

Mississippi Votes on New State Flag



By Steven A. Knowlton with the assistance of Clay Moss

The September issue of *Vexillum* covered the movement to change Mississippi's state flag up to June, 2020.¹ The Magnolia State has been busy since then.

June

The movement to take down the former state flag culminated on June 30 when Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves signed a bill declaring void the 1894 state flag which bore a Confederate Battle Flag in its canton. The bill also established a Commission to Redesign the Mississippi State Flag to choose a new flag design. Citizens of Mississippi were to vote whether to accept the Commission's candidate flag in the November 3 election.

The Mississippi State Legislature included salient stipulations in the bill for the new flag design: it must include the motto "In God We Trust" and it could not contain the Confederate Battle Flag.

The law creating the flag design commission required the governor, the lieutenant governor, and the speaker of the state House of Representatives to each appoint three members to that ad hoc body.

July

Officials from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) issued a public call for new flag design submissions on July 13.² The announcement included criteria that NAVA members will recognize from our "Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag publication. (See sidebar on page 28.)

The first six appointees to the Commission to Redesign the Mississippi State Flag were announced on July 16.

Lieutenant Governor Delbert Hosemann selected:

- Reuben Anderson, former Mississippi Supreme Court justice
- J. Mack Varner, a Vicksburg attorney
- Sherri Carr Bevis, a community relations liaison at Pascagoula-based Singing River Health System

House Speaker Philip Gunn chose:

- Robyn Tannehill, Mayor of Oxford
- Dr. Mary Graham, President of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College
- T. J. Taylor, Speaker Gunn's policy director⁴

The six appointees met on July 22 and heard Speaker Gunn underscore the gravity of their task. "I want you to understand the weight of what you're about to do", Gunn said. "This last flag that we had existed for 126 years or so. And what we are about to set the course on is going to last beyond the lifetimes of any of us. People are going to look at this new flag for years to come."⁵

The six members of the Commission appointed in mid-July set to work immediately. They:

- Agreed unanimously to make their design decision by September 2, twelve days sooner than the legislatively decreed date. Beating the deadline gave election officials more time to put the to-be-chosen design on ballots.
- Selected Justice Anderson, who is also president of the MDAH's board of trustees, to chair the Commission
- Decided to review all submissions personally rather than allow staffers from the MDAH to winnow them.

Commissioners were also authorized to propose their own designs.⁶

Governor Reeves announced his appointments to the commission on July 24:

- Betsey Hamilton, a retired public school teacher and board member of the Union County Heritage Museum represented the MDAH
- Cyrus Ben, the elected chief of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, represented the Mississippi Economic Council
- Frank Bordeaux, Vice President of Property and Casualty for BXS Insurance, represented the Mississippi Arts Commission⁷

The full nine-member Commission met on July 28 and established a procedure to work through more than 1,000 public submissions already received. The commissioners' process involved five steps:

- Each commissioner chose 25 favorite submissions.
- Each member ranked 10 favorites which MDAH staff compiled into an overall top-10 list. Commission members' submissions were added to the 10 finalists.
- The Commission narrowed the field of flags to five.



Figure 1. A staffer distributes NAVA's definitive flag design guidelines to members of the Commission to Redesign the Mississippi State Flag during its first meeting on July 22. Source: <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2020/07/27/mississippi-flag-commission-gov-tate-reeves-appoints-three-members/5517276002>



Figure 2. Commission to Redesign the Mississippi State Flag members (from left) Sherri Carr Bevis, T. J. Taylor, and J. Mack Varner confer during the group's first meeting on July 22. Source: <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2020/07/27/mississippi-flag-commission-gov-tate-reeves-appoints-three-members/5517276002>

- Those ve semi- nal designs were rendered as fabric prototypes in advance of public inspection and comment.
- Finally, the Commission met on September 2 and revealed its nal ag design choice to submit to voters for the November 3 election.⁸

The Commission's meetings were open to the public but few citizens attended. That small turnout probably re ected concern about the spread of COVID-19 rather than indifference to the issue. Dozens of people opted to watch the meetings via a video stream.

