

LIGHT FOR ALL  
**THE BALTIMORE SUN**

## Rare copy of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' goes on the auction block

This early printing of the national anthem is one of 11 still in existence



*This photo shows an 1814 first edition copy of the lyrics and music of the "Star Spangled Banner," by Francis Scott Key. It is the only known copy in private hands and will be sold on Dec 3, Christie's in New York. (Christie's auction house / November 21, 2010)*

By Mary Carole McCauley, The Baltimore Sun

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It's the typo that gives it away.

The two 13-by-9.5-inch pieces of paper that will go up for auction at Christie's on Friday spell out in big, bold, black letters, "The Star Spangled Banner." Underneath this heading is written, much smaller, these words of explanation: "A Patriotic Song."

Thomas Carr, a 19th century music publisher who operated a store at 36 Baltimore St., intended to print "A *Patriotic Song*." But he was rushing to capitalize on the popularity of the little ditty that Francis Scott Key penned while watching the bombing of [Fort McHenry](#) during the War of 1812, and lacked the modern-day luxury of spell-check. So when the first edition of the four famous verses that later became the national anthem were published in 1814, they contained a telling misspelling.

And that's how Chris Coover, a senior book and manuscript specialist for the auction house, knew that he'd been offered the real deal.

"It's a great discovery, a key piece of Americana," Coover says. "There are only 11 copies that we know about, and this is the only one in private hands. The others are all in institutions or university libraries."

Chances are that when Lot 85 goes on the auction block at around 11 a.m. Friday at the auction house's headquarters in New York, the bidding will start in the low six figures. Christie's estimates the value of the manuscript at between \$200,000 and \$300,000.

The auction house isn't releasing the identities of the sellers, but Coover identified them as two elderly Pennsylvania antique dealers. In 1989, when the couple purchased their copy of the "Banner," it was included in an album of 50 pieces of sheet music that had been bound together. The couple, not knowing what they had found, purchased the entire book for \$50 — or \$1 per song.

"They got a bargain," Coover says with intentional understatement, adding that proceeds from the sale will fund the couple's retirement.

It's estimated that the album was bound about 1820 while it was owned by a young girl named Mary Barnitz, who belonged to a prominent family near York, Pa.

Cooper noted that Carr probably made about 500 copies of the first edition, which were engraved and printed from a copper plate. Just 2 percent managed to survive the ensuing 197 years.

"It was very customary in the early part of the 19th century to collect sheet music," Coover says.

"In musical families, sheet music would be in a big messy stack, and at some point, someone would gather it all up and take it to a bookbinder. The fact that it was bound into this album of 49 other examples was probably what saved it from being discarded, damaged or destroyed. It's in wonderful condition."

The manuscript, he says, has a small tear in one corner that has been carefully mended, and a very light damp stain, possibly from tea. But, other than the misspelling, the most striking aspect of the first edition is the absence of the author's name.

"I think it was an oversight on the part of the publisher," Coover says.

"He may not have known that Francis Scott Key was the author. Key was an attorney, but he wasn't famous. By the time Carr came out with his first edition, the verses had already been printed in the newspapers, and the song had been sung on stage."

Coover says that a handful of people have already made inquiries about the "Banner," though none are from Maryland.

But even if the document never makes it to the Free State, two of the 11 copies are safely housed in the city where the song was written.

The [Johns Hopkins University](#) has a near-pristine copy that it acquired in 1977 from the collector and donor Lester Levy, along with other "Star Spangled Banner" memorabilia. The first edition is available to university staff and students for perusal, but hasn't been displayed publicly for several years, according to Kelly Spring, an assistant manuscripts curator for the university.

And the Maryland Historical Society has a third copy, which is on display through the holidays. If the society's president, Burt Kummerow, is a bit vague about how long it's owned its first edition, or how it was acquired, that's understandable.

It seems that the society's attention is focused on another item in its possession that's even more historic, intimate and valuable — an inked version of "The Star Spangled Banner" in the author's handwriting.

No, museum officials don't have the famous envelope back on which Key first jotted down the lyrics of his song while watching the bombardment. That envelope was lost long ago. Instead, the Historical Society has the piece of paper on which Key copied down the lyrics from the envelope as soon as the shaken barrister made it back to his hotel from the deck of the British sloop on which he'd been detained. This was the official version, the one on which Key intended to preserve his musings.

"We'll be doing a lot more with the handwritten version for the centennial year in 2014," Kummerow says. "We'll be sharing it with groups around the state. It's our most popular item by far."

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