

# Evocation and Figurative Thought in Tennessee Flag Culture

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Steven A. Knowlton

When the Department of Biology at the University of Memphis changed its name to the Department of Biological Sciences, it was explained that the field had expanded beyond its traditional focus and included “new concepts and methods derived from inclusion of physical sciences (chemistry and physics), mathematics, computational sciences, and engineering.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, vexillology is moving beyond description and categorization of flags and toward “a social science concerned with the meaning embodied in a banner and how that meaning is demonstrated and communicated in different cultural situations.”<sup>2</sup> As what might be branded “vexillological studies”, the field is now examining the import of flag-inspired designs that go beyond the halyard. Recent examples include the works of Laura K. Kidd and Scot Guenter on clothing with flag designs, and that of Guenter on flag tattoos.<sup>3</sup>

This paper focuses on the remarkably pervasive use of state flag-derived designs in Tennessee. The Volunteer State’s banner is widely used in the logos of corporations, governmental agencies, military units, and even professional sports teams. It is seldom the whole flag which is used; most often, it is the central badge of three five-pointed stars in a circle that appears in such designs. (Figure 1)

The use of state flag imagery in the logos of state government agencies is less surprising than its use by private organizations; perhaps most striking is the use of state flag imagery in the uniforms of two of Tennessee’s professional sports teams. The National Hockey League’s Nashville Predators find room for the three stars in a small shoulder patch. And the National Football League’s Tennessee Titans have the stars not only in their secondary merchandising logo, but in their main logo which is shown on their helmets.<sup>4</sup> (Figure 2)



Figure 1. The Tennessee state flag (field is red, center circle and bar in the fly are blue, and stars and fimbriations are white) and examples of logos incorporating the central emblem of the Tennessee flag. The last is the University of Memphis Army Reserve Officer Training Corps unit patch. (Source of the Tennessee flag image: Thomas R. Machnitzki, commons.wikipedia.org).



Figure 2. Flag-based logos used by professional sports teams in Tennessee: (l-r) Nashville Predators shoulder patch, Tennessee Titans merchandising logo, and Tennessee Titans helmet decal.

Tennessee is unique, or nearly so, among the United States in the extent to which its residents have embraced design elements of the state flag as part of their everyday visual culture. Granted, most states have flags which are not easily incorporated into logos. It seems unlikely that a professional football team would put elements of Nebraska's flag on their helmets. But even in other states with flags which lend themselves to integration within other logos, such as Colorado or South Carolina, the phenomenon does not seem to be as widespread. New Mexico does run a close second to Tennessee.<sup>5</sup>

For the curious vexillophile, a natural question is why Tennessee's flag should stand out in this way; surely Oregonians have as much love for their state as do Tennesseans, yet the Beaver State's flag remains simply a flag, not an everyday design element. A necessary but not sufficient explanation is that the simplicity of the design's central element fits easily into many logos, where more complex figures like a seal or arms do not. The round shape neatly replaces the letter "O" in many words, for example.

But the appeal goes beyond ease of display; Tennessee's flag has a unique attraction to the state's residents for reasons having to do with the cognitive effects which its design influences.

## The Political and Cultural Environment of Tennessee's Flag

Before proceeding to the discussion of the cognitive effects of Tennessee's flag, let us explore the milieu in which Tennessee's flag flies. As an instrument

of political unity, the Tennessee flag is tasked with symbolizing a state with a diversity of landforms, economies, and cultural norms. From Memphis in the southwest to Bristol in the northeast, the state is more than 500 miles long. Tennessee residents have long recognized that the state has three “Grand Divisions”: traditionally, mountainous East Tennessee has supported family farms and mining; the rolling hills of Middle Tennessee are home to livestock and tobacco farms; and the floodplains of West Tennessee support large cotton plantations. (Much has changed with the coming of the global economy, but the notion of the Grand Divisions remains a factor in Tennessee politics.)<sup>6</sup> The competing interests of these very different regions are so pronounced that the state constitution makes special provision to ensure each Grand Division has representation on the Tennessee Supreme Court.<sup>7</sup>

To even a casual observer of Tennessee, the three Grand Divisions are the most prominent feature of the state’s political culture. One element of the Tennessee flag’s strong appeal is that the three stars are well-understood and nearly obvious; unlike the recondite symbols of other states, there’s no doubt that the three stars are a meaningful representation of Tennessee.

Historically, Tennessee’s tensions flared into outright hostilities during the Civil War. While the state produced 140,000 soldiers for the Confederate army, it also delivered 50,000 Union soldiers.<sup>8</sup> Of those, almost 24,000 were members of the United States Colored Troops.<sup>9</sup> Derek Frisby notes that the popular election authorizing secession in June 1861 was characterized by “fraud, intimidation, and coercion” on the part of secessionists, and that a fair vote may have rejected secession.<sup>10</sup> West Tennessee was most fervent in its Confederate sympathies, while East Tennessee was home to the strongest Union sentiment.

