

The Centennial of Ohio's Flag From Obscurity to Esteem

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The State of Ohio in the United States of America will celebrate its bicentennial as a state in the year 2003 (Fig. 1). For almost the first century of its existence—99 years to be exact—Ohio had no official state flag. The average Ohioan of the present, when he or she is apprised of that fact, typically responds with a puzzled, “What took so long?” The complete answer to that question would take longer than most of those who ask it would care to hear, so the short answer might be that it was not felt to be needed in the early years. A fuller explanation is somewhat more complex.



1. Ohio in the United States

The apparent delay in the adoption of a state flag was not just a phenomenon found in Ohio. In 1902, when Ohio finally did adopt its flag, only 19 of the 45 states then in the Union had adopted flags. Some indication as to why this might be the case may be seen in work done by George Henry Preble, who, in the mid-nineteenth century, did one of the first surveys of U.S. state flags by writing to the individual states. In a letter dated December 29, 1866, that he received from William H. Smith, Ohio's incumbent Secretary of State at the time, one finds that the principal need for a flag to differentiate among the states was to denote the state militia and other military units formed from a particular state.¹ In the case of Ohio, Secretary Smith writes,

Ohio has no legally authorized State flag. The militia of the State in Indian wars and in the war of 1812, and the Ohio troops in the national service during the war with Mexico and the civil war, carried the stars and stripes. The regimental colors differed from the ordinary flag only in having a large eagle, with the number of the regiment, and the prescribed number of stars above.²

Possibly because of a lack of a characteristic state flag, citizens tended to associate the various state regimental

flags as those that marked their state apart from the others. Whitney Smith points out that the U.S. Civil War gave impetus to this tendency and, in fact, a good many of the present state flags appear to have been influenced by the old regimental colors identifying a particular state's troops. Such flags had a dark blue field with the state's coat-of-arms and the elaborate scrollwork favored at the time.³

Certainly another reason that many state flags did not appear earlier was the prevailing attitude among the citizens of the time that such flags were unnecessary, and, perhaps, could even be viewed as disloyal to the respected national flag. In 1906, just four years after Ohio did adopt its state flag, the following editorial appeared in the first issue of *Ohio Magazine*:

Many Ohioans may not be aware that their state has a flag, and among those who have been aware of it from the enactment of the law a disposition has been manifested to regard it with scant courtesy—more's the pity. It has been asserted with a great show of national patriotism, that the stars and stripes “ought to be good enough” for Ohio and that we “don't need” any other banner. But the good people who have thus expressed themselves have never suggested substituting the seal of the United States for the seal of Ohio, and have never objected to the latter on the ground that it places narrow and local restrictions on the scope of patriotism, as has been charged with reference to the flag. But if a state of the Union is to have a seal of its own, why not a flag? The fact is that both are fitting emblems of a commonwealth that is fully able to justify its separate and peculiar existence, as well as its identity as part of the federal union.⁴

One finds the same sentiment elsewhere. For example, in 1896, when the City of Cleveland, Ohio, adopted its civic flag (Fig. 2), a spirited debate arose in the city between opponents of a city flag and its supporters, with the former declaring that such an action was “un-American and calculated to detract from the one and only flag which we, as citizens, soldiers and true Americans delight to honor.” The supporters responded that “The people of Cleveland have just as much right to be proud of their city as they have to be proud of their country.”⁵ Ultimately the supporters won, and the flag was adopted (24 February 1896), but to appease its opponents somewhat, the ordinance of adoption referred to the flag as the “city banner.”



2. Cleveland, Ohio

Manifesting a similar conviction as those opposed to Cleveland's city flag, Ohio's neighboring State of Indiana, in 1901, adopted the forty-five-star national flag then in use as its state flag, making it virtually impossible to ascertain when the flag was meant to represent only the state or the nation as a whole. It was not until 1917 that the current state flag was adopted, as a state "banner," thus adopting the same semantic posture taken a few years previously with the Cleveland city flag⁶ (Fig. 3).

