



THE BEDFORD FLAG

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FLAG RESEARCH CENTER, 17 Farmcrest Avenue
Lexington, Massachusetts 02173 U.S.A.

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There rests in a safe in the basement of the Public Library of the Town of Bedford, Massachusetts, a flag which ranks as one of the most interesting in the history of the United States. This so-called "Bedford flag" has been written about many times, but as is the case with many historical flags its full story is not yet known. Moreover, much of the published material concerning it has been based on surmise or hearsay and these accounts are frequently romanticized or even contradictory. It is unfortunate that this historic banner should not have been the subject of a thorough investigation, but the present study will at least sort out and order the known facts.

The first piece of evidence to be considered is the flag itself. At present it is preserved between two pieces of glass and therefore direct examination of the fabric is not possible. However, it seems clear that the background material is damask silk, probably made in Europe (possibly in Italy). The design has been painted on in oil colors on both sides and retains considerable brilliance despite the age of the flag and the chipping off of paint in small areas where the flag has been creased. Although unfortunately the flag is glued to a sheer translucent material on all four sides, it is better preserved than many other flags of comparable age.

The greatest dimensions of the flag are 29" (73 cm) long by 27 1/4" (69 cm) wide. There is a vertical stripe at the hoist 4" (10 cm) wide, surrounded by a border of silver paint. The main field of the flag also has the silver border, except for a few places where it has worn off. The damask material is two shades of crimson with a floral pattern. Its painted design displays clouds of silver on the hoist side with dark grey shading. From these clouds extends a right arm encased in armor (silver with dark blue and black shading) holding a dagger or short sword. The latter has a silver blade and gold hilt and pommel. A gold ribbon in three bands fills the top, side and bottom of the fly end. The ribbon is also shaded and bears, between floral decorations, the words VINCE AUT MORIRE (Conquer or Die). At the top and bottom, respectively, there are one and two silver shaded balls; these may be parts of the clouds which have floated off or (as they are usually explained) cannon balls.

The reverse of the flag can be seen by means of a mirror in the back of the safe. It is basically the same as



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the obverse, except that the dagger is held by a left arm and passes in front of rather than behind the ribbon. Also the motto begins at the bottom of the ribbon rather than at the top, as on the front.

The flag was originally mounted on a long staff with a spearhead finial. This can be seen in the postcard photograph published by E. A. Buck of neighboring Concord in 1907 and in the engravings shown in Abram English Brown's Beneath Old Roof Trees (p. 196) and his History of the Town of Bedford (p. 23). However, in the former the vertical stripe at the hoist is visible whereas the latter two show the clouds along the hoist, the extra material having been wrapped around the pole. The latter was probably the original method of display. There is also a slight difference in the style of finial. The Buck photograph is probably correct regarding the finial since the engraving in Brown's town history has one obvious mistake (the word AUT is spelled AUN), suggesting that the engraver was not as careful as he might have been.

In Beneath Old Roof Trees Brown indicates that Mrs. Ruhamah Page Lane of Bedford had told him, when she was more than 90 years old, that

I took that silver fringe from that old flag when I was a giddy girl, and trimmed a dress for a military ball. I was never more sorry for anything than that which resulted in the loss of the fringe.

Brown also states that her son, Jonathan A. Lane, told him he heard the same story from the woman when she was much younger. A sheet entitled "The Old Bedford Flag" distributed by the Bedford Historical Society mentions a gold fringe, but this is probably an error and no other reference to gold can be found. As will be seen further on, the question of the fringe and its color is of some importance in the identification of the flag.

Aside from knowledge derived from its physical appearance, we are certain that the flag has been in the possession of the town since 19 October 1885, the 104th anniversary of the surrender of Cornwallis, when it was presented by "Captain" (an honorary title) Cyrus Brown. That gentleman, then 84 years old, had served in the Civil War although in his 60s at the time. He died two years after giving the flag to the town. Cyrus Page had presumably inherited the flag, along with the Page homestead in Bedford, from his father (Ruhamah Page's brother) Nathaniel (1775-1858). He in turn had inherited the home from his father, Nathaniel (1742-1819) and its ownership can be traced back to his grandfather John Page (1704-1782), great-grandfather Nathaniel (1679-1755), and great-great-grandfather Nathaniel

(d. 1692). The original Nathaniel Page had bought the estate in 1687.

