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articles relating to vexillology*

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# **THE FLAG BULLETIN**

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The author of the article in this issue on the Forster Flag has served the Flag Heritage Foundation, owner of that flag, as a volunteer since its incorporation in 1971 as a not-for-profit institution dedicated to the advancement of vexillology.

*Artwork for this issue, courtesy Terri Malgieri*

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# SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FORSTER FLAG

- It is the oldest known American flag, i.e. a flag intentionally designed and used to symbolize the country.
- It is the oldest surviving flag which symbolizes the United States by incorporating 13 red and white stripes.
- It was carried by Minutemen called out on the Alarm of 19 April 1775 for the Battles of Lexington and Concord.
- It is one of only 30 authentic colors carried by American troops in the Revolutionary War still extant.
- It predates the Declaration of Independence and the adoption of the Stars and Stripes.
- Its authenticity has been attested to by seven leading American flag experts.
- Its ownership from the Revolution to the present is clearly established.
- Its narrative history ranks it as one of the two or three most important Revolutionary War flags.
- Among the 27 Revolutionary War American colors in the United States, it is the only one not in a public museum or institution.
- It is one of only two extant Revolutionary War flags with British symbols replaced by American ones.
- It is in good condition and its cord and tassels have been preserved.

- Its history is referred to in a book dating back to 1895.
- It has appeared in the three most important scholarly books on American flags published since 1975.
- It was made in America, despite its original British symbolism.
- Its current American symbolism derives from the replacement of the original British Union Jack design.
- It is one of only seven surviving Revolutionary War flags with a canton of 13 stripes, the earliest American union symbol.
- It is one of only three extant Revolutionary War colors with a different design on the obverse and reverse.
- It was made before the outbreak of the Revolution to serve as a Massachusetts militia color.
- It is one of only five extant grand division colors carried in the Revolution.
- Its importance is reflected in its appearance on a 1999 sheet of US postage stamps — of which ten million were issued— of the 20 most important American historical flags.
- It has been featured in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, at the Massachusetts State House, by the National Flag Foundation, etc.
- It combines simplicity of design with complexity of construction, consisting of 25 separate parts neatly hand-stitched into a single flag.

## THE FLAG CALENDAR® THE FORSTER FLAG

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| 1636             | the East Regiment (after 1643 called the Essex Regiment) is formed in Essex County, Massachusetts-Bay*                             |
| ?1774            | the flag is made for the Manchester Company, First Regiment of Militia, Essex County   |
| 19-21 April 1775 | the flag is carried during the Alarm on the first days of the American Revolution  |
| ?Spring 1775     | the Union Jack canton of the flag is replaced by 13 stripes  |
| 17 June 1775     | the British, victors at the Battle of Bunker Hill at the cost of 1000 casualties, retreat to Boston                                |
| 1 January 1776   | the first American national flag, the Continental Colors, is officially hoisted for the first time on Prospect Hill outside Boston |
| 17 March 1776    | British forces withdraw from Boston, leaving Massachusetts-Bay de facto independent  |
| 4 July 1776      | the independence of the United States is proclaimed  |
| 14 June 1777     | the first Stars and Stripes is officially adopted as the national flag of the United States  |
| 1895             | the earliest known reference to the Forster Flag is published in the Manchester town history                                       |
| 22 January 1975  | Constance (Knight) Hodgdon sells the flag to the Flag Heritage Foundation  |
| 1976             | the flag is examined by experts for the first time   |

W.S.

*\*The official name Province of Massachusetts-Bay was altered to Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1780.*

# THE FORSTER FLAG

## THE “FIRST AMERICAN FLAG EVER MADE”

by Whitney Smith, PhD

### PREFACE

The American love of superlatives encompasses its flags — the oldest national flag in the world, the tallest flagpole, the largest flag, etc. It is not surprising, therefore, to discover as a newspaper<sup>1</sup> headline “Owns First American Flag Ever Made: Emblem Was Captured from King’s Troops in Battle of Lexington.” Flag books record other similar claims. The Bedford Flag, it is said, is “the oldest existing flag of the American Revolution.”<sup>2</sup> Another report insists that “The first time that our national flag was used... was by General Washington, in the hurried and critical stand made by him on the banks of the Assanpink [River].”<sup>3</sup>

American naval hero John Paul Jones claimed “It was my fortune, as the senior first lieutenant, to hoist the ‘flag of America’ the first time it was displayed.”<sup>4</sup> As early as 1813 there was even a dispute over such claims: ex-President John Adams contradicted John Paul Jones’ boast: “I assert that the first American flag was hoisted by Captain John Manley, and the first British flag was struck to him.”<sup>5</sup>

Vindication of any claim for the “first American flag ever made” thus requires extensive and rigorous documentation. It is also necessary to define terms precisely and “American flag” is not a self-evident phrase. This article addresses salient aspects of that question while making known publicly for the first time the origins, history, design, and significance of the militia color referred to in that newspaper article, the Forster Flag.

## INTRODUCTION

The Forster Flag<sup>6</sup> never appeared in flag books published before 1975 because it had always been in the hands of the family descended from the original owner in the Revolutionary War era.<sup>7</sup> (It has been included in the three most important books dealing with American flags published since 1975.)<sup>8</sup> That year the family sold it to the Flag Heritage Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving vexillological documentation and flags and to making them better known to the general public and to scholars. The present study is part of the ongoing effort of the Foundation to contribute to the advancement of vexillology.

The role of the Forster Flag is defined in part by other flags of the same era. Without attempting more than a brief survey, it is nevertheless important for the present analysis to put those flags into perspective. Two of the most important flag categories are the “type flag” and the “unique flag.” The former is a basic pattern (colors, symbols, sizes, etc.) of which a great number of examples are made. For example, flags flown on ships and buildings — with rare exceptions — are not considered unique or special. When they deteriorate, they are simply replaced by another flag of the same type.

In contrast, the unique flag is unlike any other and is held in high regard even when damaged or worn out. In almost all cases the design, although perhaps part of a general pattern, has distinctive characteristics that show that it belongs to a particular organization (military unit, church, labor organization, political party, etc.). While it may be replaced by a new flag, the original is often preserved at a military headquarters, museum, cathedral, or similar special building.

Unique flags tend to be made with precious materials and fine workmanship rather than workaday fabrics and modes of manufacturing. The unique flag is frequently permanently attached to a staff for display on parade or in an office, whereas a type flag is more commonly hoisted and lowered on a fixed pole and therefore has halyards, grommets, or other similar equipment.

Examples of the Stars and Stripes, although not uniform in design during the Revolutionary War, were type flags that were used until they wore out and then were discarded and replaced. Military colors in contrast, based on long-standing traditions, were unique flags often reverently preserved as mementos of the struggles they had been associated with.<sup>9</sup> The Forster Flag is definitely a unique flag and thereby has great interest for historians, collectors, museum curators, and patriots.

There are other unique flags from the American Revolution, but certain classes can be excluded from consideration in judging the historical value of the Forster Flag. Important as they may be, the flags displayed by other armies, allied or enemy, are not in the same category. Specifically, French, British, Loyalist, Hessian, and Spanish flags used during the Revolution can properly be excluded.

While exact dating is difficult, the era in which a flag was used is important when making comparisons. Strictly speaking, flags should qualify under the heading "Revolutionary War" only if they were used between the Battle of Lexington (19 April 1775) and the Battle of Yorktown (19 October 1781) or at the latest the Treaty of Paris (3 September 1783). Although made before the first battle, the Forster Flag was in service between the dates cited.

From a review of all available literature on the subject, it appears that only 30 American military colors of the Revolution survive. If Richardson<sup>10</sup> is correct in his estimation that at least 500 colors had originally been created, the survival rate over the ensuing two-and-a-quarter centuries is six percent. This contrasts with the estimate made by Madaus<sup>11</sup> that ten percent of the perhaps 15,000 colors carried during the American Civil War are extant.

Of the 30 Revolutionary War survivors, there are several paired flags: three grand subdivision colors and one standard for Webb's Additional Regiment still exist as do two colors each for the Continental Light Dragoons and the 2nd New Hampshire Regiment. In England there are said to be two grand division colors and a standard for the IX Virginia Regiment. The Forster Flag pairs with another grand division color of which only the canton still exists.



Thus flags of only 22 regiments or other military formations of the Revolution survive, although there were over 100 authorized Continental regiments and possibly an equal number of state and local militia units.<sup>12</sup> Challenges to the Revolutionary War era status of some of the surviving flags (including the “Washington’s Headquarters standard”) might further reduce the total.

