

American Maritime Flags of the 19th Century

Ships and coastal installations (both governmental and private) require flags that can be identified from great distances. Recognition was achieved during the nineteenth century by providing these vessels and facilities with flags that were especially large. Exhibited here are several American flags related to such vessels or facilities from the period 1818 to 1893. They are all large bunting flags.

Generally speaking, a “large” flag is one that is too unwieldy to be carried by one person if the flag is attached to a staff meant to be carried by single individual. Until 1854 in the British Army, and until 1895 in the American Army, military colors carried by units on foot were made of silk and measured no more than 6 feet on the staff by 6 feet 6 inches on the fly. Those dimensions—essentially a flag with an area encompassing slightly more than four square yards of cloth—were deemed the maximum size for transport by an individual on a staff. Most of the flags in this exhibit exceed those parameters.

Due to their size, large flags such as these are difficult to display and are seldom sought by collectors. Museums often relegate them to perpetual storage. This exhibit is unusual, therefore, in that it displays so many of these flags in one place.

This exhibit is sponsored by the Veninga-Zaricor family and Good Earth® Teas, Santa Cruz, CA; The Flag Center, Presidio of San Francisco, CA; and the Star-Spangled Banner Flag House, Baltimore, MD.

U.S. Revenue Cutter Service Ensign

Date: 1870–1880

Media: Wool bunting field and canton with cotton appliquéd stars and eagle, all hand sewn.

Size: 80" on the hoist by 144" on the fly (6.75' by 12')

Comment: On March 2nd 1799, the United States Congress authorized the U.S. Treasury Department to acquire ships for the purpose of patrolling the U.S. coastline in an effort to enforce its tariffs and prevent smuggling. A forerunner of the current U.S. Coast Guard, The United States Revenue Cutter Service was thus established.

To distinguish the ships owned by the Treasury Department from those under construction for the revitalized Navy Department, the Treasury Department, on August 1, 1799, created a distinctive flag for the ships under its control: “The ensign...directed by the President under the act of 2d of March, 1799, consists of sixteen perpendicular stripes, alternate red and white; the union of the ensign bearing the arms of the United States in dark blue on a white field.”

At the time of this flag’s creation, sixteen states formed the Union, Tennessee having been admitted in 1798. In 1915, the flag was modified by the addition of the Coast Guard insignia on its stripes for service as the ensign of the newly formed agency. The old design, however, continues in use as the flag designating U.S. Customs at ports of entry.

Provenance: Acquired in 2002 by the Zaricor Flag Collection from the Mastai Collection through auction at Sotheby’s of New York, New York. (ZFC0620)

U.S. Revenue Cutter Ensign

Date: about 1890–1895

Media: Wool bunting field and canton with cotton stars and arms, machine sewn.

Size: 70.5" on the hoist by 119" on the fly (6' by 10')

Comment: Because the ensign of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service and the U.S. Customs Service has not been substantially changed in its design for 205 years, dating the flags of these agencies is usually effected by studying subtle differences in construction techniques. This flag is machine sewn (thus postdating 1850). More importantly, its stars are appliquéd by a zigzag machine stitching technique. The zigzag attachment was invented near the end of the American Civil War, but its use in flag production is doubtful before 1893.

The configuration of the eagle in the U.S. coat-of-arms also is a datable device for Revenue Cutter Service flags. Early illustrations of Revenue Cutter Service flags appeared in the 1868 and 1882 versions of the Navy's *Flags of Maritime Nations* and depict the coat-of-arms with down-turned wings. The upraised wing configuration of the U.S. coat-of-arms on the Revenue Cutter Service flag does not appear until the 1899 edition of that manual. It does appear in that configuration, however, in the 1882 edition's depiction of the President's flag, which makes it difficult for historians and vexillologists to date the flag with precision.

Provenance: Acquired in 2002 by the Zaricor Flag Collection from the Mastai Collection through auction at Sotheby's of New York, New York. (ZFC0671)

20-Star United States Flag

Date: 1818 (Mississippi admitted to statehood on December 10, 1817)

Media: Wool bunting field and canton with cotton stars, all hand sewn.

Size: 58" on the hoist by 106" on the fly (5' by 9')

Comment: On the 4th of April 1818, the United States Congress altered for the third time the design of the national flag of the United States. Henceforth, its field would consist of only thirteen alternating red and white stripes. The number of stars in the blue canton, however, would be twenty, with new states being recognized in the canton by the addition of a star on the 4th of July after the state's admission.

Although a specific "grand luminary" star design had been proposed in the course of the legislation, no star pattern was delineated in the bill's final form. On May 18th, 1818, The U.S. Navy commissioners proposed that the Navy ensigns bear the twenty stars then forming the Union in four staggered horizontal rows of five stars each. However, President James Monroe disliked that pattern, and on September 18th, the Navy ordered that all of the flags should have their stars arranged in four horizontal rows of five stars each, all five in vertical alignments with the top row.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection in 2002 from the Mastai Collection through auction at Sotheby's of New York, New York. (ZFC0625)

26-Star United States Flag, Shooting Star Arrangement

Date: 1837–1845 (Michigan was admitted to statehood on January 26, 1837)

Media: Wool bunting field and canton, cotton stars, all hand sewn.