The Commission also heard expert testimony. NAVA member Clay Moss offered a slide show featuring ag designs from around the world and pointed out features which would likely prove memorable and visually effective. He also urged exibility in choosing a design. "It could very well be that you nd an emblem that you think resonates," Moss told the Commission, "and you want it to be on the ag, combined with a ag background (from another ag)."⁹

Another expert, horticulturalist Felder Rushing, urged the Commission to include a native magnolia tree blossom, widely recognized as a symbol of the state, but to eschew the entire tree, which had been used on the state ag during the Civil War.⁹

August

On August 3, the MDAH posted to its website (https://mdah.ms.gov/ms_ag) the more than 2,000 designs that had been submitted by the public. Popular design themes included magnolias, mockingbirds (the of cial state bird), wavy blue lines to represent rivers, outline maps of the state, and stars alluding to the U.S. ag (often in groups of twenty, representing Mississippi's place as the twentieth state admitted to the union). The entries also included images of beer cans and Tupelo native Elvis Presley.¹⁰ Red, white, and blue predominated the proffered color combinations.¹¹

One of the proposals gained inordinate media attention. Thomas Rosete submitted an entry, intended as a gibe, featuring a mosquito in a circle of twenty blue stars. Rosete, a recent

New Mississippi Flag Design Criteria

The Mississippi Department of Archives and History issued these flag design parameters in July 2020:³

1. Only unique flag design submissions that include the words "In God We Trust" will be considered by Mississippi's nine-member Flag Redesign Commission. Written flag descriptions will not be considered.
2. The new flag design cannot include the Confederate Battle Flag.
3. Flag design submissions must adhere to principles of the North American Vexillological Association:
 - Keep It Simple. The flag should be so simple that a child can draw it from memory.
 - Use Meaningful Symbolism. The flag's images, color, or patterns should relate to what it symbolizes.
 - Use Two or Three Basic Colors.
 - Be Distinctive or Be Related.

migrant to the state, worked as a deckhand on the Yazoo River and his experience of Mississippi involved a lot of swatting.¹² Understandably, his ag design didn't impress the Commission. It only got as far in the selection process as it did because of a typographical error in the list submitted by one commissioner. The mosquito ag was quickly removed from consideration.¹³

One ag design was notably absent. The "Hospitality Flag", which had enjoyed a moderate amount of use within the state as an alternative to the 1894 design, was kept out of consideration at the request of the designer, NAVA member Laurin Stennis.¹⁴ Her reasons for withholding the design from consideration were not made public.

By August 10, the commissioners had submitted their lists of semi- nalists, resulting in 147 proposals remaining for consideration.

The Commission revealed nine shortlisted designs on August 14. Several common visual characteristics emerged among the designs:

- Vertical stripes – The only stripes among the ags submitted with stripes were vertical.¹⁵ Moss had recommended horizontal stripes for reasons of practicality (the y edge can be hemmed while retaining the basic design) and visual psychology (horizontal stripes are more easily distinguished).
- Eight had a circle of stars.
- Magnolia trees or blossoms appeared on seven entries.
- Two had wavy lines.
- Two had outline maps.

Each design included a star composed of ve heraldic lozenges or diamond shapes championed by Commissioner Ben of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. The diamond shape is a common motif in Choctaw beadwork and basketry; it represents "the eastern diamondback rattlesnake... a respected animal that also protected the crops in the elds."¹⁶ The ve diamonds can also be seen as representative Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia/Oceania, and Europe, as Mississippi has citizens from those ve parts of the world.

Commissioner Hamilton favored a green ag to stand out among other state ags where blue, white, and red predominate. She also urged adoption of a magnolia design to "complete the brand" of the state because the ower is seen on license plates, tourism campaigns, and other visual symbols for Mississippi.

MDAH director Blount relayed concerns that her staff had heard from citizens, who thought a magnolia ag would be regarded as "a symbol of the Old South".

Another nalist ag by a professional graphic designer garnered popular support. The MDAH received nearly 700 emails¹⁷ supporting Micah Whitson's¹⁸ "Great River" ag (design number 9) as a result of the designer's website and internet marketing campaign.

