



'Custer's Last Flag' sold for \$2.2 million

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The only U.S. flag not captured or lost during George Armstrong Custer's Last Stand at the Battle of Little Bighorn in southeastern Montana sold at auction Friday for \$2.2 million.

The buyer was identified by the New York auction house Sotheby's as an American private collector. Frayed, torn, and with possible bloodstains, the flag had been valued before its sale at up to \$5 million.

The 7th U.S. Cavalry flag — known as a "guidon" for its swallow-tailed shape — had been the property of the Detroit Institute of Arts, which paid just \$54 for it in 1895.

"We'll be using the proceeds to strengthen our collection of Native American art, which has a rather nice irony to it I think," said the Detroit museum's director, Graham Beal.

Custer and more than 200 troopers were massacred by Lakota Sioux and Northern Cheyenne warriors in the infamous 1876 battle. Of the five guidons carried by Custer's battalion only one was immediately recovered, from beneath the body of a fallen trooper.

And while Custer's reputation has risen and fallen over the years — once considered a hero, he's regarded by some contemporary scholars as an inept leader and savage American Indian killer — the guidon has emerged as the stuff of legend.

The other flags were believed captured by the victorious Indians.

The recovered flag later became known as the Culbertson Guidon, after the member of the burial party who recovered it, Sgt. Ferdinand Culbertson. Made of silk, it measures 33 inches by 27 inches, and features 34 gold stars.

"It's more than just a museum object or textile. It's a piece of Americana," said John Doerner, Chief Historian at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument in southeastern Montana.

For most of the last century the flag was hidden from public view, kept in storage first at the museum and later, after a period on display in Montana, in a National Park Service facility in Harpers Ferry, W.V., according to Beal, the museum director.

Dating to an era when the museum took in a variety of natural history and historical items, the guidon was sold because it did not fit with the museum's focus on art, Beal said.

"The irony is you get all these people phoning the museum upset we're selling the flag, and no one knew we owned it," he said.

He added that he was "very pleased" with Friday's sale price: "We had a couple of people comment to us that we would be lucky to get a million for it."

A second 7th Cavalry guidon was recovered in September 1876, at the Battle of Slim Buttes near present-day Reva, S.D.

Now in possession of the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, that flag was poorly cared for and is now in horrible condition — "almost dust," according to the monument's chief of interpretation, Ken Woody.

As for Culbertson's Guidon — or Custer's Last Flag, as Sotheby's has billed it — Woody pointed out that without the Custer mystique, it would be just another piece of old cloth.

"Some people like memorabilia and Americana, and they all want to own a little piece of it," Woody said.

Sealed in a custom-made plexiglass case by the Detroit museum since its return from the Park Service in 1982, the flag has several holes and the red of some its stripes has run into the white stripes. Its once-sharp swallow tail tips are now tattered and torn.

Culbertson's Guidon also is missing a star and a section of striping about 9 inches wide and 6 inches high — apparently cut away as a souvenir before its acquisition by the museum. Yet on the auction block, even what's missing is worth a story.

"I'm sure Culbertson let other men take small snippets for themselves," Sotheby's vice chairman David Redden said.