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## The North American Indian Sets Record at Nebenzahl Library Sale

by Jeanne Schinto



Christie's, New York City

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Photos courtesy Christie's

In dollar terms, the biggest sale of rare books in the United States in five years took place at Christie's in New York City on April 10 when the private library of Kenneth Nebenzahl sold for a total of \$11,663,937 (including buyers' premiums). "From the point of view of the trade, it was a strong endorsement of the market right now," said dealer William S. Reese of New Haven, Connecticut, who bought 40 of the 165 lots offered (91% of which sold), including a \$554,500 book for a client.

Christie's international books and manuscripts department head Francis Wahlgren said, "The excitement was back. There was a surge of energy. Bidding was feverish, the room was packed, and prices were exceptional."

The sale was in the evening, a rare departure for the department. "We have had only three or four evening book sales over the last two decades," Wahlgren explained. "This was a high-quality auction, and there weren't many lots, so it conformed to both the value and quality level and also to the reputation level that Mr. Nebenzahl had."

Nebenzahl and his wife, Jossy, were in attendance, along with their children and grandchildren, sitting in a roped-off area that Christie's had designated for them. Even before the financial success of the evening, this was a happy occasion. It was the culmination of a long career for the Chicagoan who was considered to be among the leading rare book dealers in Americana and from the early 1960's through the '80's the leading dealer in American maps, until he started seeing serious competition from such entities as Arader Galleries, founded in 1975.

"Mr. Nebenzahl is in his eighties, and he felt that to leave the collection to his kids to deal with would have been a lot of responsibility," said Wahlgren. "He also wouldn't have been able to be part of organizing it and, in some cases, assisting us with it. He was a great ally to have and to work alongside. It was an amazing partnership. We learned a great deal from him."

Nicolas Barker, former deputy keeper at the British Library, gave credit in a catalog essay to Jossy Nebenzahl "for starting it all" for Ken when in 1953 she gave him Lloyd Brown's *The Story of Maps* (1949) and R.V. Tooley's *Maps and Map-Makers* (1949). By 1957 he was well into the business. At the legendary sales of Thomas W. Streeter's library at Parke-Bernet Galleries in New York City from 1966 to 1971, he started getting noticed, and the Barker essay is illustrated with a photo of him bidding at one of those sales with a writing instrument raised at eye level.

What became the top lot of the evening was a surprise to many. It was not one of the early atlases saved for the end of the sale and given fold-out pages in the catalog, though they too brought extremely strong prices. It was instead an American icon, the monumental 20th-century opus by Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*.

Estimated at \$1/1.5 million, the complete set of 20 volumes of text and illustrations, each volume accompanied by a portfolio of plates, sold in the room for \$2,882,500 to the New York City firm of J.N. Barfield. It's the new world auction record for Curtis and for a photographically illustrated book, said Sung-Hee Park of Christie's press office. Wahlgren said the dealer bought it for an American private collector.

The Nebenzahl copy was numbered 435. Of the 500 sets that Curtis planned to produce, only an estimated 272 were completed, but many of those have been broken up over time, and single plates are often on the market, selling for a few thousand dollars each. Still, the presumption had been that it would sell within estimate. A copy offered by Swann Galleries at a photography department auction on October 15, 2007, fetched \$1,048,000 (est. \$800,000/1,200,000).

What made the difference, besides an improved market? The Nebenzahl provenance accounted for some of the added value, but other factors added more. The copy sold at Swann's was on Holland van Gelder paper and came from a New Hampshire library to which it had been donated in the 1920's. Nebenzahl's copy was on the more desirable Japan vellum and had a provenance that went back only to the original subscriber, Miss Emma Marburg (1860/61-1948) of Baltimore, whose family had made a fortune in tobacco.

"It was a beautiful set—in pristine condition—that Ken got many years ago," Wahlgren said of *The North American Indian*. "He saw it as a long-term investment and put it away for his family and the future. I think he paid very little for it." Recalling that the previous record for the book was \$1.4 million, he said, "We would have been happy if it had gone for one five, but the bidding just continued."