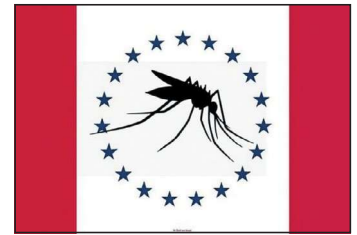


Figure 3. Thomas Rosete's suggestion for a mosquito-themed state flag. Source: <https://www.darionledger.com/story/news/2020/08/12/mississippi-mosquito-flag-swatted-down/3353515001>

More than 48,000 people registered their opinions about the new flag designs during the second half of August in a nonbinding online poll hosted by the MDAH. Commission Chair Anderson was impressed. “Mississippi has a tremendous amount of interest in what we’re doing,” he said. That high level of public interest motivated Anderson and the Commission to “give them the greatest flag we can have”.

The online poll revealed that:

- The “Great River” flag (flag 9 in Figure 4) had the most support; 25 percent of respondents favored it.
- A flag featuring an outline map of the state’s western boundary (flag 7) received the nod of 19 percent of respondents.
- Two flags with magnolia blossoms—one on a blue stripe (flag 3) and one on a white stripe (flag 2)—pulled, respectively, 16 percent and 10 percent of the online votes.¹⁹

The poll results informed the decision-making of the Commission, which proclaimed its finalists on August 18.²⁰

During that day’s meeting, the commissioners debated which designs should advance and made modifications to some entries. For example, several flags featured twenty stars arranged in a circle. The Commission added a twenty-first star—the Choctaw diamond shapes in gold—to three of those (flags 2, 3, and 7). Flag 4 was left with twenty stars, including the Choctaw diamond star.

After making modifications, the Commission voted and selected four designs (flags 2, 3, 4, and 9); the fifth was a tie vote (see Figure 5).” Commission Chair Anderson had not voted earlier saying, “When the flag came down it was one of the great days of my life, so what came up made little or no difference to me — and I didn’t vote.”⁸ His choice ultimately determined that flag 7 prevailed over flag 1.

The Commission wanted to know how the candidate flags would look in reality. MDAH staff worked with Brenda McIntyre, co-owner of NAVA commercial member A Complete Flag Source in Jackson, to have prototypes printed by Charisma Flags of Huntsville, Alabama. The flags were ready for hoisting by August 25, when they were flown over the Old Capitol Museum.

Commission Chair Anderson noted that flying the flags was a useful exercise, because “when you run a flag off a flag pole, it sure looks different than on paper.”²¹

In the meantime, online polling remained open for the finalists. The “Great River” design was in the lead on August 22 with 37 percent of online votes. No other design accrued more than 25 percent support.²² But the results changed as polling continued.

By the close of the poll on August 25, flag 2 (showing the western boundary) took the lead with 39 percent of votes. Flag 4, showing the magnolia blossom on a blue pale, was in second place with 25 percent. The “Great River” flag, which had been subject of a promotional campaign, was in third position with 17 percent of votes.²³

Following the viewing of the flags aloft, the Commission met again on August 25 to narrow the field to two designs. In addition to considering the designs per se, the Commission also engaged an attorney to determine that the designs had no copyright entanglements and to vet the designers for potentially embarrassing personal or social media histories. The due diligence paid off. One of the finalist flags was disqualified because its design included clip art which was the intellectual property of someone other than the designer.²⁴

The two finalists chosen on August 25 were Micah Whitson’s “Great River” flag and a magnolia blossom flag which combined ideas submitted by several people: mainly Rocky Vaughan with supporting changes contributed by Sue Anna Joe, Kara Giles, and Dominique Pugh.

Vaughan is a graphic designer who lives in Ackerman, Mississippi, and had been working on designs for a new state flag for many years.

Joe had submitted a flag that was eliminated in the second round, but her design for the shape of the blossom was chosen by the commission to take the central position on Vaughan’s flag.²⁵ She is a native of Greenwood, Mississippi, who lives in San Francisco. Joe, a Chinese-American, felt the old state flag’s symbolism had little meaning to her personally (positive or negative) because she perceived that her ancestors had no connection to the Confederacy or slavery.²⁶

Giles and Pugh are graphic designers and assistants to, respectively, Commissioner Tannehill and the MDAH. They focused on details such as the width of lines and color choices.²⁷

Whitson’s blue flag (Figure 6, left) had a central charge of a white shield which he based on the seal of the Mississippi Territory drawn in 1798. The shield had 18 vertical stripes, in groups of three, to represent the three European nations that had claimed the territory before it became part of the United States (Spain, France, and Great Britain), crossed by two wavy blue lines standing for the Mississippi River and Gulf of Mexico. The motto was written in a font that would have been available to printers at the time of Mississippi’s statehood in 1817. The single star in white, made of five diamonds, was placed above the shield.