Tennessee’s flag was designed by a lawyer and National Guard officer named LeRoy Reeves, and become official in 1905, a time when the Civil War was within living memory.<sup>11</sup> His motivation was to provide a means for Tennesseans to identify themselves outside the state:

*For many years I have wanted to see an appropriate symbol for our old state. The ‘single star’ of Texas, the blue flag of Virginia, the crimson emblem of Carolina have become history; yet on a thousand occasions when absent sons of Tennessee, in parades and other places would have gladly shown whence they had sprung, they have not a decent rag with which to show it. When the Tennessee societies of St. Louis and New York would celebrate Jackson Day, they cannot even hang the flag of their State over their tables.<sup>12</sup>*

Reeves's design was the first state symbol to incorporate three stars, so all three-star signs and symbols allude to the flag. Reeves stated that his main concern in the design was to promote the unity of the three Grand Divisions: "The three stars are of pure white, representing the three grand divisions of the State. They are bound together by the endless circle of the blue field, the symbol being three bound together in one—an indissoluble trinity."<sup>13</sup> He ascribed no meaning to the red field and said of the blue bar in the fly that it "relieves the sameness of the crimson field and prevents the flag from showing too much crimson when hanging limp."<sup>14</sup> (The common belief that the three stars refer to the fact that Tennessee was the third state admitted to the union after the original thirteen is completely unfounded.)<sup>15</sup>

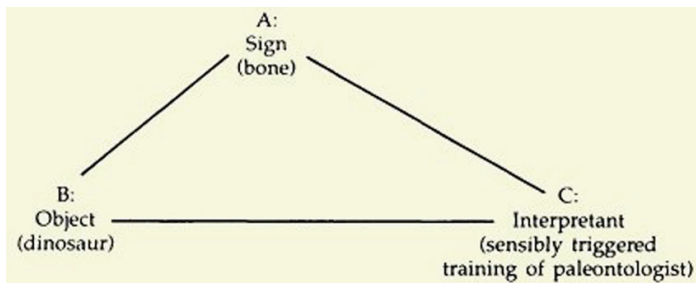
Beyond his public statements, we have no record of the thoughts of Reeves as he designed the flag. His personal papers, housed in the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University, contain no correspondence regarding the flag.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, there are no surviving records of the legislative debates about the flag, so neither do we know what interpretation the legislators ascribed to the design when enacting the law.<sup>17</sup> The popular press of the day provides no further illumination. A perusal of the daily papers of Tennessee's major cities reveals no debate or discussion about the proposed flag among the general populace or the opinion-piece writers. A small illustration of the flag appeared in the Memphis *Commercial-Appeal*, but beyond that the papers were silent except to note that the flag bill was among the new laws enacted by the legislature.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the return of a captured Civil War battle flag excited more comment than did the proposed state flag.<sup>19</sup>

With those facts about Tennessee and its flag in mind, let us turn to the reasons for the flag's abiding resonance for citizens of the Volunteer State. First, as discussed earlier, its individual elements have a symbolism that is easily intuited and relevant. Second, the elements within their setting have another layer of symbolism that is deeply resonant for some of Tennessee's citizens. And third, the phenomenon known to cognitive linguists as figurative thought allows for the presentation of a small part of the flag to evoke the entire flag and its associated meanings. I propose to demonstrate these points using the tools of two related branches of communication studies: semiotics and cognitive linguistics.

## Semiotics and Flags

A brief explanation of semiotics and pragmatics will serve as a foundation for examining the influence and cultural understanding of the design elements of Tennessee's flag. Semiotics is the branch of knowledge that studies how communication occurs through signs; in other words, what happens when an observer sees or hears a signal that represents a third entity? For example, when a paleontologist uncovers a bone, the bone serves to signify the former presence of a dinosaur; at the same time it triggers in the paleontologist's brain the idea of a dinosaur. The founder of semiotics, Charles S. Peirce, observed a "triadic" relationship in such communication: a sign communicates its object to an interpretant; or, in lay terms, the sign functions to induce in its observer the idea of some other entity.<sup>20</sup> (Figure 3) Much of the communication studied by semioticians has been linguistic, but semiotics applies to all forms of signs—gestures, images, and even animal dung provide forms of coded communication.



*Figure 3. A visual representation of Peirce's triadic relationship.*  
 Source: John Deely, *Basics of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 90.

The study of the triadic relationship between a sign, its object, and the observer, each of the sides of that triangle can be studied on its own. The sub-discipline of semantics studies the relationships of signs to objects; syntactics studies the relationships of signs to other signs; and pragmatics studies the relationships of signs to their observers and interpreters.<sup>21</sup> Vexillology has been subject to semiotic analysis for decades, although most semiotic approaches to flags have appeared outside the pages of vexillological journals.<sup>22</sup>

Pragmatics—the study of the relationship of signs to their observers—has applications in visual imagery. It is an important tool for art historians, and their approach may help us to understand part of the appeal of the Tennessee

state flag. Mieke Bal explains that the meaning imparted by a symbol is conferred by shared cultural background, also called common ground.<sup>23</sup> Observers understand the meaning of a sign because they are part of a culture which passes on, through various means, the message carried by a sign. To cite an example, in European cultures black clothes indicate mourning, while many women in North Africa wear white to mark their bereavement.<sup>24</sup> Within each culture, the meaning of the color is known. Some symbols have a very wide common ground. As flag-spotters have all experienced, an unfamiliar flag remains a mystery—we must be informed at least once of the nation, city, or political unit represented by the flag before we can associate the visual image with the object it represents; but we recognize that it very likely does represent some type of organization. Hence, common ground can apply to the notion of flags per se: when we see a rectangular piece of cloth suspended from a pole by one edge, we already identify it as symbolic of something, usually a political unit. It is a world-wide phenomenon that bits of cloth are accepted as prominent national symbols.<sup>25</sup>

So, a viewer begins with an assumed construct that informs us that pieces of cloth with no apparent practical function are symbolic, and the semiotic process begins there. Bal elaborates on this basic concept of common ground by explaining how cultural background enables observers of a sign to create meanings from unfamiliar symbols that nonetheless embody elements of other familiar signs: “Symbolicity works by means of recognition. It is useful to realize how much of a visual image we can process because we have seen elements, structures, poses, colors, compositional elements of it before, in other works making use of the same stock of elements the history of art has produced, and then reusing them, made conventional.”<sup>26</sup> The meaning we know from previous images is translated to new images that contain recognizable elements of the first image.