A telephone bidder, identified by Christie's as a private collector, took the top two atlases of the sale. The first, a complete copy of Cristoforo Buondelmonti's *Liber Insularum Archipelagi* brought \$1,762,500 (est. \$800,000/1,200,000).

An illuminated manuscript on vellum with a Latin text, it was produced in Italy circa 1450 and includes 79 colored pen-and-ink drawings of maps, plans, and views of the Aegean and the Cycladic and Ionian islands and ports. Considered the most important Renaissance illustrated travel book of the eastern Mediterranean, it is based in large part on the author's own eight years of travel around the Greek isles, and it shows the geography of ports, towns, monuments, and ruins before the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

Described in the catalog as being "in remarkably clean and fresh condition," the Buondelmonti atlas bears the original owner's initials, "IA AL." It was later owned by bibliomaniac Sir Thomas Phillipps (1792-1872), among others. It has been in the U.S. since at least 1947, when Boies Penrose (1902-1976) bought it from the London bookselling team of brothers Lionel and William H. Robinson. In the mid-1970's it was sold to John F. Fleming (1910-1987), the collector/dealer from whom Nebenzahl acquired it.

The other top atlas, the second-highest-priced lot of the evening, also came to Nebenzahl by way of Fleming in the mid-1970's. A complete copy of Battista Agnese's Portolan Atlas of the world, it sold to the anonymous phone bidder for an astounding \$2,770,500—\$1,570,500 more than the high estimate. An illuminated manuscript on vellum produced in Venice, 1542-46, the portolan or nautical atlas has 12 double-page map charts that show such things as the Gulf Stream outlined in green, Magellan's circumnavigation of the world in silver, and golden-haired wind-heads in blue, pink, and gold. It also shows California as a peninsula and Scotland as an island.

There are 72 Agnese Portolan Atlases extant, each produced as the same item, often for presentation. This one, cataloged as being in the same "remarkably fine and fresh condition" as the Buondelmonti atlas, was first owned by Adolf III von Schaumburg, who was elected to be Archbishop of Cologne in 1546, the year the atlas was completed. Although unsigned, it was nonetheless inscribed to him in a hand believed to be Agnese's or that of someone from his shop.

Helping to push the Portolan Atlas's price as far as it went was the underbidder in the room, 89-year-old Jay I. Kislak, a Florida banker and real estate developer who has given most of his fabulous collection to the Library of Congress, but who continues to buy, presumably with that entity in mind.

The price of one more atlas (est. \$500,000/700,000) exceeded the \$1 million mark. Selling to a private collector at \$1,082,500, it was a composite atlas (i.e., no two are alike) of the so-called Laferri school, produced in Rome in 1592. Of the 72 engraved maps included in this volume, representing work by over 30 Italian mapmakers of the 16th century, 14 are known only by these surviving examples, including Duchetti's maps of southern Italy, Ireland, and Venice. Some of its other rarities are one of only two recorded copies of Paolo Forlani and Pietro di Nobili's map of Cuba, and one of only six recorded copies of Vincenzo Lucchini's new map of Spain.

Another special feature of the Laferri atlas pushed up the price. This is the only recorded example with the Laferri-Nobili title page. According to the catalog, the title page is a crucial detail that confirms the descent of Antonio Laferri's business through Claudio Duchetti to Pietro di Nobili. The page also includes a rendering of the Titan Atlas holding the world on his shoulders. It was this image (copied by other mapmakers), along with Gerard Mercator's actual use of the word in 1569, that made "atlas" the universal term for any collection of maps.

The book that went at \$554,500 to Bill Reese was a first-edition copy of James Rosier's account of his 1605 voyage to New England. Bidding for a client, Reese paid more than twice the high estimate, making it the most expensive regular book of the sale. According to the catalog, there hasn't been a copy on the market since 1917. Reese said he thought a copy changed hands privately in the 1950's.

