

## National Treasure or White Elephant? A Stewardship Case Study

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### Introduction

How many of you have mystery items in your Heritage Room collections? You know what I mean. Those things that have been there forever and no one is quite sure how they got there or why they are significant. And whenever the item or items catch your attention you think, "I'll deal with that someday." Today I want to share the story of one of Union College's mystery items with you. And as I do so, I'd like to consider our roles as stewards of our collections.

**Slide:** Definition of stewardship.

When it comes to serving our institutions, we are stewards of collections, financial resources, time, human resources, and even the supplies we have to work with. Deciding the best way to deploy all of these things in the most beneficial way often requires a balancing act between each of them. So when one has too little time and too much stuff, how do we decide the best course of action?

**Slide:** My Grand Adventure

Quite early after my arrival at Union College in 2003, I began hearing references to the "Gettysburg flag" in our collection. There were so many things that needed my attention at the time that the Heritage Room and anything in it, fell toward the bottom of my to-do list. I had a feeling dealing with this flag could turn into a black hole, so I was happy to put it off. "Someday" arrived early in 2008 when DeForest Nesmith began seeing a lady in Denver, Colorado. Rumors started reaching me that someone connected with the gifting of this flag to the college wanted us to do something with it (namely display it) and if we weren't going to do so, they wanted us to pass it on to an organization that would. At this point I decided it was time to get the flag out and see what I could learn because I figured I would receive a phone call about it sooner or later.

Looking at the flag itself didn't tell me know much. The 34-star flag was used between 1861 and 1863, and there was no standardization in the arrangement of the stars, size, material, or much of anything else. This makes material analysis not particularly helpful.

The vague story that Chloe and DeForest had shared with me was that this flag had hung from the podium at Gettysburg when Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address on November 19, 1863. I couldn't remember if Chloe had ever mentioned the donor's name to me. If so, I certainly didn't remember it and neither did DeForest. There was no documentation with it in the box with the flag and nothing even indicated the name of the donor.

I next turned to the historical evidence from the dedication ceremony at Gettysburg. There are three known photographs.

**Slides:** Gettysburg pictures

I next turned to the experts.

**Slide:** Research

Easy for them to say. They weren't stuck with the flag. I wasn't ready to give up. I didn't want to dispose of the flag, but without knowing what we really had on our hands, I didn't know what to do with it. We don't have the resources to care for it very well. Display is out of the question. It is too big and too fragile for our exhibit facilities. And in the back of my mind there was the niggling thought, "What if this story is true?" I just had to see what I could find out. That left genealogical research as my next recourse. But where to start when I didn't even know the name of the person who gave us the flag?

**Slide:** Serendipity

By this time I had already traced the rumors I was hearing through DeForest and his friend (now wife) Dorothy back to Dr. Keith Hanson. The lady whose family the flag had belonged to was a nurse who had worked with Keith's father, Dr. Russell Hanson. However, Keith remembered this lady from his childhood but couldn't remember her name. I asked him to keep working on that, meanwhile, I needed to be cleaning out a bunch of old filing cabinets in the Heritage Room we wanted to remove in order to make room for new shelving. These filing cabinets were basically the library's inactive files which I organized for institutional archives. This necessitated the review of each file. That's when serendipity struck. One day I flipped a piece of paper to see a photocopied article with a picture of Chloe holding what looked like our flag. I quickly scanned the text and sure enough, it was the flag and the donor was a woman named Muriel Fleming O'Connor. I was thrilled to have a name! And better yet, a few folders later, I found correspondence between Chloe and Muriel. In one of these letters, Chloe requests Muriel to write up her story about the flag as documentation to go with it. I now doubt this ever happened because I have been through every possible place in the library this document could be and haven't found it.

So I now eagerly dove into Muriel's genealogy. To make a long story short, using obituaries and U.S. Census records, I ruled out Muriel's mother's family as the likely source. This made it easier to focus on the Flemings. One sticking point was that Victoria's obituary proved the most helpful, but it isn't indexed in the SDA obituary index although it is published in the Central Union Reaper. I located it through a search of the GC Archives rather than the index. Along the way I also learned much about Muriel's career. She had a long and well respected career as a nurse and nursed educator at the Boulder Sanitarium and the Union College Denver Nursing Campus.

**Slide:** Fleming Genealogy

I eventually determined that the information on this slide shows the Fleming family relationships. Muriel had no children and married late in life. Lucille had one child and died young. Ray and Victoria (with

their children) appear to be the only Adventist in the family. Solomon moved to Illinois from Gettysburg as a young man. He would have been a child of about 9 or 10 in 1863. Andrew and Julia moved to Gettysburg in the 1850s and had five children (the three youngest born in Gettysburg). I was certain that this Gettysburg Flemming family was connected to the Hydes of Clinton, Illinois. But I was a little uncertain about having the correct Ray related to the Hydes in Illinois. This issue was confused by census takers who sometimes spelled Ray's name as Roy. And because Fleming was spelled sometimes spelled with two m's. And because Ray's father is usually listed with the initials S. P. but the handwriting is hard to decipher.

