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Button, Button: Gwinnett Letter Sells for \$722,500

by Jeanne Schinto

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Sotheby's, New York City

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At the first of four scheduled sales of the contents of the James S. Copley Library, held at Sotheby's in New York City on April 14, an unidentified bidder paid a phenomenal \$722,500 (including buyer's premium) for a 75-word letter signed by Button Gwinnett on July 12, 1776. It is a record for a Gwinnett autograph, besting by far the last one that sold for \$270,000 on March 27, 2002, as part of the Forbes sale at Christie's.

Any John Hancock by Gwinnett is virtually guaranteed to be a winner because it's the autograph most sought after by those who collect examples by the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence. That's because Gwinnett's is the rarest. This Gwinnett is thought to be the rarest of the rare because of its date. According to Sotheby's, of the 51 known Gwinnetts, this is one of just eight from the year 1776 and the closest of all to July 4th. The Forbes's Gwinnett, by comparison, was dated September 3, 1761.

The Copley's Gwinnett was also the only remaining "obtainable" July 1776 Gwinnett, said Selby Kiffer, a Sotheby's senior vice president in its department of books and manuscripts.

The first known collector of signers was William Buell Sprague, who began his quest in 1816, when four signers were still alive, so he had a leg up, one could say. He assembled three complete sets in his lifetime (1795-1876). Others who followed his lead were Israel Keech Telft, Lewis Jacob Cist, and Thomas Raffles, a rarity himself for being a non-American. (He lived in Liverpool.) Later, Robert Gilmore, John Boyd Thatcher, Thomas Addis Emmet, and Mellen Chamberlain joined the club.

These collectors were not just acquirers; they were scholars who used their collections to fill in details of our early history. Chamberlain, for example, discovered that the signing of the Declaration actually took place on August 2, 1776, and the group who signed were not all the same men as those who had voted on July 4, 1776.

As for Gwinnett, he was a voter and a signer. So why didn't he put pen to paper more often—and/or why aren't more examples extant? Born in England circa 1735, he died at age about 42 from his wound in a duel with pistols at dawn in 1777, while the American Revolutionary War still had years to go. Gwinnett was a Continental Congress delegate from Georgia. His island holdings were pillaged by various warring sailors, and perhaps his personal papers did not survive after his wife's death, soon after his own. Their only surviving daughter died childless in 1784, according to Sotheby's catalog.

The consignor of the James S. Copley Library is Copley Press Inc., former owner of the *San Diego Union-Tribune* and other newspapers. Gurr Johns Inc. has been acting as its agent. The reason for the sale, according to a prepared statement by Gurr Johns president Elizabeth von Habsburg, was the library's "wish to share" the historical wealth "with a broader audience." Undoubtedly, the sale is part of the ailing Copley Press's continuing campaign to raise cash by selling its assets, even in down markets.

The building that housed the Copley Library in La Jolla, California, went on the depressed real estate market for \$5.4 million. It reportedly sold on April 1 for \$3.75 million to La Jolla-based venture capitalist Kevin J. Kinsella. The *Union-Tribune* itself was sold on March 18 to a private equity firm, Platinum Equity. Don Bauder of the *San Diego Reader* has written that the price was just a bit over \$50 million for assets worth \$80 million to \$100 million. Bauder, the *Union-Tribune's* former business columnist, who left that paper in 2003 after 30 years, noted that Platinum paid just \$35 million for the paper's headquarters, which had an assessed valuation of \$92 million.

By one estimate it took 22 years for the library to complete its collection of Declaration of Independence signers. It took only a couple of hours to disperse the bulk of it (a few were held back for future sales), along with 188 other historical documents, including letters by George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin.

Someone paid \$5313 for an Abigail Adams thank-you note. Another bidder spent \$7500 for a love letter by Benedict Arnold. A third made a trade of \$25,000 for a letter by John Hancock discussing, among other things, employment for his brother. The final price for a letter by Declaration of Independence signer Joseph Hewes of North Carolina was \$53,125. The price for an example of writing by another North Carolinian signer, William Hooper, was \$206,500.

All told, the take for this first sale was \$4,362,884—not an inconsiderable sum except that about a dozen key lots (including a number of George Washington items) didn't sell, while a letter signed by Lincoln, estimated at \$500,000/\$700,000, fetched \$482,500.

