

Francis Bannerman VI, Military Goods Dealer to the World

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There are few individuals over the age of fifty-five who have collected arms, armour, and military goods of all descriptions that have not heard about Francis Bannerman and his sons. If they have been fortunate, they will have visited 501 Broadway, New York City and entered the greatest mens toy store that has probably ever existed. Store, museum, adventure, frustrating and dirty would be a few words to describe a space packed from floor to ceiling with historical military goods from all over the world. If they have been royally blessed, they would have visited Pollepel Island on the east side of the Hudson River 5.5 miles north of West Point. There they would have seen the spectacle of an ersatz Scottish Castle full of military goods including 12,000 pound Civil War cannon, pith helmets by the thousands, gatling guns, projectiles of all sizes, and leather goods of all kinds frequently jumbled together.

In this digital world we now live in, it is difficult to realize that up until 40 years ago, two such places existed. As the story of Francis Bannerman and his two sons unfolds, it is clear that he knew all of the tricks of mass marketing and influence peddling. However, you can be sure that Francis would probably have had one of the first Web Sites if he could find a cheap way to establish it. He was a Scot through and through and he did not keep it a secret that only cash talked in his business. When he was buying, it was how little could he get it for, and when he was selling what a bargain he was offering. This is the New York City that Rick Burns described visually in his history of the city on Public Television; the city of opportunity for those willing to work harder and think faster than their neighbors.

Like so many successful Americans, Bannerman was brought to this country as a child and settled in Brooklyn. Francis had been born in Dundee, Scotland. His father was a Scot and his mother was Irish. His parents found a place to live on Little Street at the intersection of that street and United States Street. What more patriotic place could you find? Little Street is located along the West end of the New York Naval Dockyard, more commonly known at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. United States Street, despite its name, was less than fifty yards long and came to a dead end at the fence along the West end of the shipyard. Little Street ran



from the entrance to the Navy Yard Commandant's house to the East river.

This chance selection of a locale for a residence in 1854, greatly impacted Bannerman's future. He grew up alongside one of the largest naval facilities on the East Coast only a few years before the start of America's most tragic war. Francis's father supported his family as a junk dealer. By the time he was ten, young Francis became adapt at what New Yorkers still do with relish, i.e., scrounging the streets and byways for "stuff." Soon he acquired an abandoned skiff and rowed around in the Navy Yard picking up flotsam and jetsam discarded from warships being constructed, repaired or temporarily moored there. With the advent of the Civil War, the Navy Yard was a bonanza for finding stuff which could be sold. Bannerman's father may have gone to sea in the US Navy or as a merchantman and young Francis became the major breadwinner for the family until the end of the war.

At the end of the War, his father returned in ill health and although young Francis had been enterprising enough to attract the attention of employers, he was not able to accept a scholarship to Cornell University which had been secured for him by one of his employers. He continued his junk collecting and also acted as a messenger in the lower Manhattan area. In 1867, his father was able to establish a store and small warehouse at 14 Atlantic Avenue, very close to the very busy Brooklyn terminal of the South Street Ferry. On an ebb tide Francis could probably row from Little Street to his Father's place of business on Atlantic Ave much faster than

via the streets. Francis's father continued to conduct a junk business from Little St. but advertised himself as a commission merchant and ship chandler at Atlantic Avenue.

In January 1872, at the age of 21, young Francis was sent by his father on a rope buying trip to Ireland. The American paper makings establishments purchased large amounts of old cordage, and rope was in short supply at this time. His father could see big profits if he could get a cheap supply quickly. While in Ireland, staying with his grandmother on his Mother's side, he met and married Helen Boyce. He successfully purchased and shipped to New York large quantities of old rope, and he returned to Brooklyn with his new bride by August. Before the year 1872 had ended he had obtained American citizenship and his father had died at the age of 51. Young Francis' mother, Margaret took over operation of the store at 14 Atlantic Ave. and young Francis rented space across and up the street at 43 Atlantic Ave. By 1875, Francis and his wife had a son David Boyce Bannerman, who would later with his younger brother Francis VII, become the backbone of the Bannerman enterprise during the 20th century.

