



FLAGS FOR A NEW NATION

The troubled history of the Confederate national flag

By Donald E. Collins

The Southern Confederacy was a land of flags. During the brief span of four years, no less than three national flags represented the Confederate nation, while a battle flag represented the armies of the South. In addition, the seven states that seceded prior to the formation of the Confederacy, regarding themselves independent until a Southern union was created, either developed their own “national” flags or continued to use their state flags, which served the same purpose. These do not even take into account the various regimental flags carried by soldiers who may have, in many instances, felt greater attachment to them than to the banner of their country.

Success in creating a satisfactory national flag, however, proved to be no easy task, as each new banner was met with almost immediate disapproval or quickly became subject to unforeseen problems that demanded change. Trial and error would continue throughout the duration of the nation itself, meeting with success only as the Confederacy itself fell victim to Northern arms.

The *Richmond Daily Examiner* of March 3, 1863, described the South’s enduring passion for a national flag that even in the midst of a war for survival demanded attention: “*Man always seeks and needs a symbol to rally round; and it becomes to him somewhat mystic and divine, as the emblem of his country’s might and glory; for which he will proudly fight and die. Even those devices which belong to a cause lost and long buried live long in the memory of its faithful adherents ... Herein is one main test of a great people that they will do and dare all for their sacred flag.*”

The same writer put the issue into even more graphic perspective with a quote from Carlyle, who claimed to have “*known five hundred living soldiers [who were] sabred (sic) into crow’s*

*meat for a piece of glazed cotton, which they called their flag; which, had you sold it at any market-cross, would not have brought over three groshen.*¹

Thus, for four long years, half a million Southerners fought, and many thousands died for a piece of cloth that was, in monetary terms, valued at a few dollars, but which symbolized the very heart and ideals of the Confederacy itself, and was indeed worth dying for. This enthusiasm for a Southern national flag began with the first murmurings of secession in 1860 South Carolina and died only with the military defeat of the Southern armies.

The Samuel F. B. Morse flag: Optimism for Reunion

With the election of Abraham Lincoln as President of the United States in 1860, secession and civil war seemed to be inevitable. There would be two countries with the same history, of which both claimed with equal pride. The North might officially remain the “United States,” but the South would create its own mirror-like image of the country it was to leave. There would be in essence, two United States - one Northern and one Southern.

Perhaps it was this similarity that led at least a few far-sighted individuals to believe just as strongly in the inevitability of eventual re-unification. The break-up would only be temporary, or if permanent, the two sides would remember their common heritage and come together for defense. Samuel F. B. Morse was one of these men. Already famous for his telegraphic code, he now became an ardent proponent for peace. Should the country be divided, then the Stars and Stripes, in which the North and South held the selfsame interest, must also be divided equally between the formerly united nations. When the seceded states met to select a national flag, many delegates were of the same opinion as Morse, who said neither could claim the Stars and Stripes because defeats and victories had been shared under that banner. It was hallowed in the memory of each.² Neither side could claim it exclusively. In time of common menace, or reunification, the two flags could be united to form Old Glory once again. As Morse stated: *“And when once the old time-honored banner, bequeathed to us by our honored ancestors of every state, shall be flung to the breeze in its original integrity, as the rally-point for a common defense, will not a shout of welcome, going up from the Rio Grande to Maine, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific, rekindle in patriotic hearts in both confederacies a fraternal yearning for the old union.”*³

The tendency of Southerners to cling to the Stars and Stripes was strong. In bidding farewell to his comrades in the U. S. Senate, Senator ... Slidell of Louisiana emphatically stated that *“Every sea will swarm with our volunteer militia of the ocean, with the striped bunting floating over their heads - for we do not mean to give up that flag without a bloody struggle. It is ours as much as yours.”* That this sentiment was not uncommon is indicated by the *New York Herald*: *“Let the (South) ... keep the stars and stripes ... The Star-Spangled Banner will thus continue to wave in the United States South, as well as the United States North ... Long may it wave. The two flags, similar in stripes, will thus differ only in the number and splendor of their stars.”*⁴

The State Secession Flags

That there would be a struggle over the design of the flag that would represent the Confederacy was evident in the equally strong views of ardent secessionists who had long opposed what they believed to be an oppressive Northern government and the

¹ Richmond Daily Examiner, March 3, 1863.

² Lucile Lange Dufner, “The Flags of the Confederate States of America” (MA thesis, University of Texas, 1944), 1.

³ *Ibid*, 2; Benjamin J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field Book of the Civil War in the United States of America*. Vol. 1. New Haven, CT: Geo. H. Lester, 1878, 246.

⁴ Reprinted in the *Montgomery Weekly Post*, Feb. 27, 1861.

conservatives, many of whom had originally opposed secession and went only reluctantly with their states into Confederacy. Representing the former, William Porcher Miles of South Carolina claimed that he had resented the Stars and Stripes since childhood as the flag of a government that Southerners could look to for justice and protection. “*The State flag is dearer to my heart than the flag of the U. S. for it was under that flag that the battle of Fort Moultrie was fought - (and the battles) of King’s Mountain and Cowpens were fought.*”⁵

“National” Flags of the States

The need for a banner that would symbolize their new country was evident from the earliest days of secession as one banner after another was proposed for the seceding states. As South Carolina left the Union, Columbia and Charleston saw a sea of flags that showed the desire of the state to go it alone as such mottoes as the following were emblazoned: “South Carolina Goes It Alone,” “God, Liberty, and the States,” “Stand to your arms, palmetto boys,” “Hurrah for the Southern Confederacy,” “Now or never strike for independence,” “Goodbye, Yankee Doodle,” and “Death to all abolitionists, Let us bury the Union’s dead carcass.”⁶ It can be argued that the essential element of all future Confederate national flags was developed by the South Carolina Secession Convention that, on December 20, 1860, adopted a red silk banner with a blue cross and fifteen stars, representing the fifteen slaveholding states. The large central star represented South Carolina. A palmetto tree and crescent were in the red field.⁷

