



## EPISODE 3 2004 -ANTI-SLAVERY FLAG, ROCKFORD, MICHIGAN.

Wes: Our next investigation offers a unique insight into the campaign to end slavery. The year is 1860, a time of furious national debate and mounting tension. Abolitionists in the North demand unconditional freedom for slaves in the South. And help many escape on the Underground Railroad. At meetings and rallies, black and white abolitionists bring the dispute to a fever pitch, polarizing entire communities, sometimes to the point of violence. One hundred-and-fifty years later, these dramatic events have lead us to the small town of Rockford, Michigan, where two brothers, John and Bill Bittner, believe their ancestors may have left them with a rare remnant from that time. For years, this textile sat on the bottom of an old chest in their grandmother's home.

John: My great-grandfather had been a county surveyor. My mother and her family always called it the surveyor's chest. We, uh, brought it home and opened it up. At the bottom of it we found this old banner. I thought, well, gee, maybe it was, uh, [laughs & toots] something they used as a prop in a play back in the early twenties. ...But when I started looking at it really closely and thinking- truly thinking about it- I figured it was an abolitionist-type banner.

Wes: I'm Wes Cowen. Tukufu Zuberi and I want to find out if the Bittner's banner could be the real thing.

Wes: Wow!

Tukufu: "No Union with Slavery".

Wes: What a banner. [Tukufu: Yeah.] God, that's great.

Tukufu: Now this is amazing. So... how can we help you?

John: Well first, we want to know if it truly is an abolitionist banner or flag. And we'd also like to know how our great-grandfather William Henry Duff would come about having this banner and was he part of that movement?

Tukufu: Two great questions.

Wes: What specific information do you have about this flag?

John: It was found in LaGrange, Indiana. Uh... William Henry Duff was the son of a, uh, Irishman who came in, uh, from Ireland in the 1840s. That's all we really know.

Tukufu: It's kinda cool if you found out you were related to somebody who was part of the abolitionist movement, [Bill: Yeah...] and you have an artifact from that movement.

Bill: Ye— [John: Absolutely.]

Bill: Yeah, that's cool.

Wes: Tukufu and I'd like to take just a couple minutes to look at the flag a little bit more if you don't mind.

John: Oh, we'll go get a cup of coffee.

Tukufu: Sure.

Wes: I've appraised and sold dozens of historical textiles over the years... but never one like this.

Wes: You know, the eagle is just... I mean, it's fabulous as a piece of folk art. That painting of that eagle is wonderful. You can even see, uh, the, the pencil marks where the limner, the-the sign painter, uh, you know, sort of sketched it out and then-and then painted it.

Tukufu: Flags and banners like this were used by the abolitionist movement. Uh... and they were very popular. And you notice there are 23 stars here...

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Wes: Yeah, I did notice that.

Tukufu: That's symbolically very important. Twenty-three stars... in 1820, there are twenty-three states in the Union.

Wes: I don't think we should...

Tukufu: But there is another option. After the South seceded in 1861, the Union was left with twenty-three states. So this flag could be from either time period.

Wes: The combining the stars and the American eagle with that slogan... it-it sends a very powerful message.

Wes: While Tukufu heads to Indiana to find out more about the supposed owner, William Henry Duff, I'm taking the flag to the Textile Conservation Workshop in South Salem, New York.

Here they preserve some of the country's most precious textiles. Mary Caldanny, a professional conservator, specializes in the treatment of painted fabrics.

Wes: [S]o what are the clues that I-I should be looking for to determine the age of this?

Mary: Okay. Well, we want to know about its original construction. So one of the things that we would do is analyze the fibers that the fabric is made of.

Wes: If the fibers are synthetic, we know the flag can't be that old. Nineteenth century textiles were usually made of wool, cotton, linen, or silk. Using a polarizing light microscope, Mary can determine what material the flag is made of.

Wes: So Mary, I'm dying to know, what do you see in there?

Mary: Well right now I'm looking at the yarns from the warp and... they are cotton.

Wes: They're cotton?

Mary: Yup. Right...

[conversation continues in background]

Wes VO: Okay, that's a start, but not enough information to pinpoint a date.