During the 1870s, his mother continued to operate a ship chandlery business at 14 Atlantic Ave., and Francis operated a produce and junk business at 43 Atlantic Ave. Surviving Bannerman records reveal that at least by the Spring of 1879, and probably before, Francis was attending United States Government Auctions at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. A surviving catalogue of a US Auction sale held on February 11, 1880 bears a notation on the cover "first serious purchase of ordnance materials" in his handwriting. This is the first but not the last indication that Francis had a feeling for history. It was during 1881 that financial success had been achieved to the extent that he rented space in a house at 1465 Bergen St., Brooklyn, and he moved there with his wife and son. By this time his younger brother William had taken over as the ship chandler at 14 Atlantic Ave.

During the 1880s many of Francis's purchases at the government auctions were scrape metal in the form of huge amounts of US Navy surplus anchor and mooring chain. By 1885, Francis had a second property located at 1114 Butler Street, Brooklyn into which he moved his family and opened an office. The same year he formed a relationship with J.W. Frazier a military goods dealer and agent for the Spencer Gun Company whose business was located at 290 Broadway, Manhattan. By this time it was becoming clear the Francis had established a thriving business in scrape metal and the sale of military goods obtained mostly from US Government auctions.

The year 1884 signaled the beginning of Francis' life long effort to publicize his military goods business by the issuance of a small eleven page handwritten catalog from

1114 Butler Street. He followed up with larger printed catalogs in 1888 and 1889 (Figures 6 and 8). The issuance of these catalogs and their success forced him to more actively purchase surplus military goods at the Government auctions. One such unusual purchase was US Government surplus sleds and fur clothing left over from the Greely Arctic expedition of 1882-84.

In May of 1890, Francis made a serious investment when he purchased the Spencer Arms Co. of Windsor, Connecticut and acquired the rights to make the Spencer pump shotgun and the machinery necessary to manufacture these shotguns. In April 1889, he purchased a warehouse at 1556 Bergen St., Brooklyn, for use as a shotgun factory, and by June he was offering the Spencer pump action shotgun as the Bannerman Model of 1890. His major sales outlet for these shotguns was the well known firearms dealership of Hermann Boker at 101 & 103 Duane Street, Manhattan. While Bannerman appears to have subcontracted the manufacture of most of the shotguns parts by machine shops in Brooklyn, the assembly of the guns was performed at Bergen St. By 1893, Winchester had introduced its own pump shotgun and its well financed publicity soon made inroads into the sale of Bannerman shotguns. Bannerman sued Winchester's New York agent and after several decisions, a New York Federal court ruled in favor of Winchester in 1897. Meanwhile Bannerman had continued to improve the Spencer shotgun and advertised improved models in 1894 and 1896. His final model of this shotgun was introduced as Model 1900.

Francis was juggling several businesses at once throughout the 1890s. His scrap business became a secondary business depending mainly on how much metal surplus the US government was putting on the market. He continued to expand the military goods business issuing catalogs in 1892, 1896, and 1899. It was during this decade that he invaded Manhattan by renting space at 118 Broad Street and then at 27 Front Street from 1892 to 1897. Moving uptown seemed to be the wave of the future and he started renting larger space at 579 Broadway in 1897. Renting this new space came none too soon because 1898 became a monumental year for Francis (Figure 1). The events of 1898 resulted in an explosive expansion of his business from a prosperous business into a very substantial operation reaching throughout the world.

In January 1898, he mounted an impressive display of his military goods at the Fourth Annual New York Sportsmen's Exposition and Bicycle Show at Madison Square Garden in Manhattan (Figure 2). Before the end of the year, United States had declared war against Spain, fought a three month war in Cuba and the Philippines, and in the process created the greatest supply of United States and Spanish mil-

itary surplus since the Civil War. This was like winning the lottery for Francis. By early December he was in Havana with a large letter of credit used to acquire most of the Spanish military equipment surrendered by the Spanish. It is no coincidence that his fifth catalog, now 48 pages was issued four months later.