Size: 113" on the hoist by 210" on the fly (9.5' by 17')

Comment: This flag displays an unusual, and perhaps unique, star arrangement for its 26 stars. At first the canton bears what appears to be a scattered star arrangement but, upon closer examination, a five-pointed star in the forward section of the canton is revealed, trailing smaller stars in its wake. Collector, Boleslaw Mastai called this “shooting star” design a “comet”: and dubbed the flag the “Gildersleeve Comet Flag.”

The “Gildersleeve” in Mastai’s title arose from the inked inscription “S. Gildersleeve” that appears on the heading of the flag. Further research has suggested that this “S. Gildersleeve” marking may represent the name Sylvester Gildersleeve, the founder of a shipbuilding yard in Portland, Connecticut on the Long Island Sound. Gildersleeve founded this yard in 1821 and greatly expanded it in 1828. In 1836, Sylvester Gildersleeve entered into business with three other entrepreneurs from Middletown, Connecticut to form a packet line for transporting goods with seven ships eventually plying the trade between New York City and Galveston, Texas. The “S. Gildersleeve” marking on the heading of this flag may indicate a flag made for one of those ships, or perhaps the Portland shipyard where they were made.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection in 2002 from the Mastai Collection through auction at Sotheby’s of New York, New York. (ZFC0620)

26-Star United States Flag, Grand Luminary Star Arrangement

Date: 1837–1845 (Michigan was admitted to statehood on January 26, 1837)

Media: Wool bunting field and canton, cotton stars, all hand sewn.

Size: 170" on the hoist by 234" on the fly (14' by 19.5')

Comment: This huge bunting flag displays its 26 stars in the form of a “grand luminary”, that is to say, the smaller stars representing the various states form a large single five-pointed star representing the United States as a whole. The arrangement is symbolic of the nation’s official motto, *E Pluribus Unum*, which translates from Latin as, “Out of Many, One.”

The “grand luminary” star arrangement was widely touted by Captain Samuel G. Reid, who had commanded the privateer General Armstrong during the War of 1812. Although Reid was the most vociferous proponent of the “grand luminary” star pattern, particularly around the period of the Flag Act of 1818, Reid was not the originator of the design. Indeed, fourteen and sixteen star flags survive with the same arrangement dating to the 1790s. The “grand luminary” star pattern would reappear throughout the nineteenth century, with the latest examples bearing 38 stars (1877–1889).

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection in 2002 from the Mastai Collection through auction at Sotheby’s of New York, New York. (ZFC0606)

30-Star United States Flag

Date: 1848–1850+ (Wisconsin was admitted to statehood on May 29, 1848)

Media: Wool bunting field and canton with cotton stars, all hand sewn.

Size: 108" on the hoist by 202" on the fly (8' by 17')

Comment: The 30-star United States flag came into official existence on July 4th, 1848, when, in accordance with the Flag Act of 1818, Wisconsin's admission to the Union as its thirtieth state was officially recognized in the country's flag. The 30-star U.S. flag, however, would have a relatively short official existence. As a consequence of the discovery of gold in California, a rush of emigrants ventured to that territory between 1848 and 1850. So many settled in California that the territory was soon able to apply for and attain statehood, which occurred on September 9th, 1850. Accordingly the U.S. flag grew to 31 stars effective July 4th, 1851.

The adoption of the 31-star U.S. flag did not force the obsolescence of the 30-star flag, as many who had acquired the 30-star saw little need to acquire another. Indeed, an English observer looking out over New York Harbor in 1857 commented: "The majority of the ships had the stars arranged in five horizontal rows of six stars each, making thirty stars in all—thirty-one being the proper number on the date." For ship owners, frugality took precedence over propriety.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection in 2002 from the Mastai Collection through auction at Sotheby's of New York, New York. (ZFC0608)

31-Star United States Flag

Date: 1851–1857 (California was admitted to statehood on September 9, 1850)

Media: Wool bunting field and canton with cotton stars, all hand sewn.

Size: 113" on the hoist by 222" on the fly. (9.5' by 18.5')

Comment: The storm flag does not appear in military post regulations until 1857. At that time, the size was specified at 10" hoist by 20" fly.