## **Pragmatic Unity**

The communications researcher Evelyn Goldsmith performed a series of experiments involving illustrations of textbooks. She found that viewers could more readily identify design elements if they were within a context that made clear their cultural referents.<sup>27</sup> For example, a circle with a small vertical line can be many things; when placed within a context of an illustration with a tree, a serpent, and an unclothed woman, the same shape clearly becomes an

apple—but only for an observer who has been acculturated to know the story of the apple, eaten by Eve, in the Garden of Eden, at the prompting of the serpent.<sup>28</sup> (Figure 4) This locating of symbols in a cultural context is called “pragmatic unity”, because the singular identity of the image is defined by the relationship of the symbol to its viewer, which is the province of pragmatics. In other words, the members of a larger audience of a sign have a collective shared understanding of the context, which provides the specific meaning of the image.

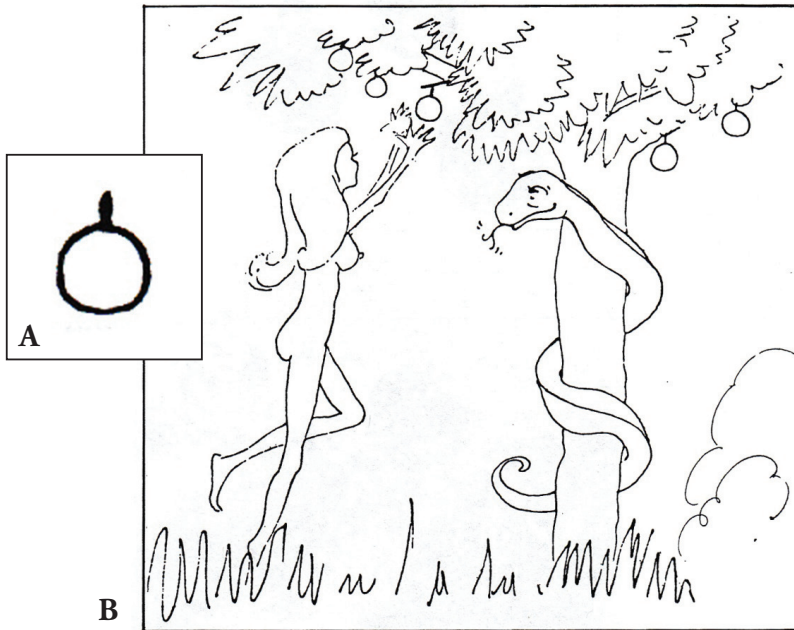


Figure 4. *Pragmatic Unity*—An ambiguous object (A) becomes identifiable in context (B). Source: Evelyn Goldsmith, *Research Into Illustration: An Approach and a Review* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 129.

## The Social and Artistic Context of the Tennessee Flag Design

Keeping in mind pragmatic unity, one can examine how the Tennessee flag takes advantage of certain symbols in context.

Despite the strong differences between the Grand Divisions, residents of all regions of Tennessee have embraced its flag. The notion of pragmatic unity may provide some explanation, by showing how the context of the symbols



of the flag connects them to other symbols important to Tennesseans. A flag designer working in the political circumstances of 1905 would have had to resort to a set of cultural associations that served as unifying imagery for the white population of Tennessee: Confederate iconography.

Tennesseans were deeply divided by the Civil War; however, by 1905 popular memory of the Civil War had changed. Instead of recalling the disunity that characterized Tennessee during the crisis, white Tennesseans participated in what modern historians call the Myth of the Lost Cause. A key part of Southern identity for many decades between the Civil War and the 1960s was the notion of a virtuous Confederate soldier class fighting a noble war that was doomed to inevitable defeat by superior Northern resources. Among the tenets of the myth was what historian Alan Nolan calls “the legend’s picture of a unified and committed Southern people,” in contrast to the historically divided white populace.<sup>29</sup> After the Civil War, writes Grace Elizabeth Hale, “whiteness [became]...a way to assert a new collectivity, the Confederacy, across lines of class and gender that divided free southerners.”<sup>30</sup>

One of the most potent symbols of Confederate solidarity was the Confederate Battle Flag. Although flags with a variety of designs had been flown by Confederate soldiers, the red banner with a blue St. Andrew’s cross and thirteen white stars had emerged as the consensus choice for those wishing to commemorate the Southern dead of the Civil War.<sup>31</sup> (Although the United Daughters of the Confederacy urged recognition that only the square-shaped banner was a true representation of the Battle Flag, the market for Battle Flags in rectangular form—to harmonize with the oblong flags that were often flown alongside the Southern Cross—far surpassed that for square flags.)<sup>32</sup> (Figure 5)

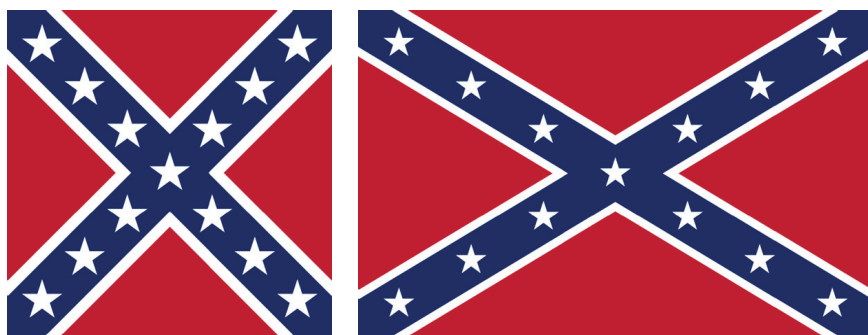


Figure 5. Confederate Battle Flag in its square and rectangular renditions.

