

A Sky-Blue Flag for the Land of the Sky-Tinted Water:

The Legislative and Administrative Process that Produced Minnesota's New State Flag

By Steven A. Knowlton

For decades, a dedicated band of activists has been lobbying for Minnesota to change its flag.¹ Those advocates—including NAVA members Lee Herold and William Becker—and their legislative allies finally achieved their aim in 2023 when the state legislature passed a bill authorizing a redesign of the state flag and state seal.

This is the story of how it was done.



Source: <simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Minnesota/ media/File:Minnesota_Flag_Flying_Outside_State_Capitol.jpg>

The Former Seals and Flags of Minnesota

History of the State Seal

The first seal for Minnesota was designed shortly after the establishment of the Minnesota Territory in 1849. Territorial legislators could not reach agreement on a symbol, so they passed a law stating that “the centre of said seal may contain such emblems, devices, and mottoes as may be agreed upon by the Governor and delegate in Congress”.² Minnesota’s congressional delegate, Henry H. Sibley,

commissioned John J. Albert, an engineer and draftsman in the U.S. Army, to draw a seal. Albert offered four versions; Sibley selected one which was later rendered in watercolor by Seth Eastman, a U.S. Army officer who commanded the federal garrison at Fort Snelling



Figure 1. A drawing by John A. Albert, and a watercolor by Seth Eastman showing the initial design for the Minnesota territorial seal, 1849. Source: Minnesota History Society, <mnhs.org/sites/default/files/collections/cache/10268003/10268003.320x320.jpg>.

near the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers (fig. 1).³ With the addition of a scroll containing the motto “*Quo sursum velo videre*” (Latin meaning “I want to see what lies beyond”) and an inscription encircling Albert & Eastman’s image, this design served as the territorial seal until statehood was achieved in 1858 (fig. 2).⁴

Albert & Eastman depicted a scene near the Falls of St. Anthony, the only waterfall on the Mississippi River and

the locus of most early White settlement in Minnesota. There is a White farmer with a plow, and an ax and a gun near at hand. A Native American with a spear rides past. Many have interpreted the direction of the rider as westward, but it is not clear that is the case in the watercolor. However, later renditions of the seal add a setting sun with rays, making the rider's direction more obvious.

(When the design was transferred to a metal seal, the image

included misspellings in the motto and was reversed, so that the rider appears to be moving eastward).

Without an official legislative interpretation on record, many observers have relied upon a poem written by Eastman's wife, Mary Eastman, to provide an understanding of the image. The poem begins, "Give way, give way, young warrior... / The rocky bluff and prairie land / The white man claims them now, / The symbols of his course are here, / The rifle, axe, and plough".⁵ Using this text, many critics have interpreted the seal as depicting the expulsion of Native Americans by White settlers and soldiers.⁶ Under pressure from the federal government and its army, between 1837 and 1889 the Eastern Dakota (also called Santee, Sioux, and Isányathi) and Ojibwe (also called Chippewa and Anishinaabe) peoples signed treaty after treaty ceding territory for white settlement until only a few small tracts were reserved for Native occupation.⁷

When statehood was granted to Minnesota in 1858, the new constitution required the legislature to adopt a state seal. After another legislative deadlock, Sibley, who had become governor in 1858, commissioned a state seal on his own initiative. Sibley kept Albert's central design, but changed the motto to read "*L'Etoile du Nord*", French for "the Star of the North". His choice of the French language honored the French voyageurs and missionaries who were among the first White people to travel in Minnesota. He also ensured that the image showed the Native rider going westward.⁸ After a citizen raised questions about the legality of the seal, the state attorney general ruled that the usage of the seal since 1858 gave it legitimacy.⁹ In 1861 the legislature acknowledged the *fait accompli* of Sibley's seal, adopting a law stating "that the seal heretofore used as the seal of the State, shall be the seal thereof".¹⁰ In a later session of the 1861 legislature, the law was amended with the requirement that "a description in writing of the same shall be deposited and recorded in the office of the secretary of state".¹¹ The lack of specificity in the law left a great deal to artistic interpretation (as seen in figures 3–5).



Figure 2. The Great Seal of Minnesota Territory, cast in iron, 1849. Source: Minnesota History Society, <mnhs.org/sites/default/files/collections/cache/10292330/10292330.640x640.jpg>.



Figure 3. The Great Seal of the State of Minnesota, cast in 1858. Source: Minnesota History Society, <mnhs.org/sites/default/files/collections/cache/10300735/10300735.320x320.jpg>.



Figure 4. Painting of the Minnesota state seal on glass, ca. 1861–1875. Source: Minnesota History Society, <mnhs.org/sites/default/files/collections/cache/10268578/10268578.640x640.jpg>.



Figure 5. Gilded plaster copy of the Minnesota state seal, manufactured by Brioschi Studios. Source: Minnesota History Society, <mnhs.org/sites/default/files/collections/cache/8692/mf007707.jpg>.

More than a century later, the Minnesota Human Rights Commission suggested that the seal be redesigned to be less exclusionary. The secretary of state issued a new design in 1971 that gave the rider the appearance of a White man (fig. 6). This design was never approved by the legislature.