Two other considerations reinforce the uniqueness of the Forster Flag. It is the only American Revolution flag out of 27 in the United States today that is not in a public museum or similar institution. Long private ownership has spared it from fading or damage from the well-intentioned “restoration” many old flags have undergone. Its cord and tassels survive and an old photograph<sup>13</sup> shows that the flag has remained in the same condition over the past century.

### THE FAMILY STORY

Some flags have been passed along for generations with only the briefest of stories associated with them to account for their origin, significance, and date — or none at all. To fill in the gaps, modern owners often turn to flag experts who are competent at the analyzing the age and general type of flag involved but who, understandably, can have no concrete knowledge of its history. In the present case the family which owned the Forster Flag before its acquisition by the Flag Heritage Foundation had very specific traditions about the history and use of the flag.

Their story is incomplete and even inaccurate in a few details, but their claims are as good as or better than those concerning the provenance of most other Revolutionary War colors. Preserved with the Forster Flag are eight newspaper clippings from the 1910s through 1937 including several unidentified and undated but based on family sources. They relate that Harry F. Knight, Jr., the brother of Constance Hodgdon (who sold the flag to the Flag Heritage Foundation) was “the fifth generation in direct descent to possess the ensign since it came into the possession of his great-great-grandfather.”<sup>14</sup>

The flag, “while not bequeathed ‘bleeding sire to son,’... has come as near that as possible.”<sup>15</sup> The flag “was captured from the British on April 19, 1775... at the Battle of Lexington” (Massachusetts) and

originally the upper left hand corner of the banner bore the cross of St. George, but that symbol was soon removed and a square of silk placed in its stead. On this were fastened 13 buff<sup>16</sup> bars, six on one side and eleven [i.e. seven] on the other, representing the 13 original states.<sup>17</sup>

“The authenticity of the relic,” it is asserted, “has never been doubted by its owners, but they do not know the circumstances by which it passed out of the hands of the British, and into those of Israel Foster,<sup>18</sup> an Essex county minuteman.”<sup>19</sup>

Forster “loaned [the flag] to the Massachusetts state authorities for exhibition in the State House, where for many years it remained draped over a drum.”<sup>20</sup> Later “the relative to whom the banner had been bequeathed attempted [after Forster’s death] to secure the flag from the state authorities, who were for a time disposed to cling to it... after some difficulty the attempt [to restore the flag to the man to whom it had been willed] proved successful.” The family also made more ambitious claims:

Undoubtedly the experiences of this historic emblem are unparalleled in the annals of war. The flag, with only slight alterations to fit the exigencies of the occasion, once led the hosts of an invading army only to be captured and spread before their eyes in the opposing ranks of those who were fighting for their liberty.<sup>21</sup>

The flag is also boasted to be “the first design of an American flag ever made, and for that reason is considered by the owner a priceless heirloom.” At the same time it was acknowledged by the family that:

**TABLE I:  
DATES OF OWNERSHIP OF THE FORSTER FLAG**

1. Samuel Forster, 1775-1794;
2. Israel Forster, son of the first owner, 1794-1863;
3. James Forster Knight, grandson of the second owner, 1863-1890;
4. Emma F. (Odlin) Knight, widow of the third owner, 1890-1917;
5. James A. Knight, son of the third and fourth owners, 1917-1931;
6. Harry Forster Knight, Sr., brother of the fifth owner, 1931-1936;
7. Harry Forster Knight, Jr., son of the sixth owner, 1936-1969;
8. Constance (Knight) Hodgdon, sister of the seventh owner, 1969-1975.

Although the Flag had a clear history [when loaned to the State House] it has not been transferred to its present owners. James A. Knight [1873-1931] the son of Mrs. [James F.] Knight, has tried to look up its history but with no further result than to learn of the facts here stated.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the family accounts, an independent source provides some information about the Forster Flag. There is a footnote in a book<sup>23</sup> written by W[illiam] H. Tappan, a member of the Committee of Publication which had been selected to prepare that history to honor the 250th anniversary of the town of Manchester, Essex County, Massachusetts. That footnote reads

The colors of this company were preserved for many years by Major [Israel] Forster [1779-1863], and at his death passed into the hands of his

grandson, James [Forster] Knight, a soldier in the War of the Rebellion [i.e. the Civil War].

In the same book<sup>24</sup> author Lamson refers to the Minutemen<sup>25</sup> from Manchester as the “Lexington Company.”

## PROVENANCE

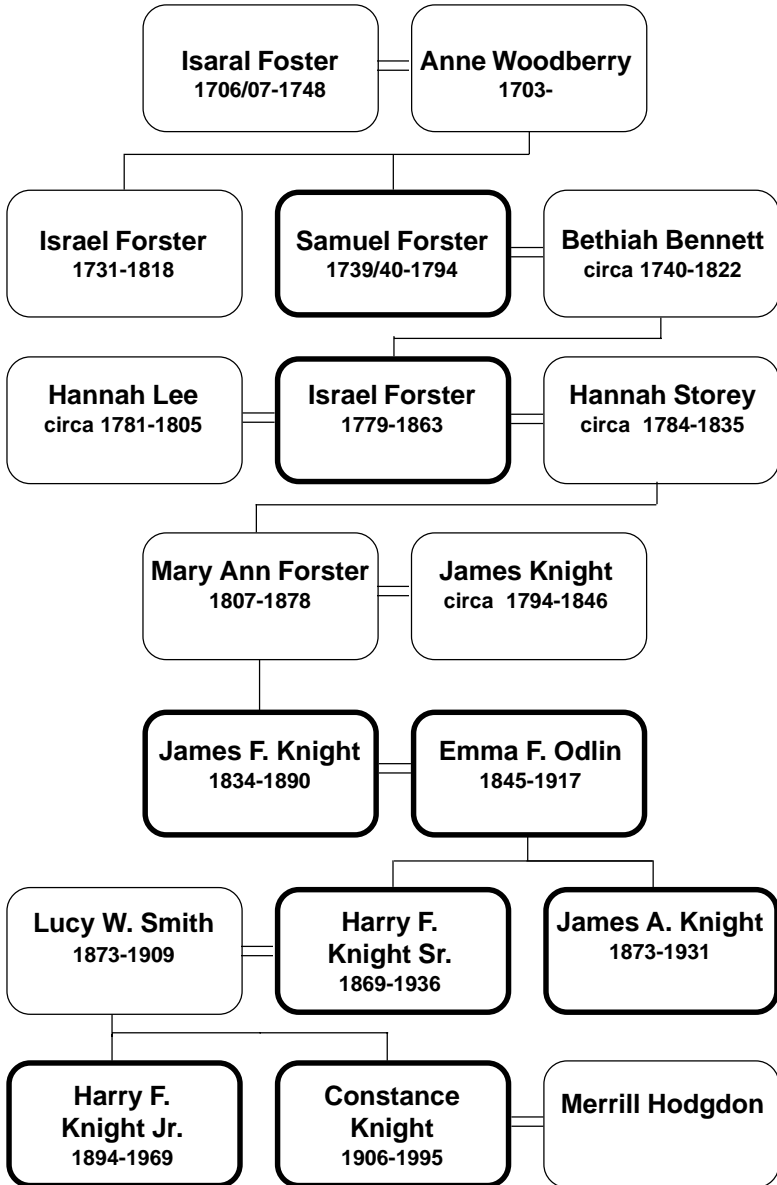
The technical characteristics of the Forster Flag (fabric, stitching, cord and tassels, mode of assembly, and size), as well as its design and relationship to known contemporary flags of the Revolution and the testimony of flag experts who have studied it, help to authenticate its standing. Nevertheless it is also important to establish the lineage of ownership from the making of the flag to the present with as great thoroughness and certainty as possible.

To that end the author interviewed the last family members to own the flag (Harry F. Knight, Jr., and Constance Hodgdon), gathered birth and death certificates for family members, checked *Vital Records* for the communities where they lived, analyzed surviving newspaper accounts of the flag, reviewed original wills in the Essex County Probate Court in Salem, Massachusetts, and read many books and journals on the civil and military history of Essex County communities during the Revolutionary War and about the people associated with the flag.<sup>26</sup>

As with all historical research, the claim of absolute thoroughness would be inappropriate, but the recitation presented here makes clear the line of transmission of ownership of the flag over the past two centuries and a quarter. It has been possible to determine the eight family members who owned the flag between 1775 and 1975 and the years the flag was in the possession of each (see **Tables I, p. 87, and II**). In some cases it has been assumed that the date one owner died was also the date of acquisition by the next, although it is possible that the flag was transferred before death.

