

Wes: We left Brooklyn and headed south across the Verazanno Narrows bridge for our next investigation, on Staten Island.

Elyse: It's summer, 1861, and the first shots of the civil war have been fired. In Stapleton, Staten Island, just over the river from New York City, angry mobs of union supporters roam the once quiet streets searching for traitors. A confederate flag is seen flying from one house. Its residents are forced to tear it down and fly a union flag in its place. Did the residents of that house make this beautiful flag to save their beloved mansion? I'm Elyse Luray. Wes Cowan and I have come to find out if this story about the red, white, and blue is fact or fiction.

Wes: Maxine Friedman is chief curator of the Staten Island historical society and the current custodian of this great looking flag.

Maxine: This flag is interesting because of its history, because of the story associated with it, and it's very much a local story and a little slice of life in Staten Island during the civil war. It would certainly be exciting to find out that the story is true and to have it documented.

Wes: Maxine, this is a great 34-star flag. But the question that I have for you is, what makes this so unique?

Maxine: This flag flew at the home of commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt in Stapleton, Staten Island, during the civil war. And Vanderbilt did not live there at the time. He lived in Manhattan. He had rented the house to Mr. Charles Stebbins, who used it as a boarding house for a small number of families. And one day this gentleman was returning home from market and he was confronted by a small but angry crowd who called him a secessionist and said there was a secessionist flag flying from the front of his house.

One of his boarders, a woman from the south, had hung a confederate flag from the front of the house, and they demanded that a union flag fly in its place by nightfall or they would burn down the house. Immediately Mr. Stebbins and everyone in his household set to work creating this flag, using whatever bits and scraps of fabric they could find. And by nightfall they had completed the flag, flew it on the front of the house and the house was spared.

Wes: Wow, that's a great story. What is it that you want to know about this?

Maxine: We'd like to know if the flag is handmade, if it's really from the civil war era and is our story true.

Elyse: While Wes takes the flag to some experts, I'm looking through the archives of the Staten Island historical society. I want to find out how prevalent pro-union sentiment was in New York at that time. The Civil War began on April 13, 1861, when the confederate army fired shots on the union at Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. This event shocked the nation, but how did the people of New York react?

"The seven regiment leaving New York, April 19, 1861." Look at all these people. It's amazing. People are cheering them on. They're hanging out of windows. They're standing on the rooftops. Flags are everywhere. They're all on the streets of New York. Once flying mainly above government buildings, the stars and stripes could now be seen all over the city. New Yorkers pledging allegiance to the union had a common symbol to rally around. Colonel Wilson was among the first to offer his services to the government on the breaking out of the war. He recruited a regiment of nearly 1200 men from the rowdy and criminal classes of New York city. The colonel, with a sword in one hand and the American flag in the other, led the men into swearing to support the flag and never to flinch from its path, through blood or death.

So New Yorkers heard the rallying cry and volunteered for service in droves, but does that necessarily mean that angry mobs were threatening confederate sympathizers? We'll need to find more information to prove that that was the case.

Wes: I crossed the Verazanno Narrows bridge and headed into Manhattan to bring our flag to the Fashion Institute of Technology, home to one of the world's finest textile conservation departments. I'm here to show our flag to Lynn Felsher, curator of F.I.T.'s textile museum. Together we'll examine it to determine if the flag is handmade and even if it's from the right time period.

Lynn: Well, first of all, I'd say really we should look at these fabrics. They are both cotton. They are both plain weaves. The blue, on the other hand, is a twill weave. These types of fabrics we find in many people's homes. These are your really basic cloths. One way the red cotton was used was to back quilts.

Wes: Really?

Lynn: And actually I have a quilt from our collection, which I can show you, which has a similar type of fabric. Love quilts. What we have here is a mid-19th-century quilt. You can see how similar. It really is.

Wes: Very similar. And this quilt dates from mid-19th century?

Lynn: Yeah. So we're looking at similar rates of oxidation for the two different kinds of cotton. A fabric's color will fade over time as it's exposed to air and light. This is oxidation. So two similar or identical fabrics with the same degree of fading will probably be from the same period, in this case, the mid-19th century. And because it has 34 stars, our flag was likely made between 1861 and '63, the only years when America had 34 states.

Wes: How do we tell that this is entirely handmade versus made on a sewing machine?

Lynn: You'll notice that, first of all, the lengths of each stitch is different.

Wes: Quite variable, yes.

Lynn: And if we look at the area between the stitches, we can see that that is also uneven. It really looks like someone made this by hand.

Wes: All this evidence is great, but I have my doubts. How in the world could something so elaborate have been sewn together in a few short hours? I'd like to look at this from a different angle.

Elyse: Fort Wadsworth on Staten Island played a strategic role in both the revolutionary and civil wars. I'm meeting local historian Elizabeth Summer here to find out more about the strength of union support in this area.

Elizabeth: Well, I think Staten Island was a bit more ambivalent, a bit more divided, and actually even Manhattan and other parts of New York, there were a lot of families who had ties to or who had relatives who had holdings in the south. A lot of them were very vested in slavery and in the land-holding.