Before the Spanish-American War, a major portion of Bannerman's military goods inventory derived from US Government surplus sales of Civil War materials of all kinds from dishes to 17,000 pound cannon and their projectiles. While these purchases were large and increasingly profitable, the surplus from the so called "Remember the Maine" war was the icing on the cake. Considering the fact that this last war was three months long as opposed to the long dragged out four year Civil War, it provided Bannerman with great merchandise, huge amounts of publicity and the opportunity to hone his advertising skills to the fullest. It is likely that a high percentage of all the "Remember the Maine" souvenirs existing today had their origin in Bannerman's fertile brain. Practically every general magazine in America contained a Bannerman advertisement. He even wrote the US Navy in 1899 to ascertain whether he could purchase all of the surrendered Spanish warships.

The gigantic purchases in Havana and elsewhere in late 1898 and 1899 forced Francis to locate storage space outside of New York City. The local city officials would not permit the storage of huge amounts of live artillery projectiles and small arms ammunition within the city. The Bergen Street cannon yard was full, an Eric Basin, Brooklyn warehouse was full, and 579 Broadway was full of not quite so lethal materials. His search for new storage luckily came to fruition in December 1900, when he was able to purchase a 6.75 acre island known as Pollepel Island 53 miles north of Brooklyn on the east side of the Hudson River. It was 5.5 miles north of West Point and easily reached by boat, the safest and least expensive way to move large cannon and live ammunition. Over the next 18 years he constructed warehouses, a private residence for his family, and a replica Scottish castle, now in ruins, which is still a sight to be seen from Amtrak trains running up the east side of the Hudson River (Figures 7, 10, and 11).

By 1900, Francis had his two sons David and Francis VII working for him and this made him comfortable enough to venture to Europe to see what kind of bargains he could acquire and how many of the thousand Mauser rifles and ammunition he could sell. This was the first of a series of buying and selling trips abroad, including 1902, 1903, 1907, 1909, 1911, 1912, and 1915. In addition he made an extended trip to China and Japan in 1905. Each of these trips resulted in an increase in variety of military and antiquarian collectors goods offered in his catalogs. Whereas the earlier catalogs offered basically Civil War surplus and than

Spanish/American War surplus, as World War I approached more and more earlier weapons from around the world appeared in the catalog. Now it was military surplus from the world, often from periods long before the Civil War.

As the business prospered in the early years of the 20th century, Bannerman's time was consumed with things like castle building on Pollepel Island, European buying trips with his wife, a new home in the high class residential Hotel Margaret on Brooklyn Heights overlooking the East River and Manhattan and the purchase of 499 and 500 Broadway, Manhattan in 1910 (Figure 3). These became symbols of his growing wealth. Simultaneously he became very active in his church in Brooklyn, the Caledonian Society and focused his charitable giving attention on Brooklyn children in need. In addition he began to play a major role in buying and selling real estate in both Manhattan and Brooklyn.

By 1903, the Bannerman catalog had expanded to 112 pages and by 1906, it had expanded to 316 pages. The first decade of the 20th century must be considered the high point in the Bannerman business. The US Government was conducting numerous surplus sales between 1903 and 1910, averaging at least 18 sales per year with 1910, leading the list with at least 36 sales. It is not clear how many of these sales Bannerman himself attended but he was represented at most by his younger brother William or by competitors through prior arrangements. It is clear from existing Bannerman correspondence that he and his major competitors, such as Stokes Kirk in Philadelphia and William Read in Boston, did not hesitate to share the abundance of riches being offered by various branches of the US Government.

It was during this same period that Bannerman actively sold a large volume of uniforms to hundreds of theatrical and vaudeville groups, patriotic, church, and school boy's brigades. Likewise many schools and patriotic groups had drill teams who sought not only uniforms but rifles or muskets. Bannerman had a substantial business in cutting down Springfield trapdoors and selling them to school drill teams. He was even able to dispose of a large quantity of white uniforms to institutions for the mentally ill.

The demand for his inventory of weapons and other military goods was so large that in addition to the government and private auctions, he was acquiring surplus military goods from the adjutant and quartermaster departments of many states. Likewise he corresponded regularly with dealers in Great Britain and on the Continent seeking as many historical pieces of arms and armor as they could furnish. Every major department store in America was encouraged to buy from him and they did. While many stories have surfaced about Bannerman supplying Latin and South American rebels and governments with all types of weapons, if such happened, it happened



Figure 1. Bannerman at his desk at 579 Broadway.