In 1983, the legislature officially changed the seal and for the first time included a highly detailed description of the image in the statute. Some details were modified. Three pine trees were added; the red pine, also called Norway pine (*Pinus resinosa*) is the state tree. The farmer's boots were removed to show him barefoot. The position of the Native American rider is shifted as well. The law included a section titled "Historical Symbolism of Seal" to clarify the legislative intent of the imagery. It specifies that the rider is going "south and represents the great Indian heritage of Minnesota".¹² A state employee, Jacki Bradham, prepared a drawing of the revised seal that was in use until 2024 (fig. 7).¹³



Figure 6. The state seal of Minnesota in *de facto* use 1971–1983. Source: Minnesota Secretary of State, *Minnesota Fair Campaign Practices Act: Summary and Annotations* (St. Paul: The Secretary, 1974).



Figure 7. The Great Seal of the State of Minnesota, in use 1983–2024. Source: Minnesota Historical Society, <mnhs.org/sites/default/files/collections/cache/10302710/10302710.320x320.jpg>.

History of the State Flag

Minnesota first acquired a flag in 1893, when an entry was needed for a state flag prize contest at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. A committee coordinating Minnesota's entry into the contest selected a design by Amelia Hyde Center, a Minneapolis artist. Center created a two-sided flag; the obverse was white and the reverse was blue. On the obverse was a design featuring the central design of the state seal, surrounded by a large gold circle. In the space between the seal and the circle was a banner with the dates "1819" and "1893", plus a wreath of flowers



Figure 8. The first Minnesota state flag (obverse), embroidered by Pauline Fjeld and Thormane Fjeld in 1893. Source: Minnesota Historical Society, <mnhs.org/sites/default/files/collections/cache/8158/mf007173.jpg>.



Figure 9. The Minnesota flag in use 1957–1983. Source: Minnesota Historical Society, <mnhs.org/sites/default/files/collections/cache/10126213/pf046924.320x320.jpg>.

commonly called “lady’s slippers” (*Cypripedium reginae*), and the date “1858”; woven through the flowers and across the seal was a red ribbon bearing the dates “1819” and “1893”. Nineteen small gold stars form a larger star shape outside the circle, and the word “Minnesota” fills the bottom of the design (fig. 8). The contest’s winner was announced on February 28, 1893, and on March 30 both houses of the legislature adopted the design as the state flag, with the governor signing the law on April 15.¹⁴

The lady’s slipper is a wildflower indigenous to Minnesota that in 1902 became the state flower. The dates on the flag signify the founding of Fort Snelling in 1819, statehood in 1858, and the adoption of the flag in 1893. The 19 stars symbolize Minnesota’s entry into the union as the 19th state after the original 13. The topmost star is larger than the others, representing Minnesota’s nickname, the North Star State.¹⁵

The 1893 design persisted through the 1950s. In anticipation of the state’s centennial in 1958, the legislature revised the design in order to make it less expensive to produce.¹⁶

Instead of having two faces (which also make the flag heavier and more prone to damage in strong winds), the flag was produced on a solid blue field. The central image was modified slightly so that the ribbon’s tails were removed, and the entire design was placed within a yellow-bordered circle with a white background (fig. 9). The law specified that the “center design... is made up of the scenes from the great seal”.¹⁷ Because the flag law did not specify the design of the center image, when the seal was changed in 1983 the flag’s central charge was modified automatically (fig. 10).



Figure 10. The Minnesota flag in use 1983–2024. Source: <sos.state.mn.us/about-minnesota/state-symbols/state-flag>.

Growing Dissatisfaction with the Minnesota State Seal and Flag

The 1957/1983 flag design has not proven satisfactory to all Minnesota lawmakers. In fact, the design was opposed even in 1957, and serious efforts to revise the flag were undertaken by legislators in 1989, 2000, and 2002.¹⁸ Between 2000 and 2022, legislators introduced 14 different unsuccessful bills to modify the state flag.¹⁹ Those who wished to change the flag had many reasons, but in recent years criticism revolved around the fact that the flag was perceived to be, in the words of one pithy headline, “racist and ugly”.²⁰

Controversial Symbolism

Although the 1983 law describing the seal also provided an official interpretation that the image of a Native American rider “represents the great American Indian heritage of the state”, many observers found in the seal’s imagery a depiction of historical events they believed to be atrocities. Kevin Jensvold, tribal chairperson for the Yellow Medicine Dakota of the Upper Sioux Community, observed that a “genocidal attempt to destroy our culture is depicted on the flag”.²¹ State senator Mary Kunesch, an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, observed that “the Indians and their loss of land” is a “very painful part of Minnesota’s history” that is “pictured on our state seal”.

Others found the ambiguous imagery of the seal just as unsatisfactory. It allowed some defenders, such as State Senator Steve Drazkowski, to view the scene as “two individuals coexisting”.²² To Angela Two Stars, a member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate tribe, it “perpetuated a false narrative of what happened to Dakota people in the state. It looks like Dakota people are willingly leaving... and that’s definitely not what happened”.²³

Vexillographic Inadequacy

Another popular argument against the 1957/1983 flag was its failure to meet perceived good standards for flag design. Its similarity to many other state flags was one critique: “It’s identical to 20 other flags that basically slapped the seal on a blue background”, observed State Representative Mike Freiberg.²⁴

Referring to the NAVA publication “Good” Flag, “Bad” Flag and its five basic principles of flag design, newspaper columnist Bill Lindeke believes “the Minnesota state flag breaks nearly every one of these rules”.²⁵ It is a complicated design that uses many colors, has both lettering and a seal, and is not distinctive among U.S. state flags.