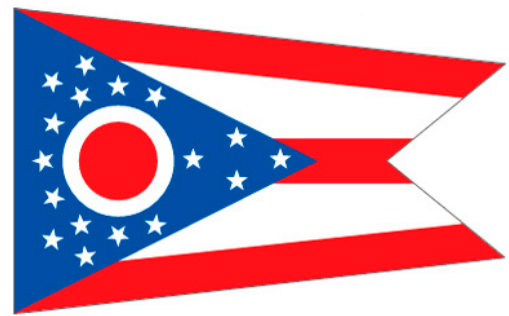


3. Indiana

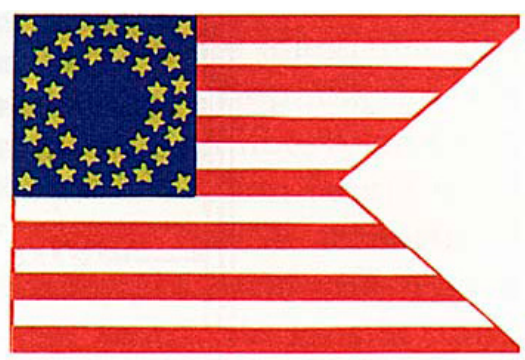
Notwithstanding the patriotic fervor of some of the Americans of the time that mitigated against the adoption of any other flag besides the Stars and Stripes, sentiment gradually began to favor the development of specialized state flags as a means to promote a state's interests in places where it was desirable, for commercial interests and state pride, to have a distinctive emblem. Interstate and international expositions provided likely venues, and it was one such exposition that gave impetus to the design and adoption of the Ohio state flag.

In the summer of 1901, the Buffalo Pan-American Exposition opened in the State of New York. Ohio was represented at the gathering with a building that had been designed by John Eisenmann, an architect from Cleveland. The incumbent Governor of Ohio, George K. Nash, was visiting the Exposition on July 18, when State Senator Samuel L. Patterson presented the governor with the flag that had been adopted by the Ohio Commission as their official exposition banner (Fig. 4). Coincidentally, the same John Eisenmann, who had designed Ohio's Exposition Building, had also designed the flag. His inspiration for the swallow-tailed shape, as Whitney Smith suggests, may have been the U.S. Army cavalry guidon in

use from 1862 until 1885⁷ (Fig. 5), although otherwise the two flags are not much alike. The cavalry guidon's swallow-tailed shape has the familiar 13 red and white stripes, but the stars of the canton are gilt rather than white, placed so that there are two concentric circles of stars, and one in each corner of the canton.



4. Ohio Commission Banner



5. U.S. Army Cavalry Guidon 1862-1885

Symbolically the triangles formed by the outline of Ohio's flag (Fig. 6) betoken the state's hills and valleys, while the stripes denote its roads and highways. The thirteen stars at the hoist side of the blue triangle mark the original thirteen states, grouped around a circle that represents the Northwest Territory from which the state was carved. The four additional stars toward the fly signify the fact that Ohio was the seventeenth state to join the Union, in 1803. The white circle with the red center is suggestive, of course, of the initial letter of Ohio and the fact that it is called the "Buckeye State." (The buckeye is a tree indigenous to Ohio that was named by Native Americans who noticed a strong resemblance between the shiny brown nut of the tree and the eye of a buck deer.⁸) The proportions of the flag are 8 x 13.



6. Ohio's Flag

The Ohio Commission's flag at the Exposition was generally favorably received, although varying critical comments included the assertion that the red disc in the flag looked too Japanese, and therefore the state seal should be substituted in its place. Another criticism from someone who evidently had not seen the Puerto Rican flag, designed in 1895, was that the Ohio flag looked too much like the Cuban flag.⁹ Nevertheless, the following year in the General Assembly, Ohio's legislature, three state legislators proposed Eisenmann's design for adoption as the state flag.¹⁰ The bill moved swiftly through the committees, and on May 9, 1902, the flag was made official.

As we have seen above, general acceptance of the new flag was not immediate, but gradually as time passed, the flag gained more and more popularity. Today it is not an exaggeration to say that Ohio's flag is one of the most popular state flags in the nation. In some states, as one travels about, one is hard put to find the state flag flying anyplace but a state government building. Such is not the case in Ohio, where the flag proliferates and is widely flown by the citizenry. In Columbus, at the rear of the State Capitol building, there is a prominent display of 88 state flags to honor each of the counties and their war veterans (Fig. 7). Candidates for state office frequently embrace it in their campaigns as a widely recognized symbol, and Ohioans are proud that their state flag is the only one of the fifty state flags that has a swallow-tailed shape (even though some flag manufacturer in Taiwan apparently misinterpreted this fact by incongruously placing the flag's basic design on a white rectangle) (Fig. 8).



