



Baltimore collector bought 'Star-Spangled Banner' for \$170

By Frederick N. Rasmussen, The Baltimore Sun

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Lester S. Levy bagged his first-edition copy of "The Star-Spangled Banner" in 1940 for \$170, appreciably less than an anonymous buyer plunked down — \$506,500 — 70 years later on Dec. 3 at Christie's Auction House in New York, for the rare two-page piece of sheet music, one of 11 copies extant.

My colleague, Chris Kaltenbach, writing in The Baltimore Sun, reported that the sale doubled its pre-auction estimates and set a world record for a single piece of sheet music.

Levy was the scion of an old Baltimore straw hat-making family — the M.S. Levy Co. — that had been founded by his grandfather in 1866, eventually growing to become the largest maker of summer straw hats in the United States.

Levy, who graduated from the [Johns Hopkins University](#) in 1918, went to work for the family business and rose to become president of Men's Hats Inc., successor to M.S. Levy Co.



Lester Levy, pictured in 1976, bought a first-edition copy of "The Star-Spangled Banner" sheet music for \$170. A recent auction of a similar item fetched \$506,500. (Baltimore Sun 1976 / January 19, 2004)

It was Levy's love of the piano that steered him toward collecting sheet music, which he began to do in earnest by 1930, when he made his first \$6 purchase in the shop of a Charles Street stamp dealer for a dozen copies of sheet music that dated to the 1850s and 1860s.

"All my life I have been a pianist, a very poor one it is true, but one who would sit down at a piano at the

drop of a hat," he told Hopkins in an interview years ago.

Being on the road in the early days of his business career afforded Levy the opportunity to forage in old bookshops for copies of American popular music.

Levy, who lived in [Pikesville](#), saw his collection expand to some 30,000 pieces, covering the years 1780 to 1980.

Topics included wartime, patriotic, presidential, minstrel music, music celebrating [opera](#), stage and movie stars, transportation, drinking, temperance, theatrical, circus, dancing, collegiate, romantic, sentimental, fraternal orders and even smoking.

Levy carefully catalogued and cross-referenced each piece by author, composer, subject and title.

It had been Levy's quest to acquire a first-edition copy of "The Star-Spangled Banner," which had been published by Thomas Carr's Music Store at 36 Baltimore St. a month after Francis Scott Key witnessed the bombardment in 1814 from the deck of a cartel ship anchored some eight miles away from [Fort McHenry](#).

Levy delighted in retelling the story through the years of how the acquisition of the desired and highly collectible copy of "The Star-Spangled Banner" sheet music nearly slipped through his hands.

He had heard about a copy for sale in New York in 1938, and after looking at it, declined to purchase it because its back cover was torn. He wanted a perfect copy.

A music publisher friend purchased it instead and promised Levy that if he learned of another copy for sale, he'd contact him.

Levy's chance came two years later, when his friend called and said there was a copy available for sale in Hagerstown.

"He gave me the name and phone number of the man who had it. I called up this guy, who was named Eaton," Levy recalled in a 1989 Evening Sun interview. "He said he would sell me the copy and would meet me outside the hotel in Hagerstown where he was staying."

Accompanied by his wife, Eleanor, Levy drove to Hagerstown, barely able to conceal his excitement. There they made contact outside the hotel with Eaton. Levy described him as "mysterious."

"We went upstairs to his room, and he opens a drawer and pulls out a copy of the Saturday Evening Post. He had hidden the copy of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' between two pages of the magazine," he told the newspaper.

"I knew it was genuine, and I said I would buy it. He wanted \$150. I didn't have that much money on me, so I gave him a check for \$20 and my personal note for the rest of it and told him he could cash the note with a friend of mine named Elliott Shapiro, the music publisher in New York," he said.

On their way back to Baltimore with his booty safely in hand, the couple decided to stop at a carpentry and antiques shop on the outskirts of Hagerstown that was owned by a man named Knodle.

Knodle informed Levy that he had a half-dozen bound books of sheet music that he would sell for \$150.

As he examined the books, contemplating their purchase, he turned to a page where two sheets had been cut out. His curiosity now aroused, he went to his car and returned with his recent purchase.

To his astonishment, his copy of "The Star-Spangled Banner" fit perfectly in the missing space.

Levy now had to confront the fact that he was dealing with a thief and in possession of what he told The Evening Sun was "hot goods."

He returned the missing pages to Knodle and explained what had happened earlier in the day. He offered to buy the books at Knodle's original \$150 asking price.

Knodle said he wanted to think the deal over and would need at least a week to do it.

On the long ride back to Baltimore, Levy suddenly remembered that he had to call his friend Shapiro in New York City, who was to cash his note once Eaton came calling.

"When this thief came in to see my friend, Shapiro pushed Eaton into a corner and said, 'Don't move,' then grabbed a telephone to call the cops," Levy said in the newspaper interview. "Eaton threw the note on the floor, fled the office and was never seen again."

The next week, Levy drove back to Hagerstown to a much-wiser Knodle, who realized the value of what he had.

When he dismissed Levy's mention of the original \$150 deal and insisted he wanted more, Levy agreed to increase his offer by \$20, and "got 'The Star-Spangled Banner' for \$170," he told the newspaper.

The only piece of sheet music from his collection that Levy ever kept locked up was "The Star-Spangled Banner," which he presented to the Milton Eisenhower Library at Hopkins in 1972. At the time, it was estimated to be worth \$50,000 to \$55,000.

By 1986, he had donated his remaining collection to Hopkins, where it is known as the Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music.

Levy, who died in 1989, was the author of three books on American music of the 19th and early 20th centuries, "Give Me Yesterday: American History in Song," "Flashes of Merriment" and "Grace Notes in American History."

He also wrote the text that accompanied reproductions of sheet-music covers from his collection, titled "Picture the Songs: Lithographs from the Sheet Music of the Nineteenth-Century America."