The other finalist (Figure 6, right) featured a white magnolia blossom bearing a golden androecium (sometimes called a



Figure 4. The nine finalists announced on August 14. Source: <https://yallpolitics.com/2020/08/17/commission-opens-non-binding-public-poll-on-9-finalists-for-new-mississippi-flag>



Figure 5. The five finalists selected on August 18. Source: https://mississippitoday.org/2020/08/18/one-of-these-five-designs-could-become-the-new-mississippi-state-flag/?omhide=true&mc_cid=a69930157d&mc_eid=7eed0b7cfb

stamen). The tower was ringed with a circle composed of 20 stars, divided by the five-diamond star in gold, with the motto completing the bottom of the circle. The magnolia blossom, inspired by the pattern shown on the state's vehicle registration plates in use between 2002 and 2007, was centered on a blue Canadian pale embriated in gold between red vertical panels.²⁸

By choosing these two finalists, the Commissions eliminated competing magnolia designs so that the online poll would give voters a clear choice between a magnolia design and an alternative. In addition, the commissioners voted against the flag with a central white panel between blue and red vertical stripes, fearing it might easily be confused with Iowa's flag. The lack of contrast between the tower and the white panel also raised concerns about visibility.



Figure 6. The two finalists flying at the Old Capitol in Jackson on August 25. Source: <https://mississippitoday.org/2020/08/25/commission-selects-final-two-designs-to-become-new-state-flag>; <https://mississippitoday.org/2020/11/03/mississippians-adopt-new-state-flag-after-confederate-emblem-flew-for-126-years>



Figure 7. The seal of Mississippi Territory, 1798. Source: Wikimedia



Figure 8. A magnolia blossom. Source: Flickr/Terry White

September

A number of questions remained to be answered by the Commission when it met on September 2 to choose the finalist flag. T. J. Taylor suggested the vote be delayed to allow for more polling data to be gathered using technology that would limit the polling to Mississippi residents.²⁹ However, MDAH Director Blount responded that the secretary of state had asked for a decision by September 2 in order to print the design on absentee ballots, so the Commission moved forward. As polling stood that day, the magnolia blossom design led with nearly 60 percent of votes.³⁰

Before deciding between the finalists, the Commission debated making changes to the magnolia blossom design—modifying the number of stars, the hue of yellow, and the typeface for the motto.³¹ NAVA's Moss testified about technical aspects of flag manufacture and visibility that informed the finalist choices. For example, Moss suggested that the outer stripes, red and yellow combined, should each equal one-quarter of the total length of the flag, thus forming a true Canadian pale of the blue center panel.

In an 8–1 vote, the Commission chose the magnolia blossom design over the “Great River” flag. The credited designers are Rocky Vaughan, with design support provided by Sue Anna Joe, Kara Giles, Dominique Pugh, Clay Moss, and Micah Whitson, because the finalist version of the flag includes the Choctaw star he developed.³²

The Commission also elected to name the flag as the “In God We Trust Flag”, and to authorize a voter education effort that would include creation of a documentary video on the flag change process.

In a press release, Vaughn expanded on the symbolism of the flag. The magnolia flag stands for Mississippi's “forward progression” and “sense of hope and rebirth” because the magnolia blooms several times a year and has a long season in flower. The blue pale recalls the United States flag, “representing vigilance, justice, perseverance”, and red stripes are for “hardiness and valor”. The gold details are a “nod to the rich cultural history of Mississippi, especially the visual arts, literature, music, and performing arts to originate in our state”.³³

Although the Commission to Redesign the Mississippi State Flag successfully concluded its work with the selection of the finalist design for the voters of Mississippi to consider, a possible political challenge arose.