The first Nathaniel was Sheriff of Suffolk County. His son Nathaniel was commissioned as a "Cornet"--fifth-ranking commissioned officer of a cavalry troop and the man who carried the troop flag (which was also known as a cornet). His son John received his own commission as Cornet from Governor Jonathan Belcher in 1737; that commission is still to be seen at Bedford. John Page was in Capt. William Reed's horse troop of Middlesex County Militia and (according to Brown) fought in the Battle of Lexington on 19 April 1775 at the age of 71. His son Nathaniel, who took part in the Battle of Concord on the same day, apparently used the title Cornet because it had been in the family for two generations. He is listed in the muster for the Bedford Minute-Men as a private.

Brown insists that "the ancient standard was brought to Bedford by Nathaniel Page, when he settled in Shawsheen (Bedford)," i.e., in 1687. Presuming that his son Nathaniel carried a cornet to correspond to his rank, he might also be included as a possible source of the existence of the flag in the family. Rhode Island historian Howard M. Chapin felt that the flag was made during the first half of the 18th century and mentions Cornet John Page as an owner. Nevertheless there does not seem to be any concrete evidence from the family or even tradition concerning the origin of the flag and its possession by the Pages. Its dating therefore must proceed on other bases.

From the size and material of the flag, it seems certain that it was carried by a cavalry company. Chapin suggests it may have been a chartered or private command rather than one of the "train bands" which were established by the legislatures. His reasoning is that such a private command would be less likely than one established by the legislature to follow the standardized flag patterns which were being introduced in the early 18th century in England. He also mentions the fact that such changes would in general be introduced later in the colonies than in England itself.

Such reasoning is not necessary if we do not insist with Chapin that the Bedford flag must have been made after 1700. There are in fact several reasons for believing that it was made before that date. Stanley C. Johnson points out in his Flags of Our Fighting Army (p. 11) that prior to about 1684 most company colors were painted, while after that date the tendency was for them to be embroidered. Thus the embroidered cavalry cornet from 1720 which Samuel Milne illustrates in his monumental Standards and Colors of the Army has little except size to suggest that it is contemporary with the Bedford flag. Unfortunately, as Milne notes on p. 63, we have almost no information on English

cavalry standards from 1688 until 1743. On the other hand if we go back to the period of the Commonwealth in England (1653-1660), we find records of many cavalry cornets many of whose designs closely parallel that of the Bedford flag.

While the New Model Army formed by Parliament in 1645 first introduced the plan of regular infantry colors, corresponding to the name and rank of the unit, the cavalry flag of that era was still largely determined by its commander. His prerogative to choose the design on his cornet resulted in a diversity of patterns--within the strictures of the prevailing political and religious ideology. Biblical allusions and allegorical references abound in these flags and almost all have mottoes. Of the 210 cornets described in 1657 by Edmund Prestwich, 18 have arms and swords extending from clouds or very similar devices. The cornet of Christopher Wray of Lincolnshire is described as follows:

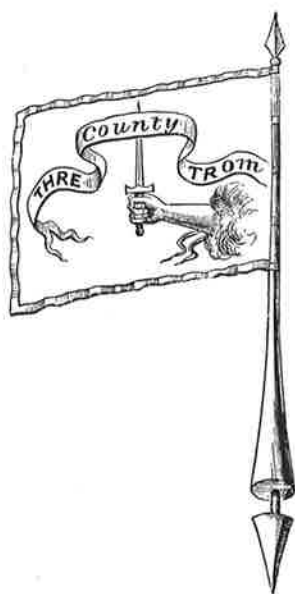
Azure: from the dexter side a darkish cloud, shaded with crimson and thereout issuing an armed arm and hand holding, in pale, a broad sword, all proper, that is, steel and gold; beneath, in base, in two lines, in letters of gold, THAT WARR IS JUST--WHICH IS NECESSARY; Fringe Or and Azure.

A similar cornet, carried by Captain Bragg, is preserved in the Parish Church of Bromesberrow, Gloucestershire.

