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PUBLICATIONS
OF THE
NORTH CAROLINA HISTORICAL COMMISSION
BULLETIN No. 14

THE NORTH CAROLINA STATE FLAG

1914

MAY 20TH 1775
N C
APRIL 12TH 1776

THE NORTH CAROLINA STATE FLAG

BY

W. R. EDMONDS

RALEIGH, N. C.
EDWARDS & BROUGHTON PRINTING CO., STATE PRINTERS
1913

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The North Carolina Historical Commission

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Introductory Note

The North Carolina Historical Commission receives numerous inquiries concerning the history of the State flag of North Carolina and the significance of the dates which appear on it. In response to these inquiries the Historical Commission has issued this bulletin. It was prepared in 1911 by Mr. W. R. Edmonds, at that time a member of the staff of the Historical Commission, now an attorney of High Point. The sketch was afterwards published in *The University of North Carolina Magazine,* new series, vol. 29, No. 3, from which it is here reprinted, with copies of recent acts of the General Assembly relating to the State flag, and copies of the "Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence," May 20, 1775, the Halifax Resolutions of April 12, 1776, and the Ordinance of Secession, May 20, 1861.

R. D. W. Connor,
Secretary of the North Carolina Historical Commission.

The State Flag of North Carolina

The flag is an emblem of great antiquity and has commanded respect and reverence from practically all nations from earliest times. History traces it to divine origin, the early peoples of the earth attributing to it strange, mysterious, and supernatural powers. Indeed, our first recorded references to the standard and the banner, of which our present flag is but a modified form, are from sacred rather than from secular sources. We are told that it was around the banner that the prophets of old rallied their armies and under which the hosts of Israel were led to war, believing, as they did, that it carried with it divine favor and protection.

Since that time all nations and all peoples have had their flags and emblems, though the ancient superstition regarding their divine merits and supernatural powers has disappeared from among civilized peoples. The flag now, the world over, possesses the same meaning and has a uniform significance to all nations wherever found. It stands as the symbol of strength and unity, representing the national spirit and patriotism of the people over whom it floats. In both lord and subject, the ruler and the ruled, it commands respect, inspires patriotism, and instills loyalty both in peace and in war.

In this country we have a national flag which stands as the emblem of our strength and unity as a nation, a living representation of our national spirit and honor. In addition to our national flag, each of the different States in the Union has a "State flag" symbolic of its own individuality and domestic ideals. Every State in the American Union has a flag of some kind, each expressive of some particular trait, or commemorative of some historical event, of the people over which it floats. The flags of most of the States, however, consist of the coat of arms of that State upon some suitably colored field. It is said that the first State flag of North Carolina was built on this model, but so far as we can learn from the records the first legislation on this subject establishing and recognizing a "State flag" was in the year 1861.

The constitutional convention of 1861, which declared for secession from the Union, adopted what it termed a State flag. This existed until 1885. On May 20, 1861, the Convention adopted the resolution of secession which declared the State out of the Union. On that same day Col. John D. Whitford, a member of the Convention from Craven County, introduced the following ordinance, which was passed and referred to a select committee of seven:

"Be it ordained that the flag of this State shall be a blue field with a white V thereon, and a star, incircling which shall be the words 'Surgit astrum, May 20th, 1775.'"

Colonel Whitford was made chairman of the committee to which this ordinance was referred. The committee secured the aid and advice of William Jarl Brown, an artist of Raleigh. Brown prepared and submitted a model to this committee. And this model was adopted by the convention on the 22d day of June, 1861. It will be observed that the Brown model, to be hereafter explained, was vastly different from the one originally proposed by Colonel Whitford. Here is the ordinance as it appears on the Journals of the Convention:

"AN ORDINANCE IN RELATION TO A STATE FLAG.

"Be it ordained by this Convention, and it is hereby ordained by the authority of the same, That the Flag of North Carolina shall consist of a red field with a white star in center, and with the inscription, above the star, in a semi-circular form, of 'May 20th, 1775,' and below the star, in a semi-circular form, of 'May 20th, 1861.' That there shall be two bars of equal width, and the length of the field shall be equal to the bar, the width of the field being equal to both bars; the first bar shall be blue, and the second shall be white; and the length of the flag shall be one-third more than its width. (Ratified the 22d day of June, 1861.)"[1]

This State flag, adopted in 1861, is said to have been issued to the first ten regiments of State troops during the summer of that year and was borne by them throughout the war, being the only flag, except the National and Confederate colors, used by the North Carolina troops during the Civil War. This flag existed until 1885, when the Legislature of that year adopted a new model.