The Confederate Battle Flag was not just a reminder of historical events, it was also an aspirational symbol of the very political characteristics of unity and patriotism that a state flag is intended to inspire. As John M. Coski writes, “White southern reverence for the battle flag was related clearly to reverence for the Confederate cause—for the memory of the Confederacy and its martyrs and sacrifices and for the principles of states’ rights and white supremacy. Rhetorical efforts, then and now, to demote the battle flag’s historical importance in order to make it more universally acceptable run afoul of overwhelming evidence that the battle flag was a powerful symbol of the Confederate cause and the entire Confederate experience.”<sup>33</sup>

Although the Battle Flag had been the emblem of a vanquished host, the phenomenon of continued reverence for the banner of a vanquished army was not unique to the South. Comparisons to Nazi Germany are almost always inapt, but it is interesting to see a similar line of thought in Adolf Hitler’s choice of the colors of the old Wilhemine flag to constitute the National Socialist German Workers’ Party flag: “The unique colors, which all of us so passionately love and which once won so much honor for the German people, attest our veneration for the past.”<sup>34</sup> Alette Hill notes that the flag was “not a symbol of defeat but a reminder of unfulfilled ambitions and courageous German soldiers.”<sup>35</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the “meaning” of the Confederate Battle Flag; indeed, Coski has written a lengthy monograph on the topic of the flag and the meanings ascribed to it through the past century and a half.<sup>36</sup> Other works provide insight into historic and current ascriptions of meaning to the flag. For an understanding of the flag’s use in the South during the Civil War, Robert Bonner’s *Colors and Blood* provides a thorough overview.<sup>37</sup> In a philosophical debate, a series of articles and reviews by George Schedler and Torin Alter have exchanged various approaches to the question of whether the Battle Flag remains a racist symbol.<sup>38</sup> Various African-American perspectives on the Battle Flag may be found in a special issue of *Callaloo*, a journal of African-American arts and letters, published in 2001.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the debate over its current significance, the notion that the Battle Flag initially represented a white supremacist impulse may be considered a fair account; after all, it was the flag of an army whose victory would have ensured the continued enslavement of most African Americans, and whose defeat was a necessary precursor to emancipation. After the contested decades of Reconstruction, segregation had become the law of the land following the

U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. It was not until the late 1940s—beginning with its display at the States' Rights Democratic Party (Dixiecrats) convention in 1948 and continuing through the era of the Civil Rights Movement—that the Battle Flag became associated with *defiant* proponents of segregation.<sup>40</sup>

Those who extolled the virtues represented by the Battle Flag in 1905 couched them entirely in affirmative tones, assuring their audiences that Confederate nostalgia was neither disloyal to the United States nor subversive of American values. A former Confederate officer spoke of “dual loyalty” on Flag Day in 1904: “There is in our hearts a double loyalty to-day; a loyalty to the present, and a loyalty to the dear, dead past. We still love our old battle flag... We have enshrined it in the sacred ark of our love; and we will honor it and cherish it evermore,—not now as a political symbol, but as the consecrated emblem of an heroic epoch; as the sacred memento of a day that is dead; as the embodiment of memories that will be tender and holy as long as life shall last.”<sup>41</sup> And a leader of the Sons of Confederate Veterans spoke in 1917: “We love that old banner because it stood for the struggle of our people to maintain domestic peace and tranquility, the most basal of the principles upon which organized society rests. We love that standard because it represents a sane and wholesome demand for real constitutional government. We venerate that emblem because it is the symbol of self-government by the consent of the governed.”<sup>42</sup>

Social historians such as Jennifer Ritterhouse have shown how child-rearing practices in the South during the first half of the twentieth century inculcated in whites the assumption of “white supremacy as natural, simply the way the world worked, no more worthy of comment than salt in the sea.”<sup>43</sup> Kristina DuRocher demonstrates that white Southerners were also socialized to believe that the oppressed African Americans of the South were content with the social order.<sup>44</sup> So even if those who venerated the Confederate flag did associate it with the social order of the South, it may not have been perceived as a symbol of injustice—if racial separation and oppression was natural and acceptable to all concerned, then a symbol of that social order was a symbol of virtue. The findings of the anthropologist Robert Shanafelt also bear on this discussion: he notes that rituals of flag display serve to reinforce group unity among dominant classes, and to induce submission among suppressed classes.<sup>45</sup> Use of the Confederate flag may have served psychosocial roles in the perpetuation of Jim Crow beyond merely evoking collective memory.

