



“EVERY ONE OF US
HAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO
MAKE THE FLAG MEAN MORE”

An interview with flag collector and author Pete Keim

By Anne Madarasz, Museum Division Director

Pete Keim first shared his impressive collection of American flags and his expertise with the Heinz History Center in the months following the events of September 11, when the History Center hosted a flag festival. Since then, he has been involved with the planning for the current exhibition, Stars & Stripes: An American Story. A retired physician and long-time Pittsburgh resident, Keim now lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife Pat. Keim recently talked about his collection and about his relationship to the flag.

In your book (*A Grand Old Flag*, published 2007) you talk about your grandfather flying the flag. Is that your earliest memory of the flag?

Pete Keim: I think it is. I was five at the beginning of World War II, and it was likely sometime during the war. I remember my grandfather talking to me about how to take care of the flag and how to respect it. It wasn't

left out overnight. If it started to rain, you ran out and took down the flag. You folded it carefully. And it didn't just get tossed on a shelf or something like that; it was put in a place that was for the flag.

When you were a kid during World War II, were flags prevalent?

No, you wouldn't see that many on a block. I remember my grandfather always flew it and we lived with my grandfather and grandmother during the war. But you didn't see a lot of them. As the war went on, you saw a lot of the banners with the blue star on it, hanging in the window, meaning that they had someone in the family who was in the war. And then if the person was killed, they put a gold star over the blue star.

When you were older and had your own place, did you fly the flag at your house?

Yeah, we always have; ever since we got married, we displayed the American flag. Earlier on, when we really didn't have a lawn, we'd put it in our apartment. And then we had two houses that we raised the kids in. As soon as we bought the house, I called someone to come and put in a flagpole. And we always flew the flag.

So your collecting started about 35 years ago?

A lot of people ask me why I started collecting flags and I don't know the exact reason. Certainly the presence of the first flag in the collection was just on a whim. I was at a farm sale in 1976 looking for furniture. I saw this old flag in a bag and—I don't know why—I asked the lady what she wanted for it and, you know, we bartered the price and I bought it. I never even took it out of the bag 'til I got home that night.

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It was a hand-sewn, 13-star flag. I started thinking about how old it is, where it's from, and I started hunting for someone that could evaluate it for me. It took me nearly a year. That flag is flown in our home. Hung and framed. It's hung in our home ever since then, with a light on it 24 hours a day.

In the meantime I started reading about it and picking up a book here and there and started reading about the history of it. Somewhere along the way I bought a second flag and then it just totally got out of control.

I've talked to a lot of collectors who love what they do or are passionate about what they are collecting, but it seems like this collection has a deeper meaning for you.

I've collected lamps and different kinds of early lighting devices, baseball cards, and things like that. But this is the American flag and this is something that not only captured my interest from collecting it, but it also captured my interest from knowing the history of it, learning American history.

But also assuming a mantle of responsibility as far as sharing it and helping Americans understand why they feel the way they do about their flag. I believe that if we educate Americans about the history of their flag, it helps them understand the way they feel about it. Sometimes they don't recognize the way they feel until special occasions, or a conversation comes up about the flag and they start talking about a flag that they have. It just becomes an emotional conversation about

what their flag means, but also what THE flag means to them.

I've worked to make it a top collection with the idea of exhibiting it, sharing it, and then to write a book to tell the history of the flag, all with the intent of helping people understand why they feel the way they do about it.

So you must have a fairly large collection now?

It got to the point where I had about 400 flags. One day I sat down and thought there has got to be some sort of direction to this, I can't keep buying every flag that I come upon. So I decided that, seeing as nobody had a comprehensive collection, meaning every number of stars from 13 to 50, that that would be a reasonable goal. With one exception. I decided early on that there was only one 15-star flag—the star-spangled banner—and I never looked for another 15-star flag. I feel that was everybody's flag, so in my mind that was part of the collection too.

Then my goal became to get flags with every number of stars, not only the official numbers but the unofficial numbers of stars. I accomplished that around 1998. Since then, I've just added flags for very specific reasons: a star arrangement I hadn't seen before or a flag with a provenance that I thought was important.

Are you swayed more by the story or by the aesthetics and design of the flag?

Sometimes it's the romance of seeing a really great flag that has a personality of its own, the preservation of the colors, the look and aging

of it, the dimensions, the proportions, all the different things that go with it becoming an individual. But certainly a flag that has provenance attached to it has great significance.

I have a 35-star cavalry flag that is in the best condition of any I've ever seen. But one that was much more tattered and torn and frayed came up for auction last year and I'd trade for it in a heartbeat because it came from Little Big Horn. It was Custer's flag at Little Big Horn!

What do you think the flag has taught you about yourself?

Certainly to be diligent and persevering and to know what you're looking for. Not only in flags, but also in life. And to be respectful: being respectful of fabric, but also being respectful of other people and recognizing the fact that something on the surface may just be a piece of cloth with stars and stripes but, in fact, it was an important part of their life and had tremendous emotion and history attached to it.

You talk to kids a lot about flags. What reactions do you get from them?

Kids are fascinating. After my talk one day, I had in front of me a 33-star flag that was carried at Bull Run or Antietam, and a boy came over who was seven, and was standing there looking at it. He looks up at me and asks, "Is this real?" And I said, "Yeah, that's a real flag. That flag, a soldier carried it in the Civil War." He looked at me and he said, "Really?" I said, "Yes." He looked at it another minute, then he saluted it, turned around, and walked away.

If you could impart only one message through your book or exhibits or talks, what would it be?

Make the flag mean something more. It's a very important message. Every one of us has an opportunity to make the flag mean more. 🌟