By 1854 the U.S. Navy provided six sizes of ensigns for the U.S. fleet. Five of these were large ensigns for regular usage. Their sizes (hoist to fly) were: 18.75" by 36"; 16.75" by 32"; 14.5" by 28"; 13" by 25"; and 11.5" by 22". Like the Army, the Navy also provided a "Storm Ensign". It measured 8.25" by 16". As in the Army flags, in all of these Navy flags, the canton was to extend through the seventh stripe from the top. While the canton's distance on the fly for Army flags was to be one-third of that dimension, on Navy flags the canton was to extend four-tenths of that distance. On this particular flag, the canton's distance on the fly measures slightly more than one-half the whole dimension of the fly. This would suggest that the flag, while close to the storm flag dimensions for both services is not a military flag. The ten metal rings along its heading, however, clearly indicate that it was to be flown from a halyard on a pole.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection in 1995 from H. Madaus of Cody, Wyoming. (ZFC0233)

33-Star United States Flag

Date: 1859–1861 (Oregon was admitted to statehood on February 14, 1859)

Media: Wool bunting field and canton with white cotton stars, all hand sewn.

Size: 102" on the hoist by 155" on the fly (8.5' by 13')

Comment: Oregon's entry into the Union on February 14th, 1859 prompted a rapid obsolescence of the 32-star flag adopted the year before to honor Minnesota's statehood. On July 4th, 1859, the 33-star flag became official. Although the imaginative star arrangement of this flag is similar to the "diamond" pattern that the U.S. Army began to experiment with in 1845, the flag's size in no way conforms to the size requirements for either the Army garrison flag (20" by 36") or the newly adopted Army storm flag (10" by 20"). It is likely, therefore, that this flag belonged to one of the many merchant ships flying under the U.S. colors.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection in 1996 through auction at Butterfield & Butterfield of San Francisco, CA. (ZFC1403)

34-Star United States Flag

Date: 1861-1863 (Kansas was admitted to statehood on January 29, 1861)

Media: Wool-cotton blend field, wool bunting canton with cotton stars, all machine sewn.

Size: 90" on the hoist by 134" on the fly (7.5' by 11.2')

Comment: The 34-star United States flag technically became official on July 4th, 1861. However, as a Northern response to the secession crisis that led to the firing on Fort Sumter in April of 1861, many 34-star flags were made soon after Kansas' admission to the Union on January 29th, 1861. Written on the heading of this flag is the inked inscription "Charles H. Collins/ No. 4 (or 9) Hillhouse Ave." followed by a litany of major and minor battles from the firing on Fort Sumter on April 12th, 1861 to the battle of Seven Pines on May 31st/June 1st, 1862. Efforts to identify Charles H. Collins have proved elusive. Several soldiers bore that name during the War. However, given the address, it is more likely that Collins may have been a student at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, who decorated this flag with the names of the engagements as the news traveled north. Why he stopped the inscriptions in 1862 is not known.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection in 2002 from the Mastai Collection through auction at Sotheby's of New York, New York. (ZFC0612)

13-Star United States Flag

Date: (1777–1795 officially); actual usage, 1860–1876

Media: Wool bunting field and canton with cotton stars, all machine sewn.

Size: 57" on the hoist by 92" on the fly (5' by 8')

Comment: Although technically official between June 1777 and May 1795, in reality the 13-star United States flag has seen continual service in the United States from 1777 to the present. The maker of this mid-century 13-star flag arranged ten stars in a circle around three others set in a triangle. If the arrangement had any special significance, it has been lost to time. The stripes and the canton of this flag are machine sewn, dating the flag to no earlier than 1850–1860, during which decade the sales of the treadle powered sewing machine proliferated. This flag may have been made for the 1876 centennial.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection in 2003 through auction at Sotheby's of New York, New York. (ZFC0605)

36-Star United States Flag, Double Ring Star Pattern

Date: 1865–1867 (Nevada was admitted to statehood on October 31, 1864)

Media: Wool bunting field and canton with cotton stars, all hand sewn.

Size: 112" on the hoist by 219" on the fly (9.5' by 18.3')

Comment: While the arranging of the stars in the United States flag in a ring or a circle around a center star dates possibly to as early as the later years of the Revolution, and definitely to the 1790s, the concept of multiple concentric rings surrounding a center star first appears during the War with Mexico (1846–1848). The concept became more popular in the Middle Atlantic states of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland during the Civil War, where the center star and inner ring was to represent the original thirteen states, and the outer ring more recent additions to the Union, all equal and united in perpetuity. Some of the manufacturers of these “concentric ring” star patterns are well known, including Horstmann Brothers & Co. of Philadelphia, Evans & Hassall of Philadelphia, and Jabez Loane of Baltimore. These makers produced flags with all the stars equal in size. Another maker (possibly William Yard), thought to have been employed in New Jersey, may have made similar flags but with the central star larger than those in the surrounding rings. 34 and 38 star variations of this star pattern are known to survive. This flag also bears the name “Spargo” inked onto its heading, possibly a reference to flag historian John Spargo. Unfortunately confirmation is lacking.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection in 2002 from the Mastai Collection through auction at Sotheby’s, New York, New York. (ZFC0647)