Maybe the flag's design and construction can tell us more.

Mary: This flag is completely hand sewn. There's no machine stitching.

Wes: Sewing machines weren't in common use until after the Civil War.

Wes: Don't you think those little grommets are-unusual themselves, because they're so small!

Mary: Tiny, and beautifully stitched actually.

Wes: After the Civil War, these hand-stitched eyelets were generally replaced by metal grommets. There are no grommets here, and that's a strong piece of evidence.

From what Mary has told me, I'm convinced the flag is from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but is it from 1820 or just prior to the Civil War?

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I've come to the Library Company of Philadelphia to meet the curator of their African-American collection, Phillip Lapsansky.

Wes: How are you?

Phil: Good.

Wes: Phil, here's the, uh... here's the flag I was telling you about.

Phil: Mm-hmm.

Wes: Isn't it great?

Phil: Yeah, it's beautiful.

Wes: Given the number of stars, the earliest possible date for the flag is 1820, so I ask Phillip if he thought the flag could have been used then.

Phil: I don't think so because this has no political significance in 1820. There is nobody raising this phrase, this-this notion. The twenty-three stars suggest that this was, uh... this-they probably stand for the states that remain in the Union after the secession of the Southern states to create the Confederacy.

Wes: Mm-hmm.

Phil: However, four of those stars would have been slaves' states.

Wes: In spite of Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware having slaves, they remained part of the Union- well- which could explain their stars on our banner.

Phil: ... the Union. Uh, "No Union With Slavery". These folks who rallied under this banner were no doubt followers of William Lloyd Garrison.

Wes: Garrison was a zealous leader of the abolitionist movement. He argued that the U.S. Constitution protected slave-holding, and called it "a covenant with death and an agreement with Hell". His anti-slavery sentiments even led him to advocate a Northern secession from the Union. His weekly Boston newspaper, "The Liberator", served as a voice for the abolition movement, and Phil has an archive of original copies.

Phil: Uh... this is the paper for 1860. Up here in this box: [Wes: Oh yeah.][Wes reads title with Phil] "No Union with Slaveholders", and the legend on the flag, "No Union with Slavery".

Wes: Yeah, I mean, it's just-it's-that's clear that the flag takes it right from the newspaper, right from The Liberator.

Phil: This little box has appeared in this very spot in this newspaper since the mid-1840s. So... uh... this is probably... uh, 1861-ish.

Wes: So the combination of the stars and the slogan help us date the flag. And the connection to Garrison reveals its owner would have been a fervent abolitionist. This really is a rare find!

Wes: Where would this flag likely have been used?

Phil: Oh, this would have been used at rallies, fairs, gatherings... There were rallies all across the Northern states: uh, Massachusetts, western Pennsylvania, upstate New York....

Wes: Abolitionist newspapers like the Liberator helped to humanize the slave and shape their readers' opinions, but at

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their rallies, the abolitionists depended on more visual tools. I now know the Bittner's flag was one of these. [Phil talking in background] Does that mean their ancestor was an abolitionist?

Tukufu: We know Duff and his flag were here in LaGrange, Indiana, far from the abolitionist activity in the Northeast.

I'm hoping archival materials at the LaGrange public library will shed some light on Duff's life here in the years before the Civil War.

Here's something- it's a profile of Duff, but there's a problem.

Tukufu: It says here that he was born December 26th, 1852. Now, by the beginning of the Civil War, that would have made him about 8 years old. And you can't imagine an 8-year-old carrying that big flag in a protest.

So where do I go from here? Maybe someone else in the Duff family owned the flag.

Here's an obituary from 1902 of a William Duff, the father of our guy, William Henry Duff.

Tukufu: "His friends over the country know him best by his work as county surveyor."

So it was William Duff Sr. who was the surveyor. So the chest, and the flag, belonged to William Duff Sr., not to William Henry Duff.

"He has always been interested and active in educational and church work. He united with the Methodist Episcopal Church in Ontario, Indiana in 1869 continuing to the time of his death."

So where was William Duff Sr., in 1861?

Tukufu: "New York at Rochester." Okay. They didn't come straight to Indiana. First, they moved to Rochester. Now Rochester was a very, very active place for the abolitionists.

