

# Flag and Symbol Usage in Early New England

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David B. Martucci

Before European colonial settlement in America, symbol and flag usage varied from kingdom to kingdom in Europe and according to who made the voyages of discovery. Understanding the prevailing customs of the times can help explain what developed locally in New England.

## CABOT'S DISCOVERIES

England's King Henry VII issued a commission to John Cabot in 1496, which instructed him to sail "... under his royal banner (Figure 1) and ensigns; and ... to seek out, discover, and find, whatsoever isles, countries, regions, or provinces *of the heathen and infidels*, wheresoever they might be, which had before that time been unknown to *all Christians*; and to set up banners and ensigns in every village, isle, or main land so discovered."<sup>1</sup>

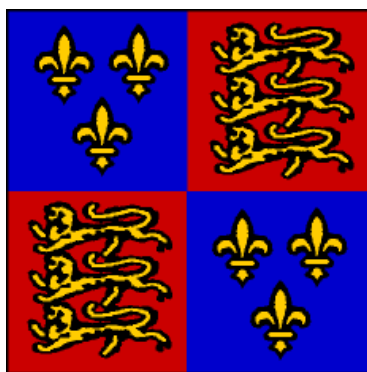
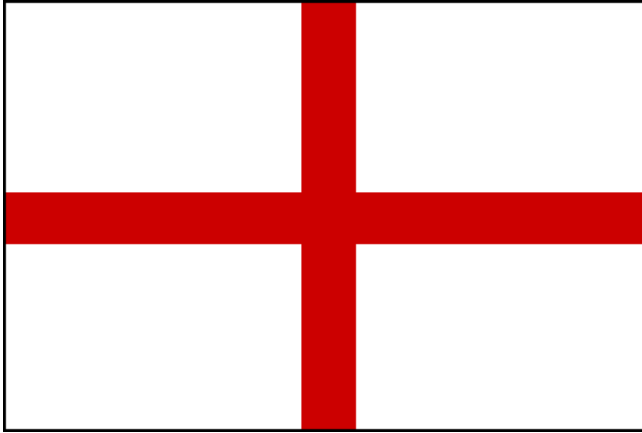


Figure 1. Royal Banner of Henry VII (Y/B, Y/R)

Cabot set sail in the *Matthew* from Bristol on 2 May 1497 and reached the coast of North America 35 days later. On 24 June he landed, perhaps at today's Griquet Harbor in Newfoundland. "The formal ceremony of claiming possession of the land was carried out with a crosier, the flag of St. George for King Henry (Figure 2), and the flag of St. Mark in remembrance of Cabot's years as a citizen of Venice (Figure 3)."<sup>2</sup>



*Figure 2. St. George for England (R/W)*



*Figure 3. Lion of St. Mark for Venice (Y/R)*

## STONES, POLES, CROSSES, AND ARMS

A mark of first arrival was the key point. Something more permanent and easily understood was needed. In 1577, Martin Frobisher, on his second voyage to America, "... marched through the country, with ensign displayed, so far as was thought needful, and now and then heaped up stones on high mountains, and other places in token of possession, as likewise to signify unto such as hereafter may chance to arrive there, that possession is taken ... by those that first found the country."<sup>3</sup> Later the English adopted the custom of erecting a post or pole bearing the sovereign's arms as a token of possession.

In his voyage around the world in 1576-77, Sir Francis Drake arrived at a land on the Pacific coast of North America where the local inhabitants were induced to cede to Queen Elizabeth their province, which he renamed New Albion. The report of this voyage states, "At our departure hence our general set up a monument of being there, as also of Her Majesty's right and title to the same, namely a plate, nailed upon a fair great post, whereupon was engraved Her Majesty's name, the day and year of our arrival there, with the free giving up of the province and people into Her Majesty's hands, together with Her Highness' picture and arms in a piece of six pence of current English money under the plate, whereupon was also written the name of our general."<sup>4</sup>

In 1583, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, in an account of his arrival at the island that was later named Newfoundland, "Afterwards were erected ... the arms of England engraven in lead, and infixed upon a pillar of wood."<sup>5</sup> The English were not alone in this custom. In 1624, the Swedish settlers who landed near what is now Wilmington, Delaware, planted a pole bearing the coat of arms of the Swedish king as a token of possession.<sup>6</sup> However, when George Weymouth and his expedition arrived in New England in 1605, he "... set up a crosse on the shore side upon the rockes"<sup>7</sup> of the first major island he stopped at. Later, on "Thursday, the 13 of June [1605], by two a clocke in the morning ... we went from our ship up to that part of the river which trended Westward into the maine, to search that: and we carried with us a Crosse, to erect at that point, which (because it was not daylight) we left on the shore untill our returne backe; when we set it up in

maner as the former (Figure 4). For this (by the way) we diligently observed, that in no place, either about the Ilands, or up in the maine, or alongst the river, we could discern any token or signe, that ever any Christian had beene before; of which either by cutting wood, digging for water, or setting up Crosses (a thing never omitted by any Christian travellers) we should have perceived some mention left.”<sup>8</sup>



*Figure 4. Replica of Weymouth's cross erected at "that part of the river which trended Westward into the maine" in Thomaston, Maine*



Figure 5. Seven-foot high limestone Padrão erected in 1486 at Cape Cross

This is interesting because despite this comment, there are no recorded instances of English explorers doing any such thing previously. What's going on here? The Portuguese, who had been exploring the coasts of Africa beginning in 1433, had apparently first adopted the custom of erecting large crosses to mark each "furthest point" in their endeavors. By the end of the fifteenth century, they began to replace these early markers, which were probably made of wood and deteriorating by this point, with large stone markers that had a cross at the top, and the arms of the Portuguese kings along with suitable inscriptions. They were placed at regular intervals along the African coastline. These stone markers are known as *Padrões*. Figure 5 depicts one that is seven feet high, made of limestone, erected in 1486 at Cape Cross.

The French, whose flag consisted of a cross with the shield of the Royal Arms in the center, also erected crosses as a sign of possession. "On July 24, 1534 Jacques Cartier took possession of Canada at Gaspé in the time of France with a cross and a blue escutcheon bearing fleurs de lis (i.e., the French king's coat of arms). He reported: '... we had made a large cross, thirty feet high; this was made in the presence of some of them [the Indians] at the point at the entrance of the harbor; on the middle of the cross we put a shield in relief with three fleurs de lis, above which was cut in large letters in wood *VIVE LE ROY DE FRANCE*.'

The same scene was repeated on 3 May 1536 when a cross was erected at Stadacona (Québec): 'under the crossbar of which there was an escutcheon of wood, of the arms of france, and on it was written in antique letters: *FRANCISCUS PRIMUS, DEI GRACIA FRANCORUM*

*REX, REGNAT* [Francis the First, by the Grace of God King of the French, Reigns].”<sup>9</sup>

“From that bay he crossed over to the main land, into a great river about twenty five leagues west from the bay, which they called St. Croix [Holy Cross]. This name was given to the river, and the country on its banks, because De Motte erected a cross fifty feet high on his landing [in 1603].”<sup>10</sup> “The truth was, that when the French landed on the west bank of what is now the Bay of Fundy, they erected a cross on the land, and gave the whole country the name of the *Holy Cross*.<sup>11</sup> The English later took great delight in burning these huge wooden crosses as they conquered parts of New France.