No more complex a reason than aggressive estimates and reserves was to blame for the disappointments. It remains to be seen whether Sotheby's will have dialed down some of its projected numbers in time for the next three sessions, which will disperse the remainder of the library—i.e., almost 1800 more letters, documents, manuscripts, books, pamphlets, broadsides, maps, et cetera, relating to all aspects of American history and culture.

As the library is being dispersed, fateful is the only way to describe the story of how it came to be in the first place.

The library's namesake, newspaper publisher James Strohn Copley (1916-1973), was adopted out of an upstate New York orphanage at age four by Colonel Ira C. Copley and his wife. The Copley newspaper business had kicked off in 1905 with Colonel Copley's purchase of the *Aurora Beacon* of Aurora, Illinois. In 1947, upon the colonel's death, control of what had become a newspaper empire was bequeathed to Jim and his brother, William, another adoptee. (A birth brother of Jim's was adopted by parents other than the Copleys.) After a legal battle, Jim bought out Bill.

Jim Copley married for the first time in 1946. He was divorced in 1963 and married his secretary, Helen Hunt, in 1965. At about the same time, he decided to take up rare book and manuscript collecting. He also adopted Helen's son, David, who was born in 1952 after her brief first marriage that ended in divorce.

According to Richard Reilly's *A Promise Kept: The Story of the James S. Copley Library*, the library quickly became a corporate entity, part of Copley Press and no longer a personal library, as early as 1966. Reilly, who was Jim Copley's book scout and then the collection's curator, also recounted that in the first couple of years, the library's focus was Western history. Then, after Jim Copley's 1969 appointment by President Richard Nixon as chairman of the Bicentennial Communications Committee, Copley switched his focus to the American Revolution.

After Jim's death in 1973, Helen took up book collecting in her late husband's honor and had the library building built in La Jolla. She also became head of Copley Press. On July 23, 1983, shortly after the library building opened, Reilly told a San Diego television talk show host, "The James Copley Library is really a love story. It's the story of a man's love for his books and manuscripts and a love story of Helen Copley for Jim Copley and her wish that all of his books and manuscripts would be preserved forever and housed in this building."

The last line of Reilly's book reads, "One wonderful aspect to the story of the James S. Copley Library is that, seemingly, it has no end." Well, now it has.

When Helen died in 2001, son David took over Copley Press—and, along with it, ownership of the library. (There were two children from Jim Copley's first marriage, but they were dispatched "into a gilded wilderness" after their father's death, according to "The Rise and Fall of the Copley Press" by Matt Potter, *San Diego Reader*, February 27, 2008.) It was David's decision to sell, as it was also his to sell the newspapers, real estate, and so on.

David, descendant of media moguls, does not speak to the press, a library spokesperson said, so we don't have his comments. Reilly, who wrote the Sotheby's catalog preface and signed it "Curator Emeritus," was reached by phone at his home in Tucson, Arizona, some weeks before the sale.

Asked his opinion of the library's dispersal, Reilly said, "I'm sad, but the newspaper business is nonexistent. David Copley, who is heir to the estate, is a terrific guy, and he kept buying material that I would bring to his attention, and he added immeasurably to the collection. But no matter how deep your pockets are, eventually you have to bite the bullet. So I'm saddened that it's going, but I think it will enrich the lives of all those eminent collectors and great university libraries that will all be interested in acquiring great material."

The first sale, however, was almost "completely dominated" by private buyers, according to one who participated. At least one letter, by Abigail Adams to Dr. Benjamin Rush, was purchased by the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS) for \$10,625. ("The acquisition was made possible by a gift to the MHS from an anonymous donor," according to an MHS press release.)

Reilly was asked if he didn't now hear the phrase "A Promise Broken" ringing in his ears. His response came quickly, almost before the phrase was out. "I can't get involved in that. I would love to comment, but I cannot. I have worked for that family for about forty years, but you know, things changed. David was tremendous in buying a great deal of material—I mean really great stuff."

Asked for an example of what David bought, Reilly mentioned materials relating to Harry S. Truman. It's an unexpected answer, considering the publicity surrounding David's more prominent interests—e.g., his famed collection of film fashion illustrations, including such things as Cecil Beaton's original sketches for the costumes Audrey Hepburn wore in *My Fair Lady*. "For a Republican family, they [the Copleys] were highly respectful of Mr. Truman," was the only explanation Reilly gave.

One of the last library purchases Helen Copley made was the Gwinnett-signed document. It has a very impressive provenance. One link, ironically, bonds her forever with another rich widow.

