

Swann Galleries, New York City

North American Atlas Leads the Auction House's Highest-Grossing Rare Maps Sale

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Swann Galleries

The maps and atlases department of Swann Galleries had its first \$1 million sale on December 8, 2015, in New York City. In fact, it didn't stop there. All told, the auction house took in \$1,274,182 (including buyers' premiums) on an offering of 554 lots, 78% of which sold. The two-catalog "day-long extravaganza" (Nicholas Lowry's description as he opened bidding from the podium) began at 10:30 a.m. and finished about seven hours later. The sale included natural history and color-plate books and historical prints and drawings too.

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The top lot by far, hammered down early in what was called "The Mapping of America" part of the auction, was 18th-century British cartographer William Faden's *The North American Atlas*. With competition from the order book that tapped out at \$240,000, an unidentified dealer on the phone, competing against two other phone bidders, one of whom didn't get a word out, took it for \$341,000. The price is a new record for the single bound volume that contains 42 engraved, minimally hand-colored maps of British military campaigns fought during the opening years of the American Revolution. According to American Book Prices Current, the previous record, £130,000 (\$205,413) hammer, was achieved at Sotheby's in London on March 15, 2000.

Unbroken by the Faden price is Swann's record for a single map. It is \$360,000, achieved on June 14, 2007, for a newly discovered manuscript example. Done with pen-and-ink and wash in London in 1737, it is "A New and Correct Map of the Province of North Carolina drawn from the Original of Col. Mosely's [*sic*]." Edward Moseley served as surveyor general of the province of North Carolina, the title of one of his responsibilities. But the Faden atlas has earned the distinction of being the most expensive single "book" sold by the auction house. (Sets of books have gone at Swann for more.)

The Faden result also marks another milestone; it occurred during Swann's second consecutive sale in which an atlas made six figures. On May 19, 2015, Hendrik Doncker's *De Zee-Atlas* [The Sea Atlas], 31 engraved hand-colored maps published circa 1665 in Amsterdam, achieved \$125,000 (est. \$60,000/90,000). Is it a trend?

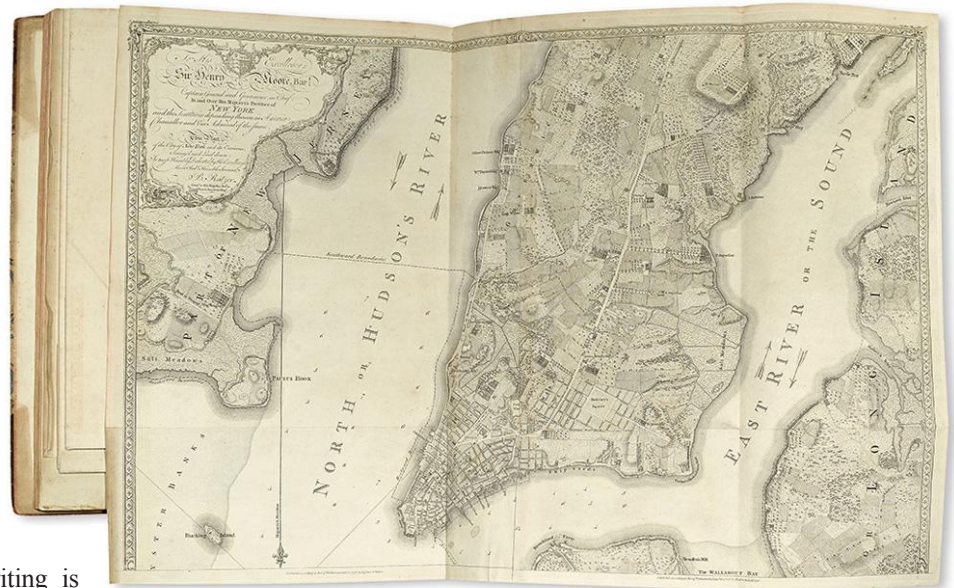
"To have a repeat performance like that is something to note," Swann's specialist Alex Clausen said. The trade isn't paying much attention to the atlas part of the market, he added, and he has made it his business to do so.

While *De Zee-Atlas* is very scarce, the Faden is "silly rare," as Clausen might say. Copies were made to order; individual buyers chose additional maps to augment a 27-map core that roughly followed those included in *The American Atlas* by Thomas Jeffreys, Faden's predecessor as "geographer" to King George III. Its potential market, on both sides of the Atlantic, included aristocrats, generals, and other important personages with an interest in matters of state.