[1]Journal of the Convention of 1861, p. 153.

As just stated, the Legislature of 1885 adopted a new State flag. The bill, which was introduced by General Johnstone Jones on the 5th of February, 1885, passed its final reading one month later after little or no debate. This act reads as follows:

"AN ACT TO ESTABLISH A STATE FLAG.

"The General Assembly of North Carolina do enact:

"SECTION 1. That the flag of North Carolina shall consist of a blue union, containing in the center thereof a white star with the letter N in gilt on the left and the letter C in gilt on the right of said star, the circle containing the same to be one-third the width of the union.

"SEC. 2. That the fly of the flag shall consist of two equally proportioned bars; the upper bar to be red, the lower bar to be white; that the length of the bars horizontally shall be equal to the perpendicular length of the union, and the total length of the flag shall be one-third more than its width.

"SEC. 3. That above the star in the center of the union there shall be a gilt scroll in semi-circular form, containing in black letters this inscription: 'May 20th, 1775,' and that below the star there shall be a similar scroll containing in black letters the inscription: 'April 12th, 1776.'

"In the General Assembly read three times and ratified this 9th day of March, A. D. 1885."

Perhaps, it may be of interest to make a passing reference to the significance of the dates found on each flag. The first date, "May 20th, 1775," refers to the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence,[1] the authenticity of which we shall not here stop either to doubt or to defend. The second date appearing on the State flag of 1861 is that of "May 20th, 1861." This date commemorated the secession of the State from the Union;[2] but as the cause of secession was defeated this date no longer represented anything after the Civil War. So when a new flag was adopted in 1885, this date was removed, and another, "April 12th, 1776," took its place. This date commemorates the adoption of the Halifax Resolutions[3]—a document that places the Old North State in the very front rank, both in point of time and in spirit, among those that demanded unconditional freedom and absolute independence from foreign power. This doc-

[1] See p. 10.
[2] See p. 13.
[3] See p. 14.

ument stands out as one of the great landmarks in the annals of North Carolina history.

Since 1885 there has been no change in our State flag. For the most part, it has remained unknown and a stranger to the good people of our State. However, as we become more intelligent, and, therefore, more patriotic and public spirited, the emblem of the Old North State will assume a station of greater prominence among our people. One hopeful sign of this increased interest was the Act passed by the Legislature of 1907, requiring the State flag to be floated from all State institutions, public buildings and courthouses.[1] In addition to this, many public and private schools, fraternal orders and other organizations now float the State flag. This is right. The people of the State should become acquainted with the emblem of that government to which they owe allegiance and from which they secure protection.

[1]See p. 10.

An Act to Promote Loyalty and Greater Respect for the Sovereignty of the State[1]

The General Assembly of North Carolina do enact:

SECTION 1. That for the purpose of promoting greater loyalty and respect to the State, and inasmuch as a special act of the Legislature has adopted an emblem of our government known as the North Carolina State flag, that it is meet and proper that it shall be given greater prominence.

SEC. 2. That the board of trustees or managers of the several State institutions and public buildings shall provide a North Carolina flag, of such dimensions and material as they may deem best, and the same shall be displayed from a staff upon the top of each and every such building at all times except during inclement weather, and upon the death of any State officer or any prominent citizen the flag shall be put at half-mast until the burial of such person shall have taken place.

SEC. 3. That the Board of County Commissioners of the several counties in this State shall likewise authorize the procuring of a North Carolina flag, to be displayed either on a staff upon the top, or draped behind the Judge's stand, in each and every courthouse in the State, and that the State flag shall be displayed at each and every term of Court held, and on such other public occasions as the Commissioners may deem proper.

SEC. 4. That no State flag shall be allowed in or over any building here mentioned that does not conform to section five thousand three hundred and twenty-one of the Revisal of one thousand nine hundred and five.[2]

SEC. 5. That this act shall be in force from and after its ratification.

In the General Assembly read three times, and ratified this the 9th day of March, A. D. 1907.

[1]Chap. 838, Public Laws of 1907.

[2]See p. 10.

Chapter 114, Revisal of 1905

SECTION 5321. STATE FLAG. The flag of North Carolina shall consist of a blue union, containing in the center thereof a white star with the letter "N" in gilt on the left and the letter "C" in gilt on the right of said star, the circle containing the same to be one-third the width of said union. The fly of the flag shall consist of two equally proportioned bars, the upper bar to be red, the lower bar to be white; the length of the bars horizontally shall be equal to the perpendicular length of the union, and the total length of the flag shall be one-third more than its width. Above the star in the center of the union there shall be a gilt scroll in semi-circular form, containing in black letters this inscription: "May 20th, 1775," and below the star there shall be a similar scroll containing in black letters the inscription: "April 12th, 1776."