Louisiana toyed with the idea of a pelican flag. On Jan. 26, Gov. Thomas O. Moore entered the secession convention hall accompanied by a Pelican flag. However, the flag committee disapproved, calling the bird “*in form unsightly, in habits, filthy, in nature cowardly.*” Still later, on February 11, 1861, the Convention adopted a State Flag, having four blue, six white, and three red stripes, and a single yellow star on the union.⁸

In Alabama, when the secession ordinance was passed, a mass meeting was held in front of the capitol and the women of Montgomery presented a secession flag, which they had made in anticipation of the ordinance.⁹ Of the original seven Confederate states, only Georgia failed to adopt a state secession flag, but used instead its own state flag.

Although the seceded states were temporarily sovereign, there was no intention that they would remain so. Their “national” flags were only national until another union of states could be forged. The real goal of the seceded states was a union of all 15 Southern states into a Confederate nation in which the interests of all would be protected from Northern interference. At the same time the secession conventions were meeting, delegations from various Southern states were visiting sister states to encourage the creation of a Southern Confederacy. With such a union in mind, the Alabama secession convention took the initiative on January 11, 1861: “... *Be it resolved by the people of Alabama in Convention assembled, That the people of the states of Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri, be and are hereby invited to meet the people of the State of Alabama, by their Delegates, in Convention, on the 4th day of February, A. D. 1861, at the city of Montgomery, in the State of Alabama, for the purpose of consulting with each other as to the most effectual mode of securing concerted and harmonious action in whatever measures may be deemed most desirable for our common peace and security.*”¹⁰

⁵ *Montgomery Weekly Advertiser*, Feb. 20, 1861.

⁶ Dufner, 6; George Henry Preble, *History of the Flag of the United States of America*. 4th ed. Vol. 2. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1894, 495.

⁷ Dufner, 4, figure 4, plate 2.

⁸ Milo Milton Quaife, *The Flag of the United States*. NY: Grossett & Dunlap, 1942, 153; Dufner, 10, Fig 9, Plate III.

⁹ Dufner, 7-8; Preble, *History of the Flag*, II, 500.

¹⁰ LaBree, Ben. *The Confederate Soldier in the Civil War*. Paterson, NJ: Pageant Books, 1959, 11.

Trial and Error: The Birth of the Stars and Bars

The invitation to Montgomery was accepted initially by only six of the seceded states, with the Texas delegation arriving too late to be involved in the major work of the Convention. Among the most prominent tasks drawing the attention of the delegates were the need for a functioning government and for a national flag to be displayed prior to the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln in the North. This allowed only four weeks to select a national ensign.

The forty-two men who met in the Alabama State Capitol Building in Montgomery were essentially conservative. Rather than trying to make radical changes, they attempted to recreate the government they knew best, that of the United States. Thus, they had a ready-made model. The Convention, which quickly replaced the word “Convention” for “Congress,” voted to operate under the *“rules of the House of Representatives as well as those of the Senate of the U. S.”* with minor additions. It was also decided that voting would be by states, rather than by individuals, *“on the principle that we are a Congress of Sovereign Independent States, and must vote ... as States, and not individually as members.”* A committee was then appointed to report a plan for a *“provisional government”* upon *“the basis of the constitution of the United States.”* Thus, by the second day, the six states had formally declared themselves to be the Provisional Congress of the Confederate States of America.¹¹

The seriousness given to the creation of a flag for the new nation is attested to by the fact that a Committee on Flag and Seal was the first committee appointed by the Provisional Congress, and was created before the election of Jefferson Davis and Alexander Stephens as president and vice-president of the Confederacy. This occurred on February 9, following the administration of oaths to the delegates to support the Confederate Constitution. A roll call of states was then taken to give delegates an opportunity to present memorials and resolutions. As South Carolina was called, Christopher Memminger presented two flags, the first designed by *“some of the South Carolina fair sex”* bore seven stars for the already seceded states.¹² The second, designed by *“a gentleman ... in Charleston ... appears to be more hopeful than [that of] the young ladies, ... They offer one with seven stars, six for the States already represented in this Congress, and the seventh for Texas, whose deputies we hope will soon be on their way to join us. He offers a flag which embraces the whole fifteen states.”*¹³

At that point South Carolinian William Porcher Miles moved that a committee of one person from each state delegation be appointed to consider a flag for the Confederate States of America. This would be followed later that day by the inclusion of the design of a national seal, arms, and motto by the committee. The motion was adopted and Miles was selected to head the six-man Committee on Flag and Seal.¹⁴

The appointment of Miles to chair the committee was both logical and fortunate. He had been a leader in the Southern independence movement, having resigned from the U.S. House of Representatives on December 13, 1860, to actively work for secession. He had signed his state’s secession ordinance and, as chairman of the powerful Committee on Military Affairs was one of the most powerful men in the Confederate House of Representatives. If a title of Father of the Confederate National Flag were to be bestowed on any one person, the overwhelming choice would have to be Miles. His drive and persistence in pushing for a flag of his own design, based on a banner he had likely viewed at the South Carolina secession convention, would eventually become the most recognized element in the last two flags of the Confederacy.

¹¹ *Montgomery Weekly Advertiser*, March 13, 1861.

¹² *Weekly Montgomery Confederation*, Feb. 15, 1861.

¹³ *Montgomery Weekly Advertiser*, March 13, 1861.

¹⁴ *Weekly Montgomery Confederation*, Feb. 15, 1861.