## ENGLISH COLORS

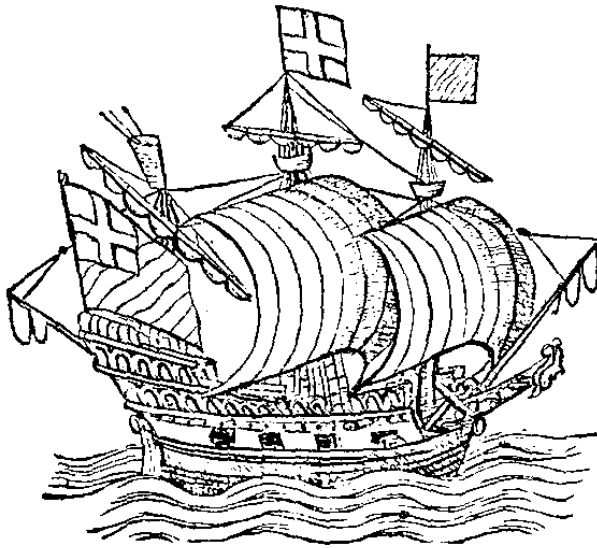
The English began to advertise settlement in Virginia (Figure 6), both the northern and southern parts, in the early 1600s. The northern portion was subsequently renamed *New England* by Captain John Smith and retains that name to this day. The English primarily used the Red Ensign, more commonly called the *Kings Colors*, on their ships and over any forts erected for defense in the new world.

## MILITIA COLORS

As soon as settlement in New England began, local militias were organized along the lines of the standard military organizations in England. A typical organizational chart of the day<sup>12</sup> (Figure 7) shows the regiment, which consisted of ten companies of about 100 men each, divided into three battalions, each commanded by one of the three principal officers: the colonel, lieutenant colonel, and the sergeant major, later called simply the major. Each of these officers was also captain of a company. Following them, each successive company was commanded by a captain, who was ranked according to precedence (which might change from time to time) and was known as “first captain”, “second captain”, and so forth.

NOVA BRITANNIA.  
**OFFRING MOST**  
Excellent fruites by Planting in  
VIRGINIA.

Exciting all such as be well affected  
to further the same.



LONDON

Printed for SAMVEL MACHAM, and are to be sold at  
his Shop in Pauls Church-yard, at the  
Signe of the Bul-head.

1609.

Figure 6. Cover of early tract advertising settlement in Virginia

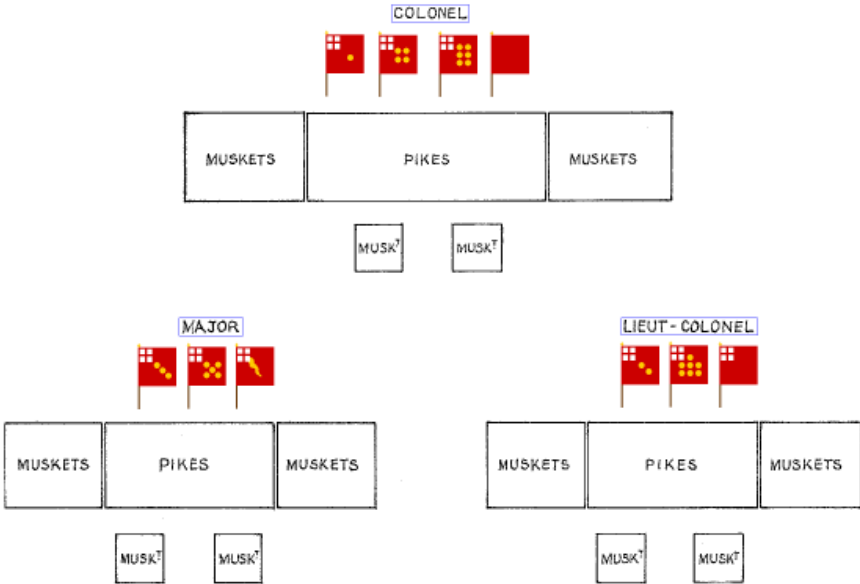


Figure 7. Typical organizational plan of a period regiment showing the “Venn” system of flags

These companies each had their own flag, called the “ensign”, as was (confusingly enough) the officer who carried the colors. The system developed in England at the time used the same basic flag color for the entire regiment, usually matching the color of the men’s jackets. The colonel’s flag was a plain solid color; the lieutenant colonel’s flag added a canton bearing St. George’s Cross; the major’s flag added a “blaze” or “pile way” as it is called in heraldry, issuing downwards from the canton towards the bottom fly corner for the flag. Each captain used the same flag as the lieutenant colonel, with the addition of one mark for each step in precedence, so, for example, the first captain’s colors had one mark, the second captain’s had two, and so on.

Slightly more than half of the regiment had pikes instead of muskets and these were grouped in the center of each battalion. By the end of the 17th century, the New England militias were the first military organizations in the world to abandon pikes in favor of having all soldiers bear muskets. The invention of the bayonet facilitated this change.





*Figure 8. Lt. colonel's company of the Red Regiment (WIR)*

Sometimes the regiments were named after their colors, so you will occasionally find references to the “Red Regiment”, for example, whose lieutenant colonel’s company might parade as in Figure 8.

The 1638 Book of Discipline used by the Military Company of the Massachusetts says of the Ensign, “... his colours ought to rest upon his side, being held by his right or left hand, and unfurled; upon the march his colours ought to be shouldered, taking up the corner end of them in his right hand, and to let them be half-flying; the Pikes and muskets all conforming unto the same posture. Marching through a city, for the more grace, his colours may be wholly flying, being advanced and held up by his right hand, or resting upon his right side. He ought to be a proper man, grave, valiant, and discreet, and to be well skilled in the Postures of the Pikes; in this respect he leads them, and they expect from him to be taught the Postures thereof. He ought to be well skilled in all the lofty Figures of displaying of the colours above the head, and to make use of them according to discretion and command; which is not only a healthful exercise to his body, but also most becoming to him, or any other Gentleman or

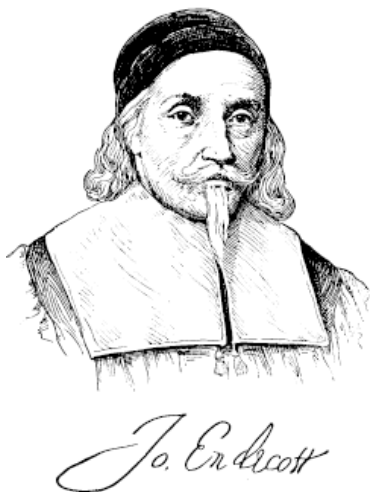


Figure 9. John Endicott

commander whatsoever, that shall sometimes make use of the same; although condemned through sloth and ignorance by others, who will not take the pains to learn it.”<sup>13</sup>

The earliest mention of military flags for use by the infantry formations of the Massachusetts militia is found at the start of the Bay Colony, particularly during the so-called “Great Migration” that began in 1630. Although it is likely there were military flags used before then, the records of the Puritan emigration detail the military supplies sent over to be used by the settlers. Among these supplies is listed “For every 100 male passengers over the age of sixteen, there were ... two ensigns ...”<sup>14</sup> The records of the first wave of emigration seem to indicate there were as many as 800 people in this category (out of more than 1,500 who came over in 1630), so the possibility exists there were up to 16 “ensigns” shipped along with them that first year. The records of subsequent emigrations between 1631 and 1643 when the great numbers had dwindled are silent about flags, but by 1636 there were three complete regiments in the colony, one in each county.<sup>15</sup> These would have had 30 companies and 60 colors.

