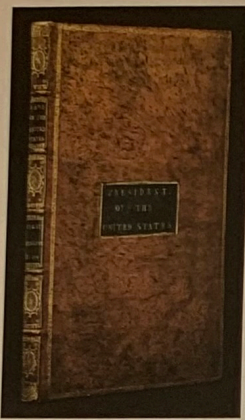


Christie's, New York City

Washington's Annotated Constitution Returns to Mount Vernon

by Jeanne Schinto



George Washington's handbound and annotated copy of the Constitution, Bill of Rights, and first Acts of Congress, 1789, 12" x 7½", sold to the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association for \$9,826,500 (est. \$2/3 million). Photo courtesy Christie's.

On June 22 at Christie's on Rockefeller Plaza in New York City, George Washington's annotated copy of the United States Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and first Acts of Congress sold for a phenomenal \$9,826,500 (including buyer's premium). After the hammer fell and the audience broke into applause, auctioneer John Hays, deputy chairman of Christie's America, immediately announced from the podium, "And that goes to Mount Vernon."

The auction house offered the Washington item directly following its late-morning sale of fine books and manuscripts. "We've come now to a proud moment," said Hays, who opened the bidding at \$1.3 million. The several contenders, in person and on the telephones, moved at steeplechase pace to \$7 million. After that, the competition was among Ann Bookout, representing the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, someone else in the room, and the last remaining phone bidder. The underbidder in the room consulted a seatmate before making his last couple of bids. Bookout consulted no one and did not hesitate. In less than four minutes the prize coveted by many was hers.

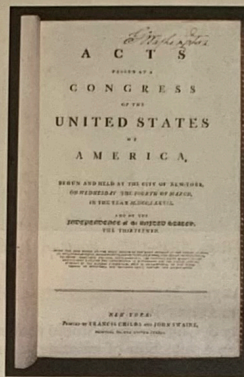
Perhaps she and her colleagues, whose private nonprofit organization owns and operates the historical site of Washington's Virginia home, felt entitled to it all along. Specially printed

and handbound for the first American president in 1789, this unique artifact had been in the library of Mount Vernon until 1876, when it was sold at auction in Philadelphia, having been consigned by the president's grandnephew Lawrence A. Washington. According to research by William M. Ferraro, associate editor of the Papers of George Washington Project at the University of Virginia, it fetched \$13.

In a prepared statement, Bookout said, "It is extremely rare to see a book of such significance change hands, and we felt that it was essential to muster our resources to bring this extraordinary document home to Mount Vernon."

Since the grandnephew let the book go, it has belonged to a succession of people, including William Randolph Hearst and Mr. and Mrs. Henry Flynt, pioneer Americana collectors and preservationists, whose collections became the basis for the Heritage Foundation in Deerfield, Massachusetts, which, when the organization deaccessioned items unrelated to its mission, consigned it to Parke-Bernet Galleries in New York City, where in November 1964, a book dealer, George Sessler of Philadelphia, bought it on behalf of H. Richard Dietrich Jr. (1938-2007), a noted collector and philanthropist. The estate of Dietrich consigned it to the Christie's sale.

Adding immeasurably to the value of this item is the marginalia. Washington did not typically write in book margins. According to Christie's catalog, Washington annotated only one other volume in his approximately 1000-book library—a copy of James Madison's *View of the Conduct of the Executive*. But in the pages of the Constitution, he added careful brackets and notes that highlight key passages concerning the president's responsibilities. Besides those markings, which are in pencil, there is an ink signature on the title page and an engraved bookplate with the Washington family crest pasted into the marbled inside cover. The crest's motto is



The title page, with Washington's signature. Photo courtesy Christie's.

"Exitus Acta Probat" ("The End Justifies the Deed"). Christie's said the bookplate and 300 prints made from it were ordered from England by Washington in 1771.

Thomas Allen of New York City bound the book and two other identical copies. Chief Justice John Jay's copy is currently in a private collection. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson's copy is in the Lilly Library in Bloomington, Indiana. It's not known for certain who designed the books, had them made, or presented them.

The price for this evocative Washington artifact outdistanced by far the \$2/3 million estimate. It did the same to the previous world record for an American historical document, which was \$3,442,500—a sum paid for an autograph manuscript of Lincoln's 1864 election victory speech, sold by Christie's on February 12, 2009.

