

American-Influenced Flags in Lower Canada

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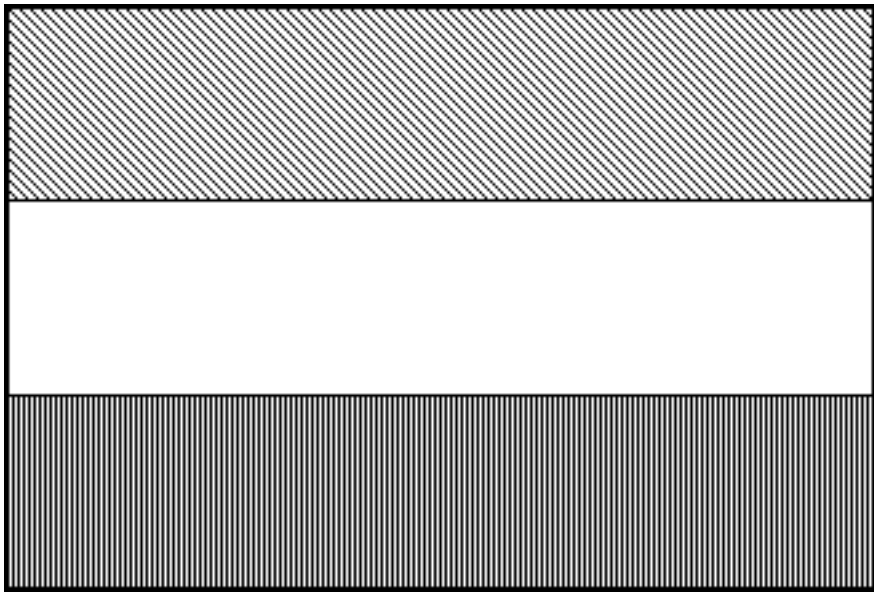
Introduction

The Parti Patriote of Lower Canada (*Bas-Canada*) of the 1830s comprised two factions: a group seeking autonomy and the end of corruption, and a group of American-sympathetic separatists. This political party's members used two types of flags, depending on their faction. This article will briefly describe the Patriote party of Lower Canada and its main flags, identify some clearly American-influenced flags used by the Patriotes, and draw conclusions. It concludes with a note on de Lorimier's mystery flag and final remarks on what remains today in Quebec.

The Patriote Party of Lower Canada and its Main Flags

Lower Canada existed from 1791 to 1840. Cut out from the Province of Quebec (1763-1791), its territory corresponded to the southern part of today's Quebec, plus the Ottawa country, today in Ontario; in other words, mainly the valleys of the Ottawa and Saint Lawrence Rivers. In 1840, it was united with Upper Canada (roughly today's southern Ontario) to form United Canada in which they were respectively known as Canada East and Canada West (although the names Lower and Upper Canada persisted in everyday use). Since 1867 Quebec and Ontario have been two distinct provinces of the Canadian federation.

From 1832 to 1837, the Patriote party, representing mainly French Canadians but also with many Irish and some British members, engaged in games of provocation with the British authorities and various loyalist militias, such as the Doric Club. These led to bloody confrontations in 1837-1838. Executions and repression lasted until 1839 and a page of history was turned with the unification with Upper Canada in 1840.



Le Tricolore canadien. V-W-R Illustration by the author.

The main flag used by the Patriotes from 1832 to 1838, known as *le Tricolore canadien*, was a horizontal tricolor of green, white, and red, of which many variations existed with the addition of green maple leaf branches, beavers, muskellunges [a species of pike], St. John the Baptist (patron saint of French Canadians), etc...¹ The flag was said to be inspired by the French Tricolor. Many interpreted the colors to represent respectively the Irish, the French Canadians (then simply known as Canadians), and the British. Another interpretation cited by Perrier claimed that the white was for the purity of Canadian motives, the green for the hope that the King would give justice to Canada in correcting abuses, and the red from the British flag as a symbol of loyalty. Even if we can legitimately doubt of the authenticity of these interpretations in the mind(s) of the creator(s) of the flag, they can at least be said to reflect the popular sentiments of the period.

American-Influenced Flags Used by the Patriotes

The references to the King and the Union Jack just cited show that Patriotes were not necessarily separatists as has often been said. In fact the following is quite enlightening:

¹ See Beaudoin's article in the bibliography for more details.