It was one of the last stops on the Underground Railroad for runaway slaves heading to Canada.

It was home to Frederick Douglas, Susan B. Anthony, and other outspoken abolitionists.

Tukufu VO: I need to know what was going on when Duff was there.

Historians in Rochester have sent me articles from local newspaper from the early 1860s describing abolitionist meetings and rallies.

Wait a minute! What's this? This is a local newspaper account of a large gathering in Rochester, on January 11, 1861.

Tukufu: Okay, this is very interesting. "Union and Advertiser." This is written about three months before the start of the Civil War. "Corinthian Hall had been rented for three days and they were there to hold an Abolition Convention."

Tukufu: What the article describes next is really amazing.

Tukufu: "An American flag bearing the words 'No Compromise with Slaveholders' was suspended across Buffalo Street, in front of the arcade this morning."

"No Compromise With Slaveholders." "Many believed it was declarations of this sort which had much to do with producing the troubles that now afflict this country and threaten a dissolution of the Union."



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Tukufu: I feel like I'm really close now. "No Compromise With Slaveholders" sounds a lot like "No Union With Slavery". So our flag might have been at a rally like this—Was Duff there too? I still need evidence he was an abolitionist. I'm meeting Steve Jaffe at the New York Historical Society. He's an expert on 19<sup>th</sup> century American history, with a special interest in slavery. Okay, what I have here is a banner or a flag, I'm not quite sure, that belonged to an individual named William Duff. We know he was an Irishman who lived in Rochester during the period of the abolitionist movement.

Jaffe: Interesting, because most of the Irish immigrants, to a place like Rochester, would have been poor Catholic laborers fleeing the potato famine in Ireland. Uh, they came over and found themselves often in competition with African-Americans, free African-Americans. And that job competition predisposed the Irish, many of them- not all of them- but many of them to be racist.

Tukufu: But we know he was not a Catholic. He was a Methodist.

Jaffe: Well that changes everything because, in a place like Rochester, a Methodist, whether Irish-born, or American-born, or English-born, would likely have been an Evangelical Protestant. Evangelical Protestants in this period, once they felt that they were born again, if you are saved, uh, you also have to go out and save the world. And so, uh, Rochester, uh, Protestants, uh, to a larger measure, white and black, uh, saw it as absolutely their responsibility to try to end slavery. So someone like, uh, William Duff, we don't know if he had this fervor before he got there. Certainly once he got there he would have plugged into it, clearly, such that he would eventually have, presumably carried a flag like this very proudly.

Tukufu: We can't say for sure - but this is strong circumstantial evidence that William Duff was an abolitionist! And now we know the flag is genuine, we've got a big surprise for John and Bill.

Bill: Good...

John: I guess the historical importance is, uh, is really, really important to me now, you know. And I, I-I'm proud that we— uh, that my ancestors were involved in that and, uh... I'm glad we still have it.

Wes: And it's a great thing. It's really, very rare. ... Uh, how rare? It's the first one that I've seen, and if I had it in an auction, I would guess that it might bring as much as \$15,000. [John: Wow] [Bill: Wow.] [John: Wow.] Maybe-maybe a little less, maybe a little bit more, but it's a very rare political banner. Someone, your ancestors, or your ancestor, had the foresight to keep this thing.

Tukufu: When I first saw this and I looked at it, it gave me a... a few chills just to think about the significance of someone holding a flag like this. And now that I know when it was, in 1861, such an important period in American history. And you've got a piece of it sittin' on your table.

John: [laughs] ...Wow.

Wes: So what do you think? [Tukufu laughs] [John: Yes...]

Bill: Just think where this has been stored all those years.[John: Yeah...]

[Wes, John, and Tukufu laugh]

Wes VO: Textiles like this are easily damaged by light, humidity, and the physical stress of folding so...

Wes: What we're going to do is-is take this back with us and get it to a textile conservator. We're gonna bring it back in a environment where you can store it, and not have to worry about it.

John: I guess I feel badly because we didn't take care of it better. I mean, it's-[Bill coughs]- it's a... but it's a nice slice of history, and it's, uh, it's good to know that they were involved

ENDS

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