Confronting Tradition and Whim: The Design of United States Civic Flags

John M. Purcell

Vexillologists whose particular area of interest is American civic flags cannot help but feel a sense of dismay at times when they survey the field. As Dr. Whitney Smith points out in his perceptive article, “American Perspectives in Heraldry and Vexillology,”¹ the vexillologist’s function is to maintain an objective point of view, observing, researching, recording; and the issue of whether the flag with which one is confronted is well designed or poorly done is more properly the purview of the vexillographer. The fact is, as people dedicated to the study of flags, we cannot help but “wear both hats”, often simultaneously, although professional ethics mostly prevent us from making any comment about a flag’s aesthetics. Of course, even in our vexillographic mode, we may well have a difference of opinion among ourselves as to whether a flag is attractive and effective; personal taste certainly enters into the picture. Nevertheless, we have, over the past several decades, come to agree for the most part about what constitutes a well designed flag. The characteristics of a pleasing design, among those set forth both by Steve Tyson in his article, “Tips on Flag and Banner Design”,² and Henry Untermeyer in his monograph, “Don’t Litter or Letter Your City Flag”,³ seem to be simplicity, absence of lettering, a maximum of three colors (preferably bright), ease of recognition when flown, a shape that is consistent with

³ Published by Mr. Untermeyer (Palm Springs, California, January 1983).
its design, and a symbolism that is readily apparent. Unhappily, a great many U.S. civic flags appear not to measure up to these guidelines.

Dr. Smith points out a number of historical reasons for this, but the overriding fact is that early American settlers were by and large not concerned about the design and use of official symbols, which would have been the function of the aristocracy and government officials in the lands from which they came. As a consequence, when early Americans found themselves in a position to need symbols of government, they tended to rely on items familiar from their daily lives and environment, and since the written word was important to them, and often carried the weight of authority, they tended to incorporate words into their symbols as well. The old heraldic rules were regarded with suspicion as belonging to a class of oppressors, and so discarded, and with them, the idea that experts from outside could tell them what to do. Further, because the new society was staunchly democratic in principle, symbols tended to be chosen by popular vote. All this resulted ultimately in a kind of “American tradition” in the types and styles of symbols adopted, just as one can often identify certain characteristics that tend to identify symbols particular to other nations by the styles, shapes, and colors they employ. Let us examine briefly some of the more notable aspects of this “American tradition”, with some examples from U.S. civic flags.

Likely the favorite format for civic flags in the United States is an emblem on a plain field, probably deriving, as Dr. Smith notes, from the familiarity with the style of regimental flags from the U.S. Civil War period (1861-1865) when this pattern was common. The emblem that has apparently gained the most favor is the use of the civic seal. Because most municipalities need an official seal to affix to public

---

4 Smith: 43-46.
6 Smith: 51.
documents, it is one of the first emblems adopted. The seal becomes synonymous with civic authority, so that when an emblem is needed to represent that authority in situations other than the authorization of documents, the tendency seems to be to want to use the seal. For civic flags, seals are usually a poor choice, simply because the seal tends to have intricate detail, considerable lettering, and, when rendered in full color, many colors. Flags with seals or seal-like emblems are hard to identify when flown, and if the lettering is to be read correctly from both sides of the flag, must be double-faced, increasing the cost and creating a heavier flag that will not fly well without a stiff wind. Some examples are Boston, Massachusetts (Fig. 1), Elizabethtown, Kentucky (Fig. 2), Honolulu, Hawaii (Fig. 3), Niagara Falls, New York (Fig. 4), and Tucson, Arizona (Fig. 5).

Another popular design in civic flags is the use of tribars, more often vertical, but also horizontal and diagonal. These flags frequently incorporate seals or emblems as well. Examples of this group are Cleveland, Ohio (Fig. 6), Kansas City, Kansas (Fig. 7), Los Angeles, California (Fig. 8), Madison, Wisconsin (Fig. 9), New Orleans, Louisiana (Fig. 10), and Rochester, New York (Fig. 11). Another group, somewhat fewer in number—ostensibly because of a tradition of apathy or suspicion towards European heraldry—are those civic flags that are heraldically based, such as Baltimore,
Maryland (Fig. 12), the District of Columbia (Fig. 13), Newark, New Jersey (Fig. 14), and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Fig. 15), or those that strive to give that impression, such as Detroit, Michigan (Fig. 16).

Other than these three historic trends, we have seen somewhat more recently the tendency to what might be called an individualistic expression in flag design. Here there seem to be three principal categories we can identify. The first of these are flags designed by graphic or commercial artists. These people are accustomed to getting their message across using the written word, so they tend to rely on that when called upon to do flag design. Some examples of these flags are Bowling Green (Fig. 17), Cleveland Heights (Fig. 18), and Solon (Fig. 19), all in Ohio.

In the second category are those communities that use the services of landscape artists, who treat the flag’s field as if it were a canvas. The result is a flag that can only be properly discerned when hanging on a wall like a painting; when it is flying its design is difficult to distinguish. Examples of this kind of flag, again from Ohio, are Minerva Park (Fig. 20), Pickerington (Fig. 21), and Zanesville (unofficial; Fig. 22).