It may be of interest to note that the historical popularity of the Tennessee flag parallels that of the Confederate Battle Flag. As Coski notes, for most of the first century after the Civil War the Battle Flag was not widely displayed outside of historical monuments or commemorations such as Confederate Memorial Day or Robert E. Lee's birthday.<sup>46</sup> It was not until the "Flag Fad" of the 1950s, which coincided with a massive movement among white Southerners to resist desegregation, that the Battle Flag was widely displayed outside of memorial contexts. In 1956, Georgia added the Battle Flag to the design of its state colors as a symbol of "opposition to school desegregation."<sup>47</sup> (See Figure 8)

Similarly, Tennessee's flag was little-known even within the state—by 1938, lack of interest in the flag was so pronounced that the state information director began a campaign to raise awareness of the banner.<sup>48</sup> But an unscientific survey of photographic evidence shows that interest in the state flag picked up during the same period as display of the Battle Flag increased—in 1960 the state flag was first flown over the Capitol in Nashville on a regular basis, and use of the flag on the campus of Memphis State University is first attested in the late 1960s.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the later evolution of meanings attributed to the Battle Flag and evoked by the Tennessee flag, in 1905 it was a symbol which, to most white Tennesseans, called to mind positive attributes of southern culture. That the Confederate flag holds other meanings for African-American citizens of Tennessee was not an important consideration to anyone involved in making laws in 1905; in fact, 1905 was a year in the middle of a two-decade long effort to make Jim Crow laws stricter and more repressive.<sup>50</sup>

## **Tennessee's Flag Evoking the Confederate Battle Flag – And Other Flags Evoking Tennessee's**

Let us return to the idea of pragmatic unity—that signs are most easily recognized in context—and to the knowledge that we ascribe established meanings to a new symbol when we have seen elements of it before. The Tennessee flag has pragmatic unity with the Confederate flag: both share the element of white stars inside a fimbriated blue charge, and the element of that blue charge on a red field. These elements function semiotically to induce in a white Tennessean of 1905 the meaning that the Tennessee flag equals unity and commitment in a noble cause.

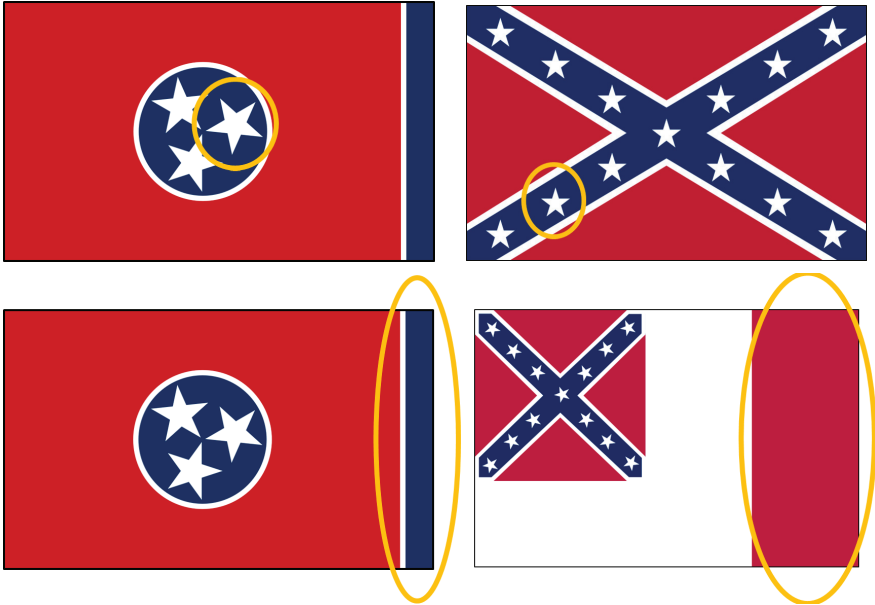
This is not to say that Captain Reeves *intentionally* set out to provide pragmatic unity between the Tennessee flag and the Confederate flag; he made no statement to that effect. But as Ann C. Tyler noted, “Interpretations are particularized within the design through their combination with other signs and their denoted messages. The audience, with its cultural beliefs and understanding, is also involved in particularizing the symbolic (connoted) message, thereby becoming an active reader.”<sup>51</sup> Interpretations are created not only by a designer, but also by a viewer. Regardless of what Reeves intended the white stars to mean, many viewers saw them as elements from the Confederate flag and attributed the same meanings to them. Despite many changes in race relations in the last half-century, Confederate imagery continues to exert a deep, almost mythic appeal to many Tennesseans. A recent publication of a Tennessee camp of the Sons of Confederate Veterans commented,

*The Confederate battle flag is revered as a symbol of freedom by those who have, at least, some understanding of what that means. . . . They understood the symbolism of the battle flag. They may not have grasped totally the Christian heritage of the banner, but they knew it represented liberty and opposition to tyranny. . . . Whenever the choice is left to ordinary folks, as it was awhile back in Mississippi, Confederate flags and symbols are resoundingly retained. It would have been thus in Georgia and in South Carolina if everyday folks had had the chance to vote on it. But then, the politicians and big businessmen really know what's best for us (or more properly, for them) and so they seek to remove those 'divisive' (historical) symbols of faith and freedom, and if they ever bother to pray about anything, they probably pray to whatever deity they embrace that the average Southerner would forget his history and heritage, and preferably his faith, too, if it would result in more business or votes for them.*<sup>52</sup>

Another explanation of the symbolic resonance of Tennessee's flag may be found in the work of the anthropologist Dan Sperber, who discovered in his research a “symbolic mechanism”: when humans encounter symbols, they employ a strategy that consists of “looking for the most systematic and coherent treatment for the diverse information with which they are confronted.”<sup>53</sup> The process by which the systemic and coherent treatment is retrieved is two-fold: focalization and evocation. Human memories are either “active,” that is, in use, or “passive”—in long-term storage awaiting activation. In focalization, the observer of visual information draws facts from passive memory into active memory in order to identify the image. Evocation then occurs to pro-

vide meaning for the image. Evocation is the unconscious exploration of “all recollections likely to corroborate the feeling of recognition.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, in the case of the Tennessee flag, the process of evocation calls to mind those sentiments attached to white stars within a blue charge on a red field. (Figure 6)