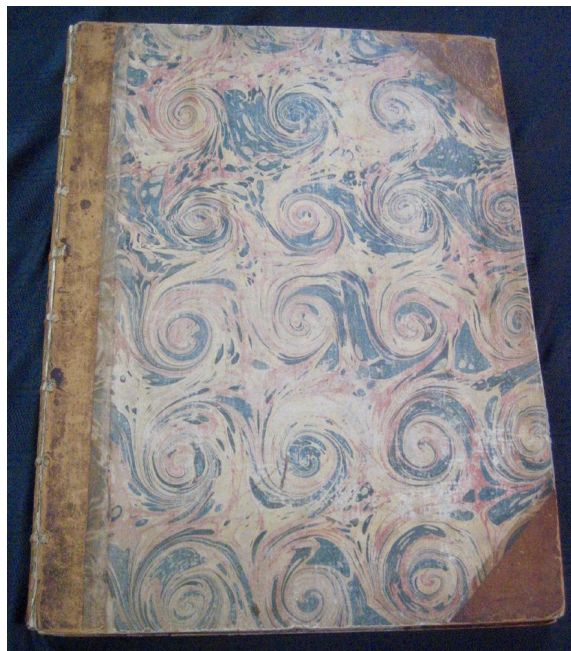
King George III's copy resides in the collection of

the British Library. George Washington's copy is at Yale University, purchased in 1970. The Boston Athenaeum, a private library to which I belong, paid \$20 for its copy—in 1864. The Boston Athenaeum's curator of maps and associate director, John H. Lannon, said the maps are in good condition but now disbound and individually cataloged. Records say the Boston Athenaeum got it from a J.W. Bouton or Bonton (the handwriting is indistinct). Online sources show a 19th-century Boston bookseller who was named the former. There is no record of this copy's original owner, however.

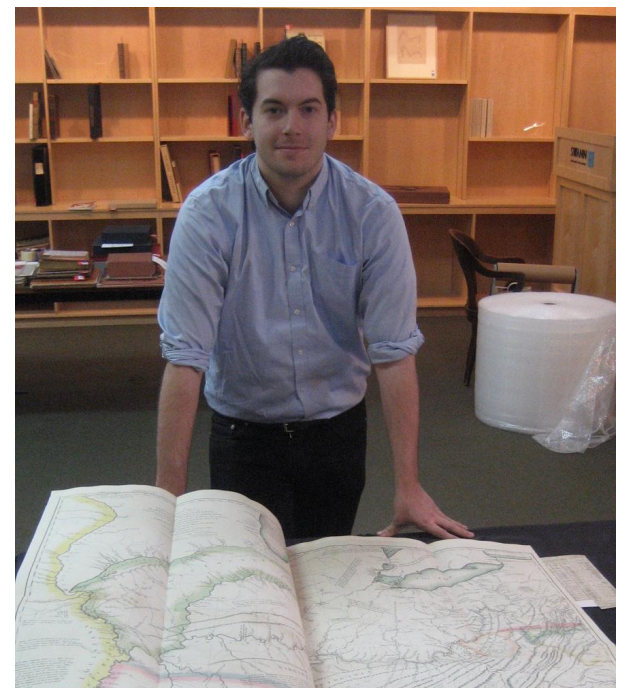
Nor is there a record of the original owner of the one sold at Swann, and Faden's shop records, if extant, have never been unearthed. Clausen's catalog description could only say: "Although the man who commissioned the atlas is unknown, he appears to have had a particular interest in military matters... a penchant for battle plans keener than that of the usual buyer." Still, the imagination starts to work, and with any luck its new owner will find some clues in its pages or elsewhere.