The third and final category comprises those flags that result from contests, committees, or the work of a civic employee or volunteer. From the vexillographer’s point of view,
Confronting Tradition and Whim: Design of United States Civic Flags

the flags that result from these sources frequently would not qualify as examples of good design. The reasons for this are often one or more of the following characteristics: too much clutter, a dependence on lettering, too many colors, too much detail, difficult to discern when flown, and an obscure symbolism. These flags are typically rather expensive to manufacture, because the more one puts on a flag, the more costly it becomes. Examples of such flags are Bellevue, Ohio (Fig. 23), Dixon, Illinois (Fig. 24), Green Bay, Wisconsin (Fig. 25), Jacksonville, Florida (former; Fig. 26), and Spokane, Washington (former; Fig. 27).

On the other hand, there are occasional successes in civic flag design that do embody the characteristics suggested by Tyson and Untermeyer. Examples of flags of this sort are Denver, Colorado (Fig. 28), Gahanna, Ohio (whose name is a Native American word meaning “Three-in-One”)\(^7\) (Fig. 29), Indianapolis, Indiana (Fig. 30), and Louisville, Kentucky (Fig. 31).

U.S. civic flags meeting the criteria for good design, however, are relatively few. If we are to be frank, the vast majority of civic flags are uninspired at best and an embarrassment at worst. Yet, as Dr. Smith indicates, “people

\(^7\) The particular Native American language is not identified in the ordinance adopting the flag. However, the area was settled by the Mingos, a tribe related to the Iroquois, and were also known as the Ohio Senecas.
have tremendous loyalty to these designs.\textsuperscript{8} When they are changed, it is often due to a new administration’s wishing to disassociate itself from the one that adopted the flag, and not because there is a desire to improve on its design. In fact, the new design is sometimes less successful than the previous one from an artistic point of view. Take for example two Ohio cities: North Olmsted adopted its first flag in 1965 (Fig. 32). The only one extant was apparently lost in a move to a new city hall, so later administrations forgot its existence. In 1990 the city had a contest and came up with a new one, somewhat more elaborate than its predecessor (Fig. 33). The other example, Toledo, adopted its first flag in 1909 (Fig. 34). In 1994, its council voted to replace on the center stripe the depiction of a stylized blockhouse of old Fort Industry, Toledo’s first settlement, with the original city seal (Fig. 35), thus making the flag considerably more expensive to manufacture.\textsuperscript{9}

Occasionally one will come across a municipality where the civic flag is tucked away in a cupboard or desk drawer because its design is not pleasing to the mayor or another person in authority, but usually there is not enough interest in the matter to consider trying to change it purely for aesthetics.

\textsuperscript{8}Smith: 51.

\textsuperscript{9}The original seal of Toledo, first adopted in 1873 and replaced in 1909, was also restored as the city’s official seal.
How should we as vexillologists react to all of this? Over the years we have striven to record the data objectively and make our analyses without a subjective evaluation of a flag’s good or poor design. That approach, of course, must continue if the discipline of vexillology is to maintain a reputation of integrity. Nevertheless, it is perhaps time for some of us also to concern ourselves as well with vexillography in an effort to foster better flag design at all levels, but especially with respect to civic flags, where the need seems to be the greatest. As we all know, there is no official entity or arbiter in the United States that approves flag design, as is the case in a number of other countries. In fact, such an institution runs counter to the prevailing American ethos of individualism.

Nevertheless, if there were an organization that could offer informed advice on good flag design that could be accessed on a voluntary basis, municipalities and other groups planning to adopt or change a flag might well avail themselves of, and, indeed, might welcome, the opportunity to do so. To this end, I am proposing here today that NAVA create an institute for the improvement of vexillography, perhaps to be called something like the North American Office of Flag Design. Such an Office, although sponsored by NAVA, would maintain a separate identity, the purposes of which would be clearly set forth in its bylaws. The function of this Office, as I envision it,
would be to offer advice from an informed point of view to any organization—governmental, commercial, or private—planning to adopt a flag, without being overtly judgmental about the final design adopted. The Office could be staffed by volunteer vexillologists who would be called upon because of their special expertise and availability for a particular need. Volunteers could declare their willingness to work locally, regionally, or nationally, and a brochure could be prepared for dissemination that would outline the role of such persons with respect to their participation in the design process, how they would proceed, their qualifications, and whether or not remuneration would be expected. Members of the Office, of course, would themselves work out details of such a procedure before any such work would be undertaken, and a code of ethics should desirably be formulated and agreed upon by all participants. The Office could then publicize its existence and begin its work. Such an Office, if invited, could function as well in Canada, because of its purely advisory nature, in a complementary way to the Canadian Heraldic Authority.

Fig. 26 Jacksonville, Florida (former)

Fig. 27 Spokane, Washington (former)

Fig. 28 Denver, Colorado

Fig. 29 Gahanna, Ohio

I am hardly so idealistic to think that the work would be easy, especially in the early days of the Office. On one hand, people are suspicious of outsiders and so-called “experts” telling them what they ought to do, especially if the outsiders’ advice is contrary to their own beliefs or ideas. (Take it from me, they will
have a hard time relinquishing that city seal!) On the other hand, modern society is accustomed to the function of the consultant who can come in to give advice about all sorts of projects. Successes such as Dr. Peter Orenski has had in working with the adoption of flags for his home city of New Milford, Connecticut,\(^\text{10}\) and the Hampton Roads group in Virginia,\(^\text{11}\) are indications of how well the Office could function at its best. We are certainly too late for those municipalities that have already adopted flags that might be better off left in the cupboard, and that have no plans to change them. Perhaps, though, as seasoned vexillologists turned vexillographers we can exert a positive force for influencing future flag designs that will create a new standard for an American tradition in civic flags in the coming century.

*This paper was presented at the 34\textsuperscript{th} NAVA Meeting in Lansing, Michigan in October 2000.*