Five of the six committee members were committed secessionists, Jackson Morton of Florida being the single exception. Two had been members of the U. S. Congress: Morton served in the Senate from 1849 to 1855, while Miles served in the House from 1857 to 1860. Jonathan Shorter, a judge, would resign from the committee in August to become governor of Alabama. Edward Sparrow was born in Ireland, raised in Ohio, and was a member of the Louisiana secession convention. J. T. Harrison was a direct descendant of Benjamin Harrison, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Francis Bartow of Georgia, also chaired the Military Affairs Committee and was a colonel in the Eighth Georgia Infantry. He died July 21, 1861, in the Battle of Manassas, the battle that helped turn the tide of public sentiment against the flag he had helped select. The delegate from Texas arrived on March 2, in time to vote on the flag but not to take part in developing it. As a result, the task of choosing the first national flag was the work of only six states.

Perhaps the need for a flag committee was recognized by the Congress because of the fact that individual members had already begun receiving designs and models for flags from constituents. Many of these in turn were undoubtedly prompted by advertisements placed in Southern newspapers for people to send designs to the Montgomery meeting. Whatever the reason, designs poured in to the committee and randomly to other members of the Provisional Congress.

Even before the delegates met there was a fever for a new Southern government and for a national flag. When the delegates arrived in Montgomery, they found that designs and models for a new flag had preceded them. As early as December 29, 1860, Southern newspapers began to print suggestions for a national flag. “*We must have a banner to fight under one that will symbolize our cause, and ... (it's) glory.*” A design of fifteen stars arranged to form a cross that appeared in the *New Orleans Crescent* on January 3, 1861, illustrates the common belief that the new Confederacy would eventually encompass all 15 Southern states.¹⁵

Advertisements placed in newspapers throughout the South prompted an outpouring of artistic sentiment and pride for the endeavors of the founding fathers of the new nation. The earliest-known design submitted for consideration by the delegates was arguably also the most artistic and beautiful of the many received. The water-color image created by Hamilton Couper, was painted February 1, 1861, three days before the opening of the Montgomery convention. Waving over Fort Sumter, with Charleston Harbor and a cloudy blue sky for a background, was a flag of seven red, white, and black stripes, one for each of the seceded states. The canton was white, with intersecting red and black crosses, and a yellow multi-pointed star in the center.¹⁶

March 4, 1861 was the unofficial goal of the flag committee, as members of the Provisional Confederate government hoped to have a flag raised on the day, and if possible, the hour of the inauguration day of Abraham Lincoln as president of the United States. This gave the committee almost four weeks to sift through the letters and designs that flooded into the Provisional Congress from all parts of the South.¹⁷

Many hopefuls for the honor of creating the national flag by-passed the flag committee, sending their proposals instead directly to other delegates who, one after another, presented them to the Provisional Congress, sometimes in multiple numbers. Records of the Congress show that between February 9 and March 4, this was done on at least twenty-six occasions, with Congressman Thomas Jefferson Withers of South Carolina proudly making the claim on February 16th that he had received the first design, before any other delegate, and had turned it over to the flag committee.¹⁸

¹⁵ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, Jan. 3, 1861.

¹⁶ U. S. National Archives. Record Group 109, “Designs for flag, CS Army.”

¹⁷ Frank G. Carpenter, “The Confederate Flag,” *Lippincott’s Magazine of Popular Literature and Science*, (April 1885), 400; E. Merton Coulter, *The Confederate States of America, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge, 1950), 191.

¹⁸ *Charleston (SC) Mercury*, Feb. 16, 1861; Carpenter, “Confederate Flag,” 400.

In response to this phenomena, and from anxiety that some might be offended should their names were not be read before the full Congress, the committee members urged Chairman Miles to make a statement that might sooth their feelings. He pointed out that because “*a very large number of models are daily submitted to the committee, ... they are not always formally presented in the House.*”¹⁹

A proposal made from the congressional floor came close to wrecking the flag committee. The desire for a near-replica of the U. S. flag was always present among many Southerners within and beyond the Provisional Congress. On February 12, Walker Brooke, a delegate from Mississippi, rose to the floor in an attempt to force just such a choice on the flag committee. The Stars and Stripes was, he insisted, “*eminently a Southern flag, ... baptized in Southern blood, ... and memorialized in the ‘Star Spangled Banner,’ ... written by a Southern man on board a British man of war, which was employed in bombarding a Southern fort.*” Consequently, he proposed: “*That the committee on flag and seal of the Confederacy, be instructed to adopt and report a flag, as similar as possible to the flag of the United States, making only such changes as may be necessary to distinguish easily the one from the other, and to adapt the former, in the arrangement of the stars and stripes to the number of States in this Confederacy.*”²⁰

Miles took immediate offense and rose to oppose the resolution that would render his committee powerless to pursue its charge. It was, he argued, objectionable on two grounds: first, he took it as interference in the work of his committee and second, he viewed the Stars and Stripes as the “*emblem of a hostile and tyrannical government.*” If the resolution were adopted, Miles announced that he would quit the committee, whose work was to receive suggestions from every quarter, deliberate, compare views, and make a report to Congress which it would accept, reject, or modify as it might seem proper. “*But if, sir, we are to be instructed to report a certain flag, I presume that we are a committee ‘fenus efficio.’ The whole matter will have been removed from our hands.*”²¹

Miles’ objections were not only procedural but personal. “*From my childhood, wherever I have seen it, I have felt that it was not the ensign of a government to which we could look for justice and protection, ... (the) State flag is dearer to my heart than the flag of the U. S. for it was under that flag that the battle of Fort Moultrie was fought - and the battles of King’s Mountain and Cowpens were fought.*” Miles followed his discourse with a request to the Mississippian that the resolution be withdrawn. Brook, “at the suggestion of a friend,” agreed to withdraw the resolution, although he reserved the right to present it at a later time.²²