Along with the *Tricolore canadien*, **the Union Jack** was present, because Patriotes were nationalist but not anti-British. Two other flags were later to be used with the Tricolore: both white, one with **an eagle** holding a maple branch in his beak; the other, a **star**, symbol of Canadian future.

[Filteau 101-102, author's emphasis and translation.]

The apparent contradiction of British and American-like flags together in those days is, as we will see, illustrative of the two tendencies within the ranks of the Patriotes: one represented by the Patriotes' leader Louis-Joseph Papineau who fought, at least in the beginning, for a greater autonomy for the colony of Lower Canada; the second represented by the brothers Wolfred and Robert Nelson who were partisans of full independence for the colony. It is significant to note that Papineau was a seigneur and opposed to the abolition of the seigneur regime, while Dr. Robert Nelson declared its abolition in the declaration of independence proclaiming himself President of the Republic of Lower Canada.

Here are some other citations of American-influenced flags used by the Patriotes at the Sainte-Scholastique assembly, where Papineau was present, but where there were also some *Tricolores*:

“A cavalier opened the march with the Patriote flag, **green, white, red**, with a beaver, a maple leaf, and a muskellunge...one with an **American eagle**, ‘free as the wind’, the wings deployed on a white field filled with **stars**, besides, another flag, with the **Canadian eagle**, holding a branch of maple in his beak, flying on a blue field towards a **star** placed over these words: ‘Notre Avenir’ (Our Future)”

[Filteau 232, author's emphasis and translation.]

“And flags, like those at Sainte-Scholastique: **the three colors**, the **eagle**, the **star**...”

[Filteau 238, author's emphasis and translation.]

(Beaudoin 151 and Perrier cite these flags, but with minor disagreements about details).

In the following flag references, note that the names of the Nelson brothers are present or that there is mention of a battle (Papineau didn't participate in battles, while the Nelson brothers did):

We often forget that the true Patriote flag had **two gold stars on the white stripe**. There was, said Amédée Papineau, an agreement between the Patriotes of the provinces and “on the first day of battle, two gold stars appeared on the white of this flag”, symbolizing that the agreement between Lower and Upper Canadian Patriotes to evince the dictators was total. **A third star was to symbolize Halifax**, but it vanished...

[Aubin 113, author’s emphasis and translation.]

Napierville, November 4, 1838: Around nine o’clock, the President of the Republic and chief commander of the Lower Canadian army, **Dr. Robert Nelson**, reiterates the Independence proclamation (the first was at Caldwell’s Manor, February 28th, 1838) in front of six or seven hundred men where floated **a big white ensign with three stars**. **Nelson** then distributes arms to **Hindelang’s army**.

[Bernard 128, author’s emphasis and translation]

In a letter general Colborne writes to Lord Gosford: “**Dr. Wolfred Nelson** warned the Patriotes at a public assembly to be armed and ready to fight. Two inns between Saint-Denis and Saint-Charles fly the Tricolore. Many innkeepers have replaced their sign with an **eagle**. Yamaska’s bank notes show the same emblem.”

[Meunier 73, author’s emphasis and translation;
see also Filteau 263.]



The flag of the Papineau family. From the website of Château Montebello.

Conclusions

I believe we can draw two conclusions from what we just observed. First, although the preferred flag was the *Tricolore canadien*, American-style flags and symbols were also quite popular in Lower Canada in the 1830s. Second, the fact that when some people are mentioned with these flags they are almost always Patriotes associated with the radical faction can lead us to believe that these flags should be closely associated with them. In contrast to this, the flag of the Papineau family, which is preserved in the chapel of castle Montebello, was a Tricolore with the letters P L H in black on the white stripe.

The historian Filteau, though he does not analyze all



Papineau at the assembly of the six counties in Saint-Charles on October 23rd 1837, by Patrick Altman (Musée du Québec).

the facts I just have, comes to other conclusions: American-style flags simply mean that the Patriotes wanted the sympathy of Americans; the fact that some flags also had Canadian symbols shows that they did not want annexation (p. 232).

I agree with Filteau that the Patriotes did not want annexation of Lower Canada to the United States and that they did want American sympathy.² However, the facts cited above indicate that these flags were not there to gain American sympathy (in fact, what Americans could have been aware of the flags flown in Lower Canada?), rather they were the flags of the most radical wing of the party. Why else would these flags appear in battle and, most importantly, be flown during the declaration of independence?