Like many Yankee families, the Forsters and the Knights did not move often or far. The first eight owners all lived in Manchester or West Medford, Massachusetts. Constance Knight

TABLE II: OWNERS OF THE FORSTER FLAG



obtained the flag from her brother because their other sibling, Karl Knight, had died in infancy in 1905. Harry Forster Knight, Jr., is shown in news photographs in 1937<sup>27</sup> after he inherited the flag from his father, Harry F. Knight, Sr., as mentioned in the articles. It had been passed to his brother James by their mother, Emma F. (Odlin) Knight, who in turn had obtained it as part of the estate of her husband, Civil War veteran James Forster Knight. He and his wife are both mentioned as owners in the newspapers.

Several articles agree that James Forster Knight “obtained the sacred relic from his grandfather,” i.e. Israel Forster of Manchester. Israel (1779-1863) had had five daughters from two marriages, but in keeping with the times probably preferred to give the flag to a male relative. His son-in-law, James Knight, had died in 1846 and Israel passed over his daughter Mary Ann (who was to die in 1878) by placing his treasure in the hands of his grandson. The story of how Israel obtained the Forster Flag from his father, Samuel Forster (1740-1794) of Manchester, requires further examination.

## THE MILITARY STORY

The history of Massachusetts military units is long and complicated, but fortunately extensive relevant documentation is available. Conflict with Indians led the first settlers of the Plymouth Colony (1620) and Massachusetts-Bay Colony (1630) to establish militias in which local men regularly served. The English counterparts on which these were modeled marched under various flags and the men of the American colonies, not surprisingly, carried colors of similar usage and designs.

While religious disputes often separated them from their cousins across the Atlantic, the colonists considered themselves part of “the English nation” and the Cross of St. George was featured in most early colors carried by Massachusetts-Bay militia. Together with the Cross of St. Andrew, that cross continued to be the primary flag symbol of Massachusetts-Bay until the Revolution. Thus John Trumbull’s painting *Declaration of Independence* quite properly featured a panoply of colors with the Cross of Saint George or the Union Jack.<sup>28</sup>

The Essex County, Massachusetts-Bay, companies of Minutemen, including the one from Manchester which carried the Forster Flag on 19 April 1775 during what was known as the "Lexington and Concord Alarm," were part of an old system of local self-defense in the county. Town militias had been established in Salem, Saugus, Ipswich, and Newbury in 1630-1631. Those local troops constituted the East Regiment in 1636, redesignated in 1643 as the Essex Regiment.<sup>29</sup> At that time Manchester, where Samuel Forster would live a century later, was a village of Salem known as Jeffrey's Creek. Today officially Manchester-by-the-Sea, the town was incorporated on 14 May 1645.

The growing hostility between inhabitants of Massachusetts-Bay and England in the 1770s resulted in an enlargement of all militia units. On 5 October 1774 the royal governor, Thomas Gage, dissolved the Provincial Congress of the colony. Nevertheless it convened on its own in Salem<sup>30</sup> and continued to act as the government of Massachusetts-Bay until 1780. On 26 October 1774 and again on 1 February 1775 that Congress voted for the reorganization and strengthening of all the militias. The First Regiment of Militia in Essex County provided two companies for the Alarm two and a half months later.<sup>31</sup>

Samuel (in some records spelled Samuell) Forster had been elected lieutenant in the Manchester Company of the regiment on 27 December 1774.<sup>32</sup> The company was under the command of Captain Andrew Marsters.<sup>33</sup> On 7 July 1775 Forster was elected first lieutenant of the 2d Company, 6th Regiment, of Essex County.<sup>34</sup>

Samuel Forster had been born on 10 February 1739/1740<sup>35</sup> in Manchester and he died on 2 November 1794 in the same town. On 14 April 1763 he married Bethiah Bennett by whom he had eight children. His son Israel, born 28 May 1779, was a distinguished and wealthy local citizen.<sup>36</sup> An officer in the local militia and a veteran of the War of 1812, Israel inherited the flag carried by his father during the Alarm of 19 April 1775.

Samuel Forster's flag was not actually displayed at either the Battle of Lexington or the Battle of Concord, however. As Reverend Lamson explained,

In April, 1775, came the call to arms, on the occasion of the attempt of the British to seize the military stores at Concord. The following men responded and marched for the scene of conflict, but receiving at Medford tidings of the retreat of the British, they returned home. Their names deserved to be put on record: — Andrew Marsters, Captain; Samuel W. Forster, First Lieutenant...<sup>37</sup>

The Manchester company, having marched about 24 miles (38.5 k) that morning, reached Medford where they learned that their presence in Lexington and Concord was no longer needed since the British had retreated to Boston. The Manchester Minutemen served out the five days they had promised, however.<sup>38</sup> They were among the 10,000 Minutemen who stayed near Cambridge in anticipation of possible further incursions by British troops.<sup>39</sup>

Samuel Forster served only three days during the Alarm.<sup>40</sup> It seems likely that as an officer he was needed back in Manchester since — as in other coastal towns of the North Shore — local people needed protection from possible British naval attacks.<sup>41</sup> Manchester town records show that he was a prominent and respected individual, active in local affairs. On 7 December 1774, for example, he had been one of three selected by the town to form a “Committee of Inspection to see that the Resolves of the Continantal Congres be carried into Execution.”<sup>42</sup>

In July 1775 he was voted to serve on the town’s Committee of Correspondence which linked Manchester with Patriots across all 13 colonies.<sup>43</sup> He was also appointed to a committee to buy land for the town “pest house” (where people infected with smallpox were forced to live) and was several times elected the town’s “clerk of the market” and “culler of fishes.”<sup>44</sup> Most importantly, the Town Meeting chose<sup>45</sup> “for Officers for the Company of Soldiers to be stationed here Samuel Foster...” As the company was based in Manchester, the flag stayed with it and was preserved, whereas colors of other Massachusetts-Bay troops were carried to far-off battles and were lost or destroyed.

The involvement of the Minutemen from the town of Manchester in the Alarm is clear from the record. The official



town history specifically mentions both the color which they carried into battle and its later ownership by the grandson of Samuel Forster. His own service record in the Manchester militia, both before and after the Alarm, is also well established. Nevertheless since one version of the family story refers to Samuel's brother Israel of Marblehead as the first owner of the flag, that claim must be addressed.

There is no record of military service by Israel Forster from Marblehead during the Alarm nor, indeed, at any time during the Revolution.<sup>46</sup> This is understandable:

Gloucester and Marblehead — both craggy peninsulas with unprotected vulnerable shorelines — were the only [Essex] County towns not to respond [to the Alarm].<sup>47</sup>

The family claimed<sup>48</sup> that he willed the Forster Flag to his nephew of the same name from Manchester. When he died in 1818 his will, with its inventory of all the items he left by bequest, went to the Essex County Probate Court.<sup>49</sup> His was a sizable estate for that era — \$74,203.37 — and the last document in the probate docket was not filed until four years after his death. Items of as little value as 20¢ were listed in his will, but there is no mention of a flag.

It seems likely that a century later, when the family first began to talk with newspaper writers about the flag, misunderstandings about its origins had arisen. No research appears to have been done until James A. Knight (1873-1931) tried unsuccessfully around 1905 to substantiate family traditions. He may well have confused ownership of the flag by his great-grandfather Israel (1779-1863) and his great-great-grandfather of the same name (1731-1818). There is also another plausible scenario. When Samuel Forster died in 1794, he may have left the flag to his brother Israel with instructions that it be given to his own son. That son, Israel, was only 15 when his father died but he was 39 when his uncle died in 1818.

The claim by certain descendants that Israel Forster of Marblehead was the first to own the flag was not likely a purposeful deceit and there was nothing to be gained by making

it — particularly in light of the problems with authenticating that statement. Certainly the family account as a whole deserves more credence than was given it by one expert on flags who commented that

most if not all of these silly stories were concocted by some maiden aunt who had been dipping her nose in the cooking sherry a bit too often.<sup>50</sup>

## AUTHENTICATION AND TECHNICAL CHARACTERISTICS

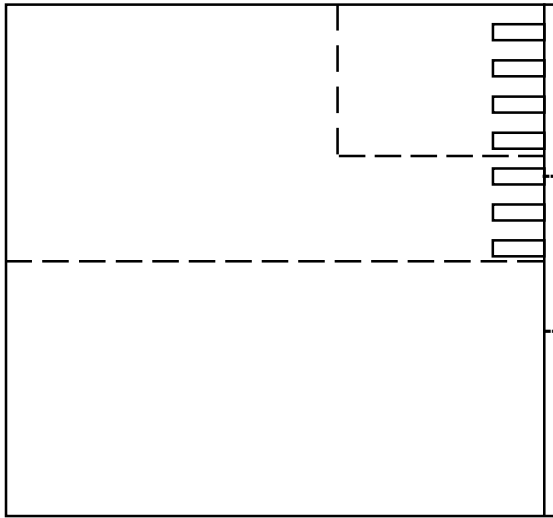
Obviously, any artifact with the importance claimed for the Forster Flag requires justification. This involves consideration of its documented provenance, its physical characteristics and its design, and its relationship to known contemporary examples. In each area the opinion of reputable historians and of textile technicians familiar with flags is essential. The Forster Flag has undergone this rigorous analysis.