## ENDICOTT DEFACTS THE FLAG

In 1634, a situation developed regarding the exact design of the company colors. John Endicott (Figure 9), who had been a leader of the early colony, took matters into his own hands, perhaps influenced by a sermon delivered by Roger Williams.

Endicott had settled in Salem in 1628 and was appointed governor of the colony, which was not much larger than the settlement at Salem. He



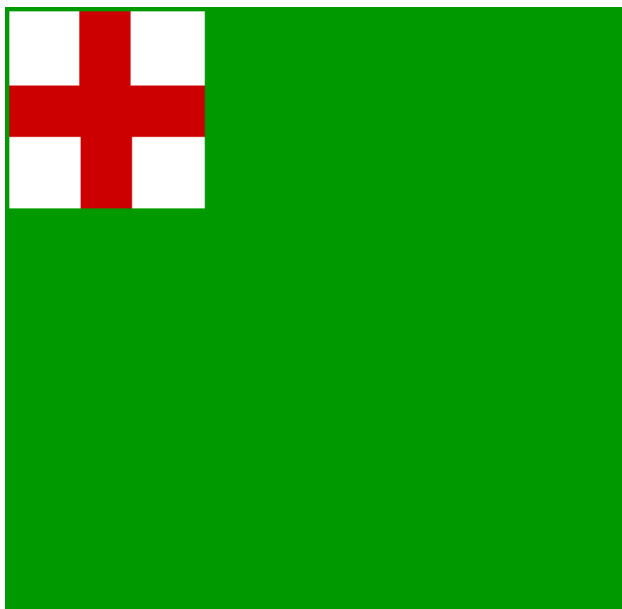
**CUTTING OUT THE CROSS.**

*Figure 10. A later fantasy—Endicott supposedly defaces the flag*

requisitioned weapons and uniforms for 100 men, which were shipped over in 1629. The supplies “... included most noticeably 100 green coats bound with red tape, deliberately copying a pattern common in contemporary operations in Ireland where a form of camouflage was required... (ref. Records Mass. 1:23-6, 31).”<sup>16</sup>

Although all later writers state unequivocally that the flag was red with the white canton bearing a red cross and that “Governor” Endicott ordered the cross “cut out” of the flag—some even state with authority it was the flag that was displayed before the governor’s mansion and that Endicott cut off the cross with his own hands (Figure 10)—there is no factual basis for any of these assertions.

But none of the existing records indicate the color or exact design of the flag. Based on Endicott’s procurement of green coats for the Salem company and the authoritative assignment of green for later colors in the same regiment (Newbury, 1684; see below), the flag was more likely green than red, although red flags with no cross were described later in Boston (Figure 11).



*Figure 11. Reconstruction of the Salem flag before defacement (R/W/V)*

Furthermore, in 1634 Endicott no longer held the post of governor—in 1630 John Winthrop and the other Puritan “Saints” took control of the colony and moved the capital to Boston. And with the Salem settlement being fairly new, it was unlikely that Endicott lived in any kind of mansion.

As for the removal of the cross, the existing records indicate he ordered the ensign, Richard Davenport, to remove a part of the cross, but the records kept by John Winthrop best explain this:

5 November 1634 “At the court of assistants complaint was made by some of the country, (viz., Richard Brown of Watertown, in the name of the rest,) that the ensign at Salem was defaced, viz. One part of the red cross taken out. Upon this, an attachment was awarded against Richard Davenport, ensign-bearer, to appear at the next court to answer. Much matter was made of this, as fearing it would be taken as an act of rebellion, or of like high nature, in defacing the king’s colors; though the truth were, it was done upon this opinion, that the red cross was given to the King of England by the pope, as an ensign of victory, and so a superstitious thing, and a relique of antichrist.”<sup>17</sup>

On 6 November 1634 Winthrop wrote to his son John, who was in London, stating, in part, “At the court it was informed, that some of Salem had taken out a piece of the cross in their ensign ...”<sup>18</sup>

Stephen Ede-Borrett in *Ensignes of the English Civil Wars* illustrates at least one flag of the period in such a way as to show how the cross was sewn onto the flag.<sup>19</sup> Likely many of them were sewn in a similar manner. He shows the horizontal piece sewn on first and then the vertical arm sewn on over the top of it. If Endicott ordered a “piece” of the cross removed, it seems likely it was the vertical bar, leaving the horizontal bar on the flag (Figure 12). Davenport, by the way, was acquitted of any wrongdoing. With some irony, he later named one of his daughters *Truecross*.

To muddy the waters further, many of the Puritans agreed the cross was somehow sacrilegious, but they were also afraid that removing it or using a different design would incur bad feelings from the mother gov-

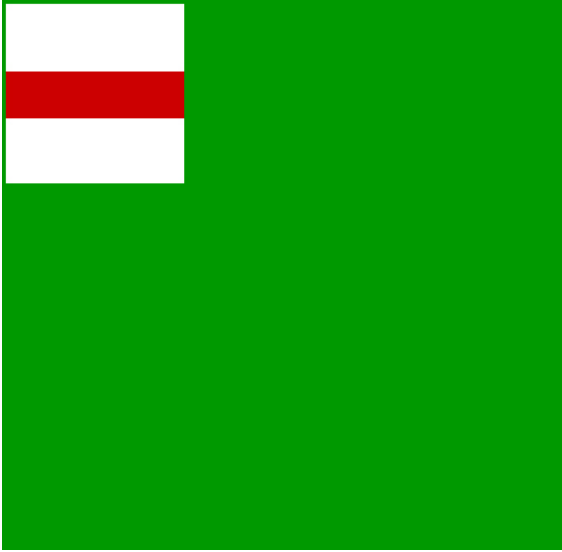


Figure 12. Reconstruction of the Salem flag after defacement (R/W/V)

ernment in England. To further quote Winthrop's accounts:

December 1634 "Mr. Endecott was called to answer for defacing the cross in the ensign; but, because the court could not agree about the thing, whether the ensigns should be laid by, in regard that many refused to follow them, the whole cause was deferred till the next general court; and the commissioners for military affairs gave order, in the mean time, that all the ensigns should be laid aside, etc."<sup>20</sup>

On 12 December 1634 Winthrop wrote to his son, stating in part, "We met last week, to consider about the business of the ensign at Salem, and have written a letter to my brother Downing [in England], wherein, under our hands, we signify our dislike of the action, and our purpose to punish the offenders.