Legislative Moves in 2023

Through the last decade, key state legislators worked to build public support for a flag change. Peter Fischer, a member of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) party,

has represented Maplewood in the state House of Representatives since 2012 (fig. 11). In 2017, two high school students brought concerns about the state flag to him, and by the next year he was advocating on public television for a redesign. State Representative Mike Freiberg (DFL), representing Golden Valley since 2012, was alerted to the issue by reading an opinion piece in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* in 2020 (fig. 12). State Senator Mary Kunesh (DFL), representing northern suburbs of St. Paul since 2020, made her interest in a new flag clear by appearing on a live improvisational comedy/public policy interview show in the summer of 2022 (fig. 13).

In the November 2022 state legislative elections, the DFL gained control of both the state Senate and the state House of Representatives. Because Governor Tim Walz is also DFL, any legislation that commanded the support of the DFL in both houses was likely to become law.

Introducing Bills

When the 2023 legislative session began, State Representatives Mike Freiberg, Peter Fischer, and Kristi Pursell introduced HF (House File) 274, a bill that would create a commission to redesign the state flag and seal. After its first reading on January 11, the bill picked up 14 co-sponsors even before the first hearing was held on February 21.²⁹

In the State Senate, Senators Mary Kunesh, Erin Murphy, and John Marty proposed SF (Senate File) 386, a bill substantially similar to HF 274. Between its first reading on January 17 and the first hearing on February 2, it acquired two co-sponsors.³⁰

HF 274 proposed to establish a State Emblems Redesign Commission to “develop, design, and recommend to the legislature and governor new designs” for the flag and seal. The bill specified that the commission would include representatives from the public, each house of the legislature, and various public interest groups. In its initial drafts, the bill stated that “the legislature intends to hold necessary votes on adoption of the state emblems redesign commission’s recommended designs” in 2024.³¹

The House bill was referred to the Committee on State and Local Government Finance and Policy, which held a hearing on the bill on February 21. The first action taken by the committee

was to pass an amendment to the bill, stating that the design chosen by the commission would become the new state flag on Minnesota Statehood Day (May 11, 2024) unless the legislature intervened after the design was announced. The bill was also referred to the Ways and Means Committee, which oversees state revenue and expenditure. Both motions passed without objection.

Hearings and Debate

At the hearing the committee chair, Ginny Klevorn, provided an affidavit stating that “The Minnesota flag is not popular with the people of Minnesota, nor a design respected outside of Minnesota.” Other documentation included resolutions by the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Reservation Business Committee and the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa in support of the bill. A dissenting citizen, Stephanie Chappell, objected to the fact that the proposed list of members of the redesign commission reserved spaces for members of various ethnic or racial public interest organizations, but did not reserve space for “Caucasians of Scandinavian heritage”. Witnesses at the hearing included Representative Peter Fischer, a co-sponsor; Kevin Jensvold, chair of the Upper Sioux Community; and Nathaniel Dennis, a student at Winona State University; all of them supported the bill.³²

The Senate bill was referred to the Committee on State and Local Government and Veterans, which held hearings on January 31 and February 2. The first day, Kevin Jensvold testified, and Thomas Atkins, a student at the University of Minnesota, shared recently redesigned flags such as those of Duluth and Utah.³³

On February 2, Republican senator Steve Draskowski offered an amendment which would immediately adopt as the state flag a rectangular version of the logo of the Minnesota North Stars, a team which played in the National Hockey League from 1967 to 1993. This amendment was defeated in an 8–6 vote. Affidavits were presented by Stephanie Chappell, who stated that the “Minnesota flag shows a land where cultures live side by side in friendship”. In contrast, social studies teacher Mark Westphal presented findings by his students showing that the Minnesota flag is similar to many other state flags not only in colors and pattern, but also motifs such as numerals, foreign languages, and people. At the end of the hearing, the bill was referred to the Senate Rules and Administration Committee.³⁴ Because the House version of the bill was moving forward, no further action was taken on the Senate bill.

Omnibus Bill

In the House Ways and Means Committee, on April 11 HF 274 was combined with a number of other bills and added as an amendment to HF 1830, which had begun as a bill



Figure 11. Minnesota State Representative Peter Fischer. Source: <house.mn.gov/members/profile/photo/15396>.



Figure 12. Minnesota State Representative Mike Freiberg. Source: <house.mn.gov/members/profile/photo/15398>.



Figure 13. Minnesota State Senator Mary Kunesh. Source: <senate.mn.gov/members/member_bio.html?mem_id=1242>.

“specifying the types of collateral the Executive Council may approve for deposit with the commissioner of management and budget”.³⁵ By the end of the legislative session, HF 1830 had become an omnibus bill containing not only the flag measure but also legislation relating to the budget, the state lottery, retirement accounts, elections administration, campaign finance, cybersecurity, and state employees with disabilities, among others.³⁶ Political reporter Alex Derosier noted that omnibus bills “are the norm at the Minnesota Capitol, where lawmakers often lump spending and other policies into big bills”.³⁷

The bill was passed by the House on April 18 by a vote of 70–59 and referred to the Senate. The Senate offered amendments which the House refused, and a conference committee was convened to decide upon a final version of the bill. (Among the amendments originally passed in the Senate was a requirement that the legislature have final approval of a flag design chosen by the redesign commission).³⁸ On May 19, the bill as amended by the conference committee was passed in the House by a vote of 69–62, and two days later it passed the Senate by a vote of 34–30. Governor Walz approved the bill on May 24.³⁹