One may also note a resemblance between the vertical bars in Tennessee’s flag and the Third National Confederate flag. (Also Figure 6)



*Figure 6. (Top) Evocation of the Confederate Battle Flag by the Tennessee state flag—white stars within a blue charge on a red field. (Bottom) Resemblance of the vertical bars in the Tennessee state flag and the Third National Confederate Flag.*

This process of pragmatic unity—identifying elements within a context and assigning them familiar meanings—helps explain the popularity of the Tennessee state flag as a template for many of the city and county flags of the state. A large number of local flags freely incorporate elements of the state flag. Davidson County, Elizabethton, Hawkins County, Jackson, Knox County, Manchester, Oakland, Rutherford County, Van Buren County, Warren County, and White County all bear designs evocative of the state flag. A slim vertical fimbriated bar in the fly by itself has little meaning—but within the context of a flag, it is a feature unique to Tennessee. (Figure 7) The Tennessean who sees these flags associates the Tennessee flag to the local flag; without any need for maps or inscriptions, a vital geographical datum is conveyed to the viewer

with appropriate cultural knowledge. This process of pragmatic association is also found in design features of other flags such as the “Canadian pale”, which is a unifying element in a number of local and regional Canadian flags, as well as the frequent use of a burgee shape for Ohio county flags, and the recurrence of a black-and-yellow triangle at the hoist of East Timorese district flags.

One explanation for the popularity of Tennessee’s flag in logos is its evocation of positive sentiment associated with the Confederate Battle Flag. However, other states have flags that are even more reminiscent of the Confederate flag: Arkansas’s central charge repeats the angles of the rectangular version of the original, and Mississippi’s flag incorporates a square version of the Confederate flag entirely. (Figure 8) If pragmatic unity inducing a sense of community is at work in Tennessee, why aren’t the flags of Arkansas and Mississippi part of their states’ design cultures? I suggest two reasons: first, as earlier discussed, Tennessee’s simple charge fits elegantly into many designs, whereas those of



Figure 7. Some local flags of Tennessee. Hawkins County, Nashville/Davidson County, Jackson, Elizabethton, Knox County, Manchester, Van Buren County, Oakland, Warren County, Rutherford County, White County.

Arkansas and Mississippi are perhaps too cluttered. But more importantly, Tennessee is lightly evocative of the Confederate flag, while Arkansas and Mississippi are more blatant. The Confederate flag is a politically charged symbol, and those who display it openly do so knowing that their display is confrontational; a large corporation with aspirations to reach a multiethnic market would not dare to use any symbol that is too reminiscent of the Confederate flag. But Tennessee's symbol offers plausible deniability; it is reasonable to say a logo is only expressing Tennessee pride, even if deeper symbolic recognition does link it to Confederate imagery.



Figure 8. Other state flags reminiscent of the Confederate Battle Flag. (l-r) Georgia (1956-2001), Arkansas, Mississippi.

A related point is that not all viewers of the Tennessee flag necessarily associate it with the Confederate Battle Flag. Stuart Hall has theorized that each interpreter of an image can read it as the presenter intended, or in an oppositional stance, or in a negotiated reading. The negotiated reading “contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements” through which the viewer acknowledges the intended meaning but ignores it or adds his or her own understanding.<sup>55</sup> Thus, a viewer may have an unstated recognition of the Confederate roots of the Tennessee flag but a public understanding only of the unity of the state symbolized by the three stars. A leading African-American organization in Tennessee, the Urban League, uses a negotiated reading of the Tennessee flag when it incorporates a three-star symbol into a state map showing its branch locations.<sup>56</sup>

## Visual Synecdoche in Flag-Based Logos

Semiotics, and particularly pragmatics, can account for the popularity of the Tennessee flag due to its strong association with a beloved Confederate icon. But the prevalence of its central symbol, usually deprived of the meaning-making red field, demands further exploration.



Visually, Tennessee's flag is a striking design; whether one is culturally attuned to its resonances with Confederate symbolism, the viewer can still pick it out on a dais crowded with other flags. In the 2001 North American Vexillological Association poll about state and provincial flags, it ranked fourteenth.<sup>57</sup> However, at least one critic had higher praise for its design: "The flag of Tennessee might not be in the top ten of the 'Great NAVA Survey of 2001'... but Reeves's design has certainly accomplished color, simplicity, distinctness, and symbolism," writes Randy Howe.<sup>58</sup> Its central emblem of three stars within a circle is, to my knowledge, unique among flags, and this distinctiveness gives artists another advantage in drawing upon the flag to create striking designs.