6 March 1635 "Mr. Endecott was also left out [as a magistrate], and called into question about the defacing the cross in the ensign; and a committee was chosen, viz., every town chose one, ... and the magistrates chose four, who, taking the charge to consider of the offence, and the censure due to it, and to certify the court, after one or two hours time, made report

to the court, that they found his offence to be great, viz., rash and without discretion, taking upon him more authority than he had, and not seeking advice of the court, etc.; uncharitable, in that he, judging the cross, etc., to be a sin, did content himself to have reformed it at Salem, not taking care that others might be brought out of it also; laying a blemish also upon the rest of the magistrates, as if they would suffer idolatry, etc., and giving occasion to the state of England to think ill of us;—for which they adjudged him worthy [of] admonition, and to be disabled for one year from bearing any public office; declining any heavier sentence, because they were persuaded he did it out of tenderness of conscience, and not of any evil intent.”<sup>21</sup>

However, not everyone agreed. Thomas Hooker, who later led a band of dissenters and settled at Hartford where they founded the colony of Connecticut and where apparently the cross was always displayed on the flag, wrote a defense of the cross as a national symbol, not a religious one. One writer states, “Some more moderate leaders such as Thomas Dudley and Thomas Hooker expressed the belief that the reformation —had succeeded in weaning people from the idolatrous use of such symbols and that the cross on the flag could be accepted as a national emblem.”<sup>22</sup>

## **WHAT DO THE COLORS IN NEW ENGLAND LOOK LIKE?**

So the question then became what flag to use? At this point there was so much disagreement that the flags then in use were “laid aside”:

April 1635 “The matter of altering the cross in the ensign was referred to the next meeting, (the court being adjourned for three weeks,) it being propounded to turn it to the red and white rose (Figure 13), etc., and every man was to deal with his neighbors, to still their minds, who stood so stiff for the cross, until we should fully agree about it, which was expected, because the ministers promised to take pains about it, and to write into England, to have the judgments of the most wise and godly there.”<sup>23</sup>

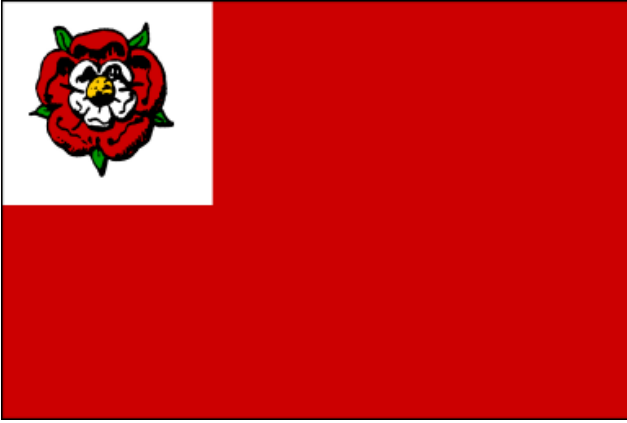


Figure 13. Reconstructed Tudor Rose design, not adopted (Y/W/R/V/W/R)

1 December 1635 “At the last general court, it was referred to the military commissioners to appoint colors for every company; who did accordingly, and left out the cross in all of them ....”<sup>24</sup> At this time, the Boston unit was ranked as the first company of the colony. If the customs of England prevailed, then the regiment that the first company belonged to would be the Red Regiment, and the Boston military colors would be red.

As late as 23 July 1680, two Dutch visitors to Boston, Jasper Dankers and Peter Sluyter, described the flag they saw there in these words, “I observed that while the English flag or color has a red ground with a small

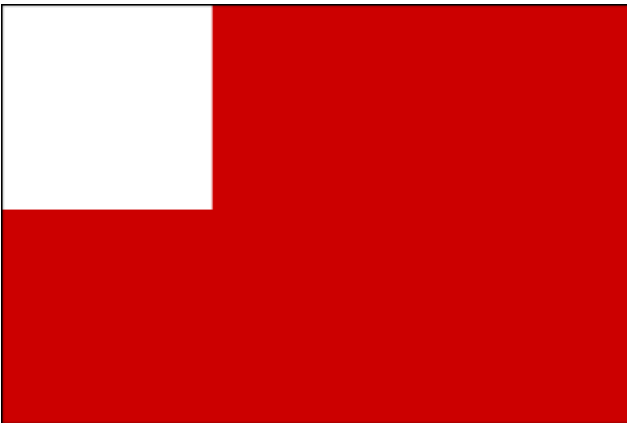


Figure 14. Crossless Ensign (W/R)



white field in the uppermost corner where there is a red cross, they have here dispensed with the cross in their colors and preserved the rest (Figure 14).”<sup>25</sup>

### **WHAT FLAG SHOULD BE “SPREAD” AT THE CASTLE?**

The real problem for the colonists in Boston was what colors to display at the Castle. Boston was situated on a peninsula jutting out into the harbor. A channel, leading to Boston from the southeast, allowed large ships to come and discharge/take on cargo right in the city. This channel ran past an island where the settlers built a fort and which they named “Castle Island” (Figure 15). This was the primary defense of Boston from attack by sea. The fort was manned in the name of the King and was the first place in the colony any visiting ship would see a flag and exchange salutes.



*Figure 15. Colonial map of Boston (upper left) and Castle William (lower right) showing the ship channel between them*

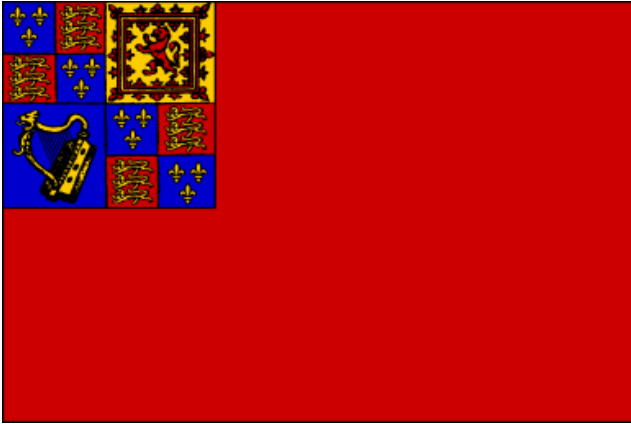


Figure 16. Reconstructed King's Arms Ensign (var./R)

The council wrestled with the proper flag for the castle. There was no doubt that if they changed the standard design, ships from Britain would clearly see what was going on and possibly report back to the authorities in London. Further, on 1 December 1635, Winthrop recorded they "...left out the cross in all of them, appointing the king's arms be put into that of Castle Island (Figure 16), ...."<sup>26</sup> However, it appears that they displayed no flag at all and that the flag with the King's Arms was probably never made.

