

Speaking of Stamps:

“New Netherlands, in the West Indies...”

by Herman Herst, Jr.

“New Netherlands, in the West Indies...”

That is how the description read in the auction catalog of one of the major auction firms in London. Offered was a document, signed by King Charles II over three centuries ago, ordering a Major Andros to run down the Dutch flag, and to raise the British flag.

I happened to be in London at the time, and my blood pressure went up when I saw it. I knew something that the auction house describer did not know: New Netherlands was the name by which New York State was known. (It is more widely known that New York City was then called New Amsterdam.)

In the West Indies? British knowledge of American geography at that time was not much better than the knowledge many Americans have today of British geography. What I seemed to be looking at was in effect New York State’s birth certificate—and it seemed mighty cheap at the estimate of £500, about \$700 at the time.

At the sale I rode the lot to \$3,500 and gave up. Other bidders had a bit more courage than I did. The document finally sold for about \$8,000, no doubt with the describer blushing considerably. He will probably never forget that New Netherlands was New York, and that it was not in the West Indies.

Recently I had great pleasure in visiting New York’s least known museum, the Forbes Magazine Galleries. My regret was that I had only allotted an hour for the visit, for I had no idea when I entered what a treat was ahead of me.

Malcolm Forbes, at a personal expense of millions of dollars, put together a half dozen exhibits, any one of which would be worthy of a visit. There are toy boats, hundreds of them, ingeniously arranged so that they make the viewer feel that he is witnessing the greatest naval pageant in history. Forbes was not content with the boats themselves; oil paintings in which toy ships appear grace the walls as well.

His collection of toy soldiers is reputed to be the largest in the world. Every British regiment in the time of Queen Victoria is shown in exact details. One tableau shows colorful soldiers of many nations, marching past the spot where one stands to observe them. It is fun to pick out from the crowd recognizable characters. I found Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. When George V saw a similar exhibit (or perhaps it was the same one) he remarked, “But where is the village idiot?” The village idiot is now included.

One exhibit, titled “The Mortality of Immortality” makes one think. Here are dozens of awards, plaques, medals, silver chargers, gold watches, all with inscriptions testifying to the great deeds done by those to whom they were awarded. Alas, when the immortal recipient died, the treasures ended up as do many things, in pawn shops, flea markets, antique shops, and even slated to be melted down. “To the best pig in the county” may make the pig raiser happy, as long as he realizes that he himself is not the best pig, but just how fleeting fame is, can be shown by the collection.

To this viewer, the greatest collection in the museum includes priceless documents of American history. Letters of Lincoln and Washington abound, but they are more than just letters. Each is selected for its content. Can anyone avoid having a thrill at seeing words by Abraham Lincoln “All persons held as slaves...shall be then, thence forward and forever, free.”

I had a particular reason for visiting the Forbes Galleries, for I had heard that one of Forbes’ recent acquisitions was a document signed by King Charles II, ordering a Major Andros to take down the Dutch flag and raise the British flag in a far off place in the West Indies known as New Netherlands.

I found the document, in all its glory, but without any explanation of how it had come to this country, nor of the battle in the auction room for possession of it.

Perhaps one reason that I wanted to get another glance at it was to regret my loss of courage during the bidding that occurred when it came up for sale. Of course, I could not think also of the price that Mr. Forbes had paid for the document, something like \$32,500. We have no way of knowing how many hands it passed through until it came to its final resting place.

But the incident does point out something that philatelists like to talk about, and that is value. The original describer thought it was worth \$700. I thought it worth \$3,000. Someone else thought it worth \$8,000...and Mr. Forbes thought it worth \$32,500. Now what is it really worth? And in the case of a unique, historic rarity such as this, how does one price it when selling? Does one base his price on cost, adding a fixed percentage, as many feel should be done? Or does one charge for it what he really thinks it is worth, regardless of his cost? Or, as some might suggest, is the price based on the prospective buyer’s ability to pay? A stimulating discussion might be had on this subject.

Addenda

1. The Forbes Magazine Galleries were permanently closed in 2014.

2. The document sold for \$110,500 in a March 2002 Christie’s New York auction of the Forbes Collection of Historical American Documents. I was able to obtain a reproducible image at http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=3886724&lid=1&From=salesummery&sid=4c4ea8e1-9a98-4c35-a9eb-e4f41dcdba58 (or just Google “Christies NY March 2002 Forbes auction”). It is Lot 1, where a portion of the contents are provided—and those contents add another aspect to this article by the late Herman Herst, Jr.:

“Charles R”

“Our will and pleasure is that you forthwith cause Our great Seale to be applied unto a Commission whereby we have impowered Our Trusty & Wellbeloved Major Edmund Andros, and in case of his death or other accident Antony Brockhurst Gent. In Our name & for Our Use to demand, & to take into possession the place in the West Indies called by the Dutch New Netherlands, but by Our Subjects New York, together with all the Fortifications, Artillery, Arms, Ammunition & Necessaries of Warre according to the Sixth Article of the Treaty of Peace concluded between Us & the States Generall of the United Provinces.”

Notice that it specifically states “...the place in the West Indies called by the Dutch New Netherlands, **but by Our Subjects New York...**” [emphasis added]. So the lot describer totally missed that reference, or did not catch its significance the way Herst and most likely the winning bidder realized.

I decided to reproduce the document on our front cover. The first line to the left of the document is where the reference to New York can be found; the second line is where the Christie’s transcript ended. The portion not included in the transcript might best be described as ‘boilerplate’ in a legal document, but it is there for you to read for yourself. JFD.

Charles R

Our will and pleasure is, that you forthwith
cause Our great Seal to be applied unto a
Commission bearing date the 24th day of this
instant July, whereby We have impowred
Our Trusty & Wellbelov'd Major Edmund
Andros, and (in case of his death or other
accident) Anthony Brockhurst Gent. in
Our name & for Our use to demand, & to take
into either of their possession the place in the
West Indies called by the Dutch New Netherlands,
but by Our Subjects New York, together with
all the Fortifications, Artillery, Ammunition,
and necessaries of Warre therein remaining, or
therunto belonging, according to the Sixth Article
of the Treaty of Peace concluded between Us & the
States General of the United Provinces the 19th day
of February last past. And for so doing this shall
be your Warrant. Given at Our Court at Windsor
the 30th day of July, 1674. in the Six & Twentieth
year of Our said Majesties.

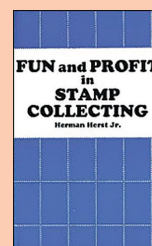
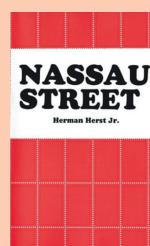
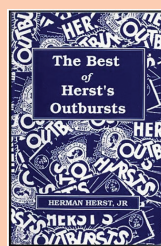
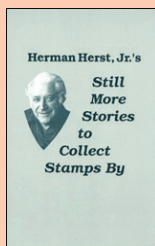
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