

## National Portrait Gallery | Face to Face blog

July 03, 2012

### For the 4th of July: Flag Stories & Facts from Collector Ben Zaricor



One of the many fascinating objects on display in the National Portrait Gallery's current exhibition, "1812: A Nation Emerges," is a large American flag, 69 by 115 inches, with seventeen stars and seventeen stripes (above).

The owner of the flag is Ben Zaricor, who recently spoke with us about this flag, his extensive collection, and about flags in general.

*Q: How did you begin your flag collection?*

A: When I was a senior in college, I saw a young man beaten for wearing a stars-and-stripes band uniform (vest). It was taken by some people to be a flag shirt. He was a customer in a pizza restaurant and was approached by men who grabbed him and carried him outside like you would carry a pizza. They dropped him on the cement and started beating him.

This led to a small riot in front of the restaurant, with several people, including myself, trying to help the young man. We were then attacked by a total of fifteen men. Guns were shown by the attackers, and a full-scale riot was averted by the arrival of the uniformed police.

That experience gave me pause about the power of symbols. I was intrigued by a symbol that people would not only die for but would also kill for. From there, I began collecting flags, in part out of curiosity and in part as a form of protest of what happened to the young man.

I began collecting during my senior year in college at Washington University in St. Louis and have continued to this day. My first two flags were Canadian; my first American flag was my twenty-fifth, collected again as a symbol of protest of what happened to the young man that night at Talanya's Restaurant in 1969.

I collected the first 1,500 flags very quietly, without fanfare. Only family and a few friends were aware of the collection until the early 2000s, when an alumnus who had heard about the collection asked me to do a small exhibition for an alumni function in San Francisco in 2003. By that time, I had begun collecting flags of great historical value. During the show at the Presidio in San Francisco, I saw the public's reaction to our exhibition of 125 flags that had turned into a larger affair. The exhibition lasted nearly a year.

The experience of seeing peoples' responses to these pieces of cloth helped me understand the quest that first drew me to collect flags—the power of a symbol, as well as flags' relationship to stories about our country and its people. I realized that it was we the people who gave the meaning to the flag and to our life as a nation. Through these old and sometimes ragged pieces of cloth, their stories helped me understand the personality of our country and how we all have some story about a flag.

It was from that point in 2003 that I went public with the collection and decided to become more aggressive in obtaining collections—both personal and from museums. At this time we have eleven collections from other individuals who came before me, plus seven museum collections. Together they represent 862 years of collecting, in addition to my 43 years. This does not count all the ones and twos I picked up in the early years of building my collection. Amassing collections helped give the Zaricor Collection the depth and breadth that it has today.

*Q: Your website says you have in excess of 3,300 flags; do you have a favorite or a handful of favorites in that mighty lot?*

A: That is like asking which of your children is your favorite! To me, the little houseboat flag from Amsterdam that a man gave my wife and I the day we took a stroll together in 1974 along the canals means as much to me as having a flag associated with Lincoln, the Kennedy assassination, or some other historical event or person. I can recall the day and circumstances of most of the flags I brought into our collection. That was my criteria to add a flag to the collection—it had to be used, not new, and it usually had a story connected to it.

Again, to me these symbols are chronicles about who we are as a people and a nation; each story weaves the fabric of our country. You can often see—particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when flag-making was still a cottage industry—the personality of the flagmaker in their

choice of materials, method of construction, and styles.

For example, I have a battle flag that was made from a dress given up one hundred and fifty years ago—you can see the wine stains from the day of the wedding. To me this speaks volumes about the meaning that this flag had to someone for them to use the most important piece of clothing they likely owned.

*Q: Could you tell our reading audience a little about the seventeen-star American flag you loaned to the National Portrait Gallery for “1812: A Nation Emerges” (above)?*

A: This flag is truly a national treasure and is one of only eight documented War of 1812 stars and stripes to survive today. During this war, our national emblem was still in transition, with many different patterns and star counts in use at the same time.

The official flag was a fifteen-star/fifteen-stripe flag mostly used by the U.S. Navy, as well as military forts and lighthouses. Myriad patterns were used on both sea and land: sixteen stars/thirteen stripes, sixteen stars/sixteen stripes, fifteen stars/thirteen stripes, seventeen stars/seventeen stripes (the flag in the exhibition), seventeen stars /thirteen stripes, and, at the end of the war, eighteen stars/thirteen stripes and eighteen stars/eighteen stripes. This tells us the country was still in search of its national character, and that we were still defining ourselves symbolically as a people.

Congress had attempted in the Second Flag Act, passed in 1794, to standardize our national flag to fifteen stars and fifteen stripes (an example is the Star-Spangled Banner). However, in 1818 Congress enacted the Third Flag Act, which had the stripes represent the thirteen colonies at the time of the American Revolution and the stars recognize a state when it entered the Union. Compromise settled the contradictions of the pattern of our national flag and united the country symbolically as well.

The flag on exhibit in “1812: A Nation Emerges” is the only known seventeen star/seventeen stripe flag to survive from that period of our history. I believe it survived more than 200 years because the Clephan family was judicious in storing it and limiting its exposure to the elements.

This flag is important for reasons other than its association with the War of 1812. Its configuration of stars in rows of a 6/5/6 pattern, with the middle star on the second row larger than the others, documents a custom from the American Revolution. (We stop seeing this in flag-making around 1880.)

It was not until we recently added this flag to our collection—along with two original thirteen-star flags, one with a large star in a pattern of 4/5/4 and one with 12 stars in a circle and one larger star within the circle—that we learned that this tradition has its roots in our country’s early history.

We have a contemporary drawing of George Washington in camp at Yorktown with a flag containing a horizontal row of stars and a second row containing a larger star, similar to one of our original thirteen-star flags. I now believe the custom dates back to the American Revolution. Our seventeen-star flag reconfirms that practice.

It is befitting that Portrait Gallery’s exhibition is the setting for the return home of this American flag after 200 years. I cannot think of a more appropriate place to show it to the American people for the first time.

*Q: What are your thoughts on the 1812 exhibition?*

A: The exhibition is a hard show to do successfully, and after seeing it, talking with Dr. [Sidney] Hart several times, and reading some material he prepared on the exhibition, I believe the National Portrait Gallery team accomplished the impossible—telling the story in these times when technology is the dominant factor in exhibitions, especially if you are going to discuss wars.

The exhibition’s use of period paintings and artifacts, as well as the setting and ambiance of the museum, give a refreshing approach to storytelling. It is fitting to learn that so much of country’s development owes its genesis to this period.

I think learning about the historical people, the politics, and direction of the country is fascinating and educational. It puts the war in a context few of us realize about its impact on the future development of the country and our customs and traditions. To do this with a low-tech approach gives me hope that content remains paramount to bells and whistles.



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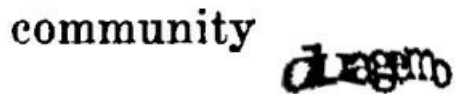
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