The leading American flag experts of the late 20th century have examined the flag and have commented on it — Grace Rogers Cooper, Donald W. Holst, Howard M. Madaus, and the author. Each, in the appropriately conservative language of scholarship, has attested to the authenticity of the Forster Flag as a Revolutionary War military color. A fifth expert, Edward W. Richardson, gave it careful consideration in his previously-cited book, the best single volume on military flags of the Revolution. Including the flag in his chapter on Massachusetts military colors, he stated that the “surviving flag appears to be the colors of a division (or ‘grand subdivision’) of an American regiment.”<sup>51</sup>

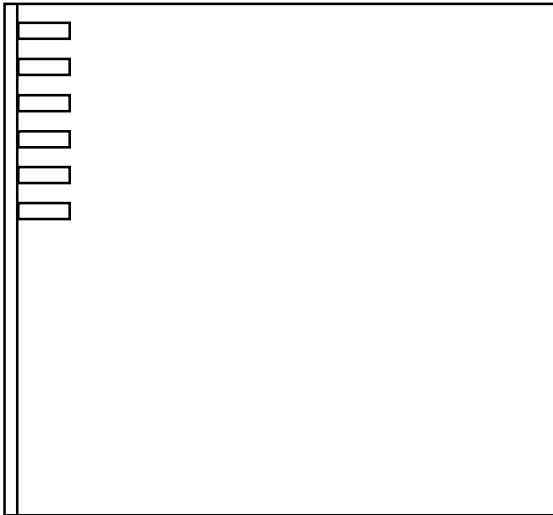
Cooper<sup>52</sup> wrote that “there is nothing in the physical evidence of this flag that would refute the claim that it dates from the early years of the American Revolution.” Holst<sup>53</sup> opined “I have no reason to doubt that it dates from the period of the Revolution, and that it was probably carried by one of the Massachusetts regiments in Continental service.”

The Forster Flag was also accepted as a Revolutionary War color by the authors of the book *So Proudly We Hail* and its editor,

**THE FORSTER FLAG**



**Fig. 1 (obverse);  
the broken lines indicate pieces of fabric**



**Fig. 2 (reverse)**

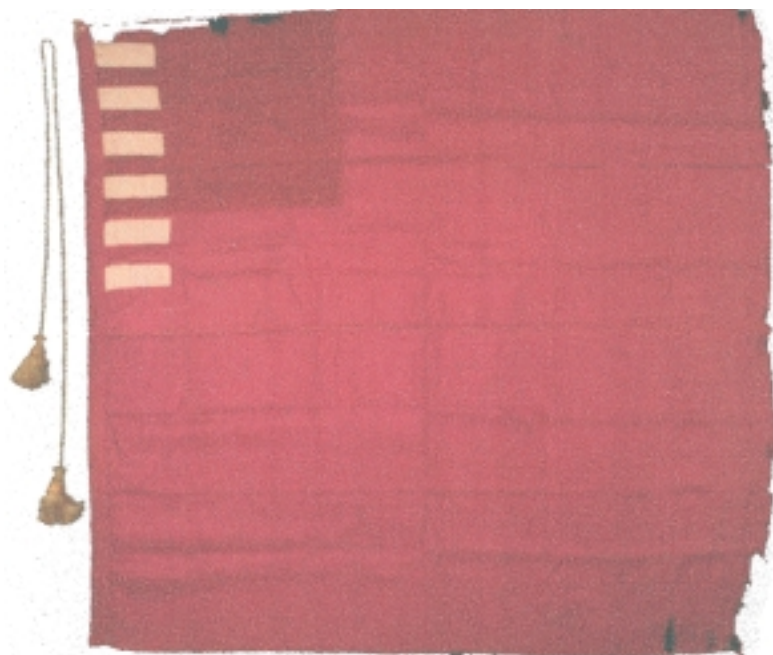
Dr. Harold D. Langley of the Smithsonian Institution. Howard Madaus confirmed his opinion of its authenticity by his holograph illustration and design analysis, prepared for inclusion in his file on Revolutionary War colors, and directly to the author. David B. Martucci, president of the North American Vexillological Association, referred to it (and other Revolutionary War flags on the author's list) in commenting<sup>54</sup> "the flags listed I totally agree are original."

The Forster Flag is made of pieces of silk, hand-sewn to create its red field and sleeve as well as the short white stripes appearing along the upper hoist on both sides of the field. Roughly square in size, the flag features seven stripes on what was intended as the obverse<sup>55</sup> (**Fig. 1, p. 95**) and six white stripes on the reverse (**Fig. 2, p. 95**). The shade of red<sup>56</sup> corresponds to 193U in the Pantone Matching System while the white is a rough match to 4685U. The pike or staff of the flag (probably with finial and ferrule) is not known to have survived. There is no indication from the hem around the outer perimeter of the flag that there was ever any fringe attached to it.

The cord and tassels of the Forster Flag have been preserved (**Fig. 3**). They originally were bright red (Pantone 173C) and white, as is still evident from some of the inner tassel strands that have been protected from fading. The cord is 67" (1.7 m) long; each tassel is 5" (12.7 cm) long and the wooden core of each is 1¾" (4.5 cm) at its thickest. The cord and outer tassel strands have faded to light brown and off-white and the crouse cord on one tassel has retracted from the core. Otherwise the cord and tassels appear to be in good condition.

The Forster Flag itself is also in good condition. There are some fold creases both vertically and horizontally and there is a split near the top edge toward the fly, apparently caused by repeated folding. At the top hoist corner only the seam thread of the top hem connects the sleeve to the rest of the flag where a small portion of the red fabric is missing. At the fly end, the width of the missing fabric varies and it appears that none of the original fly hem has survived. Toward the center of the fly end apparently only a small amount of the original fabric has been lost. The lower fly corner loss is approximately 4" (10.2 cm) deeper than at the center of the fly edge.

**Fig. 3: THE FORSTER FLAG AS IT IS TODAY  
(WITH CORD AND TASSELS)**



The coloring of the flag is uniform, with only a limited number of areas of discoloration. Given its known history and current condition, the flag appears unlikely ever to have been subject to any cleaning or other conservation work, except for a minimal basting of loose pieces at the fly end, totaling approximately 26" (66 cm) in six different repairs. Examination of the white and red colors under the turned-in folds of the sleeve reveals that the remaining (exposed) areas have been subject only to minimal darkening.

Near the center of the bottom edge there are multiple tiny (1 mm or less) punctures in the fabric and slightly below the center of the flag there is an abrasion of threads about  $\frac{3}{4}$ " (2 cm) long. Some faint circular (water?) stains appear near the bot-

tom fly corner (1½" x ¾", 4 cm x 2 cm), the bottom hoist corner (3 C" x 5 C", 8 cm x 13 cm), and on the sixth white stripe down from the top of the flag on the apparent obverse (5 C" x ¾", 13 cm x 8.5 cm). In general the flag today appears to be close to its original 18th century condition except for the tattered red area over the top white stripe, the horizontal break in the fabric near the top edge, and the missing pieces along the fly.

Because of irregularities in the original stitching and some slight stretching of the fabric over time, it is difficult to give absolutely precise measurements. Nevertheless the following are very close approximations for the design elements and for the pieces of red fabric constituting the background. The width of the flag is 4' 10½" (1.49 m). The length of the flag, including the heading, is 5' 3" (1.6 m) at its longest. The sleeve alone is 1e" (4.1 cm) wide on the apparent obverse and 1½" (3.8 cm) wide on the reverse. The white stripes and the red areas directly above and between them are all approximately 2" wide and 6" long (5.1 cm, 15.3 cm).

Taking all these measurements into consideration, the flag has a width to length ratio of approximately 15:16 with the stripes each corresponding in length to one-tenth the width of the flag. The vertical distance, measured from the top edge of the flag to the bottom edge of the seventh (and last) white stripe on the apparent obverse, corresponds almost exactly to one-half the width of the flag.

One of the most striking characteristics of the flag from the standpoint of its construction — as well as its history and symbolism — is not immediately evident to the untrained observer and is not visible in every photograph of the flag.<sup>57</sup> Although the entire background of the flag appears to be a uniform red, the canton is not of the same fabric as the rest of the flag. The matte/glossy distinction is clearly evident in the obliquely-illuminated photograph reproduced in **Fig. 4**.