Figure 2. Aerial view Pollepel Island.

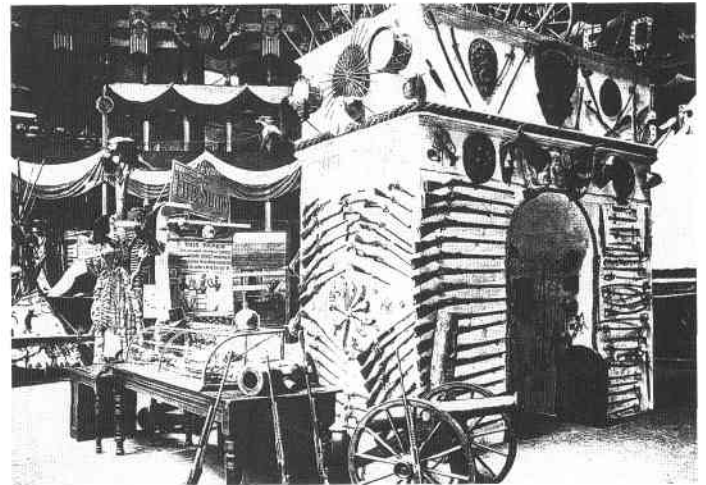


Figure 3. Bannerman display at 4th Annual Sportsman Show Madison Square Gardens circa 1896.

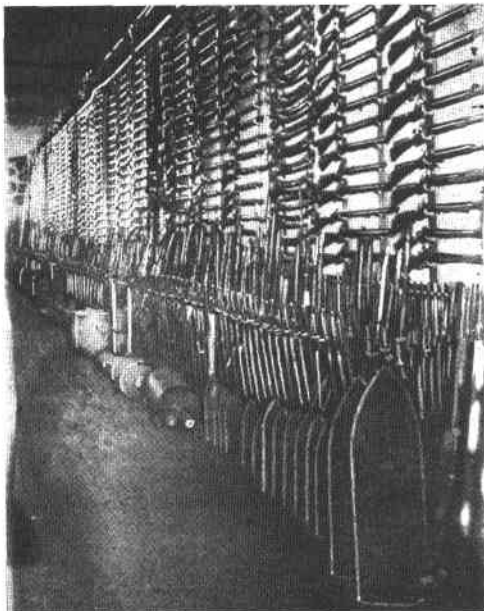


Figure 4. Interior view 501 Broadway.



Figure 5. Interior view 501 Broadway.

INDEX LOCUTES
 OF
 OBSOLETE AND OBSERVABLE
 FIRE ARMS, SWORDS, AND SABERS
 OF
 AMERICAN MANUFACTURE
 IN 1882.
 J. H. BROWN & CO.,
 110 N. 3RD ST.,
 PHILADELPHIA, PA.
 1882.
 BY
 J. H. BROWN & CO.,
 110 N. 3RD ST.,
 PHILADELPHIA, PA.
 1882.
 UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT AGENCY.
 Office of Inspection and Control, New York City, N. Y.

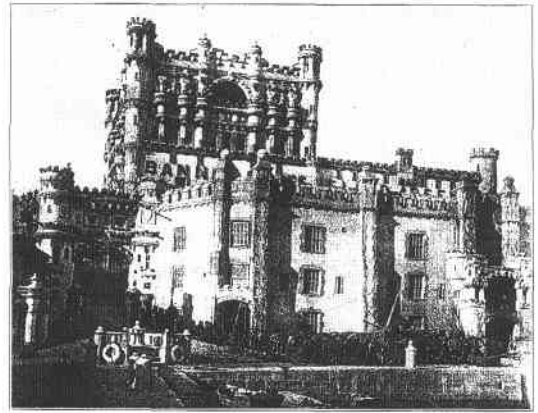
Figure 6. US Government surplus auction catalog—1882.