The letter's recipient—the person to whom Gwinnett and the others were writing—was John Ashmead, clerk of the frigate Randolph. (He was also a member of an infantry company, and the fledgling Congress wanted him to remain in service at the shipyard until the frigate was completed. He complied. Then Ashmead chose to work at sea instead of joining his militia company.) Upon his death, the letter went to an Ashmead descendant.

One day in February 1927, that descendant's descendant, John Cecil Clay of Mamaroneck, New York, read an article in the Saturday Evening Post noting that another Gwinnett document had sold at auction for \$28,500. Clay remembered there was a comparable document among his father's papers. As recounted in the Sotheby's catalog, he found it between the leaves of an old French periodical, which for many years he kept in a box along with other items, in what has been characterized as an outhouse. Clay promptly took his Gwinnett to the same auctioneers, Anderson Galleries, where it sold on March 16, 1927, for \$51,000.

The buyer in 1927 was none other than one of bibliomania's most legendary dealer/collectors, A.S.W. Rosenbach of Philadelphia. Dr. Rosenbach exhibited it several times and featured it in his (unpriced) catalogs. There were no takers via that route. In 1948 he sold it for an unknown sum to the widow of oil tycoon Edward L. Doheny, who was implicated in, but acquitted for, his role in the Teapot Dome scandal of the 1920's.

Like Helen Copley, Carrie Estelle Betzold Doheny was a second wife, and like Copley, she held an office job before her marriage. (She was a telephone operator.) While Helen took up rare book collecting where Jim left off when he died, Estelle Doheny began a rare book collection from scratch in her dead husband's honor. Each built a library building. Estelle's was the Edward Laurence Doheny Memorial Library at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California. Like Helen, Estelle, who died in 1958, expected her library to be permanent. Instead, the Doheny Library contents were sold on behalf of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in a series of seven sales at Christie, Manson & Woods International in New York City, London, and elsewhere between 1987 and 1989.

At the Estelle Doheny sale in New York on February 22, 1989, the Copley Library got its Gwinnett (thereby completing its set of signers) for \$209,000, according to Sotheby's catalog entry. The return on that investment, then, has obviously been considerable. Showing the Copley Press has made at least one good deal lately. Yet, one has to wonder if Helen, even then, in plucking that document from the dissolved Doheny collection, sensed a foreshadowing—or else swore to herself that what had happened to Estelle

Doheny's library would never happen to hers.

For more information, contact Sotheby's book department at (212) 606-7385 or visit (www.sothebys.com).