Freiberg called the passage of the flag reform bill “one of the top accomplishments I’ve had as a legislator because it’s something I think everyone will see and a lot of people are aware of”.⁴⁰ Activist Lee Herold, on the other hand, “didn’t feel like celebrating” because he knew that “the hard work [was] ahead” in choosing a new design.⁴¹

The State Emblems Redesign Commission Begins Its Work

HF 1830 became a law titled “An act relating to government operations; establishing a biennial budget; appropriating money for [13 purposes]; transferring certain funds; [3 other budget matters]; making changes to policy provisions for [7 areas of government concern]; providing penalties; requiring reports; amending [more than 100] Minnesota Statutes.” This law created a body called the State Emblems Redesign Commission (SERC), with the remit to “develop and adopt a new design for the official state flag and official state seal no later than January 1, 2024”. The requirements for the new designs were to “accurately and respectfully reflect Minnesota’s shared history, resources, and diverse cultural communities” and no symbols representing a single community or person were to be included. The commission could “solicit and secure the voluntary service and aid of vexillologists” and was required to solicit public input and feedback. The final report of the commission was to be submitted to the governor and legislature and to describe the symbols and the meanings of them that were assigned by the commission.⁴² (A search of the legal database Hein Online indicates that this is the

first legislation in the United States to incorporate the word “vexillologist”).

Although the commission was not expected to meet before August 1, the Minnesota press nonetheless engaged in speculation about possible new flag designs. Minnesota Public Radio reported that “a great majority” of listeners who wrote in wanted to see Minnesota’s state bird, the common loon (*Gavia immer*), and the state’s abundance of lakes represented.⁴³

Membership

The SERC included three members of the public appointed by the governor, namely Anita Gaul, a college instructor; Michael Harralson, a deputy judge of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe; and Shelly Buck, a member of the Prairie Island Indian Community Tribal Council. The members of the public were chosen by the governor from applicants who submitted their credentials for consideration.⁴⁴

SERC members representing constituencies named in the law were Denise Mazone, appointed by the Council for Minnesotans of African Heritage; Luis Fitch, appointed by the Minnesota Council on Latino Affairs; Kim Jackson, appointed by the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans; Aaron Wittnebel, appointed by the executive board of the Indian Affairs Council to represent the Ojibwe community; Robert “Deuce” Larsen, appointed by the executive board of the Indian Affairs Council to represent the Dakota community; Steve Simon, secretary of state of Minnesota; Kent Whitworth, director of the Minnesota Historical Society; Kate Beane, member of the the Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board; Philip McKenzie, chair of the Minnesota Arts Board; and Lauren Bennett McGinty, executive director of Explore Minnesota Tourism. Legislators serving as ex officio, nonvoting members were Mary Kunesh and Mike Freiberg of the DFL Party and Steve Drazkowski and Bjorn Olson, Republicans (fig. 14).⁴⁵



Figure 14. The Minnesota State Emblems Redesign Commission. Source: <documentcloud.org/documents/24223883-flags-and-seal-for-dec-15-serc-meeting-as-of-12-13-23>.

Exploring Flag and Seal Design

At the SERC’s first virtual meeting on September 5, Luis Fitch was elected chair and Anita Gaul vice-chair. The chair and vice-chair were selected by the committee, which sought “people either well-versed in history or very talented and experienced artists”.⁴⁶ Fitch is an artist and founding partner of a multicultural branding agency; Gaul has a Ph.D. in American history. The commission also decided to meet

weekly via conferencing software in hopes of making a decision before January 1, 2024.⁴⁸

Early meetings were devoted to discussions on the best way of ensuring public input; learning from an expert (Bill Convery of the Minnesota Historical Society) on the history of Minnesota's flag and seal; and review of a "creative brief" prepared by the chair, Luis Fitch, who is a professional graphic designer.⁴⁹ A creative brief is a document that "defines the project's strategy and goals and provides a clear vision for each Commission member" to "help the Commission agree on expectations, deliverables, and deadlines".⁵⁰

The design brief as agreed upon at the September 20 meeting established that the new flag should "resonate with the people of Minnesota and accurately represent the state's identity". Design objectives included simplicity and recognizability; distinctive colors (utilizing a "color palette that represents the state effectively"); enduring appeal; symbolism; and symmetry. A final mandate was that "symbols, emblems, or likenesses that represent only a single community or person, regardless of whether real or stylized, may not be included in a design". Similar goals were established for the seal. The design brief also established a timeline, which included a window from September 25 to October 30 for public submissions of new flag and seal designs, with review by the commission to follow through December 11, and a final decision to be made by December 28.⁵¹

The September 25 goal for opening submissions proved too ambitious; it was not until the September 26 meeting that the SERC agreed upon the rules for submissions. There were few restrictions, other than requirements that SERC members and their families could not submit designs, the submissions must include a statement explaining the design choices and the designer's connection to Minnesota, that obscenity was disallowed, and that artificial intelligence could not be employed in creating designs.⁵² Each designer was limited to three submissions.⁵³ The staff of the Minnesota State Historical Society launched an online submission form on October 2, and received more than 50 designs in the first day. Out of concern for early submissions being copied or modified, the submissions were kept sealed until the deadline passed.⁵⁵

The Designs Roll In

Throughout October, the SERC and the Minnesota Historical Society coordinated media campaigns to raise awareness of the open submission process.⁵⁶ While waiting for the deadline to pass, the SERC busied itself with decisions about how to choose the final designs for a flag and a seal, and adopted a timeline for reviewing submissions in November and December. It also heard

expert testimony from NAVA Secretary Ted Kaye, who presented an hour-long overview of flag selection processes and considerations the commission should keep in mind when choosing a design.⁵⁷ Lee Herold delivered copies of NAVA's "Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag.