CATALOGUE
 —OF—
 GUNS, SWORDS, CANNONS,
 EQUIPMENTS,
 —AND—
 MILITARY GOODS,
 —FOR SALE BY—
 FRANCIS BANNERMAN,
 1114 Butler St.,
 BROOKLYN, N. Y.
 OCTOBER, 1888.
 H. N. Atkinson, Printer, 69 Wall Street, N. Y.



Figure 10. Castle ruins post 1969.

BANNERMAN ISLAND



VISITORS ARE NOT PERMITTED TO LAND, ON
 ACCOUNT OF THE EXPLOSIVES STORED HERE

Figure 7. Bannerman castle view from the east.



Figure 9. Business cards from various locations.



Figure 11. Castle ruins post 1969.

through foreign agents, and the details do not appear in the surviving Bannerman papers known to the author.

In 1915, a year after the commencement of World War I, Bannerman apparently appreciated the possibility that this war would bring on another bonanza of surplus military goods and he should be prepared. In September he purchased a lot on the Northwest corner of 7th Avenue and 37th Street, Manhattan. This lot had 244 feet on 37th St and 98.9 feet on 7th Avenue. A two story building occupied the lot. This was a seriously important piece of Manhattan real estate and would put him in a quality location in the merchandising center of Manhattan. He immediately retained architects to design a multi-story building to be erected on the site. For reasons not yet uncovered by the author, the building was never built, possibly because of the pending development of the war (Figure 9).

As World War I progressed Bannerman offered substantial gifts of military goods to several British units, These were initially rejected by the British government because he was not a citizen; later some of the material was accepted. He likewise furnished the US government with surplus materials but he got on the wrong side of the American press who claimed he was profiteering on some materials he had purchased from the government at bargain basement prices. This prompted a Congressional investigation in June and July 1918, which ended up going nowhere.

In 1917, Bannerman became ill and spent time in a hospital in Brockton, Massachusetts near where his third son, Walter, was a practicing physician. In April 1918, while he was still recovering from an operation, one of the more bizarre events occurred involving the United States Navy. On April 1, a United State submarine chaser landed 19 officers and enlisted men on Pollepel and took charge of the island in the name of the United State Government. They mounted guards on the island and demanded that the island's custodian unlock all of the storage facilities including the powder magazines. Since the custodian did not have the keys, the navy personnel broke into the storage facilities and searched them. Despite their failure to wear proper attire when entering the magazines containing explosive materials, no serious damage was done. Bannerman arrived on the scene the following day and was effectively put under house arrest for unknown crimes. After a stiff complaint was filed with the Secretary of the Navy by Bannerman's attorney, the Navy retreated. At a subsequent time Bannerman received an apology for the Navy's invasion. The event may have been the result of wartime hysteria when someone realized that Bannerman's superintendent at the island was an Austrian and in charge of a island of military goods.

Seven months later, on November 26, 1918, Bannerman died in his home in the Hotel Margaret in Brooklyn and was

buried in Greenwood, Brooklyn's magnificent rural cemetery. He was survived by his wife, three sons and at least one brother.

The two sons David and Francis VII took over the business in which they had been actively involved since the 1890s, and the business became known as Francis Bannerman Sons. The boys, particularly David, wasted no time and by 1920, they issued catalog number 16 with 404 pages. They hired Charles J. Scott as the everyday manager of the store at 501 Broadway who remained in that capacity until the late 1950s (Figures 4 and 5).

Adversity struck the new business very quickly. On August 16, 1920, the munitions storage magazine on Pollepel exploded slightly injuring Bannerman's widow and several others. A major piece of debris was blown eastward over a thousand feet and landed on the New York Central main line railroad tracks. Windows were broken for miles around. The next year the boys sold the Bergen Street, Brooklyn factory where the Spencer shotguns had been assembled in the 1890s. This property had been for sale for well over a decade.

David, who had inherited his father's interest in the wide promotion of their goods by catalog, took over the catalog production. One of his innovations was the addition of historical material in the catalog which made it more than just a sales catalog. Indeed he must be credited for creating the catalogs which current older collectors thumbed to death in their youth and through which they received a good deal of their early education on historical arms which in turn took them into 510 Broadway to browse, smooze, and buy. A few catalogs were issued hardbound with glossy paper but the bulk of the catalogs were softbound with inferior paper. It is the ratty torn and finger stained softbound copies that are now most frequently seen.