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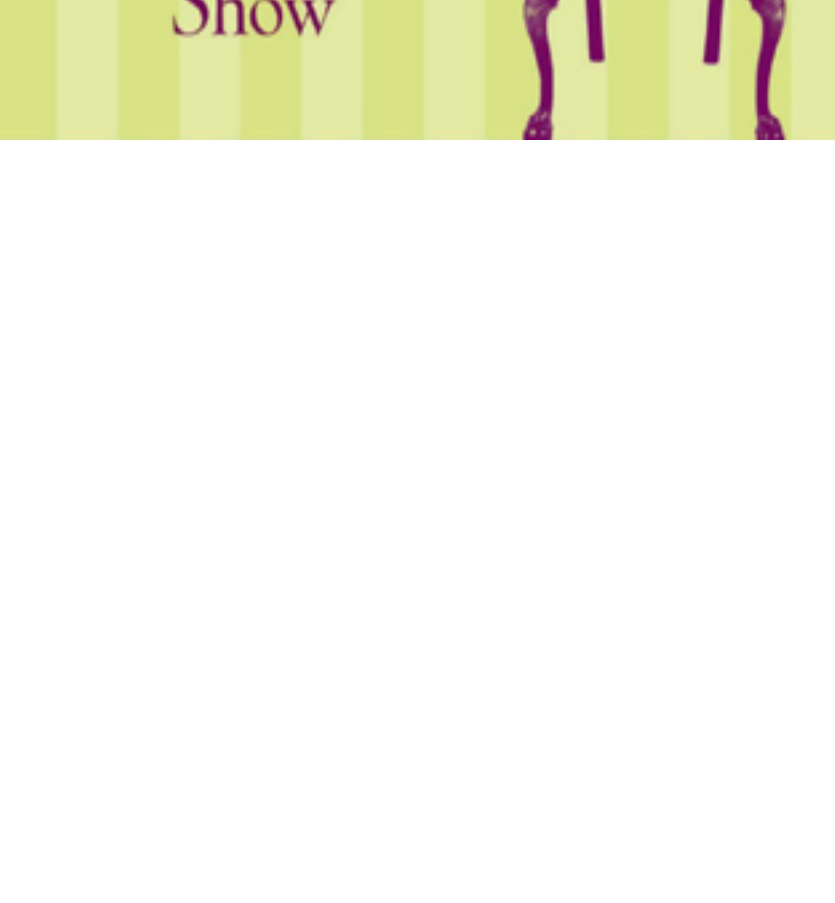
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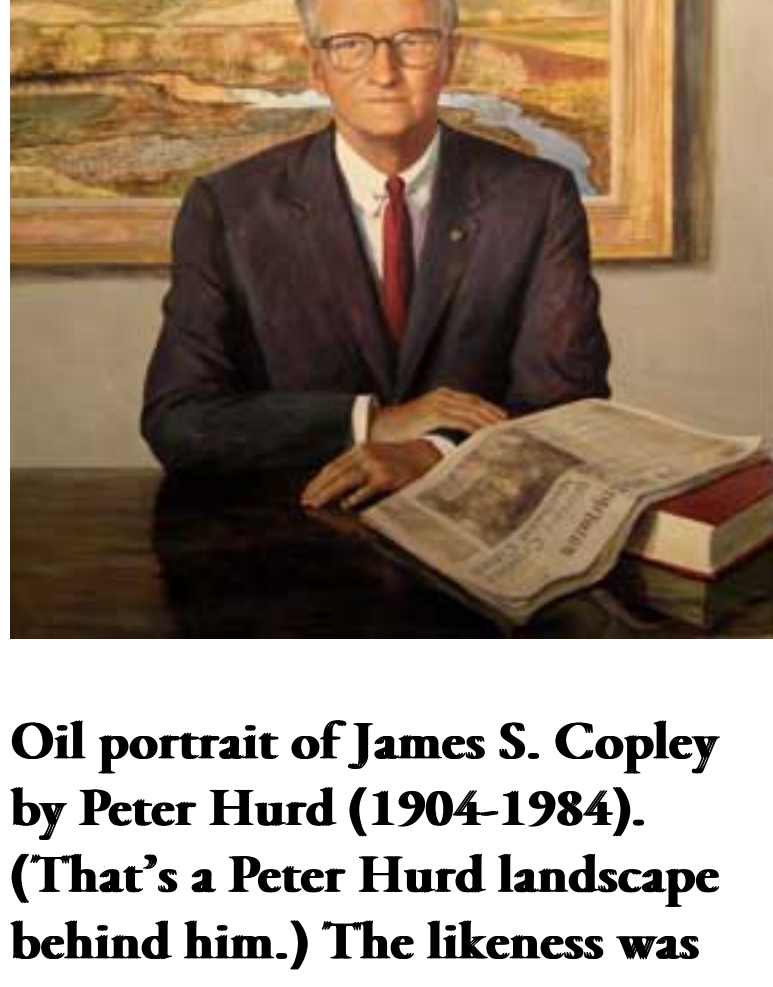
The Annual Delaware Antiques Show



The Copley Library's Button Gwinnett autograph letter sold to an unidentified buyer for \$722,500 (est. \$500,000/700,000). A Sotheby's press office spokesperson said there was only one other bidder. The text is in the hand of Timothy Matlack, scribe of the final version of the Declaration of Independence. Written on one side of a single 12 3/8" x 7 7/8" leaf in Philadelphia on July 12, 1776, the letter was also signed by five other signers of the Declaration: John Hancock, Robert Morris, Francis Lewis, George Read, and Arthur Middleton. Sotheby's photo.



The Copley Library collected art too. This 1928 oil on canvas portrait of Lincoln by Douglas Volk (or Stephen A. Douglas Volk) (1856-1935) will be sold at a future auction (est. \$5000/7000).



Oil portrait of James S. Copley by Peter Hurd (1904-1984). (That's a Peter Hurd landscape behind him.) The likeness was part of the Sotheby's exhibit of Copley Library materials but is not for sale, said Selby Kiffer. The newspaper on the desk is the San Diego Union, with the headline "Blizzard Cripples Northeast Cities." Jim Copley's father, Ira, purchased the San Diego Union and the San Diego Tribune in 1928. They merged in 1992. Schinto photo.