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Top photo: Second Regiment Infantry, First Brigade, Fourth Division, obverse panel, Maine Historical Society; Bottom photo: Fourth Regiment Infantry, First Brigade, Fourth Division, panel, University of Maine.

# TECHNOLOGY TO THE RESCUE! MAINE'S FIRST STATE COLORS

BY DAVID MARTUCCI

*The State of Maine's 1822 issue of 100 stands of double sided Militia colors is possibly the earliest example of copper engraved four-color printed flags. These flags were produced in Boston utilizing the talents of a famous painter/designer, John Ritto Penniman and several local craftsmen and craftswomen. The design is unique and finely detailed and is an excellent example of the fine printing arts. Dave Martucci, a vexillologist, currently serves as president of the North American Vexillological Association and Secretary/Treasurer of the New England Vexillological Association. He edits NAVA NEWS and the NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF VEXILLOLOGY and has published numerous articles in the vexillological press. Among other things, he is an antique flag appraiser and an expert on the U.S. Flag. He was the fact-checker for the historic U.S. Stamps released by the Postal Service on June 14, 2000 and was interviewed for a History Channel film on the U.S. Flag. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Eighteenth International Congress of Vexillology, in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1999 and subsequently published in the proceedings of that meeting.*

**M**AINE became a State on March 15, 1820, as a part of the Missouri Compromise, thereby severing its political and territorial association with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Besides the task of writing a constitution for the new state, Maine's leaders also had to negotiate settlement terms with the leaders of the Commonwealth, the territorial settlement being embodied in the "secret provisions" of Maine's Constitution.<sup>1</sup> Other settlement issues to be negotiated included the return to Massachusetts of the flags, drums, fifes, bugles, and other ceremonial items that had been issued to the Militia in Maine. Article VII of the new Constitution provided for the State's Militia, and under this section the legislature passed some laws in 1821 that, among other things, authorized the Quarter Master General to procure the necessary replacement items for military use.

For military purposes, Maine was divided into a number of districts or divisions, as it had been under Massachusetts administration. Each



Second Regiment Infantry, First Brigade, Fourth Division, obverse full view, Maine Historical Society.

division contained two brigades of infantry composed of at least four regiments, which in turn were made up of the companies of militia raised in each of Maine's municipalities. Since June 1787, the Massachusetts Militia colors were white bearing the State Arms on the obverse.<sup>2</sup> Under Massachusetts administration, each regiment had been issued a flag from the stores kept in Boston. Under the terms of separation, these were returned to Massachusetts. But this was the basic design that Maine copied in 1822. In fact, given Maine's early union with Massachusetts, almost all of Maine's flags were white prior to the American Civil War. It was the familiarity with the blue Federal regimental flags of the soldiers who became legislators after the Civil War that caused Maine to abandon her traditional flag color.

On March 21, 1821, the Maine legislature passed "An Act to Organize, Govern, and Discipline the Militia of this State," which provided, in part that "each regiment of infantry and each battalion of cavalry or artillery shall be furnished with the State colours, and the commanding officers of the regiments and battalions shall be responsible for the safe keeping of the colours, and it shall be the duty of the Quarter Master General to furnish such colours, and to present his account therefor to the Legislature for allowance."<sup>3</sup> Maine's Quarter Master General was caught in a bind by the law: with only a small store of funds at his disposal, he was directed to procure flags for the state's forty-nine regiments of infantry, two regiments of artillery, and one regiment of cav-



Top photo: Unnumbered panel, Maine Historical Society (from Colburn House); bottom photo: panel detail.

ally, along with eight additional battalions of cavalry and seven additional battalions of artillery. In addition to the shortage of funds, several technical decisions immediately presented themselves. What design would he use? How would he apply this design to each of the flags, and in what colors? How would he have the flags assembled and finished? These were problems that would challenge the Quarter Master General's ingenuity.

Adjutant General and Acting Quarter Master General Samuel Cony began by purchasing three-quarters of a yard of silk, costing sixty-nine cents. This, he thought, would serve the purpose of "ascertaining whether the impression of an engraving on silk would answer for the State colours." Apparently the test was satisfactory, because on January 17, 1822, in addition to reporting to the legislature on the strength of the



Top photo: Third Regiment Infantry, Second Brigade, First Division, obverse panel, Maine Historical Society; middle photo: reverse panel; bottom photo: reverse full view.