Although the US Government surplus sales did not continue to be a big source of merchandise after World War I, the brothers did buy at those sales and supplemented their purchases for stock by an increase in purchases at State Government surplus sales and at private auctions. In addition they made a substantial number of private purchases, particularly of historical arms. Sales tapered off badly in the 1930s and during World War II. Francis VII died in 1946 and Bannerman's other son David died in 1957. Charles E. Bannerman, David's son, was a lawyer and never actively became involved with the company until his father's death in 1957, when he took over the business.

Shortly after the end of World War II and the death of Francis VII, James F. Hogan, a veteran of World War II, was hired and subsequently became the manager of the store and the person most remembered by current collectors who visited 501 Broadway in the post war years. Meanwhile, the facility at Pollepel Island had in many ways outlived its use-

fulness and was deteriorating at a rapid pace. The family seldom visited the home on the hill and vandals and curiosity seekers landed on the island all too frequently. It was difficult to maintain security and the ownership of the Island began to be a millstone around the family's neck.

Following the death of David Bannerman in 1957, there was no family member seriously interested in maintaining the business. This led to a decision by Charles Bannerman to close the business at 501 in 1959. Most of the contents of 501, not sold in bargain lots, was moved to a warehouse at Blue Point, Long Island owned by Charles. There, James Hogan in due course, acquired the stock which he continued to sell for some years. Indeed Jim still has limited merchandise that he periodically sells at gun shows.

Charles Bannerman sold 501 Broadway in 1959, and the new owner demolished the building to create a parking lot, which is still in existence. 499 Broadway, which Bannerman used as a warehouse, still stands. This was a sad day for many since the building was a wonderful example of a mid-19th century merchandising facility, which during the Civil War had been the headquarters of E. Anthony, the famous New York photographic materials salesman. Views of the building at that time when compared with views while Bannerman owned it showed no exterior changes except the ownership signs.

Charles Bannerman during the late 1950s realized that he had a bit of a legal nightmare on his hands with the continued ownership of Pollepel Island. In legal terms it was an "attractive nuisance." In the summer of 1958, he made an arrangement with Val Forgett to remove all of the live projectiles from the Island. Val undertook this task and is still here to tell the story! It is a wonder that the whole island did not explode in one mighty blast.

In 1967 Charles Bannerman sold Pollepel Island to the State of New York, and in 1968 the Taconic State Park Commission took possession of the island as a state park. On August 8, 1969 the Bannerman Castle on the Island was destroyed by fire. The exterior walls which still stand draw the attention of anyone riding AMTRAK along the east side of the Hudson just south of Beacon. Indeed the cover of AMTRAK's 1999 major travel brochure features a color view of the castle with an AMTRAK train proceeding Southbound in the background.

Although badly neglected, the island and the remains of the castle are beginning to receive support as a state park from both the State and a private organization known as the Bannerman Castle Trust Inc. The goal is to stabilize the remains of the castle and the Bannerman family home and create nature trails where poison ivy and sumac now abound.

In summary, all of us who have been fortunate enough to have at least gazed upon parts of the interior of 501

Broadway and its contents should be thankful that we have had one of the more interesting experiences of our collecting life. Relatively few others were lucky enough to have been on Pollepel Island and to see the wondrous things stored there.

We all are indebted to Society member Mark Aziz for having the foresight to salvage as many of the Bannerman records as he could from both 501 Broadway and Pollepel Island in the late 1950s. In addition, we are fortunate that such current collectors as Val Forgett, Frank Sellers, Jack Malloy, Don Toppel, and Ray Darida, who had access to either all parts of 501 Broadway or Pollepel Island, are still around to describe these fascinating places and their contents.

SOURCES

Most of the information forming the basis for this article came from Bannerman records, preserved since the 1950s by Mark Aziz, plus Bannerman Catalogs and articles published in various periodicals and the previously mentioned six individuals and members of the Bannerman family. Probably at least 95% of the surviving Bannerman business and family papers are now part of the Bannerman Archive at The Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington, Delaware.

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