Rosier was aboard a previous voyage, in 1602, when Bartholomew Gosnold sailed to Maine, intending to establish a settlement. Three years later, Rosier sailed again with Captain George Weymouth on the *Archangel*. On May 17, 1605, they landed on an island, near what is now known as Monhegan, that he named St. George after his namesake, the patron saint of England. Published in London, *A True Relation of the most prosperous voyage...* described the native people, five of whom were captured and brought back to England. It also described a fertile land where there were bountiful trees and plants such as "Gooseberries, Strawberries, Wild pease, and Wilde rose bushes," and an unidentified "great river."

This account of one of the earliest voyages by Englishmen to New England is now considered to be one of the cornerstone works of New England history, but it also had an immediate impact. As the catalog states, "His account was directly responsible for the further attempts of Gorges and Popham to colonize the region, and convinced Plymouth merchants that 'New England' was a favorable land for commercial exploitation and colonial settlement."

The Rosier book came from the library of Frank C. Deering (1866-1939) of Portland, Maine, whose family made a fortune in Maine lumber. Reese recounted the book's path to the Nebenzahl collection.

"Frank Deering was one of the greatest Americana collectors of the twentieth century," he said. "He acquired his collection in the teens, twenties, and thirties. After he died, the collection sat in a big mansion in Portland for a generation, and Ken [Nebenzahl] brokered the sale of it to the Newberry Library in Chicago, the deal being that anything that was duplicative to the Newberry, Ken could keep to sell as stock. So some of the nicest, rarest Americana in this sale has Deering provenance. These were essentially what Ken took home from the Deering deal, and they did unusually well."

Some rare, early tracts relating to persecution of Quakers in New England also did well, each going to the same phone bidder, underbid by Reese. One was a first-edition copy of a 1660 pamphlet petitioning Charles II for religious tolerance while simultaneously defending Massachusetts Governor John Endicott's intolerance toward Quakers. With a Thomas W. Streeter provenance and bearing his bookplate, it sold for \$23,750 (est. \$4000/6000). The two others related to the execution of Mary Dyer, who was hanged in Boston in 1660. Edward Burrough's *A Declaration of the Sad and Great Persecution and Martyrdom of the People of God, called Quakers, in New-England, for the Worshipping of God* (1660/61) brought \$16,250 (est. \$4000/6000), while George Bishop's *New England Judged...* in three parts (1661, 1661, and 1667), with a Deering provenance, fetched \$17,500 (est. \$10,000/15,000).

Sales of other Nebenzahl items will take place in the future. "What we're planning, as early as this fall, is a sale of his individual map sheets," said Wahlgren. "He's got a great collection, and we want to put together a high-end group from his stock. I'd love to have a sale of single map sheets only, because we've never done that at Christie's in New York, and people do respond very well when there's a good quality collection of maps."

For more information, contact Christie's book department at (212) 636-2661; Web site [www.christies.com](http://www.christies.com).