After the submission deadline passed on October 30, staffers reported that 2,123 flag designs and 398 seal designs had been received.⁵⁸ Several hundred arrived on the last day of eligibility.⁵⁹ On November 8, the commission launched a website displaying all the designs, and offered a means for the public to comment.⁶⁰ All designs remained anonymous unless submitters made themselves known publicly.⁶¹ Over 30,000 page views and 3,000 comments were recorded in the first week of its operation.⁶²

Silly Ideas

Not every design submitted was in earnest, of course. The local press highlighted some of the most outlandish designs, such as a picture of someone's pet dog, a double-headed loon in Byzantine style, the former flag of the Soviet Union, a plain flag with the word "BAYG" (representing the distinct pronunciation of "bag" in the Minnesota accent), a collage of "presidents' heads with a hockey stick", an homage to the California flag with a mosquito in place of the bear (and perhaps invoking the famous "mosquito design" proposed in Mississippi's 2020 contest), and at least three featuring a loon shooting a laser beam from its eye, reminiscent of the popular laser-eyed kiwi bird from the 2016 New Zealand flag referendum (fig. 15).⁶³

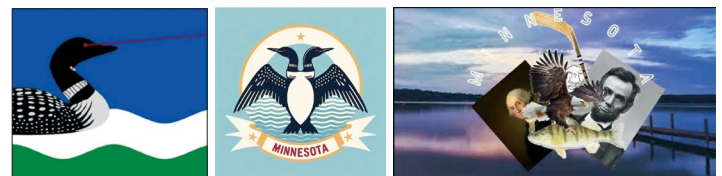


Figure 15. Some outlandish submissions. Source: <racketmn.com/new-mn-state-flag-design-submissions>; <racketmn.com/inbound-brewco-laser-loon-pilsner-library-cards>; <serc.mnhs.org/flags>.

State Representative Mike Freiberg had feared that the mocking entries would make citizens "think this whole process is just a joke", but in the end he felt the attention they garnered had encouraged more interest in the process.⁶⁴



Figure 16. Commission members Shelley Buck and Lauren Bennett McGinty review flag submissions on November 21, 2023. Source: <minnesotareformer.com/2023/11/22/minnesotans-arent-happy-about-the-six-finalists-for-the-new-state-flag>.

Consideration of Submissions, and Narrowing the Pool

Overall, the designs tended to emphasize “loons, water, and wildlife”, as well as stars, often in allusion to the state motto “*L’Etoile du Nord*”.⁶⁵ A good number were submitted by children, drawn in crayon.

The November 21 meeting was held in person. Lee Herold offered testimony about flag manufacturing, reviewing standard colors for fabrics used in sewn flags as well as limitations offered by screen printing, and cost considerations for designs of varying levels of complexity. The meeting continued with each commissioner discussing 25 flag and seal designs he or she selected for further consideration—the meeting lasted more than seven hours!

In their deliberations, the commission steered away from flora and fauna as flag charges, noting that the favored species, such as pine trees and lady’s slippers, are not endemic throughout the state. Vice-chair Anita Gaul noted that southern Minnesotans don’t encounter loons. The North Star was viewed as the symbol most likely to serve to unify the state’s populace.⁶⁶

The commission then discussed the designs for both flag and seal which appeared the most among the 300 selections made by commissioners (fig. 16). Six finalists were chosen for the flag, and five for the seal (figs. 17–18).⁶⁷



Figure 17. Finalists for the seal, selected at the November 21 meeting. The fifth design is by NAVA member William Becker. Source: <kroxam.com/new-minnesota-state-flag-narrowed-down-to-six-finalists>.

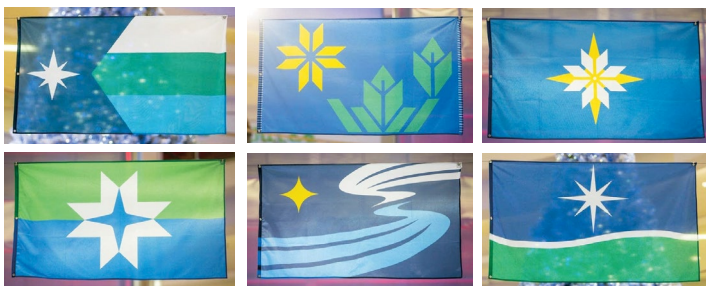


Figure 18. Finalists for the flag, selected at the November 21 meeting. Source: <mprnews.org/story/2023/12/10/and-then-there-were-six-flag-finalists-on-display-at-moa>.

