

9/11 flag featured in iconic photo returns to ground zero

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Visitors view the display for the American flag (left) that firefighters hoisted at ground zero in the hours after the 9/11 terror attacks, September 8, 2016, at the National September 11 Museum in New York City. AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews

NEW YORK, N.Y. — An American flag was raised at ground zero on September 11, 2001, in a defining moment of patriotic resolve. After disappearing for more than a decade, the flag took its place at the site on Thursday, days before the 15th anniversary of the terrorist attack.

The 3-foot-by-5-foot flag took a symbolic and curious journey. It was on a yacht moored in lower Manhattan, then amid the smoking wreckage of the World Trade Center, then at a firehouse about 2,400 miles away in Everett, Washington. Now, it is back in Manhattan, in a glass case at the National September 11 Museum. A TV show, a mysterious man and two years of detective work helped recover it.

A Hole In The History Of Attack Site

"In a museum that's filled with such deeply powerful artifacts, this newest of artifacts is certainly one of the most emotionally and historically powerful," said Joe Daniels. He is the president of the National September 11 Museum.

The flag's absence, he said, "just felt like a hole in the history of this site."

The flag is the centerpiece of one of the most powerful images of American strength on 9/11. After plucking the flag from a nearby boat, three firefighters raised it up. It stood brightly against the ashen destruction as photographer Thomas E. Franklin of The Record of Hackensack, New Jersey, captured the scene. The Pulitzer Prize-winning picture inspired a postage stamp, sculpture and other tributes.

Mysterious Whereabouts Of Real Flag

Meanwhile, the flag was signed by New York's governor and two mayors. It was flown at Yankee Stadium. It stood outside of New York City's City Hall and on an aircraft carrier near Afghanistan — except it was not the same flag. It was bigger. By 2004, the yacht's owners had publicly admitted the error.

By then, officials had no idea what had happened to the real flag.

They were in the dark until November 2014. That year, a man turned up at an Everett fire station with what is now the museum's flag, saying he'd seen a recent History channel piece about the mystery, according to Everett Police Detective Mike Atwood and his former colleague Jim Massingale.

Washington State Man Returns A Gift

The man, who gave firefighters only the name "Brian," said he'd gotten it as a gift. He said it was from an unnamed National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration worker who'd gotten it from an unidentified 9/11 widow.

The detectives gathered surveillance video and circulated a police sketch, but they haven't found the man or been able to confirm his explanation of the flag's origin. DNA tests of material found on electrical tape wrapped around the flag's halyard didn't match the firefighters or other people known to have handled the flag.

Flag Dust Matches Ground Zero Debris

One forensic expert analyzed dust on the flag and halyard and found it consistent with ground zero debris. Meanwhile, the detectives scrutinized photos and videos of the flag-raising and consulted one of the yacht's former crew members to compare the flag's size, material, stitching, hardware and halyard.

Taking all the evidence together, "we feel it's very likely the one captured in the photo," said Massingale, now with the Stillaguamish Police Department on the Stillaguamish Tribe's reservation in Washington.

The yacht's owners, Shirley Dreifus and the late Spiros E. Kopelakis, were so surprised when first told the flag might have resurfaced that Kopelakis wondered whether the call was a prank, Dreifus said. She and Chubb insurance donated the flag to the museum.

