



Department of the Secretary of State

Maine State Archives

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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

LD 115, “An Act to Restore the Former State of Maine Flag”

*Testimony Provided by Shenna Bellows, Secretary of State
February 3, 2021*

Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack and Members of the Committee:

The Secretary of State does not have a formal position on LD 115 but seeks to provide useful information from the Maine State Archives that may assist the committee in its deliberations on this important legislation.

Maine’s state flag has undergone changes over the 200 years of our statehood. Perhaps most interestingly, our state did not designate an official flag until 1901. Maine had flags of course, designed by state and local militias for their individual use, some of which can be seen in the Hall of Flags at the State House today.

According to a 1973 supplementary pamphlet for use with the Maine Revised Statutes:

“For many years the State of Maine had no flag established under the authority of law. At one time the “Stars and Stripes” with the seal and arms of the state in the center of the union was most in use. During the Civil War a blue silk flag, conforming in size and trimmings to the United States regulation colors, blazoned with the arms of the State in the center of its field, was carried by Maine troops.”

In 1901, the House of Representatives referred “An Act to Establish the State Flag” to the Military Affairs Committee. The original bill specified that:

“The State Flag is hereby declared to be blue, charged with the Arms of the State in the colors and as described in the Resolves of the State of Maine from 1820 to 1828, Volume I, Chapter IV. Resolve for providing a Seal, June 9th, 1820, Description of the Device, & c., of the Seal and Arms of the State of Maine.”

A record of the Committee deliberations or of any floor debates is not found. Instead, our records in Maine State Archives reveal that the Committee report delivered Representative Frederick Walls of Vinalhaven with a recommendation of ought to pass was identical in language to that presented by Rep. Paulhus today.

For an unknown reason, that design only lasted 8 years, before legislation changed the flag to its current design in February of 1909. Unfortunately, any record of the debate around the change in flag design does not survive, so we cannot provide any reasoning behind it.

Interestingly, our neighbor state of New Hampshire established their first state flag in 1909, the same year as Maine's redesign, and uses a similar design with a blue background and state seal in the center. Massachusetts's flag uses their state crest (instead of a seal) and was adopted in 1908, around the same time. Vermont adopted their flag in 1923, Connecticut in 1897, and Rhode Island in 1897. The majority of New England state flags are similar – a blue background with a state seal or crest in the center.

The Seal of the State of Maine, which now graces the blue shield of our current state flag, was designed by a joint committee during the beginning of our statehood. A copy of their report resides in the Maine State Archives, and while a record of their deliberations is missing, we do have the product. The seal of the state originally was meant as the official mark, the “seal” to represent Maine on official documents. Often affixed to state records with wax, the state seal elevated a document and the action it represented with great solemnity.

Symbolically today, flags remind us of our unity as one people engaged in a common cause, and of surviving difficult struggles together. The design of the flag is made meaningful by the people who embrace it. The lack of debate in the record means we do not know why the flag was changed in 1909, which leaves us only to speculate. But it also frees us to make our own choice for what would be a best and most appropriate flag for the state today. As you deliberate LD 115, we believe the history of where we had come from on the matter may prove useful to you. I have enclosed copies of the original bills from 1901 and 1909 as well as the 1973 pamphlet with this testimony. These are the types of historical documents that you can find in the Maine State Archives. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.