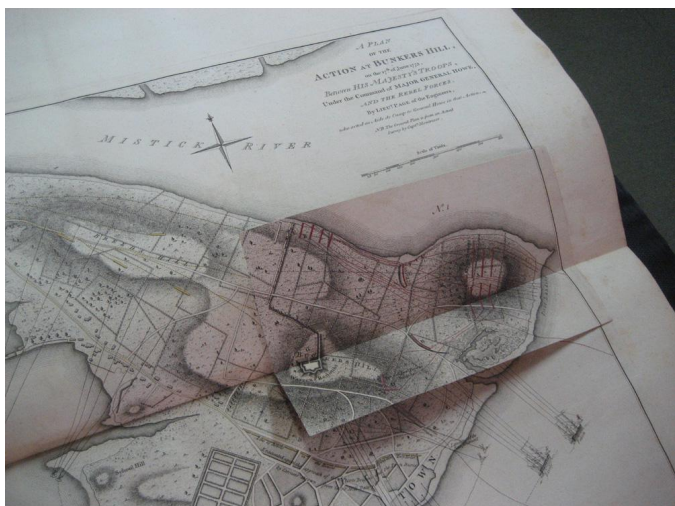
The North American Atlas, 42 engraved maps on 48 sheets or joined sheets, published circa 1780 in London by William Faden, was the sale's top lot, going to an unidentified dealer for \$341,000. Pictured here is "PLAN OF THE OPERATIONS OF GENERAL WASHINGTON, against THE KINGS [*sic*] TROOPS IN NEW JERSEY, from the 26th of December 1776 to the 3d January 1777."



The North American Atlas, which now holds the record for the most expensive single volume of any kind sold at Swann, measures 22" x 16 1/4". Schinto photo.



Alex Clausen with the atlas by Faden. This was the fourth sale organized and cataloged by the 27-year-old, who replaced Gary Garland as Swann's specialist for the department called Maps & Atlases and Natural History & Color Plate Books a little over two years ago. Before coming to Swann Galleries, Clausen worked as gallery director for two New York City dealers, first on Madison Avenue at W. Graham Arader and subsequently on Bleecker Street at Todd Merrill & Associates. Clausen received a B.A. in political science from the University of Minnesota and studied international political economy in the general course at the London School of Economics. He said that after a childhood surrounded by books, he fostered his love of rare and important works at his universities' libraries, most importantly, the Wagensteen Historical Library, the James Ford Bell Library, and the British Library of Political and Economic Science. The mapping of Africa, ornithological illustration, and the exploration of North America are some of his personal interests. Schinto photo.



Some of the maps show the sequence of a battle with overlays. Here is the Bunker Hill example. Schinto photos.



Descendants of Robert H. Elliston (1926-2013) were its consignors. Described in the catalog as “a collector and longtime resident of western Pennsylvania,” Elliston bought the atlas at some point in the 1940s, 1950s, or 1960s. The descendants weren’t sure of the time line, although they did know that he kept the atlas under his bed. They also knew all along that it had value, because every year through the 1960s, they recalled, the collector would get a phone call from a dealer looking to buy it.

There are singles or groups of these maps in other institutions, and single sheets or groups from disbound copies appear on the market, sometimes for vigorous sums. The map of the Delaware River where Washington crossed it, for example, is highly desirable. This atlas has that map, plus General Burgoyne’s failed Saratoga plan, the Battle of Brandywine, a plan of the action at “Bunker’s [sic] Hill,” and the remarkable two-part map of New York City by Bernard Ratzer. *Fine Books & Collections* magazine said the Swann copy was “believed to be the best copy to appear at auction in over a century.” The fact that it was battle-scene heavy was “definitely an asset,” said Clausen, who estimated it at \$300,000/500,000. As the bidding indicated, that level was right.

Maps of battles already won or lost have political rather than military purposes—unless someone cares to learn by his mistakes. In Clausen’s words, they were an aid to “political jockeying to establish fault; they were attempts to explain why this or that campaign was a failure.” Full of details gleaned from eyewitness observers, the maps show such things as “floating batteries” in Boston’s Mystic River that runs along Bunker Hill and, on a map of Boston proper, symbols for “blockhouse for cannon,” “guard house,” “magazine,” “bastion,” “traverse,” et cetera. The map of Trenton lists the British losses—e.g., on December 26, 1776, from the Regiment of Artillery: “1 colonel, 2 Lt. Colonels, 3 Majors, 4 Captains, 8 Lieuts., 12 Ensigns, 2 Surgeons, 92 Serjeants [sic], 20 Drummers & 13 Musicians, 25 officers [sic] servants....”

