



1ST CONTINENTAL REGIMENT/1ST PENNSYLVANIA REGIMENT FLAG

By Wendy M. Werner and Jack Armstrong

The origin of this flag's design can be traced to the beginning of 1776 in the vicinity of Boston. Thompson's Rifle Battalion, which later became the First Continental Regiment of the Continental Army, was reorganized on 1 January 1776. This unit, which had been raised in Pennsylvania in June of 1775, served with the Army during the siege of Boston from the summer of 1775 until mid-March of 1776 when it marched with the army to New York in pursuit of the British.

On 20 February 1776, general orders were issued by Washington from his headquarters at Cambridge that every Regiment should be furnished with Colours, and that those Colours should, if it can be done, bear some kind of similitude to the Uniform of the regiment to which they belong, the Colonels with their respective Brigadiers and the Qr. Mr. Genl. May fix upon such as are proper, and can be procures.... The Number of the Regiment is to be mark'd on the Colours, and such a Motto, as the Colonel may choose, in fixing upon which, the General advises a Consultation amongst them.¹

The first Continental Regiment was apparently one of the first to comply with Washington's request for regimental colours. Colonel Edward Hand, who had been promoted from Lieutenant Colonel on 7 March 1776, assumed command of the Regiment soon after Washington's orders. His letter of 8 March 1776 to James Yeates of Lancaster, written from the camp on Prospect Hill, contains the only contemporary description of the flag which has been found. The description, which is a postscript to the letter, reads:

Every regiment is to have a standard and colours. Ours standard is to be a deep green ground, the device a tiger partly enclosed by toils, attempting the pass, defended by a hunter armed with a spear (in white), on crimson field the motto Domari nolo.²

Diaries, letters, and orderly books searched for any other contemporary descriptions of the flag mention, but do not describe colours, and this omission makes it impossible to state definitely that the flag first used by the regiment was the same in every detail as the one described by Hand in his letter. Nor can it be determined when the regiment first received its flag or when the flag was first carried in battle. A letter written by Washington from Philadelphia on 28 May 1776 to General Israel Putnam, in command of the Continental Army at New York, indicates that several regiments had not yet complied

with his orders of the three months previous regarding colours. In a postscript, he gave this instruction to Putnam, "I desire you will speak to the several Colonels, and hurry them to get their colours done."³

Several sources of flag information implied that the flag was with the regiment in Canada and at Boston. But if it had been designed and ordered in February or March 1776, as Hand's letter indicates, then it would not have been with the two companies of Thompson's Battalion which left for the Canadian expedition on 11 September 1775. It is also doubtful that the flag was with the regiment at Boston, since the design had only been determined approximately one week before the regiment moved on to New York and Long Island.

Several sources suggest that this particular flag was a militia flag, possibly carried from Pennsylvania to Boston by one of the two companies recruited in Lancaster County. This theory could not be documented. The flag of the First Pennsylvania Regiment has probably been confused with that of the Hanover Associators which was adopted in June of 1774. The Hanover flag also had a rifleman as part of the device. Although there were numerous early militia flags utilizing lions, hunters or riflemen, and Latin mottoes, none of these flags' descriptions matches that of the First Pennsylvania Regiment.

An interesting anecdote about the flag has survived. The following information was recorded almost 100 years after the war when the flag was on display in the national Museum at Independence Hall.

The banner born [sic] by the first regiment of Pennsylvania militia at the battle of Brandywine, [was] captured by the British, and retaken through the personal prowess of Colonel Thomas Robinson, an act of gallantry recognized by Washington himself in the presence of the whole army by spurring his horse into the very middle of the creek and giving him a fraternal embrace, as described by Judge Peters⁴

A Judge Richard Peters (1744-1828) was in communications with Washington at that time, but Peter's writings and Washington's letters did not refer to this incident.

Colonel Thomas Robinson, who recaptured the flag at Brandywine, received it at the end of the war when the First Pennsylvania was mustered out of service in November 1783. The flag remained in the possession of the Robinson family until 1879. The resource studies file at Independence National Historical Park indicates that the flag was "deposited as a loan with the National Museum, Independence Hall on May 27, 1874, by Mr. William S. Robinson," who was a grandson of Colonel Robinson. It was displayed at Independence Hall during the Centennial Exposition of 1876. In 1877, it was in the temporary possession of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. In December 1879, William S. Robinson sold it to Matthew S. Quay, who was the Secretary of the Commonwealth.