Once the work of the committee had begun, it faced the task of sifting through the hundreds of entries sent in by Southerners ranging from schoolgirls to men and women from all walks of life. Some were crudely drawn crayon designs, others came on cardboard, on the backs of envelopes, small ones sewn in silk, large ones on cloth, and every imaginable surface on which a design might be drawn. They ranged from the practical to the highly imaginative, including the eye of God looking over the South, eagles perched and in flight, the sun rising over the horizon, heraldic crests, crosses, palm trees, cotton bales, hearts, a castle surrounded by stars, and even two-sided flags with different images on each side which would have been not only impractical, but nearly impossible to make.²³

Those proposals that used the U. S. flag as a model were by far the most numerous. On these, varying numbers of narrow or broad stripes were arranged vertically, horizontally, at angles, curved, and even in circles and ovals. The blue canton wandered over the surface of

¹⁹ *Charleston Mercury*, Feb. 19, 1861.

²⁰ *Montgomery Weekly Advertiser*, Feb. 20, 1861.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Survey of the original designs for the Confederate National Flag. U. S. National Archives, Record Group 109.

the banner, floating from the upper left hand corner, to the center; and took on differing shapes from square, to rectangular, to oval, to wave-like. The stars were placed in a variety of patterns and varying sizes. And while the red, white and blue of the Stars and Stripes were generally retained, the arrangement of colors varied greatly.

In the final analysis, the Committee could not agree upon any one flag design and on March 4, 1861, presented four finalists to the Provisional Congress, which met in secret session to make its selection. The first of these was a red flag with a blue circle in the center. The second was a flag with an unknown number of horizontal stripes of alternating red and blue, with a blue union and stars. The third, which was designed by Miles, the committee chairman, although soon to be rejected by the Provisional Congress, would eventually succeed as the famous Battle Flag of the military as well as the most prominent feature of the Second and Third National Flags. The single difference between Miles' design and the later Battle Flag was in dimensions, the former rectangular and the latter square. The fourth and winning finalist was the so-called Stars and Bars flag, which would be chosen over the others in a secret session of the Provisional Congress. These were reproduced in "considerable size" and hanged in the Congressional hall for observation and selection by the delegates meeting in secret session.²⁴

Within an hour or two of its selection, the first national flag of the Confederacy, quickly sewn "by fair and nimble fingers," and flung to the breeze by Letitia Tyler, granddaughter of former U. S. President John Tyler, who himself would be later elected to the permanent Confederate Congress.²⁵ Thus the Provisional Congress had successfully met its self-imposed deadline of being hoisted in time to greet the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln as president of the U. S. A smoke-ring, blown from the barrel of a saluting cannon, seemed to bode well for the Confederacy and its new flag. But that was not to be.

An Understandable Mistake: The Stars and Bars

The first negative comments attacking the new flag were made by the Committee on Flag and Seal itself in, oddly, its March 5th report to the Provisional Congress recommending the new national flag. It made no secret of the fact that the committee disapproved of anything that resembled the Stars and Stripes in its grudging acceptance of the Stars and Bars, as the first national flag became popularly called. "*Whatever attachment may be felt,*" the committee wrote, "*for the stars and stripes (an attachment which your committee may be permitted to say they do not share), ... we cannot retain the flag of the government from which we have withdrawn ... without encountering many obvious practical difficulties.*" Grudgingly, the committee felt that it had to concede to "*what seemed so strong and earnest a desire to retain at least a suggestion of the old stars and stripes.*" In recommending the flag chosen by the delegates of the Provisional Congress on the previous day, it is revealing that the committee failed to use the terms "bars" or "stripes." Instead, these were euphemistically styled as a "*red field, with a white space extending horizontally through the center.*"²⁶

Although many current publications refer to the Stars and Bars as officially "adopted" as the first national flag of the Confederacy, this is highly unlikely. E. Merton Coulter and other flag historians argue convincingly that Confederate leaders were so anxious to have a flag raised on the day and, if possible, hour that Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated in Washington, D. C., that they considered the flag committee's recommendation sufficiently

²⁴ Dufner, 31-32; Letter, William Porcher Miles to Pierre Beauregard, Aug. 27, 1861, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.

²⁵ Dufner, 31-32.

²⁶ Dufner, 27-29; Walter A. Montgomery, "Flags of the Confederacy," *Confederate Veteran*, May, 1916, XXIV, no. 5, pp. 197-198.

official for the purpose. Its only official standing was that the Committee on Flag and Seal reluctantly recommended it after the Congress selected it in secret session. On February 14, the Provisional Congress passed a resolution that the decision for a flag be left to the permanent Congress.²⁷ There is no record that this was ever done, leaving the Stars and Bars as the recognized, but unofficial national flag for the following twenty-six months.

The Need for a Change: The Mistake is Recognized

For several months, most Southerners were content with the Stars and Bars and its similarity to the old American flag for which they continued to have fond memories. The honeymoon, however, would last only so long as actual warfare had not commenced and as long as Northern arms had not drawn Southern blood. On April 12, Lincoln's order to resupply Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor in South Carolina led to actual combat as General Pierre G. T. Beauregard ordered Confederate batteries to fire on the fort. Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers to put down the rebellion resulted in further secessions and both sides built up their armies.

