Long-Forgotten US Government Historical Treasures Saved by Famed Millionaire Treasure Hunter

Ben Benson helps save and preserve beautifully engraved original US Government master copper engraving plates used to make early maps of areas of the United States from the 1880's to 1950's.

WASHINGTON (PRWEB) November 20, 2018 -- From civilization’s inception, mankind has sought to preserve its most important records via durable engraving. In Exodus, Moses descended Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments engraved onto stone. NASA sent the Spacecraft Voyager on its deep space mission with greetings engraved on a solid gold disc. The United States has its own rich history similarly preserved, hand engraved on large, long forgotten copper plates archived for many decades in government warehouses.

In 1879, the US Congress passed a law that established a division under the Department of the Interior to create area maps — “snapshots in time”. Completing the map for each geographical area, referred to as a Quad, was a herculean task that involved extensive field surveys, mapping, and finally, careful etching onto copper plates in a reverse intaglio method. The result: stunning master plates capable of reproducing the area maps via the most advanced technology of the period.

Rapidly growing and areas deemed important were a major focus of this project. Each Quad was titled to commemorate a then-prominent feature or place. Some titles are familiar today while others are novel.

In 2015-16 with little fanfare, the US Government decided to dispose of these historic treasures. Many plate sets went to governmental agencies or museums for display, while the remainder of the collection went for sale at auction; this is where Ben Benson comes in. Benson believes that when people learn of these unique, historical artifacts, they will find them important, meaningful as well as beautiful.

Benson originally planned to bid only on the plates for New England where he was raised and he was not surprised when the Nantucket Island set sold for $17,000 and Martha’s Vineyard went for $7,000 stating that “People in New England clearly treasure their history”. He was, however, surprised when only a few bidders logged on to bid for other State’s historical plates. Benson asks “Can it be that people in other areas around the country have less interest, or is it simply that no one knew of the obscure government auction and that the part of their amazing history was available?”

If there was no interest on the part of the public, there was a high likelihood that the copper plates would be desired for their scrap – copper value and forever lost, Benson could not let that happen; he bid for each and every set that wasn’t well-bid auction. Since then he has started a grassroots, get the word out campaign for these historic engravings collection. He felt the best place to begin was with land surveyors, the people who would be most knowledgeable about them and work to preserve geographic history everyday thru their careful painstaking work. To that end he is contacting every surveyor in the areas he has engravings and offering them the first chance at these treasures.

In total, Benson acquired 860 sets in coverings areas in 44 states that can be seen online at: USAengarvings.com beginning on Dec 4th. For example, you will see “Santa Ana-1894” that covers the coastal areas around contemporary Newport Beach. If you look closely at the zoom photo of the paper map, you see a fledgling Newport Beach with a single railroad track and a few buildings along the shoreline.
Benson believes that if the word gets out people will indeed want to preserve these historical treasures. “I am not trying to make money at this, I will be happy to break even, my goal is simply to connect these artifacts with those who will appreciate them,” Benson states. I am starting with the Registered Professional Surveyors (and Civil Engineers and Foresters) and they will be offered the chance to buy them at a deeply discounted price that reflects my actual cost from the government. The bottom line is that they will be able to buy a set of engravings plates (typically 3 plates in a set) for about $350 after the discount. Think of that, original master engravings that took hundreds of hours of hand and field work to produce for just $350. Some may also choose to purchase them and donate to their local museum or library.
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