While the coincidence of design between these English cavalry cornets of 1645-1684 and the Bedford flag is striking, a still more important piece of relevant evidence exists. The British Museum contains a manuscript book painted by a herald sometime during the reign of Charles II (1660-1685). One entry in this manuscript shows a sketch of a cornet with the annotation:

Worke don for New England
For painting in oyle on both sides a Cornett
one [sic] rich crimson damask, with a hand and
sword and invelloped with a scarfe about the arms
of gold, black and sillver [£ 2.0.6]
For a plaine cornett Staffe, with belt, boote and
swible at first penny 1.0.0
For silke of crimson and sillver fring and for a
Cornett String 1.11.0
For crimson damask 11.0; £ 5.2.6.

It will be noted immediately that the crimson damask, gold, silver, and black paint; the painting on both sides; and the "hand and sword and . . . scarfe" correspond to the



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Bedford flag. Even the silver fringe matches family tradition. Moreover, the staff shown in the manuscript sketch looks like the one in the photograph of 1907. The (flag-) belt with its "swible" (swivel-socket) and the "boote" (probably a case made to protect or hold the flag) might have been lost or worn out.

The temptation to agree with historian Brown and those others who have insisted that this is none other than the Bedford flag is certainly strong. The principal objection to that assumption is inherent in the sketch from the manuscript: while the arm, sword, clouds, and motto are present the design only roughly approximates the Bedford flag pattern. Particularly disturbing is the presence of the inscription THREE COUNTY TROM on the ribbon. Some vexillologists have simply ignored the flag in the manuscript; others, apparently eager to have as many flags as possible in their books, have shown it together with the Bedford flag. (W. H. Waldron's Flags of America provides the ingenious anthropomorphic explanation of the similarity between the two flags by claiming that the "Bedford banner is the lineal descendent of the Three County Troop Flag.") H. W. Williams suggests that the Bedford flag may have been a replacement made in New England for the original Three County Troop flag, perhaps worn out or lost.

Lawrence Phelps Tower (The Untold Story of Our Flag) ignores the differences between the two designs and insists that the Three County Troop flag was carried at Bedford. He also disregards the manuscript sketch and imputes a Dutch origin to the flag. His explanation for the inscription THREE COUNTY TROM (necessary for his thesis that the United States national flag is derived on Dutch models) is based on the fact that trom is the Dutch word for drum, "as in our Fife and Drum Corps." Aside from the fact that it does not explain why the other two words are in English, this explanation fails on at least two counts. The flag sketched is a cavalry standard, while fife and drum normally were used only by the infantry at that time. More importantly, the Three County Troop is referred to by that name in the official records over a period of almost twenty years, beginning at the time of its founding in 1659 in the Massachusetts counties of Essex, Suffolk, and Middlesex.

What then is the explanation for the two designs? Were they two separate flags, one possibly patterned after the other? From the evidence presented above, I conclude that the Bedford flag is in fact the very "worke don for New England" in the mid-17th century. The discrepancies between the designs may be simply explained: whoever made the manuscript note was not attempting to reproduce exactly the flag for anyone else's benefit, least of all future generations. He wanted only to make a sketch sufficient to remind him

of the cornet in question should a problem arise, for example, concerning payment. The inscription THREE COUNTY TROM was written on the ribbon (since he had no need to recall the actual motto) as a reminder of the group for which the work had been done. The two errors are nothing more than misspellings, like the ones in the text accompanying the sketch. Until the 19th century when the increase in literacy and in the number of units in the army made such inscriptions both possible and necessary, English and American cavalry and infantry colors never included the full name of the unit they represented.

While it is true (as Tower points out) that a red flag bearing an armed arm extending from a cloud is cited by one author as having been used in the 17th century Netherlands, similar flags are shown in old flag books for Poland, Russia, Algeria, and Bosnia as well. Moreover, it is only in England and America where we find a Puritan tradition of victory through the strength of the "arm of the Lord" that the design is consistently employed in battle flags. On the other hand, Samuel Appleton (writing in the 1886 Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, p. 200) is undoubtedly wrong in suggesting that the Bedford flag influenced the arm and sword crest in the Massachusetts coat of arms. This is rather based on the seal of Massachusetts Bay used from 1775 to 1780.