At the September 2 meeting, a representative of the advocacy group Let Mississippi Vote announced that it had initiated a petition drive to place a referendum on a 2021 or later ballot allowing voters to choose from among four flag designs, including the 1894 flag, the “In God We Trust Flag”, a modified version of the flag of the state's bicentennial celebration (which had the state seal centered on a horizontal tribar of blue, white, and red), and the Hospitality (Stennis) Flag. Let Mississippi Vote's spokesperson, Lauren Smith, noted that the group's intention was “not to stack the deck against one flag or another. It's simply to give the people a choice. Only having one flag on the ballot is not a choice.”³⁴

Mississippi's referendum process requires gathering at least 21,239 signatures in each of five districts within the state. Nevertheless, any measure that received enough signatures would be unlikely to appear on a ballot before 2023 when the next statewide general election will be held.³⁵

While the secretary of state prepared ballots for the voters to accept or reject the “In God We Trust Flag”, other parties prepared for the campaign and for the eventuality that Mississippi would have a new flag after November 3. The Mississippi Economic Council, the state's chamber of commerce, underwrote an advertising campaign in support of adoption of the “In God We Trust Flag”.³⁶ The Council also commissioned the manufacture of 1,000 flags for distribution around the state and sold t-shirts, yard signs, face masks,

bumper stickers, and other promotional items. Banks, businesses, and newspapers endorsed the “In God We Trust Flag”.³⁷

Clay Moss worked diligently to create digital vector art that would allow flag manufacturers to reproduce the winning flag accurately. He evened out the spaces between stars and letters and scaled the design to accommodate standard flag sizes as well as a large version for the state capitol. Minor modifications to the dimensions of the artwork allow the elements of the flag to appear centered and in visually correct proportions when seen from a distance.

November

On November 3, the voters of Mississippi adopted the “In God We Trust Flag”, with 72.8% of voters in favor of the design and 27.2% opposed.³⁸ During its next session, the state legislature will enact into law the new design as the official state flag. In practice, however, Mississippi already has a new flag flying throughout the state.

Steven A. Knowlton is Librarian for History and African American Studies at Princeton University. He serves as editor of *Vexillum* and first Vice President of NAVA.

Clay Moss teaches and coaches at Park Place Christian Academy in Pearl, Mississippi. He served as an advisor to the Commission to Redesign the Mississippi State Flag throughout the summer of 2020.



Figure 9. The Commission to Redesign the Mississippi State Flag poses before an illustration of its final choice. Source: <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/politics/2020/09/02/new-mississippi-state-flag-commission-final-design/3455475001>

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⁴ Luke Ramseth, “Six Commission Members Selected to Design New Mississippi Flag”, *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/politics/2020/07/16/six-commission-members-selected-to-design-new-mississippi-flag/>

⁵ Luke Ramseth, “You Are Making History: Mississippi Flag Commission Begins Process to Choose New Banner”, *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/politics/2020/07/22/you-are-making-history-mississippi-flag-commission-begins-process-to-choose-new-banner/>

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⁹ Geoff Pender, “Expert Tells Mississippi State Flag Redesign Commission: ‘Keep It Simple’”, *Mississippi Today*, July 28, 2020, <https://mississippitoday.org/2020/07/28/expert-tells-mississippi-state-flag-redesign-commission-keep-it-simple/>. For examples of Civil War-era magnolia flags, see Clay Moss, “Mississippi’s Magnolia Flags”, *Vexillum* no. 9 (March 2020), 22–23.

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²⁷ “Meet Flag Designer Kara Giles”, *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.clarionledger.com/videos/news/2020/09/04/meet-mississippi-state-flag-designer-kara-giles/>

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³⁷ “Mississippi’s Largest Banks Support Adopting a New Official State Flag”, *Tupelo Daily Journal*, October 25, 2020, https://www.djournal.com/opinion/letters_to_editor/your-opinion-mississippi-s-largest-banks-support-adopting-a-new-official-state-flag/article_91725f33-d571-52c3-8e62-488f24c4aa51.html; “Major utilities support a new Mississippi state flag”, *ibid.*, https://www.djournal.com/opinion/letters_to_editor/your-opinion-major-utilities-support-a-new-mississippi-state-flag/article_c9fdb23c-b85b-5811-9150-38f7311fba1.html

³⁸ “Mississippi election results certified by state leaders”, *News Mississippi*, November 21, 2020, <https://newsms.fm/mississippi-election-results-certified-by-state-leaders>