The flag is still owned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and is currently at the William Penn Memorial Museum.

The method of display is excellent in that both sides of the flag are visible. Two large sheets of plexiglass sandwich it. Unfortunately, the plexiglass is not as large as it should be and the flag is folded on the staff and top edges.

A piece of an 1833 newspaper has been sewn over the entire center portion of the obverse side of the flag. Handwritten over the unrelated newsprint is:

This is my father's Revolutionary War flag who was Col. Of the 1st Pennsylvania Regiment under Genl. Wayne. He served in the war seven years and four months, was wounded in the arm and leg and part of heel shot off, had three horses shot from under him.⁵

Like the flag, his motto must have been, "I refuse to be subjugated." Lt. Col. Robinson served with the 1st Pennsylvania Regiment from 11 June 1777 till 1 January 1783. He had been a Lt. Colonel in the 5th Pennsylvania Regiment prior to this, and was transferred to the 2nd Pennsylvania Regiment with the same rank.⁶

The extant flag differs in two ways from what Colonel Hand had expected. First, the hunter is dressed in dark blue rather than the anticipated white. Several possibilities arise as to the reason. The artist might have thought blue to be more aesthetic, or the white could have been repainted later, or, more likely, this flag is a replacement for an earlier one. The latter seems most valid as there is no battle damage. A regiment that was constantly and heavily engaged over the eight year span would no doubt have "gone through" several flags.

The second variation from the letter of 8 March 1776 is the appearance of the letters "P.M. 1st. Rt." Colonel Hand was a doctor by profession so for him to overlook such a major item on the flag seems unlikely. It is possible that both the blue coat and the unit letters were added later.

The question arises as to what these letters signify. The most obvious estimate is "Pennsylvania Militia, 1st Regiment". Although this unit was established by Congress (and therefore considered regulars rather than "militia" as we think of it today) the "Militia" is probably correct.

The crimson center portion of the flag takes up one-ninth of the entirety, as can be seen on the photograph of the overall flag. The color of the field is an olive green as can be seen in the folded and relatively unfaded areas.⁷

The flag measures 53-1/2" on the hoist by 61-1/4" on the fly, including a 3-1/4" sleeve. The center section is 17-3/4" high by 21-1/4" wide. It is nearly, but not exactly centered. The green silk field is made from three horizontal strips measuring (from the top) 7", 23", and 23-1/2". The seams are flat felled. There is no fringe on the flag. Attachment to the staff was by a sleeve formed by folding the material over and sewing it.

Construction involved sewing the three strips together to form the field, then the center portion was cut out and the crimson center piece was sewn into the void. There is a 1" loop (visible on the

photograph) at the lower corner of the staff edge. Its function may have been to hold any tassels that may have been on the staff.

Only the reverse side of the flag is visible. As previously mentioned, a piece of newspaper has been sewn exactly over the center piece, thereby hiding the obverse side.⁸ This unfortunate situation has caused the true positions of the figures to become reversed in every artistic rendition that we have seen. The probable cause for this widely published error is the frontispiece of the Pennsylvania Archives volume that was published in 1890.⁹ The picture is part photograph and part illustration. The photo was taken of the obverse side since the staff is to the left, but the center is an illustration of the reverse side, with only the letters "P.M., 1st. Rt." being turned around. (The letters of the motto are "readable" from either side of the flag.) The illustrator should have turned around the figures as well. The correct arrangement for this flag will have the hunter on the right and the tiger on the staff side.

The painted details on the flag itself are very sharp and clear. The hunter as he is called, is close in dress to a ranger. He is depicted wearing a black leather or cloth cap with a flap on the front. His hair is long and plaited, being tied with a ribbon. There is a curl over his ear. A white neck cloth or stock is visible. The coat is blue and is secured by a waistbelt. This belt is made for the suspension of some sort of weapon, but nothing is on it here. Over his shoulder (his back being to the viewer) are sewn two pieces of material, the only pieces sewn to an otherwise painted flag. Attached with white thread in a crude attempt at repair, they are not part of the design and do not belong on the flag.