15 March 1636 "Here arrived a ship, called the *St. Patrick*, belonging to Sir Thomas Wentworth, deputy of Ireland, one Palmer master. When she came near Castle Island, the lieutenant of the fort went aboard her, and made her strike her flag, which the master took as great injury, and complained of it to the magistrates, who, calling the lieutenant before them, heard the cause, and declared to the master that he had no commission to do so. And because he had made them strike to the fort, (which had then no colors abroad,) they tendered the master such satisfaction as he desired..."<sup>27</sup>

31 March 1636 "One Miller, master's mate in the *Hector*, spake to some of our people aboard his ship, that, because we had not the king's colors at our fort, we were all traitors and rebels, etc. The governor sent for the master, Mr. Ferne, and acquainted him with it, who promised to deliver him to us. Whereupon we sent the marshal and four sergeants to the

ship for him, but the master not being aboard, they would not deliver him; whereupon The master went himself and brought him to the court, and the words being proved against him by two witnesses, he was committed. The next day the master, to pacify his men, who were in a great tumult, requested he might be delivered to him, and did undertake to bring him before us again the day after, which was granted him, and he brought him to us at the time appointed. Then, in the presence of all the rest of the masters, he acknowledged his offence, and set his hand to a submission, and was discharged. Then the governor [Henry Vane] desired the masters, that they would deal freely, and tell us, if they did take any offence, and what they required of us. They answered that, in regard they should be examined upon their return, what colors they saw here, they did desire that the king's colors might be spread at our fort (Figure 17). It was answered that we had not the king's colors. Thereupon two of them did offer them freely to us. We replied, that for our part we were fully persuaded, that the cross in the ensign was idolatrous, and therefore might not set it in our ensign; but, because the fort was the king's, and maintained in his name, we thought that his colors might be spread there. So the governor accepted the colors of Capt. Palmer, and promised they should be set up at Castle Island. We had conferred over night with Mr. Cotton, etc., about the point. The governor, and Mr. Dudley, and Mr. Cotton, were of opinion, that they might be set up at the fort upon this distinction, that it was maintained in the king's name. Others, not being so persuaded, answered, and the governor and Mr. Dudley, being two of the council, and being persuaded of the lawfulness, etc., might use their power to set them up. Some others, being not so persuaded, could not join them in the act, yet would not oppose, as being doubtful, etc.”<sup>28</sup>

16 April 1636 “The governor with consent of Mr. Dudley gave warrant to lieutenant Morris to spread the king's colors at Castle Island, when the ships passed by. It was done at the request of the masters of the ten ships, which were then here, yet with this protestation, that we held the cross in the ensign idolatrous, and therefore might not set it in our own ensigns; but this being kept as the king's fort, the governor and some others were of opinion, that his own colors might be spread upon it. The colors were given us by Captain Palmer, and the governor in requital sent

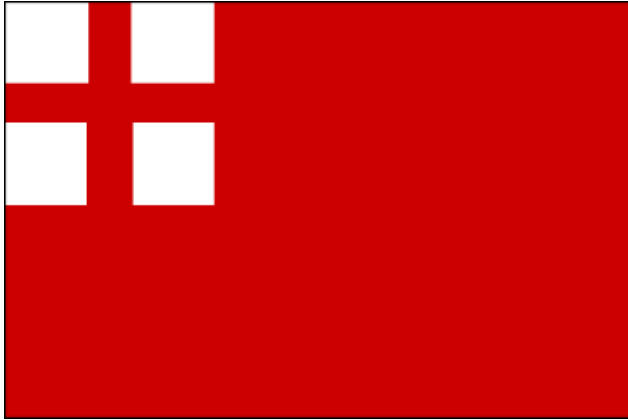


Figure 17. *English Ensign (R/W/R)*

him three beaver skins. But the deputy allowed not of this distinction.”

There the matter rested for most of the next 50 years, with the proper King’s Colors displayed at the fort on Castle Island and crossless ensigns displayed by the militia. In an undated pamphlet entitled *Good News from New England*, the author says

Prest to oppose haters of peace with guide  
 Of officers, three regiments abide  
 In Middlesex, seven ensigns are displayed,  
 There disciplined by Major Sedgwicke’s aid.<sup>30</sup>

(Major Sedgwick of the Middlesex Regiment was commissioned in 1644.)

## CHARTERED MILITARY COMPANIES

In addition to the militia units, there were a number of chartered “Military Companies” organized in this period. These were considered elite units and were privately financed and then chartered by the colony. The first was the Military Company of the Massachusetts, chartered in 1639, and still in existence today under the name of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company. Note the use of the name “Artillery” is not a

reference to cannon, but is used in the 17th-century notion of musket projectiles. In 1645, three other military companies were chartered.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately we do not know of any flags used by these units.

### THREE COUNTY TROOP

Massachusetts also fielded a number of cavalry troops: Suffolk Troop (organized prior to 1652), Essex Troop (1652), Norfolk Troop (1656), Three County Troop (1658), and the Middlesex Troop (prior to 1662). We have information on the flag of only the Three County Troop. A record in England dated 1659 details the “Work don for New England” (Figure 18) and illustrates a flag of red silk bearing an arm holding a sword and lightning bolts coming out of a cloud. The surrounding ribbon is inscribed “Thre County Trom”. The design is typical of such flags in this period. No doubt the emblem is the Arm of God ready to strike the bearer’s enemies.

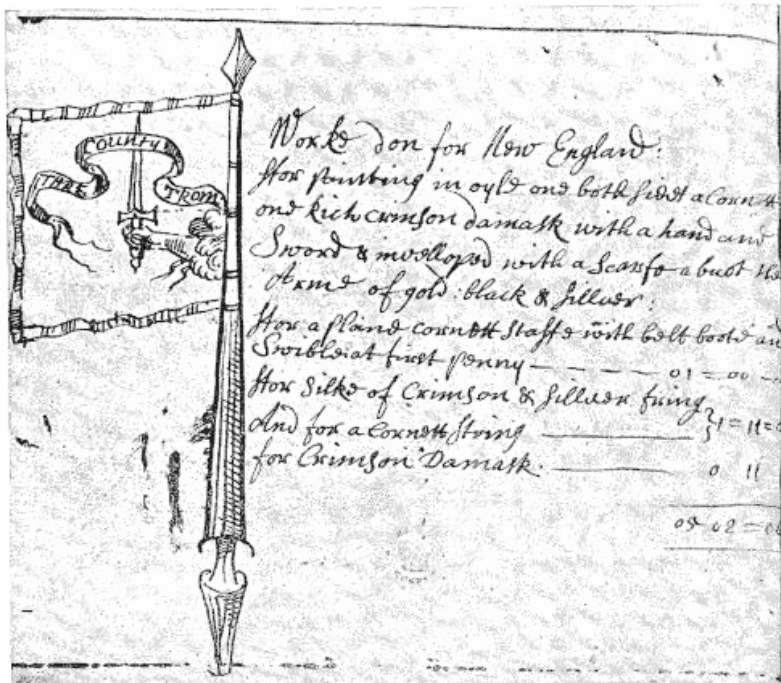


Figure 18. “Worke don for New England”



*Figure 19. The Bedford Flag (Y/R)*

## **BEDFORD FLAG**

Another flag long thought to be the Three County Troop flag is that preserved in Bedford, Massachusetts (Figure 19). Similar in size to other cavalry flags of the era, and once having been affixed to a pole very similar to that illustrated in the “Work don for New England”, it is documented as having been used on 19 April 1775 at the Battle of Concord Bridge, the opening of the American Revolution. It is a painted crimson damask silk bearing a very similar design with a different inscription (translated as “Conquer or Die”). Recent technical investigation suggests it dates from the early 18th century, not the middle 17th century. It was perhaps made later for one of the other cavalry units.