The canton consists of six distinct segments of fabric (**Fig. 5, p. 101**), pieced together to fill an area 18¼" (46.4 cm) high and 22" (55.9 cm) long. In all, it appears that the flag consists of 25 separate pieces — the sleeve or heading (three joined lengths plus an internal lining), the upper field, the lower field, the 13 white stripes, and the six pieces constituting the canton.<sup>58</sup> This part of the flag deserves special attention.

**Fig. 4: THE FORSTER FLAG PHOTOGRAPHED AT AN ANGLE TO HIGHLIGHT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CANTON AND FIELD**



### **THE CANTON OF THE FLAG**

In her 1976 technical analysis of the Forster Flag,<sup>59</sup> Grace R. Cooper of the Smithsonian Institution noted that the two broad pieces of fabric composing the background were of “red silk... of plain weave with the weft of coarser yarns than the warp.” The appearance “is of a medium weight silk” but, as she noted,

the “canton section [was] replaced with a red silk of lighter weight.” The white stripes “are [the] same type as [the] original red, but thread count of 100 x 56.” Cooper described the sleeve as “medium coarse linen covered with the original red silk fabric, set in with original seam.”

The widths of silk available when the flag was made<sup>60</sup> would have allowed a combining of just two pieces to form the background instead of eight. It would presumably also have been possible to inset a single piece of white silk to serve for each stripe, showing on both sides of the flag. If the stripes were added after the original flag was made, however, appliqué may have been preferred because that manner of modification would have been the easiest.

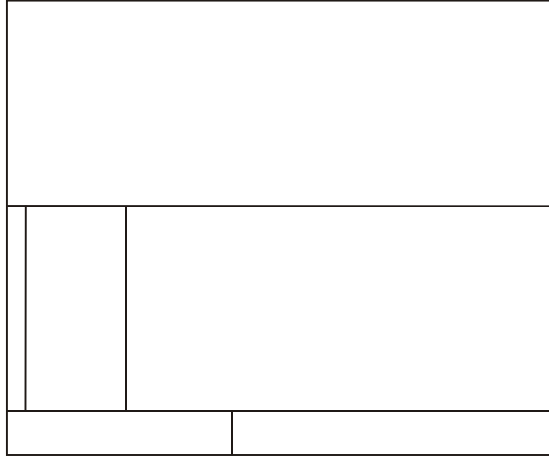
It is extraordinary that the red portions of the complex canton appear to play no symbolic function in the flag but, on the contrary, seem intended to have been perceived only as part of the red field when the flag was in normal use. It is reasonable to consider why the entire background of the flag was not simply composed of two pieces of red silk of like size and shape — especially since the canton must have required cutting out a piece of fabric of comparable size from the original silk which forms the top half of the flag.

The canton as it now exists has been laboriously put together out of six separate segments, one of which is only  $\frac{3}{4}$ " (1.9 cm) wide — not counting a small portion under the sleeve — by 9" (22.9 cm) long. In brief, the construction of the flag seems unnecessarily complicated, in contrast to the simplicity of its design. In seeking to analyze the probable reasons for that complexity, it is important to take the stitching of the canton and stripes into consideration.

Cooper stated that the flag had retained its original seams except where some replacement seams had been made in the canton. Both seams were of 2-ply S-twist, although the originals were of linen and the replacements of silk. She concluded that the “original seam [had been] released at [the] heading and lighter silk and white stripes added.” The technical report thus clearly indicates that the Forster Flag as it exists today is not exactly the same flag it once was. Nothing in the construction of the flag gives direct evidence as to what the original design



**Fig. 5: THE SIX PIECES OF FABRIC IN THE FORSTER FLAG  
CANTON (APPARENT REVERSE)**



may have been, but it does allow for reasoned speculation, particularly when combined with the claims that have been associated with the history of the flag.

All the stitching is uniform, precise, and neatly done with the exception of the basting repairs and the stitching around the stripes and canton. For example, where the pieces of silk forming the sleeve are stitched together, the seams are entirely turned under such that no threads are visible. Seams on the top and bottom edges of the flag are consistently nine stitches to the inch (2.5 cm) and, along the sleeve, seven stitches to the inch. There is no significant variation in the lengths of those stitches. In contrast there are from three to six stitches per inch for the stripe seams, with great variations in the length of each stitch. For the canton, the only part of the flag with a double row of stitching, the number and length of the stitches vary even in two parallel seams and many of the stitches overlap each other.

As Cooper noted, the original seam of the heading was let out to allow for the introduction of the canton and stripes and then restitched. The stitching apparently was done by two (or

more) different individuals — one presumably the maker of the original flag and the other(s) being responsible for the subsequent modifications. Even the current coloring of the stitching is different — white for the background and heading and a mixture of white and light tan for the canton.

## UNION SYMBOLS IN AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY FLAGS

While the story of military colors carried by Americans in the Revolutionary War is incomplete, as based on surviving documents and flags, extant information allows analysis of the probable role of the Forster Flag relative to other colors. As previously noted, the general design tradition exemplified by the Forster Flag (with a union symbol in the canton) was well known to colonial forces because the British had been using military colors with their own union devices in the canton since at least the 1620s. As early as the 1630s Massachusetts-Bay was following the same pattern, as exemplified by the Endecott and Newbury<sup>61</sup> colors.

In revolutionary America the problem with this basic flag pattern lay in the choice of an appropriate new symbol of unity. It is known from surviving contemporary examples of currency, engraving, chinaware, flags, etc. that the unity of the “Thirteen United Colonies” was expressed graphically by many objects — ribbons, mailed fists, chain links, arms, arrows, even the rattles on a snake’s tail (**Fig. 6, inside back cover**).

Early in 1775 Charles Lee (later a major general) had proposed that each regiment and each of its four grand divisions have a color of its own utilizing related but distinctive symbols.<sup>62</sup> The canton of a color — found in the house of Major Israel Forster (1779-1863) of Manchester and now owned by the Peabody Essex Museum (Salem, Massachusetts) — was probably the flag of a grand subdivision in the same regiment that included the grand subdivision which displayed the Forster Flag.<sup>63</sup> Only a small portion of the field of this “Peabody Essex color,” of white silk, is extant. Seven pieces of blue silk have been sewn on it to form a canton of 13 blue and white stripes measuring in all 11½" (29 cm) along the hoist and 14" (35.6 cm) horizontally.

Cooper stated that “the white silk in the blue and white stripe [Peabody Essex color]... is not the same fabric as the white stripes in [the Samuel Forster Flag] although it is the same general type fabric.”<sup>64</sup> Richardson thought that the two colors might have served two grand subdivisions in the same Massachusetts-Bay regiment or that the Peabody Essex flag could have been a regimental standard. In either case, it would appear that the uniform design for all the flags of the Essex Regiment, in accord with General Lee’s proposal, was a nearly square silk flag of solid color with a canton bearing 13 stripes, alternately of white and the color of the field.

This manner of simultaneously expressing unity through design similarity and of establishing distinctiveness through color variations from one grand subdivision color to the next was different from that chosen for Webb’s Additional Regiment where Roman numerals differentiated the subdivisions. Nevertheless, it achieved the same objective.

The explanation for the difference may perhaps be found in the General Orders of 20 February 1776 issued at the headquarters of the Continental Army in Cambridge, Massachusetts-Bay, under the authority of General Washington.<sup>65</sup> They stated that each regiment was to have a standard and each grand division a color, the latter bearing the number of the regiment. Variation of unit designation (i.e. the numerals) rather than of flag colors might have been preferred as giving greater visual unity to the grand divisions of a regiment when their flags were carried in the field or on parade. If correct, this surmise provides the latest probable date for the modification of the original Forster Flag, namely 20 February 1776, when the new rules went into effect.

So far as is known, stars were not introduced as a unity symbol in American flags until early 1777 when they appeared in an artillery standard.<sup>66</sup> The only documented example of an American military color with combined stars and stripes as a symbol of unity is the “Brandywine Flag,” believed to have been carried by the Chester County [Pennsylvania] Militia at the Battle of Brandywine on 11 September 1777.<sup>67</sup> The sequence of union emblems utilized for military colors in the American colonies is shown in **Table III, p. 105.**

Some flags containing old emblems continued in use after a new emblem was introduced. This was the case with the British Union Jack in the Continental Colors, reported flying as long as three months after the adoption of the Stars and Stripes. Nevertheless there is a strong presumption that military colors featuring a canton of 13 stripes as a unity emblem, such as the Forster Flag, were only made from early 1775 until June 1777, that is, from the outbreak of the war until the adoption of the Stars and Stripes.

During that same period the British Union Jack was removed from certain existing American flags. In the color of the First Troop Philadelphia City Cavalry, made in 1775, the original Union Jack canton was later painted over with 13 horizontal silver and blue stripes.<sup>68</sup> John Trumbull's painting *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill, 17 June 1775* records a parallel contemporary usage in showing the New England Flag bereft of the British symbol it had displayed since 1686.