The "Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence"

May 20, 1775

1. Resolved, that whosoever directly or indirectly abetted or in any way, form or manner countenanced the unchartered and dangerous invasion of our rights as claimed by Great Britain is an enemy to this country, to America and to the inherent and and inalienable rights of man.

2. Resolved, that we the citizens of Mecklenburg County do hereby dissolve the political bands which have connected us to the mother country and hereby absolve ourselves from all allegiance to the British Crown and abjure all political connection, contract, or association with that nation who have wantonly trampled on our rights and liberties and inhumanly shed the blood of American patriots at Lexington.

3. Resolved, that we do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people, are and of right ought to be a sovereign and self-governing association under the control of no power other than that of our God and the General Government of the Congress, to the maintenance of which independence we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual coöperation, our lives, our fortunes and our most sacred honor.

4. Resolved, that as we now acknowledge the existence and control of no law or legal officer, civil or military, within this county, we do hereby ordain and adopt as a rule of life all, each and every of our former laws—wherein nevertheless the Crown of Great Britain never can be considered as holding rights, privileges, immunities, or authority therein.

5. Resolved, that it is further decreed that all, each and every Military Officer in this county is hereby reinstated in his former command and authority, he acting conformably to these regulations. And that every member present of this delegation shall henceforth be a civil officer, viz, a justice of the peace in the character of a "committee man" to issue process, hear and determine all matters of controvery according to said adopted

laws and to preserve peace, union and harmony in said county, and to use every exertion to spread the love of country and fire of freedom throughout America, until a more general and organized government be established in this Province.

Ordinance of Secession

May 20, 1861

An ordinance dissolving the union between the State of North Carolina and the other States united with her under the compact of Government, Entitled "the Constitution of the United States."

We, the people of the State of North Carolina in Convention assembled, do declare and ordain, and it is hereby declared and ordained, that the ordinance adopted by the State of North Carolina in the Convention of 1789, whereby the Constitution of the United States was ratified and adopted; and also all acts and parts of acts of the General Assembly, ratifying and adopting amendments to the said Constitution, are hereby repealed, rescinded and abrogated.

We do further declare and ordain, that the Union now subsisting between the State of North Carolina and the other States, under the title of "The United States of America," is hereby dissolved, and that the State of North Carolina is in full possession and exercise of all those rights of sovereignty which belong and appertain to a free and independent State.

Halifax Independence Resolutions

April 12, 1776

It appears to your committee[1] that, pursuant to the plan concerted by the British Ministry for subjugating America, the King and Parliament of Great Britain have usurped a power over the persons and properties of the people unlimited and uncontrolled; and disregarding their humble petitions for peace, liberty and safety, have made divers legislative acts, denouncing war, famine, and every species of calamity, against the Continent in general. That the British fleets and armies have been, and still are daily employed in destroying the people, and committing the most horrid devastations on the country. That Governors in different Colonies have declared protection to slaves, who should imbrue their hands in the blood of their masters. That the ships belonging to America are declared prizes of war, and many of them have been violently seized and confiscated. In consequence of all which multitudes of the people have been destroyed, or from easy circumstances reduced to the most lamentable distress.

And, whereas, the moderation hitherto manifested by the United Colonies and their sincere desire to be reconciled to the mother country on constitutional principles, have procured no mitigation of the aforesaid wrongs and usurpations, and no hopes remain of obtaining redress by those means alone which have been hitherto tried, your committee are of opinion that the House should enter into the following resolve, to wit:

Resolved, that the delegates for this Colony in the Continental Congress be impowered to concur with the delegates of the other Colonies in declaring Independency, and forming foreign alliances, reserving to this Colony the sole and exclusive right

[1]At the session of the Provincial Congress, April 8, 1776, the following committee was appointed, viz:

Cornelius Harnett, Allen Jones, Thomas Burke, Abner Nash, John Kinchen, Thomas Person and Thomas Jones, "to take into consideration the usurpations and violences attempted and committed by the King and Parliament of Britain against America, and the further measures to be taken for frustrating the same, and for the better defense of this Province." Their report, known as the "Halifax Resolutions," was submitted to Congress April 12, 1776, and unanimously adopted. It was the first step taken by any of the Colonies in favor of a Declaration of Independence.

of forming a constitution and laws for this Colony, and of appointing delegates from time to time (under the direction of a general representation thereof), to meet the delegates of the other Colonies for such purposes as shall be hereafter pointed out.