I propose that the widespread use of the central emblem of the flag within Tennessee's visual culture is an example of a phenomenon known to cognitive linguists as figurative thought—and in particular, of that trope known as synecdoche. The concept of figurative thought bears a short digression. Figurative is, of course, the opposite of literal. Many of us are familiar with obvious examples of figurative thought, particularly metaphor. Figurative thought is so pervasive that very many of the fundamental ways we express ourselves are rooted in it. Consider the saying, "It's just a phase he's going through." We are so accustomed to think of experience as a journey that it seldom occurs to us that is in fact a metaphor. Similarly, an expression such as "I'm in love" is grounded in the metaphor of an emotional state as a place. George Lakoff notes that our use of figurative thought is "mostly unconscious, automatic, and used with no noticeable effort, just like our linguistic system and the rest of our conceptual system."<sup>59</sup>

Different varieties of figurative thought are known as tropes. The trope of metonymy is almost as well-known as metaphor. In metonymy, speakers express the notion of one entity by calling it the name of a related entity. For example, reporters will often proclaim that "the White House issued a statement." The White House, a building, is incapable of action; it was the staffers of the executive branch who work inside the White House who issued the statement. A variety of metonymy is synecdoche—the use of a part of something to represent it as a whole. The phrase "All hands on deck" really means all crewmembers; we use the hand to stand for the whole body. In flag lore, "The Stars and Stripes" is a synecdoche for the American flag.

Although figurative thought has primarily been studied by linguists, it is a phenomenon of all forms of communication, including the visual. Jerrold

Sadock reports that figurative thought has underlying principles that are “of a general psychological sort and are thus not specifically linguistic.”<sup>60</sup> Therefore, one may proceed to cover the figurative thought involved in visual synecdoche using the principles researchers have discovered in linguistic research.

The use of the three-star emblem from Tennessee’s flag in isolation from its context is a form of visual synecdoche: the central emblem represents the entire flag, and the viewer of the three-star emblem associates it with whatever meanings he or she ascribes to the flag. Visual synecdoche is different from pragmatic unity in that it works without context. The three stars in a circle are significant enough to provide meaning without being surrounded by the ground of associated elements. However, that does not mean the common ground is absent from the cognitive process. Raymond Gibbs notes that in understanding metonymy, viewers “make immediate use of common-ground information—the beliefs, knowledge and attitudes that are shared” among those creating the images and those viewing them.<sup>61</sup>

Researchers have explored the characteristics of visual elements that provoke an understanding of common ground in metonymy and synecdoche. Charles Forceville found that, in order for a viewer to recognize visual metonymy, the viewer must have a “conceptual domain”—a set of internalized associations that provides context for the meaning of a single image; he uses the example of the Leaning Tower of Pisa as a single element within the conceptual domain of “travel to Italy.”<sup>62</sup> If one doesn’t know anything about this building, it cannot call to mind other thoughts about Italy. Of course, very many visual images could be used as metonyms for travel to Italy, from crowded train stations to glasses of wine. Forceville and many others find that metonymy and synecdoche function according to “salience.”<sup>63</sup> Salience is that part of an image which conveys the features of an image which are most outstanding or relevant to the conceptual domain under discussion; according to Gibbs, “the general cognitive principle of metonymy [is that] people use one well-understood aspect of something to stand for the thing as a whole or some other aspect of it.”<sup>64</sup> The Leaning Tower of Pisa is more salient to the conceptual domain of “travel to Italy” because it is both unique to Italy and very commonly encountered by tourists; train stations and wine are not unique to Italy, and other unique features, such the city hall of the village of Nole, are not as commonly encountered.

When exploring the use of Tennessee’s flag elements, we see that salience is determinative of the use of the three stars in a circle. The conceptual domain

for Tennesseans is the entire flag—red field, blue stripe, and central emblem. But the salient element is three stars in a circle. It is unique to Tennessee’s flag in ways that other elements of the flag are not. Blue stripes appear in all sorts of flags, as do red fields. Neither of those elements is used for visual synecdoche. But the three stars in a circle are widely used, as we have seen. Even the colors of the stars and circle are not as salient—many logos dispense with the color scheme while retaining the element of stars in a circle. Just as *hands* can stand for *workers* because the hand is the most important part of the worker for accomplishing seafaring tasks, so the *three-stars-in-a-circle* design element can stand for the *entire flag* because it is what make the Tennessee flag distinctive.

There is one other aspect of synecdoche in Tennessee flag culture to explore: the use of three stars *without* the circle. The stars within a circle is a unique design feature among flags, but three stars are encountered occasionally in other flags—such as the Philippines, the District of Columbia, Vojvodina (Serbia), Guayas (Ecuador), and the flag of the anti-Assad forces in the Syrian civil war that began in 2011. And yet many logos of Tennessee organizations make free use of the three stars alone, without the circular element. (Figure 9)

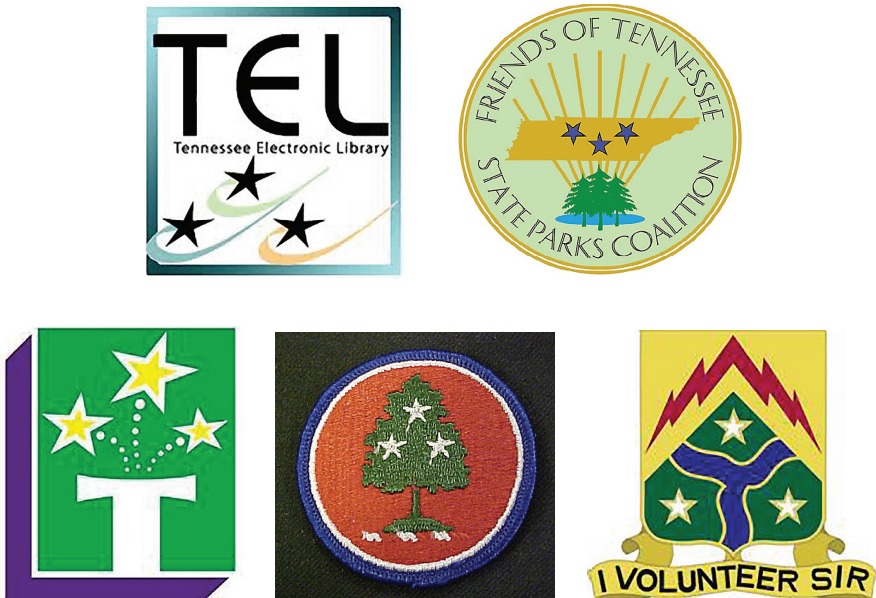


Figure 9. Examples of logos using three stars without a circle. Top row: Tennessee Electronic Library, Friends of Tennessee State Parks Coalition. Bottom row: Tennessee Lottery, Tennessee National Guard, 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment (headquartered in Knoxville).