A change in flags became evident even to early supporters of the Stars and Bars following an incident during the Battle of Manassas when Confederates nearly fired on each other over the difficulty of telling for certain whether the flag of the approaching soldiers was Union or Confederate. The solution lay in creating a distinctive flag that would easily identify troops as friend or foe as they moved across the battlefield. General Beauregard, in command of Southern forces, realized this after a near fatal occurrence on July 21, 1861, when he spied unknown troops moving toward him. There was only a slight breeze and the colors of the column drooped on the staff. General Beauregard tried again and again to decide what colors they carried. He used his glass repeatedly and handing it to others begged them to look, hoping they might detect the as yet unrecognized banner. The general was anxious but finally determined to hold his ground. Suddenly a puff of wind spread the colors to the breeze. It was the Confederate flag - the Stars and Bars.²⁸

As a result of this, and because of suspected friendly fire episodes among Confederates caused by the inability to distinguish Confederate and Union colors at a distance, Beauregard resolved that the Southern cause should never again be endangered in that manner. Seeking advice for a new, more distinctive national flag, he turned to Colonel Miles, who had served on his staff as a voluntary aide during the summer of 1861, and more importantly, chaired the Committee on Flag and Seal. In late August, before leaving the army to return to Congress, Miles described to Beauregard the Saint Andrews cross design he had proposed, and which had been rejected by the Provisional Congress. He doubted, however, that he would have any more success in urging Congress to abandon the Stars and Bars in Richmond, the new Confederate capital, in September than he had in March in Montgomery.²⁹

After explaining Beauregard's concerns, Miles proposed his design as the new national flag again to his committee, and was rejected once more, this time by a vote of four to one. Beauregard next turned to his superior, General Joseph E. Johnston, to propose a different route - this time the flag he would seek would be solely for the military. "*I wrote to [Miles] that we should have two flags - a peace or parade flag, and a war flag to be used only on the field of battle. ... How would it be for us to address the War Dept. on the subject for a supply of Regimental or badge flags made of red with two clue bars crossing each other diagonally on which shall be introduced the stars, the edge of the flag to be trimmed all around with white,*

²⁷ E Merton Coulter, "The Flags of the Confederacy," p. 193; Devereaux D. Cannon, Jr. *The Flags of the Confederacy*, St. Jukes Press and Broadfoot Publishing, 1988, 9-10.

²⁸ Dufner, 41; La Bree, *the Confederate Soldier*, 47.

²⁹ Coski, "The Confederate Battle Flag in Historical Perspective," *Confederate Symbols in the Contemporary South*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000, 92.

*yellow or gold fringe? We would then on the field of battle know our friends from our Enemies.*³⁰

When the high command of the Virginia army met in September, all agreed on the St. Andrews cross design, with Johnston proposing that the flag be square and thus better proportioned. Beauregard agreed. The new flags were made and delivered in a jubilant ceremony at Centreville, Virginia on November 28, 1861. The Cross of St. Andrews soon became popular with other Confederate armies, and as the Southern forces gained successes on the battlefield, Miles and Beauregard's preferred ensign also became increasingly popular with the Southern population, later working its way into incorporation in the second and third national flags. It would take time, however, for the Provisional Congress to accept anything but a near-replica of the Stars and Stripes.

In the meantime, growing popular contempt for a national symbol that reminded them of the enemy brought increasing momentum both in the government and among the general population for a new national flag. This need to distance the country from the United States was expressed regularly in the Southern press.

In this atmosphere, Miles continued to press his own flag on Congress. In an August 12, 1861, reply to the Reverend R. S. Trapier, who supported Miles in his efforts, he informed his fellow South Carolinian that Congress was not yet receptive to proposals to abandon the Stars and Bars. His own committee, he claimed, had "*no sympathy with this sentiment*" against changing the flag. But he expressed hope that the sentiment against changing the flag was dying out. "*But the committee has no control over the subject. That body is 'functus officio'.*" The only hope for change, Miles suggested, was for the people themselves to petition Congress for a new flag. "*If the feeling be so general as supposed*" among the states, people should memorialize Congress. However, if the feeling is not yet that strong for a change, then "*there is not prospect of a change at the present.*" Miles explained further that Congress would not look favorably on such petitions if the first came from South Carolina, which was viewed as the most radical of the seceded states.³¹

Miles' interpretation of the Congressional mood proved to be incorrect, however, as only two weeks after his pessimistic correspondence with Trapier, there was a shift in his direction. On August 28, approximately a month after the near disaster caused by the similarity in flags at Manassas, he proposed, and Congress accepted a resolution that the Committee on Flag and Seal should "*inquire into the expediency of so changing the Confederate flag as to make it more distinctive and more distinguished from the flag of the United States.*"³² While the reason for this change in heart is unknown, there is little doubt that the shift more than likely resulted from the confusion in flags at Manassas played a roll.

By November, only seven months after the Stars and Bars was first raised in Montgomery, the *Richmond Dispatch* reported that a general recognition had developed that it "*shall not remain the permanent ensign of the Confederacy.*"³³ A month later the editor of that same paper spared no words in describing the South's error in selecting its first national flag, which it called a "*natural but most pernicious blunder.*" The South had taken a piece of the "dear old rag," taking for granted that the stars and stripes could be shared between the Union and the Confederacy. The new nation was, he argued, clearly entitled to from seven to eleven of the stars, and three to four stripes, and taking them to create the stars and bars was "*honest to a fault.*"³⁴ However, as demonstrated at Manassas, the ability to distinguish friends from enemies at a distance was one of the most important purposes of a flag, and in that the Confederate flag had failed. "*In no war, has it ever been as important*

³⁰ Coski, "The Confederate Flag," 92.

³¹ Letter from William Porcher Miles to Rev. R. S. Trapier, Aug. 12, 1861. Museum of the Confederacy, Rich'd, VA.

³² Vol. 1, Provisional Congress, Aug. 28, 1861.

³³ *Richmond Dispatch*, Nov. 14, 1861.