Other flags incorporating a Union Jack in the canton which were used by American units early in the Revolution included those of the Newport [Rhode Island] Light Infantry Company (1775), the Independent Battalion of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania (1775), and the Monmouth Color (undated). The blue and buff standards of the 2nd New Hampshire Regiment (1775/1777) have designs in the canton which resemble but do not exactly replicate the Union Jack. None of these flags was altered to eliminate the British symbol.

Flags with 13 stripes in the canton date from early in the war. These include those of the First Troop Philadelphia City Cavalry (silver and blue stripes); Second Regiment, Continental Light Dragoons (stripes of gold and blue and of red and silver respectively); the Peabody Essex color (blue and white stripes); the Delaware Militia (red and white stripes); and the 13th Continental Regiment (1776; red and white stripes?). All were in use in 1777, although they may well have been made earlier. In contrast, colors with 13 stars as a union symbol in the canton came later — the Headman Color (1778), the Bucks of America color (circa 1780), the General Philip Schuyler flag (1780), and the Rhode Island Regiment color (1781).

The Union Jack served as the first unity symbol of American

military flags before being replaced, successively, by 13 stripes, the Stars and Stripes, and 13 stars. Pre-Revolutionary militia units of Massachusetts-Bay carried a color with the Union Jack in the canton and some continued to do so while the Revolution remained a struggle for the rights of Englishmen living in the colonies, just as the first American national flag (the Continental Colors) with its Union Jack canton remained in use.

### CREATING THE FORSTER FLAG

Cooper asserted that the Forster Flag had been modified:

Red silk in main body of flag is of plain weave...  
Canton section replaced with a red silk of lighter weight... Original seam released at heading and lighter silk and white stripes added.<sup>69</sup>

Holst is more explicit about the original design:

I believe that [the flag] probably consisted of a red field with the British Union in the upper canton [Fig. 7, p. 107]... [Later] this union was removed and replaced by a piece of red silk.<sup>70</sup>

#### TABLE III: UNION EMBLEMS IN EARLY AMERICAN MILITARY COLORS

Cross of St. George: from the early 17th century until the union of England and Scotland in 1707

British Union Jack: from 1707 until the Declaration of Independence on 4 July 1776

13 stripes: from Spring 1775 until the adoption of the Stars and Stripes on 14 June 1777

13 stars (or 13 stars and 13 stripes): from 14 June 1777 until circa 1783/1790

If the Forster Flag originally had a British Union Jack as its canton, then at some point — certainly after the Declaration of Independence but probably much earlier — political sensibilities in radical Massachusetts-Bay would have recommended to the Americans who rallied under it that a union symbol of their own would be more appropriate than the crosses of the king. Silk being a difficult commodity to obtain after the war began,<sup>71</sup> those who bore the Forster Flag might well have been forced to piece together the six strips of red needed to fill the 18¼" x 22" (46.4 x 55.9 cm) canton area where the Union Jack had been. The 13 white stripes also apparently required economizing: each is only roughly 2" x 5¾" (5.1 x 14.6 cm) in size.

Three characteristics of British Regimental Colours rule out the possibility that one might have been captured from the British troops which marched to Lexington and Concord and modified to create the Forster Flag. There is no indication of any embroidery or painting on the Forster Flag — nor of their replacement — such as would have characterized a British flag. The size of the Forster Flag is a foot (30.5 cm) narrower and 16" (41 cm) shorter than the standard Regimental Colour and the background is solid red not white with a St. George's Cross.

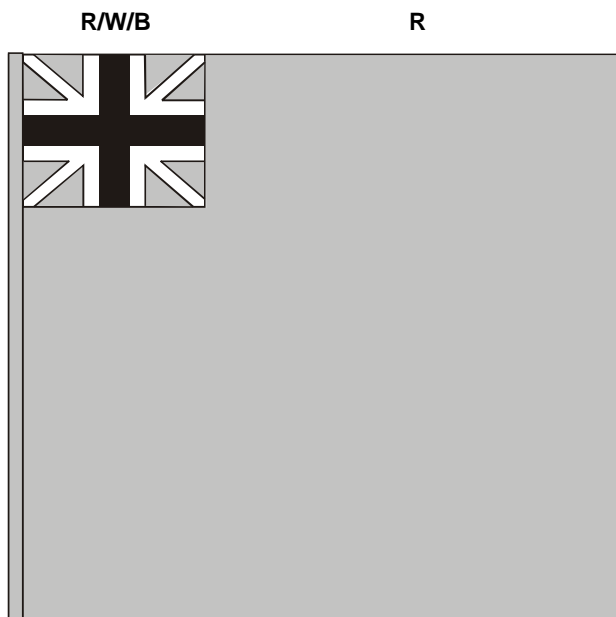
British colors had been standardized in regulations issued in 1747, with minor changes in 1751 and 1768. Regiments of foot (later called infantry) carried a King's Colour and a Regimental Colour. The latter had the Union Jack in the canton and the field was of the color of the regimental uniform facings unless that was red, white, or black. Red facings required that the Regimental Colour be white with a red Cross of St. George with "royal devices, or ancient badges" painted or embroidered at the center on the cross. The size of these flags was 6' wide by 6'6" long (1.83 x 1.98 m).

Like the Forster Flag, the Monmouth Color has a completely plain (yellow) field. Its measurements (4'8" x 5'1", 1.42 x 1.55 m) are much closer to those of the Forster Flag than to a British Regimental Colour.<sup>72</sup> As with the Forster Flag, the tradition concerning the Monmouth Color is that it was captured from the British. This probably suggests the naïveté and exuberant patriotism of 19th century commentators on the flag rather than concrete knowledge of its provenance. Richardson<sup>73</sup> notes that

modern authorities believe the Monmouth flag to be American in origin, rather than British, for reasons which also apply to the Forster Flag:

There is no emblem or unit designation on the field. American divisional colors were generally plain but a British color would have had both a symbol and unit designation. The canton measures 21 by 20 inches [53 x 51 cm] and is inset. An officially made British color would not have had an inset canton, although a number of surviving American colors do.

Clearly the inset canton in the original version of the Forster Flag was removed and replaced by the pieces of crimson



**Fig. 7: CONJECTURAL ORIGINAL APPEARANCE OF THE FORSTER FLAG**

material and the 13 white stripes now characterizing the flag. The most reasonable conclusion to be drawn from the physical evidence of the flag and current historical knowledge of colors carried by British and American forces is, as suggested by Holst, that the original canton was a Union Jack later replaced by the first American symbol of union, 13 red and white stripes.

While this explanation contradicts family lore that the flag was the first war booty of the Patriot forces — a claim which would be difficult to prove, even if it could be shown that the Manchester company had had some encounter with British forces — nevertheless it does endorse the kernel of the family story, namely that an original Union Jack canton was replaced by American stripes.

Knowing that one of their Forster forebears was a Minuteman who served during the Alarm probably led later generations of his family to surmise that he had managed to capture a British flag on 19 April 1775. In fact the color almost certainly had already been in use as a Massachusetts-Bay militia flag bearing the Union Jack symbol. Since sentiment in Massachusetts-Bay against British rule was the strongest anywhere in the 13 colonies, a change of the design to the earliest Patriot symbol, the thirteen stripes, is not surprising.

### **“THE FIRST AMERICAN FLAG EVER MADE”**

The Forster Flag has a significance which transcends its role in the Alarm of 19 April 1775. While this is implicit in the facts already presented, a clearer picture can be gained by summarizing and addressing specific questions. As with most old flags, absolute certainty is elusive, but the evidence available for the Forster Flag is remarkably strong when compared with what is known about other surviving flags of the American Revolution.

The issues to be addressed may be framed successively by the following questions:

Was the original design of the Forster Flag the same as the one characterizing it now?



If it originally was different, what was the first design?

If the flag originally had a Union Jack as its canton, was that flag American-made or was it a British color captured by Patriot forces and later altered?

If the flag was altered to stripes, why was that done and what was the intended symbolism?

When was the alteration in the design made?

The physical evidence of the flag as it exists today, as analyzed by flag experts, indicates that changes were made in the sleeve and canton and that these were roughly contemporaneous with the original construction of the flag. The stitching has been let out and re sewn in a style cruder than the original. The canton is of a different fabric from the rest of the flag and is consistent with a piecemeal replacement of an inset original canton. The rest of the flag has not been altered.

Hypothetically, the original canton might have had any combination of colors or symbols, but known flags of the same era strictly limit the likely possibilities. In the British tradition, followed as well in British North America, the canton area bore the national symbol. In chronological order the earliest American “union symbols” were stripes, stars and stripes, and stars (**Table 3, p. 105**).