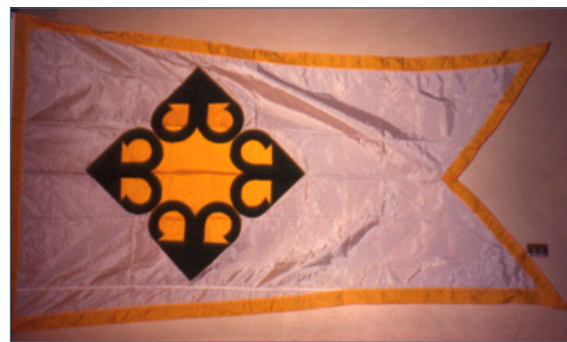
7. State Flags at the State Capitol



8. Taiwanese version!

The shape of Ohio's flag has influenced many of its civic flags. At present, of the some 160 civic flags in Ohio, 29 have the swallow-tailed shape, proportionately far more than any other State. Three examples will show how varied they are:

Englewood (Fig. 9), in the southwestern part of the state, has a white field bordered in yellow with a large floral emblem in a diamond-shaped pattern near the hoist. The emblem has four cursive letter E's in green on a gold background. The E's, of course represent the first letter of the city's name.¹¹



9. Englewood

Mentor (Fig. 10), a northeastern city, has a flag patterned closely after the state's, except that the device on the blue hoist triangle bears a red cardinal, the state bird, facing the fly on a large white circle. Curved above the cardinal on the hoist side is the national motto, "In God We Trust," and curved below on the fly side of the cardinal is the legend, "Incorporated 1963." Two white stars appear on the blue triangle at each of its points, placed so as to follow the curvature of the circle.¹²



10. Mentor

Worthington (Fig. 11), in the state's center, has a flag with a dark red field bordered in dark blue. Running across the center is a white cursive letter W that extends from the hoist edge to the fly edge through the blue border. In the canton position is an old quilting pattern known as the "Star of Ohio." It is a red diamond on a white square. From each of the sides of the square are two yellow isosceles triangles on a dark blue field. Surrounding the whole is a white letter O for Ohio, which indicates that the city considers itself the "Star of Ohio."¹³



11. Worthington

As Ohio prepares for its bicentennial year in 2003, certainly its flag will fly even more widely. The flag that faced an uncertain future at its inception, has now become intrinsically linked with its identity. Ohioans, justifiably proud of their heritage, may perhaps be excused for agreeing with the rather effusive comments of John Robert Gebhart, a vexillologist who wrote, in 1973, "The Ohio state flag is superb. It is patriotic individualism"¹⁴ (Fig. 12).



12. Ohio's State Flag

NOTES

- 1 George Henry Preble, *Origin and History of the American Flag* (1872, 1880; reprint ed., Philadelphia: Nicholas L. Brown, 1917, 2 vols.).
- 2 Preble, 639. It will be noted that conventions of capitalization have changed in the past century. Nowadays we capitalize the War of 1812, the Civil War, and the Stars and Stripes. Perhaps historical distance lends more distinction! (See also note 4.)
- 3 Whitney Smith, *The Flag Book of the United States: The Story of the Stars and Stripes and the Flags of the Fifty States* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1970), 91.
- 4 *Ohio Magazine* 1 (July, 1906): 96.
- 5 *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 20 July 1941.
- 6 Smith, 139. The "state banner" was renamed as the "state flag" in 1955.
- 7 Smith, 182.
- 8 John Robert Gebhart, *Your State Flag* (Philadelphia: Franklin Publishing Co., 1973), 77.
- 9 *Ohio Magazine*: 97.
- 10 W. Sanford Bittner, "A Flag and Flower for Ohio," *Echoes*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (May, 1965): 1. The legislators who introduced the bill for adoption were three members of the Exposition's Ohio Commission: State Representatives C. L. Swain of Cincinnati and William S. McKinnon of Ashtabula, and State Senator Patterson of Waverly. (McKinnon was incumbent Speaker of the House of Representatives in the General Assembly.)
- 11 Englewood's flag was designed by David Arnold, a city councilman, ca. 1977.
- 12 It is believed that Mentor's flag was designed by a high school student about 1985. (The mayor's office apparently has no accurate record.)
- 13 Worthington's flag was designed by Cathleen Chrystal DeCoster. The flag was adopted on May 4, 1992.
- 14 Gebhart, 78.