³⁴ *Richmond Dispatch*, Dec. 7, 1861.

that distinct emblems be carried.” “Our enemies are of the same race as ourselves - of the same color and even shade of complexion - they speak the same language, wear like clothing, and are of like form and stature. ... Our general appearance being the same, we must rely solely upon symbols for distinction.” The Confederacy knew the flag it had to fight and in choosing a near replica, the Confederacy clearly had erred.³⁵

Other newspapers spread the news of the growing desire to replace the Stars and Bars. The October 21 *Natchez Courier*, in reporting rumors that the flag was to be changed, noted the suggestion of a Judge Porter of Alabama, who proposed using the flag raised by Kosciusko in Poland following the American Revolution in lieu of the current flag that “borrows too much from the North, and is associated with stripes.”³⁶ The *Charleston Mercury* noted that “the papers are all discussing what kind of flag the South ought to adopt” as a permanent flag. “It seems to be generally agreed that the ‘Stars and Bars’ will never do for us. They resemble too closely the dishonored flag of Yankee Doodle.” Growing sentiment appeared to favor the Battle Flag, which “we imagine ... will become the Southern flag by popular acclaim.”³⁷

As interest heated up, designs from the public began to appear in newspaper windows and counting rooms. Unlike the campaign for the first national flag with the predominance of variations on the stars and stripes, the new offerings varied widely in design. Few of the designs offered referred to the South’s peculiar institution. The lone serious entry was a white flag with a black bar running from the upper to the lower corner. The black bar was referred to as the “Nigger in the middle.” The most grotesque suggestion of this nature was made in jest. “Nothing could be more comprehensively Southern,” according to the *Charleston Mercury*, than “a buzzard sitting on a cotton bale, with a chew of tobacco in his mouth, a little nigger in one claw, and a palmetto in the other.”³⁸

Further evidence of the shift in public mood toward a new, more distinctive Southern flag became evident as people began to send in new designs. The *Richmond Dispatch* noted that by New Year’s 1862, a large number of designs attempting to improve on the Confederate flag were being received. A great many, including some that it described as being “exceedingly ugly,” were placed in the newspaper’s window for perusal by the public. The best, it thought, was a cross, surrounded by stars, on a pure white field, the upright red, the cross piece blue, and the space where the two pieces cross each other white.³⁹

Following the approval of Miles’ resolution of August 28, 1861, the Provisional, then the permanent Confederate Congress plodded along for another nineteen months, coming near success on at least two occasions, only to be followed by more delays. It was not until December and January when the flag was again mentioned in Congress, and only then to announce that constituents had sent models, which as always, were referred to the flag committee. On January 31, 1862, a new resolution was passed that simply mirrored Miles resolution of five months earlier to “inquire into the propriety” of changing the Confederate flag so as to “make it more easy to be distinguished from that of the United States.”⁴⁰

Two weeks later, with three new members appointed in January, the Committee reported, as had Miles in his August 27 communication with General Beauregard, that the Stars and Bars was only a “provisional” flag that should not outlast the Provisional Government “for which it was intended.” The overriding need for change was the same as Miles had forecast in the flag committee’s March 4, 1861 report giving its hesitating approval of the Stars and Bars - that is,

³⁵ Dufner, 52; *Richmond Dispatch*, Dec. 7, 1861.

³⁶ *Richmond Dispatch*, Oct. 23, 1861.

³⁷ *Charleston Mercury*, Jan. 27, 1862.

³⁸ *Charleston Mercury*, Jan. 4, 1862.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Jan. 17, 1862, p. 1; Dufner, 58

⁴⁰ Minutes, Provisional Confederate Congress, fifth session, secret session, Jan. 31, 1862.

that it too closely resembled the flag of the U. S. and “*experience has proved it cannot be used in battle without the liability of leading our men in battle to confusion and disaster.*” The Committee then presented three designs to Congress from which to choose for a national flag.⁴¹

In its anxiety to see the Stars and Bars replaced, the *Richmond Examiner* of February 13 hastily announced that the flag committee had selected a new national flag, which it had narrowed from a curious collection of designs that included beehives, snakes, and temples of liberty. The new flag, bearing a blue union with four stars on a red field, was announced as “*almost unanimously approved by Congress,*” with the exception of the stars and their arrangement.⁴² Other newspapers in Richmond and elsewhere in the South doubted the *Examiner’s* claim, cautiously preferring to wait for an official notification from Congress. Nevertheless, the *Examiner* in its confidence saw fit to display the new flag in the Southern capital.⁴³

The *Examiner’s* announcement proved to be both premature and wrong. When Congress met the following day, Jackson Morton of Florida, despite being a member of the flag committee, made a motion that killed consideration of a national flag for the duration of the Provisional Congress. It was “proper,” his resolution argued, that a decision on a “Flag for the Permanent Government” should be left to the Congress of that government, which was about to assemble. The motion carried nine to three, and the Stars and Bars would remain the flag of the Confederacy for another fourteen months.⁴⁴

The flag issue was taken up immediately by the permanent Congress, which met in mid-February. Committees on flag and seal were created in each house, with both called upon to jointly work toward the goal of a national flag and seal. Thomas Jenkins Semmes of Louisiana was chosen chairman of the House of Representatives committee, and Alexander Boteler of Virginia served in the same capacity for the Senate committee. The months of February into April 1862 were spent collecting flag models and designs to be considered along with those gathered earlier. Nearly all the submissions contained some arrangement of stars.