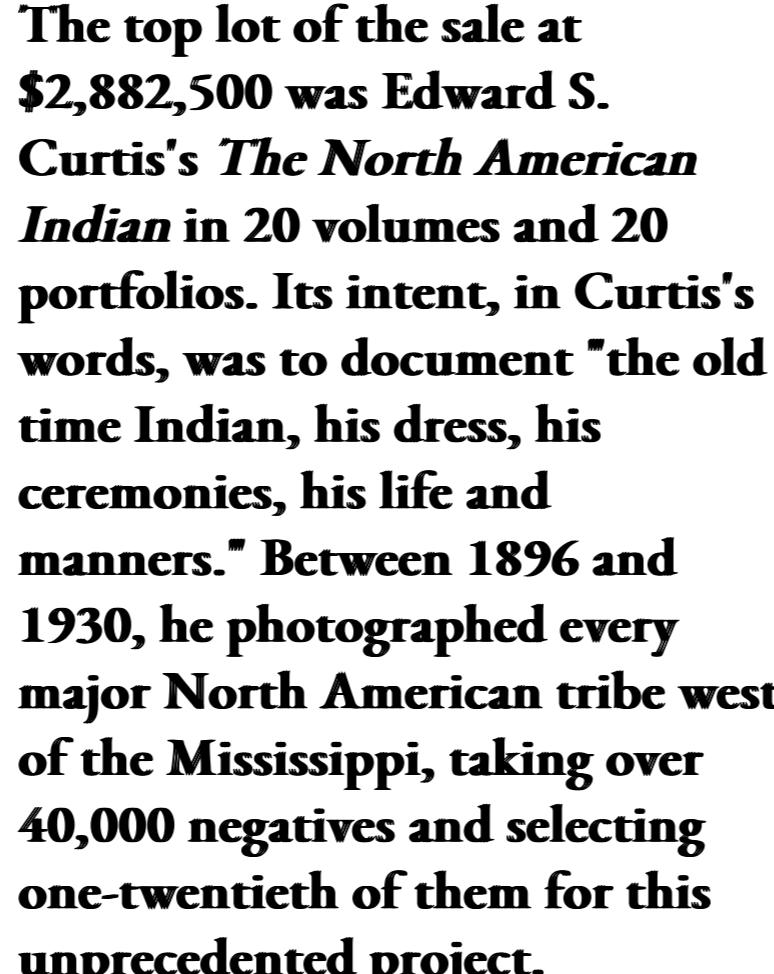
**A first-edition copy of Thomas Lechford's *Plain Dealing: or, News from New-England* (London, 1642), with a Frank C. Deering provenance, brought \$68,500 (est. \$20,000/30,000). Lechford, an English-born solicitor, arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1638. The only practicing attorney in Boston, he found life among the Puritans a trying endeavor. Unable to practice his profession unfettered, he returned to England in 1641. His firsthand account of colonial life in Massachusetts is considered to be one of the most interesting and authentic.**

**A first-edition copy of Bartolomeo dalli Sonetti's *Isolario (Book of Islands)* with 49 woodcut charts sold to a private collector for \$314,500 (est. \$150,000/200,000). Published in Venice, 1485-86, it is the first printed maritime atlas.**

**A first-edition copy of an early work by Galileo Galilei in a contemporary Roman gold-tooled vellum binding, written in the 1590's but published posthumously in Rome in 1656, sold for \$50,000 (est. \$12,000/18,000). Comprising a lecture series he gave in Padua, it is one of the rarest Galileo works; only two other copies have been sold at auction since 1975, according to *American Book Prices Current*.**

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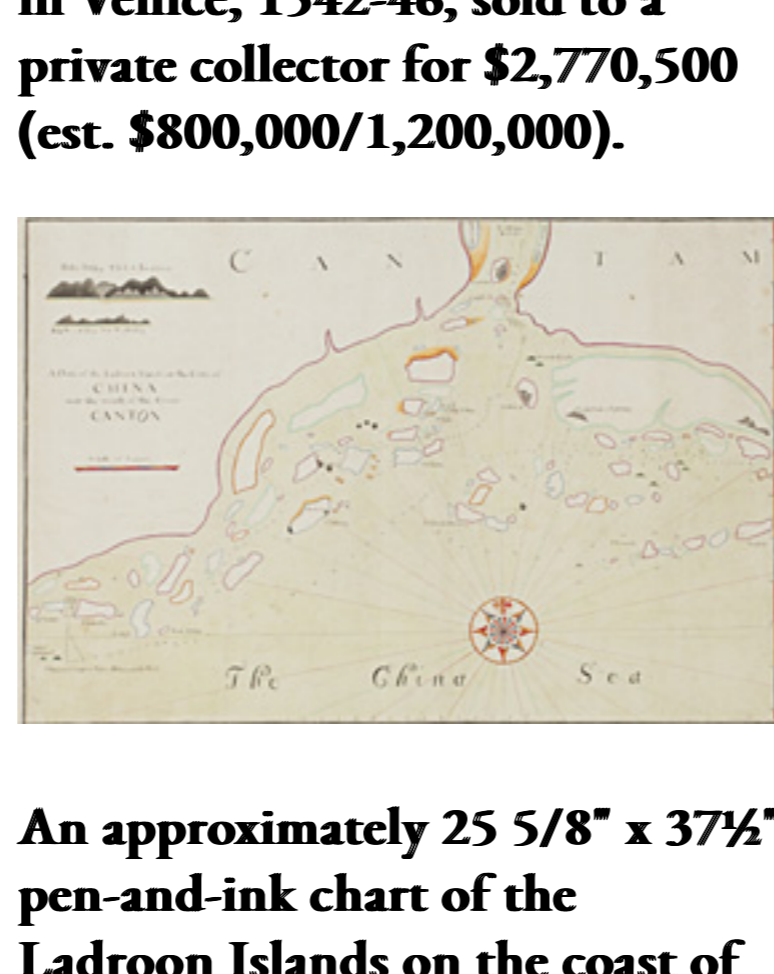
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**The top lot of the sale at \$2,882,500 was Edward S. Curtis's *The North American Indian* in 20 volumes and 20 portfolios. Its intent, in Curtis's words, was to document "the old time Indian, his dress, his ceremonies, his life and manners." Between 1896 and 1930, he photographed every major North American tribe west of the Mississippi, taking over 40,000 negatives and selecting one-twentieth of them for this unprecedented project.**