Elyse: In our story, this woman, she raises up her flag, and people come to her and say, "Take the flag down." And it sounds like from the things that you're telling me that that actually could have taken place.

Elizabeth: I think so, yes. It's very likely we do have stories of incidents similar to that that happened in other parts of the city.

Elyse: Elizabeth told me that the archives at historic Richmondtown are a one-stop resource for everything to do with local history. If there's any account of our flag story, it should be here. Ah, I think I found something. Staten Island has assumed a marshal appearance. Soldiers are hurrying to and fro. A secret combination is said to exist in a certain portion of the Island. Those members have assumed the duty of ascertaining who are traitors and warning them. The first blow struck for stars and stripes. The war has commenced. A schooner from South Carolina sailed into Staten Island, having the Palmetto flag flying, which is the confederate flag. Some of the people of Staten Island insisted that this confederate flag be taken down and replaced with the flag of stars and stripes. The captain refused, and after a loud breakout and violence of words, the captain received a severe beating. So there was this mob mentality sweeping Staten Island, but there's no reference here to our flag story. I'm hoping Wes is making progress with the flag itself.

Wes: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is the State Capitol. It's also home to the National Civil War Museum and has a great collection of flags made during this conflict. Howard Mattis, one of the country's leading experts on civil war flags, is curator here. I know the flag is from the civil war period and made by hand, but one thing has been bugging me. Could it really have been made so quickly?

Howard: Got a great flag here.

Wes: This is Maxine's flag, homemade, made in a matter of hours. What do you think?

Howard: Well, it's got a couple of things that support the story. First of all, the stripes on a sewing group, particularly one that's rapidly trying to put it together, that would make sense.

Wes: Right.

Howard: The fact that the stripes are seamed and seamed vertically, which is anathema in the flag business, because if you start seaming flag stripes vertically, once it takes the wind, it's a weak spot. It's going to tear it apart. So the stripes say that, yeah, this flag was made rapidly and was made nonprofessionally.

However, when we jump into the canton, we've got a different story. The canton are what's called often the union is where the stars are. The stars are sewn to each side of the two sections that are folded over to make the canton.

Wes: Right.

Howard: So here and here. You know, and I noticed when I first saw the flag that they're so well cut out.

Wes: Right, it's almost as if there were a cookie cutter that formed the stars.

Howard: And then they were sewn on with great detail. We have in our collection here at the museum an example of another cotton homemade flag. This is a large cotton flag, 34 stars, just like the one we've been looking at, but if you look at the stars and see how crudely they're made.

Wes: Oh, yeah.

Howard: This point is so much less refined and not matching up with the other points on the flag. And also notice how, when this flag was quickly assembled, that the person who sewed the stars on missed the point on the other side. This one I can see being done in a matter of a day. I would have a lot of trouble seeing how anyone could put that number of stars on a canton in a matter of one day.

Wes: How long did it take to do just the stars on the canton?

Howard: My estimate is somewhere between 15 minutes to a half hour, depending on the speed of the seamstress, per star.

Wes: Per star.

Howard: Now, there's not just 34 stars. We're looking at 68 stars. Right. Multiply that by a minimum of a quarter an hour, more likely half hour.

Wes: No way that the story that Maxine has about this flag being made in a matter of hours could possibly be true.

Howard: Not in my opinion.

Wes: Howie thinks the flag was probably made by a group of people that included a professional seamstress. This would explain the perfect stars. But what about the inconsistencies in the stripes? In 1861, particularly right around April 12th through the 15th after Fort Sumter had been fired upon, there was a tremendous outpouring of respect for the U.S. Flag and there simply wasn't enough material available to satisfy all the need. Whoever made this flag might have struggled to get pieces of red and white fabric big enough to make all the stripes, so they would have had to rely on bits and pieces stitched together to finish the job. But one thing's for sure: this flag wasn't made in the few hours described in Maxine's story. And it's hard to imagine even the best seamstress on Staten Island producing such perfect stars with an angry mob breathing down her neck.

Maxine, it is an authentic Civil War 34-star flag. No question about that. But it's also what I like to call a well-loved flag. It's a flag that somebody thought enough of to prepare and keep and take care of. After all, it's 142 years old. But I'll tell you what: based upon everything that Elyse and I have been able to discover about your flag, the story that you have about it being made in a matter of hours is not true.

Maxine: It certainly would have been very exciting if you had been able to prove the story, but just knowing that it really is from that era and obviously displayed at that time and probably displayed for many years after as well, is important to know.

Wes: Well, you know, we were able to find a lot of documentation about what was going on in Staten Island in 1861. And I think that your folklore probably was generated from stories that were in the newspapers that were so very similar to it. Around that time period, the flag started to become the symbol of the union. For the first time, children were waving the flags. You could see them at the post office. People were hanging them from their homes. They were running down the street with them, and this flag was part of it all.

Elyse: We would have loved to raise Maxine's flag, but we were afraid the wind would rip it apart. So we have a replica, and for the first time in 140 years, a 34-star flag is flying over Staten Island.



Episode 8, 2003: Boarding House Flag  
Staten Island, New York

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