The March 6 *Charleston Mercury*, reiterating that “*there is no mistaking the general dissatisfaction existing with the Stars and Bars,*” illustrated four designs on its front page which it believed were under consideration by Congress. Among these was a rectangular version of the Confederate Battle Flag that differed from that designed by William Porcher Miles only in the number of stars, fifteen instead of thirteen, and the absence of a white border adjacent to the Saint Andrews cross. In the *Mercury’s* opinion, this was not likely to be chosen due to it being objectionable to some religious denominations, “*the Israelites, if not the Roman Catholics - in a country in which Church and State are separate.*” Another design, bearing a simple black stripe running diagonally from bottom to top, was one of the few presented during the four year history of the Confederacy to allude to “*our faith in the peculiar institution.*” This flag would also discard the “*everlasting Yankee stars and the worn out combinations of red, white, and blue.*”⁴⁵ The committee rejected any design reminiscent of the Stars and Stripes as a manifestation of “*our entire and absolute severance from the United States and a complete annihilation of every sentiment indicating the faintest hope of reconstruction.*”⁴⁶

On April 19th, 1862, the joint senate and house flag committee submitted still another recommendation for a permanent national flag. The proposed flag was red, with a Saint

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, February 11, 1862; *Charleston Mercury*, March 6, 1862.

⁴² *Richmond Examiner*, February 13, 1862.

⁴³ *Charleston Mercury*, February 21, 1862.

⁴⁴ Journal of the Provisional Congress, fifth session, Feb. 14, 1862.

⁴⁵ *Charleston Mercury*, March 6, 1862.

⁴⁶ Committee Report, April 19, 1862, Journal of the First Congress, p. 15-16.

Andrews cross, in the center of which was a blue shield containing a yellow sun, the alternately short and long rays to represent the number of states in the Confederacy. A feeling that success had finally been attained is indicated by illustrations placed widely in the Northern and Southern press over such optimistic headlines as “The New Flag of the Confederacy” and “The New Rebel Flag.” The sun had been frequently urged as an emblem of the South, symbolizing among other things, its geography. While not being overly enthusiastic over the design, the *Charleston Mercury* nevertheless noted that it “*in no way resembles the flag of the Yankees.*” In that respect it would probably be “*generally well relished by the people.*”⁴⁷

Perhaps the lack of excitement over the flag design worked toward its rejection by Congress. After no further action was taken over the next five months, Chairman Boteler asked, and was granted, permission to withdraw the Committee’s report and resolution in support of the flag.⁴⁸ With no new national flag in sight, another spate of proposals began to make their way to the flag committee. The Stars and Bars, still widely reviled by the people, would continue to wave over the Confederacy for another year.

Although the need for selecting a Confederate National Seal placed the flag issue on a back burner for brief period, flag designs were still sent to Congress and the flag committee, and criticism of the stars and bars continued. According to the *Southern Illustrated News* of March 12, 1863, “*Our people are tired of looking at the poor imitation of the stars and stripes ... We may call it ‘stars and bars’ but ... the whole thing is suggestive of the detested Federal Government and its oppressions.*” The same person expressed a popular sentiment in suggesting the Battle Flag for the nation standard. “*We have always thought that General Joseph E. Johnston settled the question of a national flag.*”⁴⁹

The Stars and Bars reign as the national flag ended during April of 1863. While the battle flag had gained increasingly in popularity over more than a year, there were those who considered it unsuitable for a national flag, at least when used alone without the addition of other features. Yet during this month, two separate sources accurately predicted or at least made public their opinion on a choice for a national flag that proved prophetic. On April 24, General Beauregard, wrote to his cousin, Louisiana Congressman C. S. Vellere, that in his opinion, the national flag should consist of the battle flag as the union Jack on an all white field. A day earlier, the *Savannah (Georgia) Daily News* had voiced precisely that same sentiment. Whether or not these influenced Congress, or were even known to that body, their suggestions accurately reflected the sentiments of a winning block in the national legislature.⁵⁰

On May 1, 1863, their wishes were granted in a contentious session on the floor of the Confederate House of Representatives. On that day, the Senate sent to the House S-132, an act to establish a Flag for the Confederate States, which called for the Battle Flag as a union on a white field with a horizontal blue bar dividing the field. Flag committee chairman Boteler asked for and received permission to suspend regular business to discuss the bill. An almost successful attempt to delay consideration of the flag until at least December was defeated when William Porcher Miles’ succeeded in keeping the bill on the table.

Once debate began, disagreement was expressed with the flag that had easily passed the Senate with little or no debate, although nearly all in the House would agree that the Battle Flag should be retained as the union. The first to fall was the blue horizontal bar. A nearly successful attempt was made to substitute this with a red border around the outer edges of the flag. Another proposal suggested that the entire flag should be similar to the military’s

⁴⁷ *Charleston Mercury*, April 21, 1862; *Chicago Times*, May 8, 1862.

⁴⁸ Journal of the House of Representatives, September 5, 1862, p. 16.

⁴⁹ Dufner, 60; *Southern Historical Society Papers*, Volume 8. Richmond, VA: Rev. J. William Jones, 1880. p. 155.

⁵⁰ Beauregard to Vellere, April 24, 1863, *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 5, 1863; *Savannah Daily News*, April 23, 1863.

battle flag. Ironically, this was opposed by Miles, the designer of the original battle flag, who argued in support of the battle flag on an otherwise all white field as suggested earlier by Beauregard and the *Savannah Daily News*. This was placed in the form of a resolution by Texas Representative Peter W. Gray, who submitted the following proposal, that “*The field to be white, the length double the width of the flag, with the union (now used as the battle flag) to be a square of two-thirds the width of the flag having the ground red, thereon a salter of blue, bordered with white and emblazoned with mullets or five-pointed stars, corresponding in number to that of the Confederate States.*” The latter design was approved and signed the same day by President Jefferson Davis.⁵¹

The *Atlanta Intelligencer* of May 23, 1863 expressed the relief felt by many in the Confederacy. The new flag met with general approval and relief after two years with the Stars and Bars and its “unpleasant reminiscences” of “*the flag of tyranny, the Stars and Stripes. ... The design for a flag ... has justly been left a mooted question for more than two years. At last it is decided and the whole South is satisfied.*”⁵²