Flag Designers Speak Out

The designers whose flags became finalists included a Twin Cities-based designer, Brandon Hundt, who has been selling t-shirts with his design since 2015; Sarah Agaton Howes, an Ojibwe artist; John Muller, a Mankato native now living in Texas; the father-and-son team of Pete Pitman and Todd Pitman; and Andrew Prekker, a resident of rural Minnesota. When interviewed, they expressed

enthusiasm for the prospect of their designs being modified by the commission. “A really important part of working in community is being willing to have that back and forth”, noted Howes. Hundt thought it would be useful to “test how the flag would work”.⁶⁸ Prekker was drawn to the Minnesota flag question through social media even before the redesign was announced, and was designing new flags “just for fun” until the opportunity to submit his ideas arose.⁶⁹

Criticism from the Public and Media

Shortly after the meeting, the finalists were posted to the SERC website for public viewing and comment. Judgment was also offered by the media. Newspaper columnist Joe Soucheray noted the presence of a star on each finalist, as well as the dominance of the colors blue, white, and green. “The fear of the submissions [not] being meaningful is palpable”, he wrote, observing that “stars are seen in every state” while the designs lack Minnesota-specific imagery. For this fault, he blamed the guidelines which prohibited symbols representing single communities: “When you prescribe meaninglessness, that’s what you get”.⁷⁰ Sam Fleming of the University of Minnesota called the finalists “mid”, youthful slang for “average or poor quality”.⁷¹

Newspaper readers weighed in, sometimes opposing the idea of a new flag, or echoing Soucheray’s and Fleming’s critiques. Others applauded the finalists, such as Bloomington resident Heidi Wortel, who, “Having never seen a loon, [was] thrilled they have chosen to focus on the North Star. It is our motto, after all.”⁷²

Many of the public comments expressed concern that the flag would not have a loon. Chair Luis Fitch responded that, “The loon is beautiful, I can see why”, but reiterated that the commission wanted the flag to include symbols that represent the entire state.⁷³ The loon, according to the commissioners, as the official state bird was more appropriate for a seal, which is an official government symbol, rather than a popular symbol.⁷⁴

The designer of one of the seal finalists noted that his submission “could be a last hope” for those wishing that the bird appear somewhere. Ross Bruggink, a graphic designer, observed the totemic nature of animal symbolism: “People in general really like when there’s an animal or some sort of mascot to represent what they believe in or who they are”. Bruggink also designed one of the flag finalists, and Brandon Hundt also had a finalist in both categories.⁷⁵

While the comments remained open throughout the selection process, the commissioners met on November 28 to review feedback to date. Chair Luis Fitch presented a summary of the most common themes in the submitted designs, which could be used as the commission considered possible changes to the finalists.⁷⁶ The commission agreed that all submissions were drafts, subject to change by the commission before adoption.⁷⁷

Choosing a Seal and Flag

The December 5 meeting was devoted to review of public opinion; a summary was presented of approximately 15,000 comments on flag finalists and 6,000 related to seal finalists. In addition, 28 individuals spoke to the commission.⁷⁸ Fitch presented a slide show that discussed the finalists for flag and seal, and offered a variety of changes that could be made to each. A point observed in the previous meeting was that a star was the most common design element on submissions—found on 1,785 of them, compared to only 291 designs with a loon.⁷⁹ All six flag finalists included a star. Fitch led an extensive discussion on the many different renderings of a star that were available to the commission as it chose designs.⁸⁰

A Seal is Adopted

To wrap up the discussion, the commission unanimously adopted submission S224, designed by Ross Bruggink, as the seal of Minnesota, “subject to further design modifications”. The step was taken because, according to commissioner Aaron Wittnebel, “We’re ready today to eliminate the other four”. Questions about whether to retain the French motto and the state’s date of founding were considered to be on the table for future deliberation.⁸¹ Bruggink, feeling “very honored”, offered to present variations on his submission at the next meeting.⁸²

December 12 saw the commission make changes to the seal that had been adopted the previous week. In the intervening days, Bruggink had prepared mockups of a number of possible variations of the seal design he submitted. Commissioners suggested incorporating various design elements from the 12 different mockups. In the end, it was decided that the eye of the loon was made to be red, an aesthetic choice. The date 1858 was removed, in deference to the fact that Minnesota has been occupied for thousands of years before statehood. Much debate ensued over the inclusion of the motto “*L’Etoile du Nord*”, and whether it would be better rendered in another language than French. In the end, the commission decided that it lacked the statutory authority to change the state motto. Instead, the commission opted to include the words “*Mni Sóta Makoce*”—a Dakota phrase meaning “land of the sky-tinted water” or “land where the waters reflect the skies”—the source of the state’s name. With those changes, the seal was finalized (fig. 19).⁸³

On December 19, the commission noticed an error in the seal it had adopted, and revised the description to include 98 yellow bars (instead of 97) around the outer rim.

The official report of the commission notes that the seal includes:

- an outer circle with 98 bars in gold, representing the state’s 11 federally recognized Native American tribes and 87 counties

- The inscription “The Great Seal of the State of Minnesota” in Georgia font, enclosed by decorative blue dots, called roundels
- strands of wild rice, the official state grain
- the common loon with a red eye
- a four-pointed star in white representing “L’Etoile du Nord”
- the phrase “Mni Sóta Makoce” in Montserrat-Variable font
- abstract renderings of trees to represent the official state tree, Norway pine; and
- a stylized body of water.⁸⁴



Figure 19. The seal of Minnesota, as adopted by the State Emblems Redesign Commission. Source: <arc.stimg.co/startribunemedia/AA3PF0R6VNZWP475BA2I7GYLX4.jpg?fit=crop&crop=faces&w=550&&auto=format>.

