the time the flag was not considered sacred in the same way," says Bridgman, who sold that flag for \$3,000 in 2002. "It's not that they didn't love the flag," he says, "but they didn't see anything wrong with that."



Bridgman's current inventory includes a \$55,000 flag, which he values as an example of mid-19th-century folk art. It was found in Embden, Maine, in the former home of a Union soldier who fought at Gettysburg. The flag, measuring 35 by 58 1/2 inches, is made from a cotton bed sheet and decorated on one side only. An eagle is painted next to the canton, the field of blue that contains the stars, and the stripes were fashioned from silk ribbons and silk swatches. "It's so odd," says Bridgman, noting that the flag was sewn quickly."

This flag is in excellent condition, but most of Bridgman's stock has sustained some damage over the decades, from wind sun, water, moths, and even acid rain. "There are people who want them to be perfect as collectibles,

but you have to be much more forgiving. They were not put away like quilts and samplers, they were generally used outdoors," Bridgman says. "But I like them to display their age. Many people do. And often, condition has nothing to do with the price."



32-foot long, 20-star Navy pennant is one of the few surviving flags that were made before 1820