## **SAVAGE PORTRAIT FLAGS**

A painting of Major Thomas Savage made in 1679 (Figure 20) shows a tiny scene in the background of a regiment lined up in review with three flags posted in front. On the observer’s left is a plain red flag; in the center is the same with a white canton bearing a red St. George’s Cross; on the



Figure 20. Portrait of Major Thomas Savage, 1679

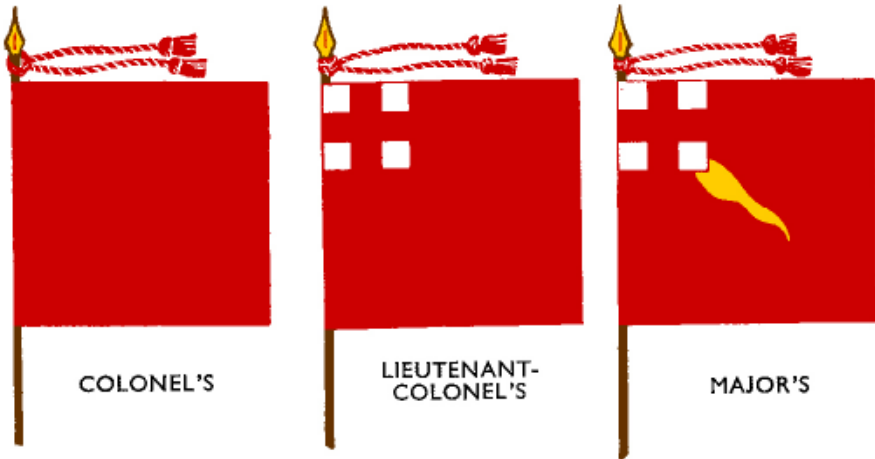
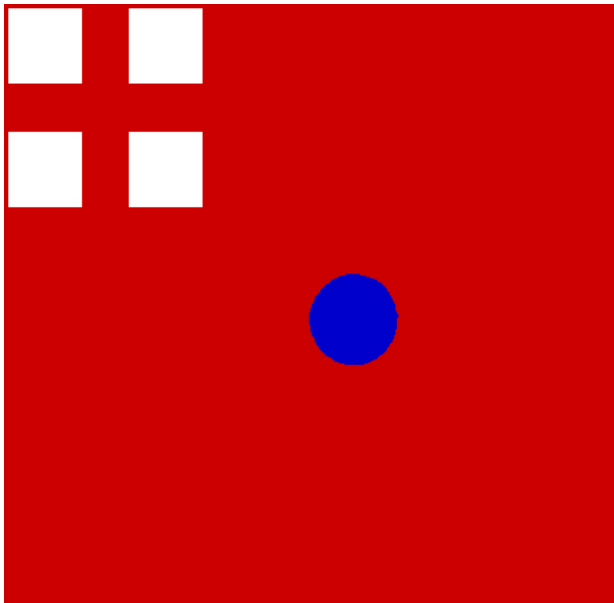


Figure 21. The three flags shown in the Portrait of Maj. Savage

right is the same flag with the addition of a wavy pile (or flame as it is often called) seemingly in yellow (although it may be white). These are the colors of the colonel, lieutenant colonel, and major of the Red Regiment (Figure 21). Savage led a company from Boston, so this illustration is of the Suffolk County Regiment.

## THE CROSS RESTORED

Samuel Crampton of Salem, Massachusetts, made colors for the militia of Saybrook, Connecticut, in 1675 (Figure 22). The flag was described as being “of double sarsnet [a type of silk], red with a white field to shew the red cross... with a blew ball in ye sd collures.” The size is described as being five and a quarter feet by six feet,<sup>32</sup> clearly a flag made in accordance with the common militia practice. It is ironic that a flag maker in the birthplace of the controversy about the cross in the flag would make one with the cross for a unit in Connecticut.



*Figure 22. Reconstruction of the flag made for the militia of Saybrook, Connecticut in 1675 (B, R/W/R)*



By the middle 1680s, the cross was more often included in the flag than not. Captain Thomas Noyes of Newbury, Massachusetts, was ordered by the council for the colonies in 1684 “to provide a flight of colors for your foot company, ye ground or flight whereof is to be green, with a red cross with a white field in ye angle, according to the ancient customs of our own English nation, and the English plantations in America, and our own practise in our ships and other vessels. The number of bullets to be put into your colors for distinction may be left out at present without damage in the making of them.”<sup>33</sup> The “number of bullets” of course refers to the distinguishing devices signifying the precedence of the captain within the regiment. Likely the reorganization of 1680 was still being implemented and their status was not fully determined at the time the flag was needed.

Judge Samuel Sewall kept a diary of that era and he mentions the cross controversy many times. Apparently two years later he received orders to restore the cross in his flag. The reason for this is that Massachusetts was about to get its first governor appointed by the King and many thought it advisable to be more conformist, especially about temporal matters. Sewall was the captain of one of the military companies of Boston, the South Company. As captain, Sewall would be the person ordered to have the cross added to the flag. The entry for August 20, 1686, the day he received red silk for making the cross, sheds light on his feelings, “I was and am in great exercise about the Cross to be put into the Colours, and afraid if I should have a hand in ’t whether it may not hinder my Entrance into the Holy Land.”<sup>34</sup>

Two days later he comments in his diary that he “... seriously discoursed with Capt. Eliot and Frary, signifying my inability to hold, and reading Mr. Cotton’s arguments to them about the Cross, and sayd that to introduce it into Boston at this time was much, seeing it had been kept out more than my Life-time, and now the Cross much set by in England and here; and it could scarce be put in but I must have a hand in it. I fetcht home the Silk Elizur Holyoke had of me, to make the Cross, last Friday morning; and went and discoursed Mr. Mather. He judged it Sin to have it put in, but the Captain not at fault; but I could hardly understand how

the Command of others could wholly excuse them, at least me who had spoken so much against it in April 1681, and that Summer and forward, upon occasion of Capt. Walley's putting the Cross in his Colours."<sup>35</sup> The next day he tendered his resignation as captain but it was refused. It was then the news was passed to him that they "... might expect Sir Edmund Andros, our Governor, here within six weeks; for ought I know that [restoring the cross to the flag] might make him more placid."<sup>36</sup> Apparently he agreed and he stayed on as captain for several more years, although discussion about the appropriateness of the cross lingered as well.

### **GRAYDON'S TREE FLAG**

That same year, one Lieutenant Graydon<sup>37</sup> painted or had painted a number of flag illustrations in a manuscript book, *Insignia Navalia by Lt. Graydon, 1686*.<sup>38</sup> Among the illustrations is a white flag bearing a red St. George's Cross and in the canton is a tree, possibly an oak tree. It is labeled "New England" and is the earliest known illustration of the famous Pine Tree Flags (Figure 23). The term "Pine Tree Flags" encompasses several tree varieties, including pines, oaks, willows, and possibly others. This echoes the usage of the famous "Pine Tree Shillings" minted in Massachusetts up to 1688, although all bore the same 1652 date, a time before minting money in the colonies became illegal (Figure 24). It seems likely the addition of a tree may have been introduced to help secularize the cross emblem.