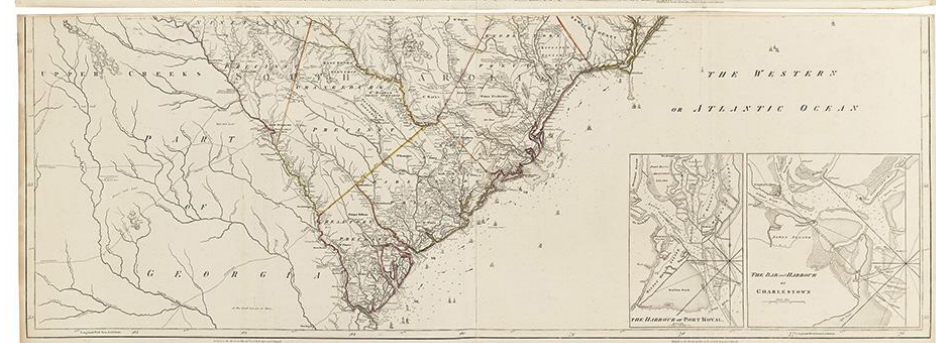
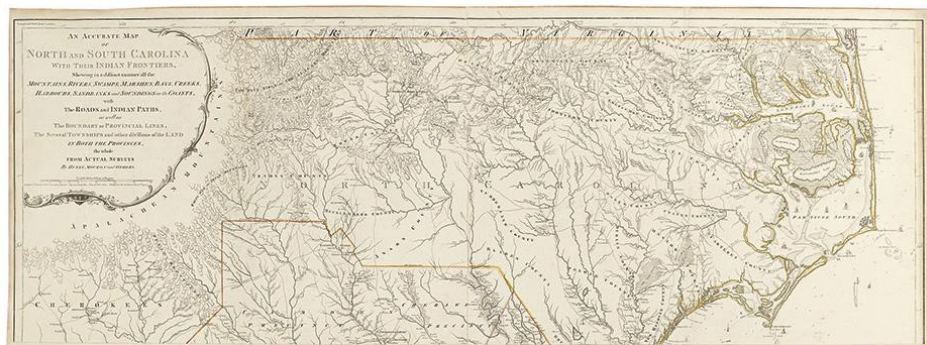
In addition to the battle plans, the cartographic images that include period settlements are filled with fascinating bits of information. The Ratzer map of Manhattan, for example, shows the island’s northern farms and plots owned by the various Stuyvesants along the East River. On a map of Narragansett Bay, banks, shoals, rocks, and soundings are marked and principal farms’ owners are listed, e.g., “Mr. John Collins, Mr. James Brenton, Mr. Robert Lawson, Mr. Lopez, Mr. Abraham Redwood, Mr. William Redwood, Mr. John Banister...” along with “Charity Farm, the Donation of John Clarke Esq. for the Relief of the Poor and bringing up Children unto Learning.” To pick out just one name to gloss, “Mr. Lopez” is undoubtedly Newport merchant Aaron Lopez (1731-1782), a Portuguese native and important leader of the colony’s Jewish community.

The scale of these maps is generally in yards rather than miles. That’s how closeup these views are. “The binding needs some love,” said Clausen, “but the condition overall is very good.”

This sale took place during one of the trade’s more overwhelming end-of-year auction marathons in recent memory. On December 2-5, Sotheby’s had its sale of Robert S. Pirie’s world-famous English literature collection that achieved \$14.9 million in its first two days alone. Christie’s continued with part two of the books and Americana collection of Charles E. Sigety on the day before Swann’s sale. The Bonhams rare books department had its auction the day after Swann. That’s a lot of material to land on the market at once and a lot of tiny catalog print for bidders to absorb, but it made for some interesting comparisons.

In one instance, both Christie’s and Swann offered nearly identical copies of the same item within 48 hours, John Melish’s “Map of the United States.” The Christie’s example from the Sigety collection brought \$38,750. At Swann the map sold for \$42,500 to the same unidentified dealer who bought the Faden atlas. The dollar difference is small, but as Clausen said, “Anytime I can outperform a name-brand auction house, that’s something I’m going to hang my hat on.”