Now we will see that another Patriote mentions a starred flag in a letter on the eve of his execution. This is quite surprising if we think of the *Tricolore* as the preferred flag for all Patriotes and regard, like Filteau, American-style flags as only meaning that the Patriotes wanted American sympathy.

A Note on de Lorimier's Mystery Flag

Chevalier de Lorimier was a young Patriote, the father of two girls, who was executed in 1839. On the eve of his death, he wrote a vibrant letter to his fellow Canadians of which we cite the following:

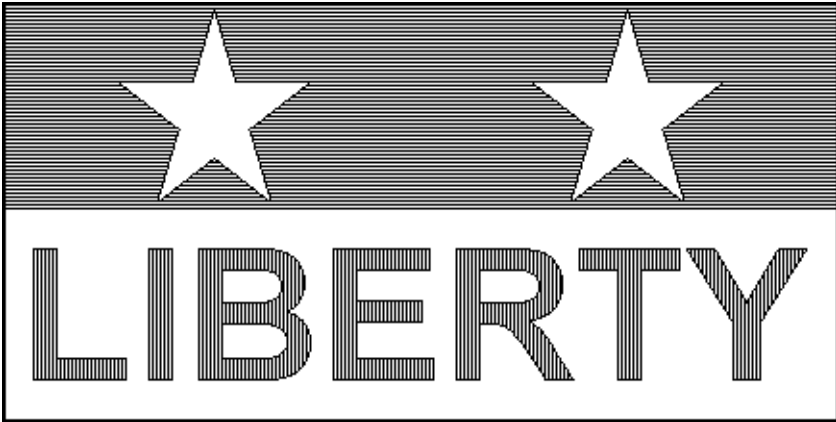
The peaceful *Canadien* will see joy and freedom again on the Saint Lawrence; everything converges to this goal, even the executions, the blood and tears shed on liberty's altar today water the roots of the tree that will fly **the flag marked with the two stars of the Canadas**.

[De Lorimier 56-57, author's emphasis and translation.]

Was de Lorimier thinking of a particular flag or should we just interpret this citation as a poetic phrase? We can think of four possibilities:

- De Lorimier alluded to a fictional flag simply for its poetic effect.
- De Lorimier alluded to the flag of the Upper Canadian Reformists (upper half blue with two white stars; lower half white with the word LIBERTY in red).

² During their exile in the USA, the Patriotes founded a secret society, *Les Frères Chasseurs* (The Brother Hunters), which recruited Americans for an eventual invasion of Canada. Although many Americans have been said to have joined, the promised support in men and weapons never became a reality.



Flag of the Upper Canadian Reformists. W stars/B; R letters/W. Illustration by the author.

- De Lorimier alluded to the Tricolore with two gold stars.
- De Lorimier alluded to one of the flags flown by the Nelsons' supporters.

Now here are some facts:

- De Lorimier fought with the **Fils de la Liberté (Sons of Liberty)** against the Doric Club where he received a bullet in the leg. This organization used posters with an eagle [Filteau illustrations].
- De Lorimier was executed along with **Hindelang** who fought alongside **Dr. Robert Nelson**. (See above for Hindelang and Nelson).
- De Lorimier's army was to join **Dr. Robert Nelson's** in **Napierville** until the latter was defeated. (See above for the flag flown in Napierville by Nelson).
- In his letter, de Lorimier on several occasions clearly calls for independence and liberty for Lower Canada.

Given these facts, I believe we can discard immediately the fictional flag hypothesis; de Lorimier was too close to Nelson not to be aware of the use of flags with stars and therefore his phrase could not have been innocent.

Since I have nowhere read of any contacts de Lorimier could have had with Upper Canadian Reformists, I see no reason for him to allude to their flag. Also, though he wishes freedom for both Canadas, his letter is clearly addressed to the inhabitants of Lower Canada (...*on the Saint-Lawrence...*).



ASSOCIATION
DES
FILS DE LA LIBERTÉ.

EN AVANT!

(Section No. 4.)

Citoyen,

IL y aura Assemblée DIMANCHE
prochain à l'HOTEL-L'HUISSIER,
Faubourg St. Antoine de notre Section,
à 1 Heure.

~~FRANÇOIS LORIMIER~~, Chef.

Montréal, 21 Oct. 1837.

From Filteau.