The stars without a circle also work as visual synecdoche for the entire flag, because the salience of a visual image to a viewer depends on what the viewer knows about the image. This relates to another feature of salience: its reliance upon the viewer. Carmen Curcó explains that “feature salience is the result of the interpretation process, not a pre-established fact. Notions such as salience should result from instantiations of the optimization of relevance, rather than having to be separately specified. Therefore, they are attached to a particular individual, interpreting a particular utterance taken in a particular context of interpretation, at a particular time.”<sup>65</sup> The salience of a visual image to a viewer depends on what the viewer knows about the image.

Tennesseans, who are the main customers of the organizations that use the three stars in their logos, will have a strong bias toward seeing the three stars as a Tennessee symbol, and not a Filipino symbol. First, they have been acculturated to recognize three stars from other more flag-specific symbols; and second, there is little reason to suspect most Tennesseans are even aware of the other three-star flags. As with pragmatic unity, visual synecdoche depends on the viewer knowing something that the designer expects him or her to know; it is the common ground that makes visual communication possible.

## **Conclusion**

The original question which motivated this paper was: why does the Tennessee flag exert such attraction? It is more widely used as a design element than any other state flag I know. The tools of semiotics allow one to assert that a feature called pragmatic unity draws upon shared understandings of symbolism to allow viewers to connect familiar elements to well-known designs. In this case, the white stars in a blue emblem on a red background are powerfully evocative of the feelings summoned by the Confederate flag. And in 1905, most white Tennesseans ascribed feelings of unity and purpose to the Confederate flag, as a result of widespread sentiment regarding the “Lost Cause Myth”. Turning to the question of why the central emblem—stripped of its context—retains its power as a design element, figurative thought informed the discussion. The trope of visual synecdoche enables viewers to identify just those design elements that are most salient, and use them to recall an entire visual design. Through this process, the bare element of three stars evokes, to many Tennesseans, those powerful feelings embodied by the Tennessee and the Confederate flags.

This type of semiotic analysis works particularly well in Tennessee because its flag has a distinctive design that recalls a well-studied set of cultural meanings, but it can also apply to many other flags. The research embodied in this paper has relied primarily on the work of linguists. Psychologist Roger Kreuz suggests that empirical research, such as polling of Tennesseans about their associations for the state flag, could produce a data set with which one can test the notions of evocation and association of the Tennessee flag with the Confederate Battle Flag.<sup>66</sup> A model for such research exists in Guenter's study of American responses to the Australian flag; future researchers on the Tennessee flag would do well to explore such an approach.<sup>67</sup>



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## End Notes

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4. When the Titans played in Super Bowl XXXIV in 2000, over 88 million viewers worldwide soaked in the flag-based imagery for three hours. (Bill Gorman, "Super Bowl TV Ratings, TV by the Numbers", last modified 18 January 2009, <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2009/01/18/historical-super-bowl-tv-ratings/11044/>). This may be more people than have ever paid attention to the actual flag of Tennessee, whose residents number a little over 6 million.
5. This observation is derived from a search of the internet using Google Images, <http://images.google.com/>. The search string "[state name] corporation logos" retrieves numerous examples of Tennessee logos incorporating the state flag design; New Mexico produces nearly as many, and other states have few results meeting this criterion.
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14. *Ibid.*
15. This belief seems to have originated in Byron McCandless and Gilbert Grosvenor, "Our State Flags", *The National Geographic Magazine* 32, no. 4 (October 1917): 332, which received a much wider distribution than any of the Tennessee newspaper articles covering Reeves's design.
16. Laura Smith, interview with the author, 7 February 2013.
17. The Tennessee legislature did not begin recording its deliberations until 1955. For a legislative history of the flag law, consult Tennessee General Assembly, *House Journal*, 1905 (Bill no. 405) and Tennessee General Assembly, *Senate Journal*, 1905 (Bill no. 550). The bill was reported out of committee on April 15 and approved on April 17, the last day of the legislative session. There was probably little debate, as it was one of dozens of bills approved in the final moments of the session (which was extended by turning back the clocks in the legislative chambers). Interestingly, although the legislature had approved a different design in 1897 (for details, see Cannon, *Flags of Tennessee*, 26-27), the wording of the bill made no reference to repealing or amending the previous law. The bill was titled "To prescribe a state flag" in the House, and "To designate a flag or banner for the State of Tennessee" in the Senate.
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65. Curcó, "On Mosquitoes and Camels", 289.

66. Roger J. Kreuz, in discussion with the author, 17 September 2012.

67. Scot M. Guenter, "Images of the Land Down Under: American College Students' Responses to the Australian National Flag", *Crux Australis* 5, no. 22 (1989): 6-17.