The Final Six Flags Get More Attention

Over the weekend of December 9 and 10, mockups of the six flag finalists went on display in the Mall of America in the Twin Cities suburb of Bloomington (fig. 20). A sign urged visitors, “Look up, Minnesotans!” to view the flag display. As with online comments, reactions from mall-goers varied from “These actually have a little more personality to them” to “I liked the old one, you know?”⁸⁵ The flags were also on display at the Becker County Museum in northwest Minnesota from December 13–17.⁸⁶ As the certainty of a new flag became more apparent, sales of the 1957/1983 design spiked, at least in Lee Herold’s Rochester flag store (a phenomenon also seen when Mississippi changed its flag).⁸⁷



Figure 20. The six finalist designs on display at the Mall of America. Source: <mprnews.org/story/2023/12/10/and-then-there-were-six-flag-finalists-on-display-at-moa>.

Narrowing and Expanding the Options

On December 12, the commission then heard from the designers of each of the six finalists for the flag; the designers each had four minutes to explain their designs, and then answered questions from commissioners. Following that, each commissioner was presented with six stickers. Each commissioner placed stickers on mockups of the flag finalists. A commissioner could place all six stickers on one design, or distribute them among several. The final tally showed that designs F1953, F2100, and F944 had the most stickers, so the commission decided to focus on those three choices, while retaining the option to incorporate elements from the other three finalists into future designs (fig. 21).⁸⁸



Figure 21. The top three finalists (left to right): F1953, F2100, and F944.

The December 15 meeting gave the commission the opportunity to review dozens of variations on the three flag finalists chosen previously. Local designers Tyler Michaletz and Jenae Michaletz were appointed by the commission to prepare modifications to the designs as submitted, so that the commission could consider a wide range of possible choices. Working with input from NAVA members Ted Kaye and Brian Cham, the Michaletzes delivered a total of 85 designs in just three days (fig. 22).⁸⁹

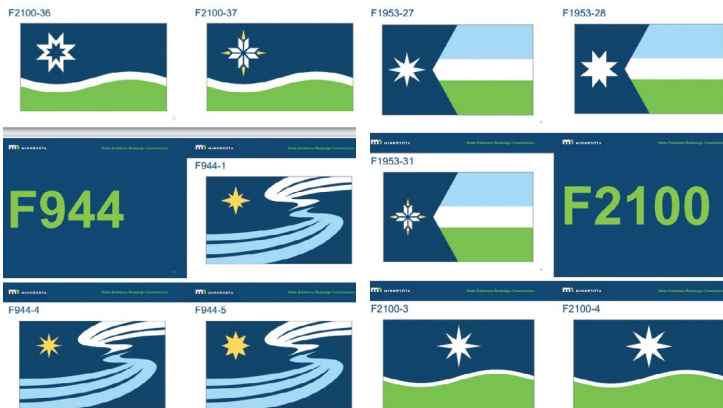


Figure 22. Examples of variations on the finalists, as prepared by Tyler Michaletz and Jenae Michaletz. Source: <mnhs.org/serc>.

A Final Choice Requiring Revision

After a presentation on the design options, the commission voted to narrow the choices to two. Another vote eliminated the second flag, leaving F1953, designed by Andrew Prekker, as the choice of the commission, with further revisions to the design possible.⁹⁰ The Prekker design has an irregular pentagon at the hoist in navy blue; the shape, when the hoist is on the left, is an abstract depiction of a map of Minnesota. On the pentagon is an eight-pointed white star. The fly consists of three stripes, white on top, with green and light blue below. After the December 15 meeting, the commission posted on its website the variation that the commission adopted as a template for future work. It had an eight-pointed star rendered in a pattern familiar from quilts, and the stripes in the order of light blue, white, and green (fig. 23).

A viral social media post incorrectly labeled this



Figure 23. The variation on Prekker's design that was posted on the SERC website on December 15. Source: <mnhs.org/serc>.

variation as the new flag and compared it to the flag of Puntland, a state of Somalia (fig. 24). U.S. Representative Ilhan Omar, a Somali-born citizen who represents Minnesota's 5th congressional district, has ancestors from Puntland. The Minnesota Historical Society quickly debunked the connection between Prekker's design and Puntland. "The designer... from Luverne, Minnesota, cited many symbols and references of Minnesota as his design inspiration", a spokesperson said.⁹¹

On December 19 the commission moved on to discuss revisions to the flag finalist, reviewing further work by the Michaletzes, who offered 22 variations on Prekker's submission.⁹² Of special concern was the star in the hoist. The original design had an eight-pointed star that resembled a cross and had four large points with four smaller points at their corners. The commission preferred a star with evenly spaced and shaped points. Another concern was the stripes in the fly. A unicolored field was preferred, on the grounds that the green was said to represent nature and agriculture, which are not unique to Minnesota; the sky-blue color, however, reflects the meaning of the state's name in the Dakota language.⁹³ The resulting design also benefited from symmetry—it could not be flown upside-down.

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Minnesota Has a New Flag

The new flag of Minnesota, as approved by an 11–1 vote, includes the designer's abstract representation of the shape of Minnesota in the hoist, with an eight-pointed star rotated so that two points align vertically with the edge, and a field of sky blue (fig. 25).⁹⁴ The alignment of the star is meant to suggest that it is "facing due north".⁹⁵ The orientation of the star, along with it having eight points, a relative rarity among flags, led the Michaletzes to suggest it might become known as the "Minnesota Star", which would be reinforced by its resemblance to an



Figure 25. Graphic image of new Minnesota flag. Source: <mnhs.org/serc>.