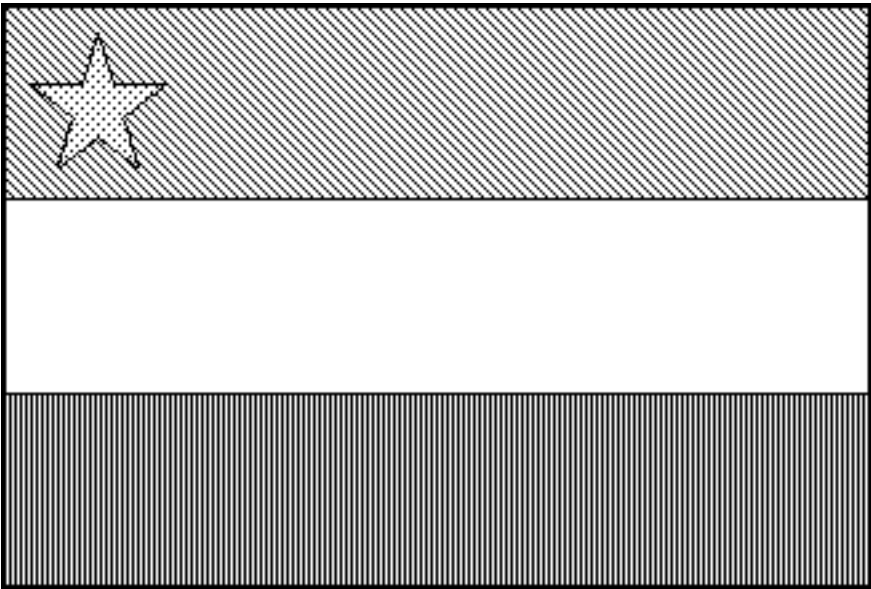
Although the starred Tricolore hypothesis is seducing, it would seem awkward to me that de Lorimier made no allusion to the stripes, only to the stars. This is not a completely improbable hypothesis, though.

The last hypothesis, that he alluded to a flag of the style used in Nelson's presence, is therefore the only one left and the facts given above all support a similarity of thinking between de Lorimier and the Nelsons.

What is Left Today in Quebec?

As Beaudoin (p. 163) has noted in *The Flag Bulletin*, since the 1960s the *Tricolore canadien* or *Drapeau des Patriotes*, as it is now known, has regained popularity among nationalists in Quebec. The flag is often seen in nationalist demonstrations, sometimes with the addition of a gold star on the green stripe near the hoist.³ It is improbable that this symbolizes sympathy for Americans or an allusion to the two factions of the Patriotes, rather a demonstration of republican ideas, but the influence from the 1830s' flags might be there.⁴ So although American-like flags are no longer in fashion in Quebec, one can still find traces of a past not so distant when things were different.

In conclusion, I believe I have provided a hypothesis that is better supported than Filteau's by the facts at hand. In the end, it might turn out that the association between American-influenced flags and radical Patriotes is not



Drapeau des Patriotes. Au star/V-W-R. Illustration by the author.

³ Many variations are seen. The *Mouvement de Libération National du Québec* (MLNQ), for example, uses this starred flag with a centered image of a famous carving by Henri Julien, *Un Vieux de 37*: a Patriote holding a hunting gun, smoking a pipe and wearing a beanie, boots, and an arrowed sash.

⁴ It is probable that in the 1960s, the star was that of socialism, this being a popular ideology in the separatist milieu of that period. However, currently, the MLNQ claims on its web site that “the star signifies the light which guides the people of Quebec towards its destiny as a nation”.

as clear-cut as I propose, but I believe I have established that the use of these flags is surely less innocent than what has been assumed so far by historians.

I also hope to have given a good example of the interaction that is possible between history, political science, and vexillology. I have expanded on the use of American-influenced flags in Lower Canada and shown that the cleavage between the two factions of the Patriotes was such that they tended to use different flags.

Finally, I have provided some support for the idea that flags are the mirror of a society; when a society changes, so do its symbols or the interpretations given to them, all this within the natural continuity of history. Thus, whatever the original intentions behind the creation of the first *Tricolore canadien*, some interpretations were given to it at the time. More radical Patriotes then adopted different flags after the lack of success of the more moderate flag. Today the starred tricolor, which inherits from both of these traditions, takes on yet another meaning: the desire to establish an independent republic of Quebec.

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