### **NATIVE AMERICAN ROOTS OF THE PINE TREE**

The use of the pine tree as a symbol in New England likely predates European settlement by several hundred years. The League of the Five Nations (later increased to Six Nations), more commonly called the Iroquois League, adopted two symbols in antiquity that both showed a pine tree symbol. The legend of the founding of the league states that Hiawatha gathered the leaders of the five nations together at the most central point and together they planted "The Tree of the Great Peace", which is



Figure 23. The flag of New England painted by Lt. Graydon (tree proper, R/W)



Figure 24. A Pine Tree Shilling of Massachusetts Bay Colony

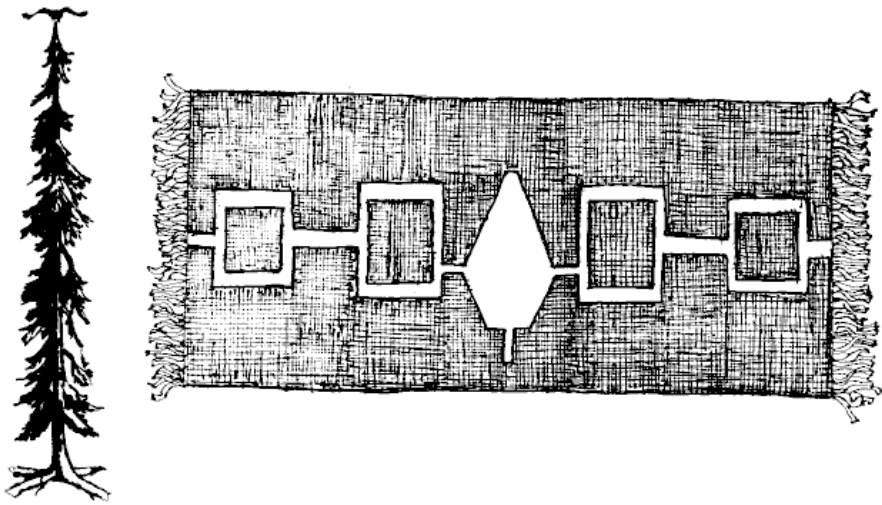


Figure 25. *Tree of the Great Peace emblem (left) and the Wampum Belt of Hiawatha (right), the two symbols of the Iroquois (W/B++)*

represented as a very tall white pine tree with an eagle atop it. The Iroquois seal still bears this emblem today. The other symbol is commonly called the “Wampum Belt of Hiawatha” and is made of shell beads of purplish-blue and white forming an image of a pine tree in the center and four squares linked to it, representing the united tribes (Figure 25). This emblem is still used as the Iroquois flag today.

The Iroquois territory is located in what is today upper New York State, but many of their traditions and customs were taught to and adopted by a number of more easterly situated peoples. Among them were the Pennacooks of central New Hampshire, northern Massachusetts, and southern Maine. The name “Pennacook” is Algonquin meaning “Children of the Pine Tree”. This tribe had some influence in the early European colonies and it is thought possible their symbol was later adopted by the New England settlers.<sup>39</sup> One possible piece of evidence of this is the seal adopted in the early 1630s by the Massachusetts Bay Company (Figure 26), which shows a native holding an unstrung bow and down-pointing arrow (still used as a part of the Massachusetts coat of arms today) with these words coming out of his mouth: “Come Over and Help Us.” Behind him we see two trees, on the left is a pine tree and on the right an oak tree.



Figure 26. Seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony

There is no doubt that the oak tree has been a symbol of England for centuries. Is the pine tree used here as a symbol of native New Englanders? We think so.



*Figure 27. First pattern of the New England Flag (V, R/WIR)*

## THE PINE TREE FLAG

At any rate, within a few years we see a number of illustrations of the New England Ensign with the pine tree in the canton of the cross (Figure 27). All of the English sources show it strictly as a red flag with the emblems in the canton. A blue-field version occasionally appears in history books, but this is an error of history. All the early sources that show the blue flag appear to have copied it from a Dutch-French work that showed the field “hatched” as blue, but described it directly below in Dutch and French as “The Red Flag of New England”.<sup>40</sup> There is no doubt the flag was red, the traditional color of England. This flag with some differences in the species of tree appears in the literature of the sea for a number of years afterwards. We don’t know how extensively it was actually used, but as we shall see it was not forgotten.



*Figure 28. The “Escutcheon Jack” (W, R/W/B)*

## **THE ESCUTCHEON JACK**

In 1701, the union of the two kingdoms of England and Scotland took place and new flags were prescribed. In addition to different militia flags (colors were reduced to just two per regiment), a merchant jack for use in the colonies was prescribed. Often called the “Escutcheon Jack”, this flag consisted of the new Union Flag with the addition of a plain white shield in the center (Figure 28).<sup>41</sup> News of it was passed around in the various colonies but there is no contemporary evidence that it was actually used, although if there was anyone left who thought the red cross was sinful, this certainly would have pleased them! Since the undefaced Union Flag was supposed to be reserved for the use of the Royal Navy and ships flying it gained some port privileges, it’s thought few ships changed their flag.