Yet, despite the sighs of relief, the first raising of the new flag over the Confederate capitol in Richmond was an extraordinarily low-key affair. Two hours before noon on May 14, the flag was hoisted on the flagstaff at the southern end of the Capitol building unattended by any demonstration as might have been expected. The Second National Flag “*just slipped quietly into the place of the other old flag. It was not an event, ... not a cannon bade it welcome, not a voice said 'hurrah,' not a drum beat.*”⁵³

The first official use of the new national flag was to cover the coffin of General Stonewall Jackson at his funeral. This resulted in it popularly being referred to as “Jackson’s Flag.” Because of its white field, it also became known as the “Stainless Banner.” Perhaps because of its earlier use in Jackson’s funeral, there was little fanfare when it was first raised over the Confederate Capitol Building at approximately 10:00 a.m. on Thursday, May 14, 1863. Unlike celebration that accompanied the raising of the Stars and Bars on March 4, 1861, no cannons were fired, nor drums beat, and but few witnesses to the event.⁵⁴

Like the Stars and Bars, the Second National Flag was a mistake that should have been foreseen. The flag presented to the House of Representatives by the Senate contained all of the necessary attributes of a flag that could be sustained without change by the Confederacy. Had either the blue bar or red border been approved, the flag would have contained the elements that had been challenged previously or would be challenged in the future. The addition of those features would have made for a national ensign that was distinctive, could be easily identified from a distance, and could be reversed as a signal of distress at sea. The rejection of the blue bar and red border left a flag in which the white could be misinterpreted as a flag of truce when hanging limp against its flagstaff when there was no breeze. At this point, the history of the Confederate national flag was a history of mistakes.

The flaws in the new flag were noticed quickly. Its dimensions were ungainly, so much so that the legal length and width of the flag were often ignored. Most noticeably, the very flag that flew over the Confederate capitol building was legally (and almost certainly purposely) incorrect, disregarding the legal dimensions. Since this fault could be and was frequently ignored in practice, it was the least serious of the flag’s problems. More important was the design itself. Being largely white, it gave the appearance of being a flag of truce, the large expanse of white, taken with the obscurity of the union whenever it was drooping, caused it to be mistaken for a flag of truce. Other objections were raised over the

⁵¹ Journal of the Confederate Congress, May 1, 1863.

⁵² Reprinted in the *Savannah Daily Morning News*, May 23, 1863; in Thian, p. 83.

⁵³ *Richmond Enquirer*, May 15, 1863.

⁵⁴ *Richmond Enquirer*, May 15, 1863; in Thian, p. 80.

ease with which the white field became soiled, and the difficulty of distinguishing it at a distance, when displayed against a background of white clouds.

The second national flag was selected on the final day of Congress, and a new session would not meet again until December 1863. Two months later, in February 1864, Representative Gustavus Henry, Jr. of Tennessee introduced the first bill to change the Confederate flag. But the issue of a third national flag did not draw the same attention as the effort to replace the Stars and Bars. Thus, a new flag committee, whose task it would be to consider changes in the second national banner, was not chosen until May 7, 1864. The urgency for a new flag diminished, the number of new designs submitted to the committee were few in number. Only one of these was given serious consideration, and early on it was widely recognized that this would be the new national flag of the Confederacy.

Artillery Major Arthur L. Rogers, its designer, had served with distinction throughout the war, being commended by General Beauregard for action during the First Battle of Manassas. He was on the staff of General Stonewall Jackson at the Battle of Chancellorsville. When Jackson was shot, Rogers voluntarily gave up his place on the ambulance, despite being seriously wounded himself. During his convalescence around Richmond, he gave thought to correcting the mistakes in the national flag, the new one of which he argued should “*be white and red, with as little as possible of the Yankee blue.*” The flag he developed, which consisted of simply modifying the flag’s dimensions and adding a vertical bar at the end would be accepted unchanged during the now brief life of the Confederacy.⁵⁵

Rogers campaigned arduously for his design, communicating with the leading military officers of the Confederacy. Before presenting it to Congress, he wrote to General Robert E. Lee, who replied that it was “*very pretty and ... added distinctness to the flag.*”⁵⁶ Rogers also solicited and received endorsements from numerous other army and navy officers, including Joseph E. Johnston, Richard S. Ewell, John Singleton Mosby, and Captain Raphael Semmes. President Jefferson Davis and the Richmond press also came on board in favor of the new design. With this support, Rogers expressed hope that his flag would be approved by February 22, the birthday of that “great Virginian,” George Washington.⁵⁷

On December 13, 1864, Semmes of Louisiana, noting the stated objections of naval officers that the present flag, in a calm, looked like a flag of truce, introduced Roger’s bill to establish the flag of the Confederate States. Other than revising the width to length, the major change was the addition of a red bar “on the outer half from the union to be a red bar extending the width of the flag.”⁵⁸ It was sent to the Senate committees on naval and military affairs, which gave their unanimous approval, and was forwarded to the House. The popularity of and certainty of passage of the bill was such that it was seen floating in Richmond months before the bill reached the Senate. President Davis signed the bill on March 4, 1865.

After four long years of disappointment, the Confederacy finally had a national banner that was without flaw and without controversy. Although the nation would last only another month before Lee’s surrender at Appomattox would bring the war to an end, this was a flag that could have endured. It is doubtful that controversy would begin anew had history had a different ending. As it was, it is doubtful that the third national flag flew to any great extent beyond Richmond, and probably never over a Southern battlefield.

⁵⁵ *Southern Historical Society Papers*, Volume 8, p. 160.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁵⁸ *Southern Historical Papers*, New Series, Vol. 13. Richmond, VA: Virginia Historical Society, 1958. p. 461.