It is also the most expensive Washington item ever sold publicly. An autograph letter written in 1787 by Washington to his nephew Bushrod Washington, about the ratification of the Constitution, was the previous high point. That went at Christie's at \$3,218,500 on December 4, 2009.

One other record was made, perhaps the most notable. This 106-page object now holds the auction record for the most expensive non-illustrated book. The most expensive book of any kind sold at auction remains the copy of John James Audubon's *Birds of America* that fetched £7,321,250 (\$11,542,683) at Sotheby's in London on December 7, 2010.

Other items from the Dietrich estate have been in the auction news. (See the story of Freeman's April 30 sale of the Dietrich American Foundation's flag collection in *M.A.D.'s* July 2012 issue, p. 27-D.) *M.A.D.* readers will also recall that on January 31, 1987, at Sotheby's in New York City, Dietrich paid what was then the highest auction price ever for a piece of furniture—and more than double the price of any piece of American furniture at the time. He bought, with Leigh Keno acting as his agent, the so-called Cadwalader easy chair for \$2.75 million.

The mahogany and upholstered chair with carved hairy paw feet was made circa 1770 by Thomas Affleck (1740-1795) for John Cadwalader (1742-1786) of Philadelphia. A close friend of Washington, Cadwalader was a Revolutionary War general. He and his wife entertained regularly. In 2002, when Dietrich donated the chair to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, curator Jack Lindsay said it was "not mere fancy to speculate that George Washington or John Adams or any of the other great patriots could have engaged in lively conversation while seated in the Cadwaladers' parlor. For that matter, they could have been planning the Revolution...."

Dietrich's family owned the Dietrich Corporation, a cough drop and candy manufacturer. He was its president for many years. In 1986 the company was sold to Hershey. Dietrich retired the same year and devoted himself during the next two decades to philanthropy and collecting Americana. He donated or lent more than 2000 objects and 1500 books and documents to more than two dozen institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the White House, and the U.S. State Department.

A friend of Dietrich, William S. Reese, a book dealer in New Haven, Connecticut, said, "He was an early customer of mine, when I was just starting out in the business [in 1975]. I met him when I was nineteen years old. He always collected everything—books, maps, prints, furniture in all forms, fine arts and paintings, folk art, and such Americana objects as the flags sold at Freeman's back in April. But books and printed material were a major interest of his into the early 1980's, when furniture became his primary interest. When he bought the Washington item in 1964, he was twenty-six years old."

Reese was on the phone for the bidding. "But the bidding roared along at a very fast rate, as you know, and although I had a bid, it went past my bid, and I never expressed myself." He laughed, adding, "It's good for the market

that a marker of nearly ten million dollars is out there. It's a price approaching the most expensive piece of American furniture ever sold."

The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association plans to make the volume "a centerpiece" for the organization's latest initiative, the Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington. Currently under

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construction, it is scheduled to open in fall 2013, situated on 15 acres near the main entrance to the estate. According to a press release, it "will serve as a place to safeguard Washington's documents as well as a gathering place for leaders and scholars."

The cost of the project, which includes the building's construction and its initial slate of programming, is approximately \$100 million. The organization already has raised \$85 million, of which \$38 million is from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, based in Las Vegas, Nevada. According to its Web site (www.dwreynolds.org), Reynolds was "a media entrepreneur." The library's namesake, Fred W. Smith, is the foundation's chairman.

In 2001 the same foundation granted the National Portrait Gallery \$30 million to buy the Gilbert Stuart painting of Washington known as the Lansdowne portrait. It hangs in a dedicated space of the gallery that the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation helped renovate with a \$75 million donation. It would not be surprising if the same foundation had put up the money for the book, but the press office did not say that was so—only that the association "owns and operates George Washington's estate without accepting any government funding, instead relying on the generosity of patriotic Americans and admirers of Washington from around the world."

For more information, see Christie's Web site (www.christies.com).



Each year George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate, Museum & Gardens, 16 miles south of Washington, D.C., attracts more than one million visitors. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, founded in 1853, bought the estate from the Washington family in 1858. The organization stated that since taking ownership of the property, it has "welcomed home scores of original Washington family objects, largely through private donations." Photo courtesy Mount Vernon.

38-NH Maine Antique Digest, August 2012



An architectural plan for the Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington at Mount Vernon, where the book will be displayed. Photo courtesy Mount Vernon.