

Park Historians Want To Purchase Rare Portrait of 1833 Fort Mackinac Commandant

Artifacts Once in Whistler Family, Now in Hands of Canadian Dealer

By Karen Gould

A rare portrait of William Whistler, who served as a commandant at Fort Mackinac in 1833, is part of a collection the Mackinac State Historic Park Commission hopes to purchase, if it can raise \$54,000.

"The portrait was likely done when he was serving at Fort Niagara," around 1831, said Steve Brisson, the chief curator at Mackinac State Historic Parks.

The painting is one of three items in the collection that is owned by a Canadian antique dealer who acquired the pieces from Commandant Whistler's granddaughter. Also included is a silver Indian trading piece Mr. Brisson calls a gorget. The gorget contains an engraving depicting Winnebago Chief Red Bird surrendering to Commandant Whistler's pistols, housed in a wooden box, round out the collection. The pistols were made in 1820 by Stewart Meyer of London.

Phil Porter, director of Mackinac State Historic Parks, said the antique dealer is asking \$60,000 in Canadian funds for the collection, about \$54,000 in U.S. dollars, which he said is a reasonable price for all three pieces.

Chief Red Bird surrendered to Mr. Whistler when he was commandant at Fort Howard in Green Bay during the Winnebago War of the 1820s.

At right: Detail of a silver Indian trading piece depicting the Winnebago Chief Red Bird surrendering to Commandant Whistler.



Commandant William Whistler



Commandant Whistler's pistols were made in 1820.

"This is a significant event in Northwest history," said Mr. Brisson, and, in fact, there is a mural on the wall in the Governor's Room in the Wisconsin State Capitol Building that depicts the surrender of Chief Red Bird.

Mr. Porter said the portrait likely once hung in Fort Mackinac's Stone Quarters.

Commandant Whistler, who was an officer at Fort Mackinac in 1823, left the post, but returned as its commandant in 1833.

"He was a significant officer in the U.S. Army," said Mr. Brisson. "He served for over 60 years and when he retired in 1861, he was a full colonel."

Unsigned by the artist, the portrait is attributed to Grove Sheldon Gilbert, a famous portrait painter who worked in western New York in the early 19th century. To make the identification, art experts compared the work to hundreds of other paintings by the artist, who did not sign his other portraits, either.

Mr. Gilbert was known to be painting in the Niagara area at the time Mr. Whistler was at Fort Niagara.

"All experts are 99 percent sure this was painted by Gilbert in 1931," said Mr. Brisson.

Park staff became aware of the collection from Mackinac Island

cottager and historian Brian Dunnigan, who is curator of maps and head of research and publications at the Clements Library at the University of Michigan. Several

years ago while Mr. Dunnigan was the director of Fort Niagara, the collection was offered to the fort, though it never was purchased. He recently heard the collection is still for sale and passed the information on to the park.

The collection passed through several generations of the Whistler family before it was sold to the Canadian antique dealer.

"This is an outstanding opportunity for us to add significant objects to our collection," Mr. Brisson said.

Mr. Porter said Mackinac State Historic Parks has about \$20,000 available for the purchase, and hopes to raise the balance this summer. Meanwhile, the Canadian dealer has agreed to hold the collection.

If acquired, the items would be displayed at Fort Mackinac in the Soldiers Barracks.

Looking Back

Compiled by Ryan Schlehuber

115 Years Ago
The St. Ignace News
Saturday, June 6, 1891

If we're going to celebrate the 4th, it is time a move was made in the matter.

Wednesday night's rain storm was welcome and vegetation was much benefited.

F.R. Conway telegraphed from Kennedy yesterday for a coroner to hold an inquest on a man who had hung himself. No further particulars.

A painful accident occurred to Willie Kirby at Mackinac Island last Wednesday morning. He was employed on the steamer *Chas. West*, and while making the boat lines fast to the dock, his right leg was caught in the lines in such a way that when it tightened it cut the leg off below the knee. He was immediately taken to the Fort hospital, where he still is. It was found

necessary to amputate the leg four inches above the rope cut. The sufferer is having the best of care and treatment and will likely pull through, for he is possessed of more than ordinary grit and a good constitution. The shock was too much for his mother and she has been very ill the past three days.

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Farm lands in the United States, taking the country as a whole, occupy only 289 acres to every 1,000.

Joseph Cuppens, scalded at the furnace two weeks ago, died from his injuries on Tuesday last, after several days of intense suffering.

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