About this time, I was also able to get in touch with Muriel's only niece who was not of any help. Her mother died young and I believe that Charlotte was largely raised by her father and step-mother and she really didn't know much about her mother's family. I have since sent her copies of my research which I hope she appreciated. She hasn't replied again.

I finally turned to volunteers listed with the U.S. Genweb Project for DeWitt County, Illinois. Through this connection I connected with a lady named Judy Simpson. She was more than happy to help me with local look ups to confirm the information I already had and then we hit the jackpot. Judy is acquainted with a cousin of the Hyde family who knew Muriel and her mother. These connections now confirmed what I believed to be true, but also supplied me with a most interesting document.

**Slide:** Newspaper clipping

For the first time, I now knew the story that Muriel believed to be true. The sad part is that the historical record does not support this story. Her great-grandfather was most definitely Andrew, not Alexander. The Pennsylvania Home Guard was fighting in Virginia in November 1863. And Andrew Fleming served in the Second Seminole Wars in the 1830s where he was injured. He was in his 50s during the Civil War. It is highly unlikely he played any military role during the Civil War. The census in fact lists him as a laborer in 1850 and no occupation in 1860. He appears to be something of a nobody in Gettysburg having moved there from Baltimore in 1850, apparently before the census. And I haven't been able to locate any individual connected to the ceremony with whom Muriel could confuse her great-grandfather.

**Slide:** Internal Evidence

So now with the story considered highly suspect, I returned to the question, of what to do with the flag. By this time, I had grown attached to it just as a symbol of this adventure. And I really wanted to know the truth. The family saved it for some reason, but why? And if the story could not be proven, did the flag have any value in and of itself just for its age? Serendipity struck again when I chanced to catch an episode of the Antiques Roadshow on PBS which just happened to feature a flag collection. From this I learned about some of the key characteristics to look for when determining a flag's authenticity. I decided it was time to get the flag out again.

The flimsy nature of this flag suggested that it wasn't intended to be flown, which again made it suspect, but I decided to see what more I could learn about the production of flags in the 1860s. This time I

came across Jeff Bridgman, an antiques dealer in York, Pennsylvania. Information on his website, suggested that what we have is a parade flag. Since his company deals with a lot of Americana including flags, I decided it couldn't hurt anything to email him to see what he said. I included a number of detailed pictures. He responded within a number of days. Just from the visual evidence I submitted, he believes that flag is most likely authentic. It is a parade flag...(slide). And without verification of the Gettysburg connection, Bridgman believes the flag to be worth \$2500 to \$3500.

One of the questions I had for Bridgman was whether he had seen this unique arrangement of the stars before. It looks quite odd. He replied that he had and suggested that I turn the picture vertical, viewing the flag as one would when hanging it from a podium.

**Slide:** Vertical flag

Remember that there were no standards for display, so the field of blue on the right rather than the left is not considered significant. Viewed from this angle, the arrangement of the stars is much less awkward.

**Slide:** What would you do?

[Discussion]

### **The Rest of the Story:**

I had hoped to have a more conclusive ending to the story at this point, but I don't. I would like a true appraisal which is an expensive undertaking. And our Nebraska location is an inconvenient distance from the most of the appraisers who have the expertise to evaluate this type of object.

So I will conclude with what I speculate the true story may be. It is entirely likely that the Fleming family attended the ceremony, but I don't think that Andrew played a publicly significant role. It is more likely that he was a common laborer at the time and that he was perhaps a workman hired to help construct the podium and set up for the ceremony. He could have also been part of the cleanup crew afterwards and since the flag wasn't considered anything special at the time, he could easily have taken it home. His daughter Dorothy (or Dora) and oldest child never married. She was a school teacher and the last remaining family member to live in Gettysburg, moving to Nebraska at about 60 years of age. She lived near Ray and his family in Nebraska. It doesn't seem far-fetched that she would have inherited the flag from her father and then passed it along to her nephew, Muriel's father.

It does remain a mystery how the story might have been distorted in such a short space of time. Dorothy would have been about 18 years old in 1863, old enough to be a part of the story and not rely on her father to tell her about it. One hopes that a school teacher would not be prone to fabrication. Likewise Ray and Victoria had a reputation in the family for being devout and conservative Seventh-day Adventists, so once again, one would hope they wouldn't knowingly pass on a false story. Muriel was about five years old when Dora died so she probably wouldn't have remembered hearing the story directly from her great-aunt. And then there is the possibility that the newspaper journalist writing the

story “dressed” it up. I’m just as curious about where the newspaper story originated from as I am about the true history of the flag.

After two years of research, I have learned a lot. Would I do this much work again? In addition to quite a bit of normal work time, I spent hours of personal time on it. And to be honest, I enjoyed every minute of it. Given the potential significance of the flag for our nation, I felt that it was worth my time to explore the facts as much as possible. The experience has been rewarding, if not conclusive. And I think I gained useful knowledge that I may apply in other ways in the future. So the answer is “yes” for me. I would do this over again. Of course I’m very thankful that not every mystery item in our collection requires this level of commitment to documentation.

In the end there is a certain frustration that not only can we not prove this flag was at Gettysburg in 1863, we can’t prove that it wasn’t there. My only hope now is that someday serendipity will strike again and additional information about Andrew Flemming will be uncovered.