**He issued the first volume in 1907 and the last two in 1930, after which his company, financed by J.P. Morgan and his son, went bankrupt for failing to sell enough subscriptions to pay the costs. In 1935 the materials from the project, including the photogravure plates, were sold to the Charles E. Lauriat Company, a rare book dealer in Boston, and Curtis (1868-1952) turned to gold mining and farming for the last years of his life.**

**When the plates were rediscovered in the 1970's, collector interest in vintage photography was burgeoning, and Curtis was declared to be one of our most important photographers of Native American culture. Today he is also considered to be a controversial one, who sometimes used inauthentic poses, props, and other elements to satisfy his artistic vision.**

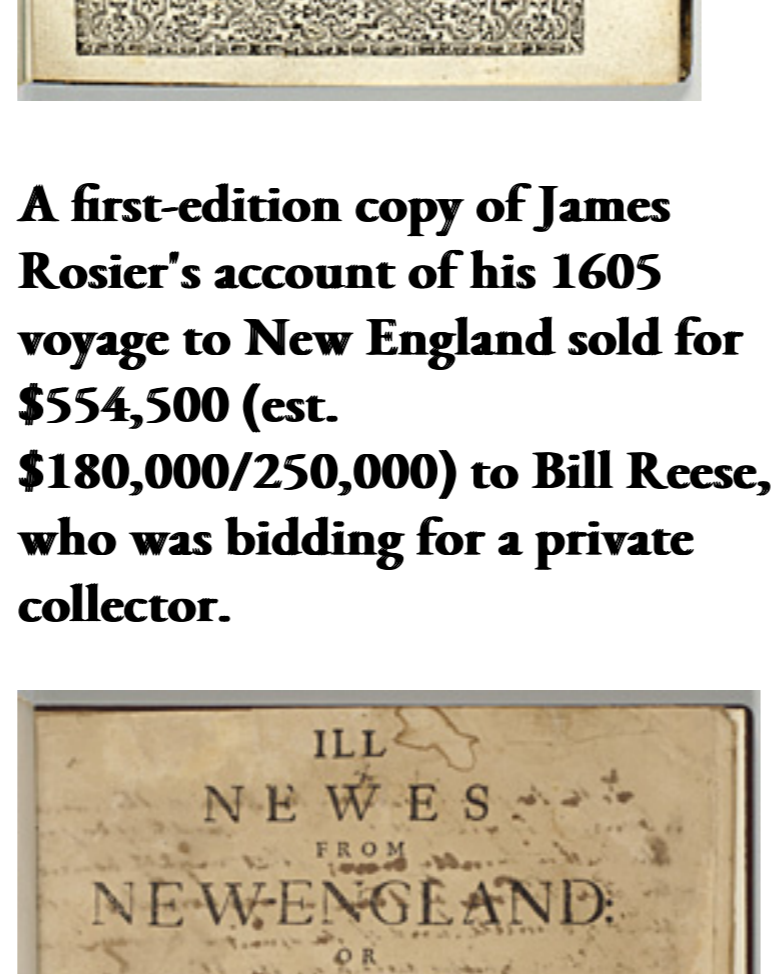


**Battista Agnese's Portolan Atlas of the world, an illuminated manuscript on vellum produced in Venice, 1542-46, sold to a private collector for \$2,770,500 (est. \$800,000/1,200,000).**