If 13 stripes constituted the replacement design, an earlier symbol must have been in the original. After 1707, the Cross of St. George of England alone would no longer have been appropriate and there is nothing to indicate that the flag predated the union of England and Scotland. Since the modern British union dates from 1801, the logical candidate for the original Forster Flag canton is the 1707-1800 version of the Union Jack.

While family claims of the capture of a British flag by Patriot forces on 19 April 1775 are highly unlikely, such claims may have been merely a hypothesis advanced to explain family traditions that a British symbol had originally appeared in

the flag before it assumed its present configuration. The known presence of the flag at the Alarm might have suggested the appealing notion of a battle trophy and of a flag remade in order to be flaunted before the British in subsequent battles as a reminder of their loss. The idea that a flag with a British symbol might intentionally have been carried by local Minutemen was probably beyond the imagination of those more than a century later who were proud of the service their ancestors in the Revolution and Civil War.

The date that the 13 stripes were first introduced as an American unity symbol is unclear. A number of authors have addressed that question without producing definitive or, in some cases, even convincing evidence.<sup>74</sup> It was certainly no later than 1 January 1776 when it appeared as part of the Continental Colors. References in December 1775 to “Continental flags”<sup>75</sup> suggest the possible hoisting of that flag a month before its official display on 1 January 1776 on Prospect Hill outside Boston, but the flag designs are not clearly specified. Satiric cartoons<sup>76</sup> illustrate flags of 13 stripes and ones with 13 stripes on white, but their dating is uncertain.

It has been suggested that the use of red and white stripes by the Sons of Liberty, going back perhaps as far as the Stamp Act protest in 1764-1766, was the basis for the recognition of that symbol as the prime American flag emblem, at least before the stars were added in 1777. The problem is that available knowledge of the exact designs of the flags hoisted on Liberty Trees is fragmentary.<sup>77</sup>

A flag at the Bostonian Society is the only known surviving example and its authenticity has not been definitively established. Moreover, it has nine stripes not 13 and they are vertical rather than horizontal. While it is possible that the inspiration of now-lost earlier flags influenced the choice of the Minutemen, it appears that the specific form of 13 horizontal red and white stripes symbolizing the unity of the 13 United Colonies can be found with certainty only in 1775/1776. Thus the precise dating of the Forster Flag relative to other examples is a question of importance.

Any work to transform the original Forster Flag would have made sense only when it was in active service. The conditions

in Manchester following the retreat of the British to Boston in April 1775, Samuel Forster's own military career, and the good condition of the flag all point to the likelihood that the period of active usage for the flag was brief. That in turn strongly suggests an early date for the introduction of the stripes.

It is significant that in the Forster Flag the white stripes alone (i.e. not white and red stripes together) are symbolic of the 13 colonies. Moreover, they are less sophisticated in execution and design than the stripes of other similar Revolutionary War colors. These facts suggest that the men of Manchester were not following any established pattern in modifying their flag, but were acting entirely on their own. That in turn intimates that they may well have been the first to utilize 13 stripes as an American symbol on a flag.

Just as the advisory Provincial Congress under Governor Gage had converted itself into the Patriot-controlled legislative Provincial Congress, so the color of the old Essex Regiment apparently was altered to a new flag of American design and symbolism early in 1775 as part of the reorganization and strengthening of the First Regiment of Militia in Essex County. Since Manchester did not send troops to New York, New Jersey, and other theaters of the Revolution following the Patriot victory in New England, the design change probably occurred between early February and April 1775.

Like other colors bearing the British Union Jack in the canton, the Forster Flag might have been left in its original form. Obviously the men who carried it felt strongly that it should no longer express fealty to the Crown, that it should be "Americanized." Their transformation of the flag was neither required by law or custom nor suggested by any continued use in the field. The citizens of Essex County had undergone a transformation of sentiment from Fall of 1774 through the Spring of 1775. No longer British subjects, they had become citizens of a new country still struggling to be born.

Their livelihoods encouraged a free, individualistic attitude, naturally antagonistic toward discipline and authority or any personal restraint. The Revolutionary spirit of every man

being one's equal encouraged this proud, independent outlook. It was this spirit that had heralded the Revolutionary movement in the first place. Without it, there would have been no war of independence.<sup>78</sup>

While the United States did not yet exist, these Patriots were not parochial in their visions or actions. They had enlisted the resources and allegiance of others throughout the 13 colonies in their own struggle and after realizing their victories locally they continued to contribute to the success of the Revolution as a whole. At one point Essex County alone provided approximately 10% of all soldiers in the American army.

The question of appropriate symbols was clearly on the minds of many. In September 1775 "floating batteries" launched on the Charles River near Boston, on orders of General Washington, displayed a version of the Pine Tree Flag which had represented New England for over a century. Washington's secretary, Colonel Joseph Reed, suggested wider use of that flag "that we may distinguish our Friends from our Foes,"<sup>79</sup> but, that flag was too parochial to serve outside New England.

In searching for an appropriate design that would express the unity of the 13 colonies, the appeal of 13 horizontal stripes, regardless of their coloring, would have been strong. Such a flag could easily be made from available stores; it would be readily recognizable even at a distance on fort or ship; it was strikingly different from the flags of other nations;<sup>80</sup> and its symbolism of the unity and equality of the 13 colonies was clear.

There is no evidence to suggest that leaders like Washington or Reed actually saw the Forster Flag and derived from it the basic design of the first national flag of the United States, the Continental Colors. On the other hand the circumstances were right for that to happen: a common flag was needed as the local revolt was transformed into the Revolutionary War. Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and others<sup>81</sup> were present in eastern Massachusetts-Bay in 1781 and the flag was in use by one of the Minutemen companies that answered the Alarm.

What is certain is that in removing the Union Jack from the original color they carried and replacing it with the stripes which

were to become the basis for all subsequent American national flags, the men from Manchester had consciously created an *American flag* — one intended to stand not for a town or province but for a new country emerging from British rule. Strong evidence also exists to suggest that the Forster Flag, if not the first American flag of 13 stripes, is at the very least the oldest surviving one.

## NOTES

1. Article from unidentified newspaper with a Boston by-line, apparently dating from the first decade of the 20th century, in the files of the Flag Heritage Foundation.

2. Barbara Hitchcock, *The Bedford Flag — A National Treasure* (Bedford, Mass.: Friends of the Bedford Flag, 1998), p. 45.

3. George Henry Preble, *History of the Flag of the United States...* (Boston: Williams, 1880), p. 276, quoting a paper read before the New Jersey Historical Society by a Mr. Haven.

4. Letter of 10 October 1783 to Robert Morris, *ibid.*, p. 230.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

6. The name has been attributed to the flag by the author as a convenient way of identifying it, based on its use during the Revolution by Samuel Forster. It is characteristic of American historical flags that they are given names which never existed at the time they were created and actually flown, but which serve as a quick reference to a particular design among many similar ones. A flag dealer, for example, will know immediately what a customer means if requesting the Betsy Ross flag rather than the Guilford Court House flag, Bennington flag, or Serapis flag even though all are 13-star American flags.

7. Since 1975 the Forster Flag has gained some of its deserved recognition. For example, it has been illustrated and/or described in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, presented in a collection of paintings of famous American flags at the National Flag Foundation (Pittsburgh), and included in a display of flag replicas at the headquarters of the Society of the Cincinnati (Washington DC). The US Postal Service featured it in its 1999 sheet of 20 stamps, showing the most important American historical flags under the heading *The Stars and Stripes*, of which 10 million were issued.

8. Whitney Smith, *Flags Through the Ages and Across the World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), William Furlong and Byron McCandless, *So Proudly We Hail: The History of the United States Flag* (Washington DC:

Smithsonian Institution, 1981), and Edward Richardson, *Standards and Colors of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1982).

9. Thus more than two dozen plus unique flags from the Revolution have survived, but not a single Continental Colors.

10. *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

11. Howard M. Madaus, director, Civil War Museum, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; personal communication.

12. Richardson, p. 3.

13. "Relic of Lexington," *Boston Globe*, April 1908.

14. "Fifth Generation Now Has Flag," *Springfield Union*, 5 March 1937.

15. "Owns First American Flag Ever Made..." Boston by-line, circa 1905.

16. In newspaper accounts based on information from the family which owned it, the flag stripes are referred to as "buff." Nevertheless, the color corresponds to the white silk available in the late 18th century.

17. "First Yankee Flag Is Here..." newspaper article, circa 1920.

18. In the 17th and 18th centuries the name was spelled Forster, Foster, Faster, Fauster, Forstar, Fostor, and Fostuer. It was pronounced FOH(R)-ste(r).