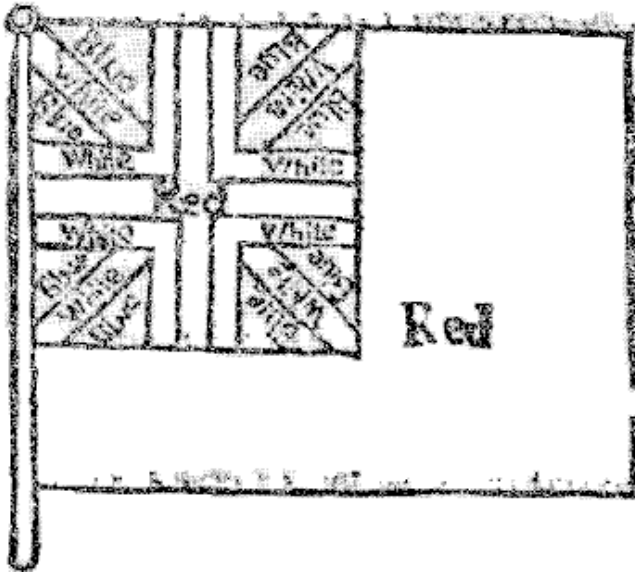


Figure 29. Drawing from the "Boston News-Letter", 26 January 1707/08

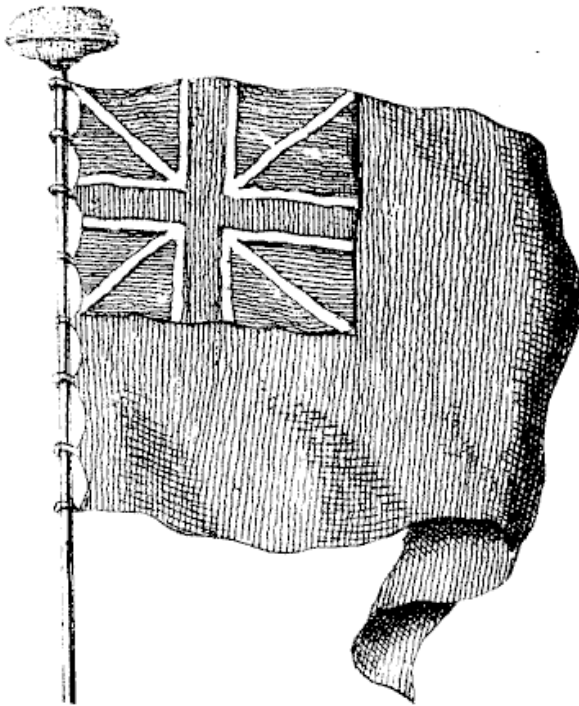


Figure 30. English Ensign in the colonial period



## BOSTON NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

On 26 January 1708 (1707 Old Style) the *Boston News-Letter* published the text and a drawing of the proclamation by Queen Anne of the new British Ensign to be used by all ships.<sup>42</sup> It is red, with a rather large Union Flag in the canton (Figure 29). From this point on, most illustrations showing flags in them show this flag on ships and forts (Figure 30), although there is still considerable variation in military colors.

## FRENCH & INDIAN WAR ERA FLAGS

As Britain and France drifted towards war over the possession of North America, the colonial governments organized and reorganized their military units. Few flags from this era have survived but three that have follow here.

### LAUBE FLAG

A flag found a few years ago in the bottom of a trunk in Long Island,



New York, likely dates from this era. Although in form it appears to be the older pine tree and cross of New England, the flag, made of buff-colored homespun wool includes an inscription “5th Regt.” Regimental numbering is thought to have begun following the Jacobite Uprising in 1745, after the victorious British regiments had difficulty deciding which should be first to parade before the king. The family that owned the flag includes a person who was ensign in the

*Figure 31. The Laube Flag...Pine Tree and Cross of the Fifth Regiment.*



*Figure 32. New-York Historical Society Louisbourg Flag fragment.*

5th Connecticut Regiment in the 1750s (and possibly earlier) and it is thought that this was his flag (Figure 31).

## **NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY FLAG**

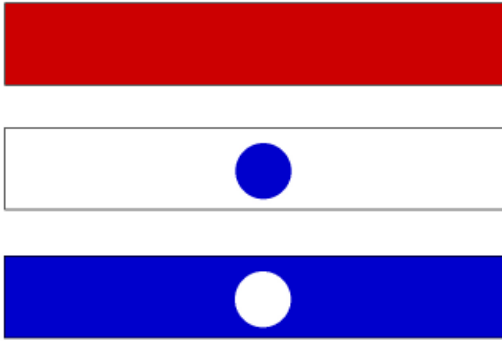
A flag fragment preserved by the New-York Historical Society shows Britannia seated on the shore with a British Navy ship in the background. It has remnants of red wool material on three sides. It is not known if this small piece was a canton (which would have had to have been inset somewhat to have red fabric at the top and two sides) or some other portion of the flag.<sup>43</sup> By tradition it is a piece of the 1st or 2nd Massachusetts Regimental Flag used at the siege of Louisbourg in 1745 (Figure 32). According to traditions in the town of Waldoboro, Maine, where the 2nd Massachusetts Regiment was raised in 1745, it carried a red flag.



*Figure 33. The Moulton Flag, York, Maine*

## THE MOULTON FLAG

Another flag associated with the siege of Louisbourg (Nova Scotia) in 1745 is that passed down in the Moulton family and now in the collections of the Smithsonian. It is identified with the 3rd Massachusetts Regiment, which was commanded by Colonel Jeremiah Moulton of what is now York, Maine. It is approximately three feet square, of white linen, and bears an oak tree with a sword suspended upright in its branches. Below is a scroll bearing the inscription “BELLO PAX QUÆRITUR” (“Peace is Sought Through War”), words supposedly uttered by Oliver Cromwell at his second investiture (Figure 33). The symbol of the tree on this flag echoes the symbols of New England a generation earlier. It is possible this flag is a piece of a larger flag since the edges are not hemmed, but it is also possible the missing portion was fringe, which was just coming into fashion on flags. The piece is one-sided, so another panel with either a different design or the same design was probably attached to the other side.<sup>44</sup>



*Figure 34. The three “vanes” described in 1746: from top to bottom, English transports (R), Massachusetts transports (B/W), and those from Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire (W/B)*

**VANES**

In the attack on French Canada in 1746, the transports of the New England troops each flew a distinctive “vane”. The term “vane” is an archaic one, now out of use as relating to flags, but at the time probably meant a long, narrow flag flown at the peak of the tallest mast to help indicate the wind direction. Usually these

were plain-colored cloth. In this instance, the English transports were to wear a red vane; those from Massachusetts a white vane with a blue ball in the center; and those of Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire, a blue vane with a white ball (Figure 34).<sup>45</sup> It is interesting to note that these color combinations are similar to the present state flags of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. At one time, the Rhode Island flag was also blue.



*Figure 35. The 1768 cartouche showing the second pattern of the New England Flag*

**1768 CARTOUCHE**

A scene of Boston Common near John Hancock’s mansion, dated 1768, contains a cartouche in the corner, part of which depicts a local fellow dressed in a hunting shirt and pants with a liberty cap on his head. He is holding an updated version of the Pine Tree Flag: the British Red Ensign bearing the Union Flag as its canton, with the first quarter



*Figure 36. Third pattern of the New England Flag depicted at the Battle of Bunker Hill (V/W/R)*

of the union white with a green pine tree (Figure 35).<sup>46</sup> A century had passed since New England wrestled with its own unique symbols, but the citizens of New England had not forgotten the trials of their fathers.

## **BUNKER HILL**

After the beginning of the Revolutionary War, forces in Massachusetts utilized the pine tree symbols in a number of different ways, providing continuity with their forefathers and their desire to govern themselves. Massachusetts adopted the New England Jack as its Navy Flag; although echoing the events of 1634, it removed the red cross and

retained the pine tree. A red ensign with just the tree in the canton was also used and it is illustrated in the painting by John Trumbull entitled *The Death of General Warren at Bunkers Hill* and was painted in 1786 (Figure 36).

Although more symbols of the United States rather than of New England soon took precedence, New Englanders have never forgotten their unique vexillological heritage.



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**Endnotes**

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22. "A Flag, A Cross, and A Sword", Robert F. Huber, *Howland Quarterly* (Yarmouth, Maine: Pilgrim John Howland Society, March 2004) [http://www.pilgrimjohnhowlandsociety.org/article\\_flag\\_cross\\_sword.shtml](http://www.pilgrimjohnhowlandsociety.org/article_flag_cross_sword.shtml). Huber does not cite his source but Savage in his retelling of Winthrop's Journal (*op cit*) on p. 189 in footnote 1 states, "A tract of nearly thirteen pages, in defense of the cross, by the celebrated Hooker, is among the MSS. of our [Massachusetts] Historical Society...." Requests for information relating to the whereabouts and availability of this manuscript to the Massachusetts Historical Society have revealed the manuscript is not presently found in the Society's collections.
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