The hunter's breeches are yellow-tan and the white stockings come up over his breeches. The knee high boots are black with brown tops. There are no accoutrements. A surprising feature of the hunter is his facial similarity to Colonel Hand. Both have the same eyes, nose and long face.

The tiger is gray-brown and only has a few stripes on the shoulders. He looks quite nasty except for the rather blank stare which is shared with the hunter.

An imaginative touch is the way the scroll terminates. It evolves from the classic flat ribbon into a round cord and then ends in a split tongue effect. It is light blue with black letters. The letters above the net are white.

The flag shows the ravages of time and improper storage, but seems to have no battle damage. Photographs taken prior to its being placed between plexiglass indicate extreme chipping and cracking of the painted areas.¹⁰ This is especially true along the fold lines. Considerable stitching with white thread was done to repair the center silk. Also, there are the two pieces of added cloth mentioned previously. The silk of the field has deteriorated with age, but is not torn or damaged otherwise.

It would not be possible to close without a word of compliment to the unknown artist who painted this standard. The work is excellent. Details are clear, the shading is well done, and the proportions are proper. The tiger looks mighty formidable. The treatment of the scroll finials is creative and appealing. This flag is a work of art as well as a priceless relic of our formative years.

Our special thanks to Mike Winey, then a Field Curator at the William Penn Memorial Museum, for his guidance, patience, and helpfulness during our field trips there.

ADDENDUM: Since this article was prepared, the flag has undergone partial restoration. The newspaper backing was removed and the obverse side was exposed, verifying the conclusions of the authors.

The letters above the hunter are in readable order, the tiger has his back to the hoist edge, the hunter is shown as right-handed and his coat is unadorned in the shoulder area.

After cleaning, the green field has become much lighter, approaching gold, apparently from fading and aging. A test will be made to determine, as much as possible, its original shade of green.

¹ John C. Fitzpatrick. Ed., *Writings of George Washington from the original manuscript sources 1745-1799*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C. 1931, IV, p.341.

² *Pennsylvania Archives*, 5th Series, Harrisburg, 1906, II, p.13.

³ Fitzpatrick. *Op cit.*, V. p. 88.

⁴ Philadelphia, Committee on restoration of Independence Hall *3rd Report*, 1875. P. 13

⁵ Personal communication from Michael J. Winey, then Field Curator, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, William Penn Memorial Museum, 2 March 1973.

⁶ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 2nd Series, Harrisburg, 1890, X, pp 320. 326.

⁷ For general reference, the crimson color is very close to exact in *Peterson's Book of the Continental Soldier*, Harrisburg, 1986. Opposite p. 161, The green field should be somewhat grayer.

⁸ The logic in reaching this conclusion is as follows: first, looking at the "exposed" side. The staff sleeve is now on the right. Second, the "P.M., 1st. Rt." are reversed. The obverse side would have the letters painted correctly, while this side has them backwards so that sunlight passing through the flag will not create an unreadable jumble of forward and backward letters. Because silk is so thin, any light behind it will allow both sides to be seen at once, although the opposite side will only be like "shadows". To prevent this confusion, the reverse side was simply traced over the finished obverse side. The letters of the motto are in proper order from both sides because they are on an opaque background (the scroll). To test this line of thinking, a strong light was directed through the newspaper and flag, then viewed from the other side. The conclusion was that the figures and letters on the other side are lined up exactly, or that the other side is blank. (The latter seems impossible, unless there were two crimson silk pieces sewn back-to-back, and one is missing.) The third reason is that as we see the painting, the hunter is left-handed. This and the waist belt designed to hold a scabbard. The attachment area is on the right hip as portrayed here, yet it would have been worn to suspend the weapon on the left in actuality. (The detail in this part of the hunter is somewhat difficult to make out as there is a stain of

some sort over that area.) The conclusion is that the available side is a reversal of the obverse side. Proper positions would find the tiger to our left and the hunter to our right.

⁹ *Pennsylvania Archives*. 2nd Series. Harrisburg. 1890. X. frontispiece.

¹⁰ Personal communication from Bruce S. Bazelon, Registrar, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, William Penn Memorial Museum, 26 March 1973.