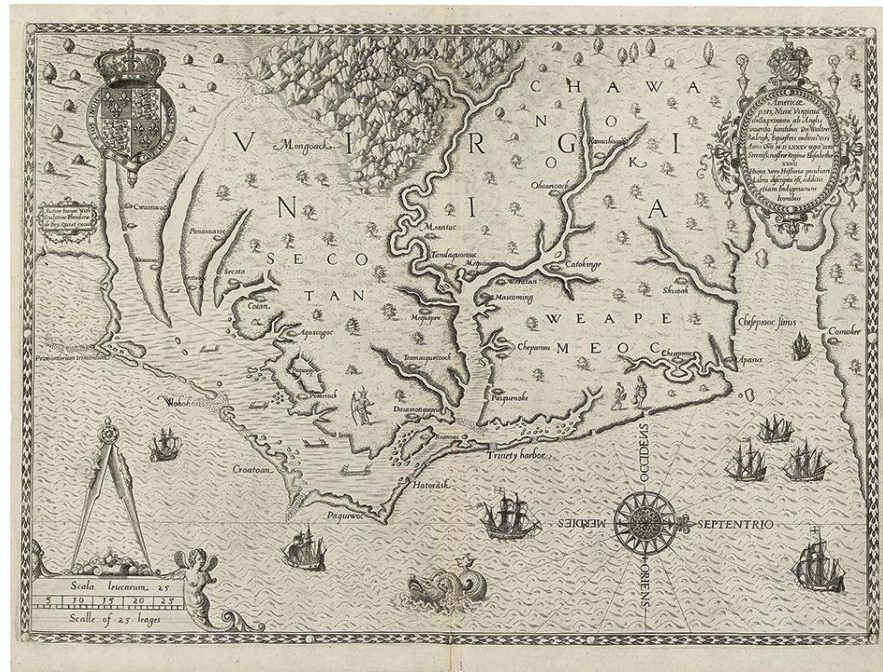
For more information, see the Swann website (www.swanngalleries.com).



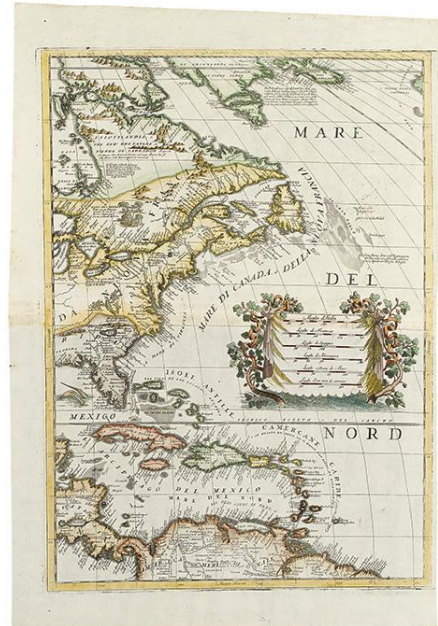
This four-sheet map of North and South Carolina by Henry Mouzon was published in London by R. Sayer and J. Bennett in 1775. The large (approximately 21¼" x 56½") engraving sold to a collector for \$13,750 (est. \$10,000/15,000).



Swann consistently does well with good Manhattan material, and Egbert Vielé’s “Topographical Map of the City of New York” proved the rule. Published in New York in 1865, the approximately 19" x 61" hand-colored lithograph brought \$6000 (est. \$3000/4000).



A collector bidding as an absentee paid a within-estimate price of \$12,500 for a second state of “Americae pars, Nunc Virginia,” published by Theodor de Bry and John White in Frankfurt in 1590. As the catalog states, the approximately 13" x 17" double-page engraving was the first to name the Chesapeake Bay and the first with “Virginia” in its title. It was also the first map showing in accurate detail any part of what is now the United States.



Vincenzo Maria Coronelli’s two-sheet engraved map of North America clearly shows California as a island. Published in Venice in 1688 on two sheets, each of which measures approximately 27½" x 19½", it sold to a collector on the phone for \$8750 (est. \$7000/10,000).

“This Italian mapping is perhaps as important for the things it gets wrong as the things it gets right,” Clausen’s catalog entry said. Besides the California mistake, the Mississippi River, based on French explorer La Salle’s misplacement, is 600 miles too far to the west. Fanciful though this rendering was, it “entered the mindset in England and the Netherlands,” said Clausen, “and took a century to be corrected.”



Henri Chatelain’s engraving of the Western Hemisphere on four joined sheets depicts the transitional phase of the California-as-an-island idea. The tentative nature of its demarcated eastern border shows there was creeping doubt in the idea. Measuring 31" x 56", the map was published in Amsterdam in 1719. It sold to a collector bidding absentee for a mid-estimate \$10,000.