19. "Relic of Lexington," *loc. cit.*

20. "First Yankee Flag," *op. cit.* Inquiries by the author at the State House concerning this claim proved fruitless.

21. *Ibid.*

22. "Relic of Lexington."

23. Reverend D. F. Lamson, *History of the Town of Manchester, Essex County, Massachusetts, 1645-1895* (Manchester, Mass.: Town of Manchester, 1895), p. 78.

24. Page 289.

25. Portions of the citizen militias of Massachusetts-Bay at the time of the Revolution were known as Minutemen because they were prepared to act immediately in the event of hostile British actions.

26. The author was aided by his sister, Sybil Whitney Smith, who has professional skills in genealogical research and computer presentations of the resulting documentation. He discovered from her work that Jacob

Forster, born in England in 1635, was not only the great-grandfather of the first owner of the flag, Samuel Forster of Manchester, but also his own great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather.

27. "Fifth Generation Now Has Flag," *op. cit.*; "Captured in Lexington," *Boston Post*, 19 April 1937.

28. This mural in the US Capitol Rotunda is represented on p. 118 of *Compilation of Works of Art and Other Objects in the United States Capitol* (Washington: GPO, 1965), 88th Congress, 2d Session, House Document Number 362.

29. The 101st Engineer Battalion of the modern Massachusetts National Guard is the direct successor of the Essex Regiment. Its history is available at [http://www.state.ma.us/guard/101en/unit\\_history](http://www.state.ma.us/guard/101en/unit_history).

30. Ronald N. Tagney noted in *The World Turned Upside Down...* (West Newbury, Mass.: Essex County History, 1989), p. 107, that "This bloodless act of revolution in Salem marked the emergence of the free independent state of Massachusetts."

31. <http://www.state.ma.us/guard>, *loc. cit.*

32. Ezekiel Walter Leach, *Historical Collections of the Settlements of Manchester 1640-1835*, p. 98. In this 1835 manuscript, now in the collection of the Manchester Historical Society, Leach summarizes events in Manchester based on local manuscripts, including contemporary minutes of town meetings.

33. Secretary of the Commonwealth, *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1899), Vol. V, p. 929; both Forster and Marsters are mentioned in this source as having marched during the Alarm to Medford. Concerning Captain Marsters, see also John M. Marsters, *Address to the Old Men of Manchester...* (n.p., n.d.).

34. Leach, p. 100.

35. New Year's Day was changed to 1 January in Britain and its colonies beginning in 1752. Earlier dates are thus cited in both the original ("Old Style") and modern ("New Style") years.

36. File on the Forster family at the Manchester Historical Society.

37. Lamson, p. 77.

38. Helen Tilden Wild, *Medford in the Revolution: Military History of Medford, Massachusetts 1765-1783* (Medford: Miller, 1903), p. 9.

39. Ronald N. Tagney, *A County in Revolution...* (Manchester, Mass.: Cricket Press, 1976), p. 184.

40. Captain Marsters also served only three days according to *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors...*, Vol. X, p. 268.
41. "Gloucester requested that forces being raised in Gloucester and Manchester be permitted to remain in town; townspeople feared a British landing [in May 1775]," *American Archives*, Fourth Series, Vol. II, p. 1347.
42. *Town Records of Manchester from 1718 to 1769'...*, Vol. II (Salem: Salem Press, 1891), p. 147.
43. Leach, p. 100.
44. *Town Records...*, pp. 150-151.
45. *Ibid*, p. 153; 3 July 1775.
46. He is not listed in the definitive *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War*.
47. Tagney, *A County in Revolution...*, p. 161.
48. "Relic of Lexington."
49. Docket No. 9872, will of Israel Forster dated 3 April 1805, Essex County Probate Court, Salem, Massachusetts.
50. Letter from Donald W. Holst of the Smithsonian Institution to the author, dated 15 November 1976, in the files of the Flag Heritage Foundation.
51. Page 97.
52. *Textile Analysis of a Flag* prepared for the files of the Smithsonian Institution (at which she was curator in the Division of Textiles) and dated 13 July 1976; copy in the files of the Flag Heritage Foundation.
53. Holst, *loc. cit*.
54. Letter to the author, dated 25 June 1998, in the files of the Flag Research Center.
55. This is suggested by the stitching: if the side where the fabric was turned under for the seams is visible, the sleeve is to the viewer's left. The obverse — i.e. the "right," front, or face side (where the hem is not visible) has the sleeve on the viewer's right.
56. As analyzed in 2001 by the author.
57. This cannot be seen, for example, in the photograph on p. 191 of Whitney Smith, *Flags Through the Ages and Across the World*, *op. cit*.
58. In addition there is a cord inside the sleeve along its outer edge. The cord is held in place at the top and bottom by crude stitches which pass through the sleeve.



59. *Textile Analysis...*, *op. cit.*

60. Massachusetts-Bay ships "set out to Europe loaded with fish [and] returned with cargoes of Bilbao iron... French silks..." (Tagney, *A County in Revolution...*, p. 10).

61. See the article on the Newbury colors elsewhere in this issue.

62. Richardson, pp. 249-250. Donald W. Holst in "Regiment Colors of the Continental Army," *Military Collector & Historian*, Vol. XX, No. 3 (Fall 1968), p. 73, suggests that this plan may have been published in February 1775.

63. Richardson, p. 97.

64. Letter written as curator in the Division of Textiles at the Smithsonian Institution and dated 14 July 1976, in the files of the Flag Heritage Foundation.

65. Richardson, pp. 251-252.

66. See Donald W. Holst, "Notes on Continental Artillery Flags and Flag Guns: Part II," *Military Collector & Historian*, Vol. XLVI, No. 4 (Winter 1994), pp. 171-174.

67. See John M. Hartvigsen, "The Brandywine Flag," *The Flag Bulletin*, No. 186, pp. 50-69.

68. The First Troop has long taken pride in its original standard, still preserved in its Armory in Philadelphia. In *Book of the First Troop Philadelphia City Cavalry 1774-1914* edited by Joseph Lapsley Wilson (Philadelphia: First Troop, 1915) the bill for making the standard is quoted. It dates from 8 September 1775, but the flag itself may have been ready for the Troop when it served as an escort for George Washington as he traveled from Philadelphia to New York 23-27 June 1775. It is unlikely, however, that the Union Jack — a symbol of continued loyalty to the Crown until the 1776 Declaration of Independence — would have been overpainted by 13 stripes immediately after having been made. The Troop continues to insist that its standard is "the earliest surviving instance of the use of 13 stripes on an American banner" (*First Troop Philadelphia City Cavalry. November 17, 1774* [Philadelphia: First Troop, circa 1981], p. 1.)

69. *Textile Analysis...*, *op.cit.*

70. *Loc. cit.*

71. Acts of the British Parliament (the "Coercive Acts" or "Intolerable Acts") went into effect in the summer of 1774, closing the port of Boston. The Continental Congress in Philadelphia in retaliation adopted the Association agreement ending imports and exports to and from Britain and its

dependencies. Luxuries like silk quickly became scarce.

72. The same is true of the Dansey (Delaware Militia) color.

73. Page 104.

74. Howard M. Chapin, *The Artistic Motives in the United States Flag* (Providence: Pavillon Club, 1930), pp. 10-12; Henry W. Moeller, *Shattering an American Myth: Unfurling the History of the Stars and Stripes* (Mattituck NY: Amereon House, 1995), pp. 132-134; Smith, pp. 60-62; Lawrence Phelps Tower, *The Untold Story Behind Our Country's Flag* (Minneapolis: General Mills, 1964) pp. 4-15.

75. Preble, p. 231; Furlong and McCandless, p. 69. See also Samuel Eliot Morison, *John Paul Jones, A Sailor's Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), pp. 38-39 and 423-425.

76. Michael Wynn Jones, *The Cartoon History of the American Revolution* (New York: Putnam's, 1975), pp. 99 *et seq.*

77. Furlong and McCandless, pp. 59-60, claimed that a "union flag" raised in Boston on 31 July 1769 "consisted of thirteen red and white stripes," but their citation is to Preble (1880, p. 195) who does not describe the design. A flag of nine red and white stripes owned by the Bostonian Society is said to have been displayed in August 1767, but the authenticity of this is unproven.

78. Tagney, *A County in Revolution...*, p. 205.

79. Furlong and McCandless, p. 87.

80. It is true that the East India Company flew a similar flag on its ships, but usage was restricted to display south of the Equator.

81. Preble, p. 217.

#### 225 YEARS AGO

On 14 June 1777 the Continental Congress resolved that "the Flag of the united states be 13 stripes alternate red and white, that the Union be 13 stars white in a blue field representing a new constellation."