If reasonable justifications exist for identifying the Bedford cornet as the one pictured in the British Museum manuscript, then this relic was made more than 300 years ago and is the oldest flag known to exist in the United States. This and its fine state of preservation are enough to warrant attention being paid to it. But, regardless of the battles in the Indian wars over which it flew, quite naturally the question arises of whether or not it was carried at the Battle of Concord of the first day of the American Revolution.

Apparently the first public assertion of this claim was made on 19 April 1875, 100 years to the day after the event. At that time Isaac E. Fitch, great-grandson of the man before whose tavern the Minute-Men had gathered on that fateful morning, bore the Bedford flag in the centennial procession at Bedford. Afterwards the cornet was returned to the Page household where it had been in storage in an upstairs closet. It next received recognition from another of Fitch's great-grandsons, a Mr. Jenks, who recorded in the Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society of 1885 (pp. 165-167) the story of the use of the flag at the Battle of Concord. This was immediately following the presentation of the flag to the town by its owner, Capt. Cyrus Page. At the next meeting of the Society, Mr. Appleton

first publicly suggested the identification of the Bedford flag as the Three County Troop cornet of the 17th century.

The greatest attention was focused on the flag by historian Abram E. Brown, himself a Bedford resident, in the two books already cited and a pamphlet (The Flag of the Minute-Men), all published in the 1890s. Remarkably, none of these sources gives any factual basis for the claim that the flag was used at the Battle of Concord. Jenks simply says "When the Minutemen were summoned to go to Concord, he came, and naturally brought with him the flag he had borne before; and under it they marched to the fight" (p. 166). However, the "he" referred to in this case was John Page, who would have been 71 in 1775. It is known that men of even 90 took part in the fighting that day, but John Page does not appear on the list of participants at the Battle of Concord (although Brown in his town history says that he was at the Battle of Lexington).

All the other sources seem to agree that it was Nathaniel Page (1742-1819) who carried the flag; but even here the record is confused because Brown in his town history (p. 88) refers to Nathaniel's uncle of the same name (1702-1779) as a Minute-Man. Moreover, Brown's proof that the flag was used consists of undocumented claims that it was in the house at the time (and therefore must have been used) and that "from the ancestor who hastily seized that flag . . . has come the story from generation to generation." He also records the tradition that "Cornet Page lay down his flag and went to work [removing military stores so that the British could not capture them], and when returning to look for it 'found that the boys had gotten it and were playing soldiers with it.'"

From the surmise that the Bedford flag was used at Concord, it is an easy step to heralding it as the only flag so flown and as "the first American flag." Yet the claim has in fact been made that the Minute-Men from Sudbury carried a rattlesnake flag with the motto DON'T TREAD ON ME to Concord and the "first flag in America" title is certainly unjustified. In manufacture, design and symbolism the flag is clearly English; moreover, the Declaration of Independence was more than a year away. If anything, the flag provides a bridge from the earliest colonization of New England to the dawn of its contributions as the first area to take up the cause of American independence.

Today the original Bedford flag stands as a treasured piece of local and American history. It is recognized by Bedford as the town flag and representations appear on stationery, motor vehicles, etc. Exact replicas have been made under the auspices of a local group and a commemorative medal has been issued. Hopefully, by the time of the

Bicentennial of the Battle of Concord in 1775 further documentation will have been found to give us a better picture of the history of this handsome flag.

Two areas in particular call for thorough study. In 1836 Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote the poem "Concord Fight" at the time of the dedication of a granite monument on the site of the bridge at Concord where the battle was fought. The first stanza reads:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard round the world.

Historian Brown insists that Emerson had no knowledge that a flag had actually been used in 1775. If in fact he did know of the Page flag and its history, this would give us a reference to the flag at Concord 40 years closer to the event itself.

Finally, we must consider Capt. Jonathan Wilson, the commander of the Bedford Minute-Men and one of those who was killed on 19 April 1775. His tombstone in the Bedford cemetery displays at the top a hand holding a dagger, somewhat similar to the emblem on the Bedford flag itself. This suggests that perhaps it was added to his tombstone because he fought and died under that emblem. This theory, which would be difficult to prove definitively, is weakened by the fact that, although the same emblem can also be found on the tombstone of Capt. Isaac Davis, captain of the Acton Minute-Men (also killed at Concord), it can be seen as well on the headstone at Acton of Maj. Daniel Fletcher, who was not at the battle.