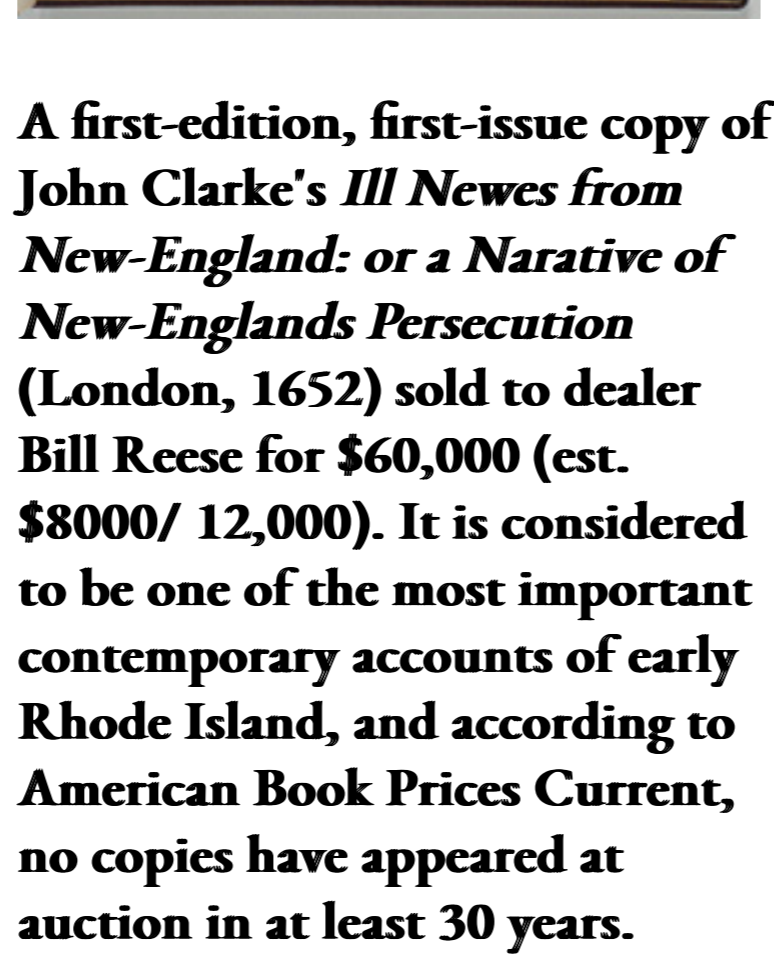


**A composite atlas by the Laferri school sold for \$1,082,500 (est. \$500,000/700,000) to the buyer of the Portolan Atlas. Produced in Rome in 1592, this is the only recorded example with the Laferri-Nobili title page.**

**Christie's reproduced the Atlas image from the Laferri-Nobili title page (right) on the back cover of the catalog's dust jacket. Schinto photo.**



**A first-edition copy of James Rosier's account of his 1605 voyage to New England sold for \$554,500 (est. \$180,000/250,000) to Bill Reese, who was bidding for a private collector.**



**A first-edition, first-issue copy of John Clarke's or a Narrative of New-England's Persecution (London, 1652) sold to dealer Bill Reese for \$60,000 (est. \$8000/12,000). It is considered to be one of the most important contemporary accounts of early Rhode Island, and according to American Book Prices Current, no copies have appeared at auction in at least 30 years.**

**Clarke, who cofounded the colony with Roger Williams, was a leading advocate of religious freedom in America. He spent almost 12 years in England persuading Charles II to grant religious tolerance and separation of church and state to the tiny political entity. Clarke eventually wrote the charter himself, and his words were echoed in other colonial charters and in the founding documents of the United States.**

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