Figure 24. An inaccurate viral post comparing a rejected flag variation to the flag of Puntland. Source: <twitter.com/EndWokeness>.

eight-pointed star that is a prominent feature on the floor of the rotunda in the State Capitol (fig. 26). Fitch noted that “It still says Minnesota in two ways—in the shape and in the star”.⁹⁶

The official report ascribes these meanings to the design elements:

- the star represents the North Star, or ‘L’*étoile du Nord*, Minnesota’s state motto
- dark blue is for the “night sky, where Minnesotans from all cultures look and imagine a larger universe, while working to create a better North Star State”; the shape is a rough map of the state
- the “bright blue” field represents water
- the eight points are for “many cultures” and also recall “quilting by both Indigenous people and some new immigrants”; as well, it calls to mind the State Capitol’s rotunda star.⁹⁷

The new flag was announced to the public the same day, with Secretary of State Steve Simon praising it because it “captures the imagination while standing apart from all other state flags”.⁹⁸

Commission chair Fitch exulted that “the next generation will be raised with a new flag”.⁹⁹ Vice-chair Gaul opined that “we have vaulted from an F to an A-plus”.¹⁰⁰



Figure 26. The new flag, adopted by the commission on December 19. Source: <mpnews.org/story/2023/12/19/new-minnesota-flag-final-design>.

The remaining work of the commission was to settle bureaucratic matters related to the records of its work, and to review, modify, and approve a



Figure 27. The rotunda of the Minnesota State Capitol. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

final report on the new flag and seal for transmission to the governor and legislature. This was done on December 27; the report was issued on January 1, 2024.¹⁰¹

On December 29, a minority report was issued by the two Republican legislators on the commission, Steve Drazkowski and Bjorn Olson, along with Aaron Wittnebel, the commissioner who represented the Ojibwe community. They noted “defects in the process and outcome of the commission’s work”, such as a brief timeframe for

decision-making, what they perceived as inadequate public outreach, and alleged insufficient attentiveness to public opinion. They also observed a number of design details in the seal that they felt were in contravention of the enabling legislation.¹⁰² (Despite his misgivings, Wittnebel later published a “defense of the new flag and seal”).¹⁰³

Resistance Fails to Stop the New Flag

The new design, by statute, was to become the state’s flag on May 11, 2024. The only way to stop that from happening was for the state legislature to pass a law rescinding the SERC’s authority. In the early days of the 2024 legislative session, non-voting commission members Bjorn Olson and Steve Drazkowski, with other colleagues, introduced bills that would require a referendum to be held on the new flag, or an affirmative vote of the legislature. None has been reported out of committee.¹⁰⁴

Public opinion has been divided on the new flag. A poll conducted in late January found that 49% of Minnesotans preferred to keep the old flag, while 23% preferred the new flag and 21% wished to re-do the design process.¹⁰⁵ A similar survey in March showed that opinions had not changed much, with 52% favoring the old flag, 24% wanting to move forward with the new flag, 16% preferring a different design, and 6% with no opinion.¹⁰⁶

At sunrise on May 11, Statehood Day, soldiers from the Minnesota National Guard retired the old state flags that had been flying over the State Capitol complex. The flags which flew over the capitol itself and in the Court of Honor were sent to the Minnesota Historical Society for preservation.¹⁰⁷ New flags were raised in their place by state administrative workers (fig. 28).¹⁰⁸ The flag also went on display in locations inside the capitol (fig. 29).



Figure 28. The new Minnesota flag is raised on the state capitol by Charlie Krueger, grounds supervisor for facilities management. Source: <mpnews.org/story/2024/05/11/new-minnesota-state-flag-debuts-state-capitol>.

The same day, a reception was held at the Minnesota State Capitol in honor of the 166th anniversary of Minnesota statehood; among the events was the official unveiling of the new state seal (fig. 30).

Secretary of State Steve Simon bestowed upon Luis Fitch, Anita Gaul, Ross Bruggink, and Andrew Prekker the Medallion Award of the National Association of Secretaries of State. The Medallion Award honors “outstanding service and dedication to furthering the mission of NASS within the state”.¹⁰⁹

In a display of vexillological diligence, contributors to Wikipedia were prepared with a new image, and the “Flag of Minnesota” page was updated precisely at 12:01 a.m. on May 11!

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Figure 29. The U.S. flag and the new Minnesota flag on display inside the state capitol. Source: <twitter.com/RepFreiberg/status/1789484237520871673/photo/3>.

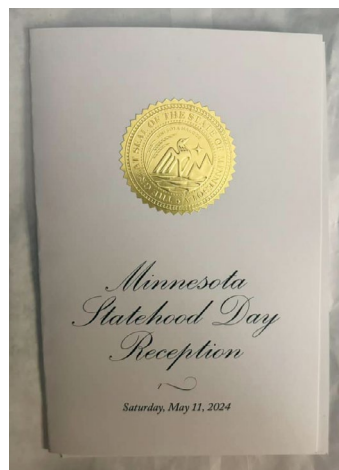


Figure 30. Program from the Minnesota State Day Reception on May 11, showing the seal in golden foil. Source: <facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10113014760886659&set=p.10113014760886659&type=3>.

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