



Daily Mail WV

West Virginia flag turns 90

- *Ernest E. Blevins*
- *March 7, 2019*

Ninety years ago today, the West Virginia Legislature adopted the familiar Montani Semper Liberi flag we know today as the official state flag. But getting to that official flag took more than 65 years from statehood in 1863.

The first flags associated with West Virginia appeared with the regiments from the new state fighting in the Civil War. On Jan. 25, 1864, the state Legislature passed Joint Resolution No. 5 authorizing “a suitable flag” for the 7th West Virginia regiment, listing the battles it participated in — starting with Romney in 1861. This appears to be the first flag authorized by the new state.

Other regiments later received similar flags through the same process. The flags were designed with a state coat of arms on one side, and the United States seal, including an eagle holding olive branches and arrows, on the other. The name of the regiment appeared on a blue field.

The state seal, or coat of arms, was designed by Joseph H. Diss Debar of Doddridge County. The design incorporated a boulder with the date West Virginia joined the Union, flanked by a farmer with an ax and plow (depicting agriculture) and a miner with a pickaxe (depicting industry).

The words “State of West Virginia” and the state motto are incorporated into the seal and coat of arms. By Joint Resolution No. 20 on Sept. 26, 1863, the Legislature adopted Debar’s state seal and the state motto — Montani Semper Liberi — (Mountaineers are always free).

But Debar’s coat of arms lacked official colors. To remedy confusion, the Legislature in 1905 adopted colors painted by Miss Helen Shrewsbury of Charleston as the official seal colors.

The Mountain Laurel, or “big laurel” (Rhododendron maximum), was selected by a vote of school children and adopted by the Legislature as the state flower in 1903.

Meanwhile, in April 1904, the United States commemorated the 100th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase with an exposition in St. Louis. The West Virginia commission to that expo recognized the need to identify the West Virginia exhibit and elected to “adopt and use a state flag at the West Virginia building on the exposition grounds.”

The commission designed the flag with a “sprig of mountain laurel upon an immaculate white field with a pale blue border” on the front and a state seal on the back.

Recognizing there was as yet no official state flag, the West Virginia Legislature on Feb. 4, 1905 adopted the flag designed for the Louisiana Purchase exhibition. That was described as the “proportion of nine to thirteen, [the same as the U.S. flag] of which West Virginia forms a part; the field thereof shall be pure white, upon the center of which shall be a sprig of the rhododendron maximum or “Big laurel,” having flowers and leaves; and on the reverse side shall be the state coat-of-arms and the motto; the field of pure white shall be bordered by a band or strip of blue, and this in turn shall be bordered by a strip of fringe of carmine red.”

Over the next two years, the 1905 flag was found to be “wholly impracticable” with letters that read toward the staff, bleeding through the white background and “destroying the distinctive features” of the flag.

So in February 1907, preparing for the Jamestown Exposition, House Joint Resolution No. 2 decided a seal and motto should be moved to the obverse side and the rhododendron blossoms and leaves moved to the reverse side. The fringe was changed to gold.

The Legislature revisited the state flag in 1929 as the 1907 flag designed was cited as “impractical of manufacture, making the cost of purchase thereof prohibitive to the schools of the state ...”

To remedy the problem, the new flag remained white, with blue surrounding the West Virginia coat of arms with the scrolled lettering of “State of West Virginia” and “Montani Semper Liberi.” The rhododendron blossoms and leaves were added to surround the coat of arms.

On March 7, 1929, the Legislature adopted Senate Resolution No. 18 recognizing that flag as the official state flag.

In 2001, the North American Vexillological Association conducted a survey of best flags based on design from the 50 United States, Canada and other nations. The West Virginia state flag ranked 51 out of 72 flags.

On Feb. 8, 1977, the Secretary of State’s office adopted a pledge for the West Virginia state flag:

“I pledge allegiance to the flag of West Virginia, which serves as a constant reminder that ‘Mountaineers Are Always Free,’ which stands as a symbol of her majestic mountains, fertile forests, rich veins of coal, and the pride of her people.”

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