Second Regiment Infantry, Second Brigade,  
Fifth Division, panel, Maine State Museum.

militia, General Coney reported that the estimated cost of obtaining 100 stands of colors for the infantry regiments would be \$1,000, “provided an engraving is obtained,” and \$1,600 if they were painted. Colors for the Cavalry and Artillery regiments, he thought, would have to be painted, and would cost an additional \$300. Based on Coney’s report, the Maine legislature voted on February 8 to set aside \$3,000 for drums, fifes, and for the “purchase of State Colours from engraved plates on the best terms to be distributed among the Regiments & Battalions of Militia, the most destitute.”

As for a design, Coney did not have to look far. On April 6, 1821, he sent Jonathan McKinney to Westbrook “to get the colour of the Lt. Infantry Company in that town to aid in forming a design for the State Colours.” Earlier on August 16, 1820, the ladies of Westbrook had presented the Light Infantry Company, an elite volunteer corps, with “an elegant Standard,” suitable, Coney, thought to serve as a starting point for the Maine flags.<sup>4</sup>

Coney had a drawing of the design made up and engaged a famous Boston painter, likely the painter of the Westbrook colors, to make a “specimen” of the flag he had in mind. That rendering, along with the thirteen artillery and thirteen cavalry standards, was painted by John Ritto Penniman, an “Original Military Standard, Ornamental Painter and Draftsman” whose studio was located on Market Street in Boston.<sup>5</sup> Penniman had been offering his work to the Maine market for several years and was proclaimed by the *Portland Gazette and Maine Advertiser* to be “the artist who, in paintings of this particular kind, stands unrivaled.” Penniman may have been a student of Gilbert Stuart, and he later worked closely with the firm of William S. and John B. Pendleton, pioneer lithographers in Boston. Boston’s Annin and Smith made the engraved copper plate and printed the panels. William B. Annin and

George Gridler Smith were partners in a successful printing business in Boston from 1820 to 1833, and both men had apprenticed with noted Boston engraver and publisher Abel Bowen. As early as 1815, Annin had made an engraving of a Penniman original, and by the early 1820s Penniman was working regularly with Annin and Smith.<sup>6</sup>

The flag blanks were sewn in Boston by John R. Penniman and Mary Boardman and the panels were sewn on by Penniman and Eliza Fisher. On August 18, 1822, the flags were transported by stage to Portland. The firm of Racklyft and Noyes, on Union Street, lettered the unit designations on each pair of panels for 100 infantry colors.<sup>7</sup> Five years later in 1827 Annin and Smith printed forty-two impressions from “standard plate”—apparently a second printing of the design. On March 21, 1822, General Cony reported that his “system of having them engraved” was a “great improvement and the expense will be short of my calculations.” Cony had estimated the costs for both the printed infantry colors and the painted artillery and cavalry standards to be \$1,300; his expenses for the flags were considerably lower:

Three-quarters yard test silk	\$0.69
Transportation to Westbrook and back	3.50
Drawing paper for design	0.50
For painting 1 Infantry Standard for specimen	10.00
Silk purchases	625.29
Engraved plate	112.50
Printing 214 panels	133.75
Lettering the Unit numbers on 204 panels	15.00
Painting 26 Artillery and Cavalry Standards	286.87
For making the 26 Standards	23.05
For making 102 Flags	25.50
Sewing the printed plates onto 99 flags	29.70
TOTAL	\$1,266.35

These flags may be the earliest examples of copper engraved plate prints on fabric, since art historians have not been able to locate any earlier examples of this type of fine-detail fabric printing. No multi-color prints on silk of this type exist for this time. Cony’s technology was ahead of his time, at least as far as flags were concerned.

Of the original flags, seven of the engraved print copies (representing probably no more than four flags) are known to exist.<sup>8</sup> They include one

of the center panels of the Second Regiment of Infantry, Second Brigade, Fifth Division, now in the Maine State Museum collection; the two-sided flag of the Third Regiment of Infantry, Second Brigade, First Division; the flag of the Second Regiment of Infantry, First Brigade, Fourth Division, still mounted on its original pole with brass finial but too fragile to unroll completely; and a badly deteriorating unnumbered center panel, the last three of which are in the collection of the Maine Historical Society; and a center panel of the flag of the Fourth Regiment of Infantry, First Brigade, Fourth Division, now hanging in the Office of Special Collections, Fogler Library at the University of Maine.<sup>9</sup>

The unnumbered panel in the possession of the Maine Historical Society shows incredible detail, even when compared to the other existing panels, and contains a wider variation in colors, leading this researcher to think it may be the original sample print, made on that “three-quarters yard test silk” bought by the Quartermaster General in 1822.<sup>10</sup> It was found at the Reuben Colburn House in Pittston, Maine, which had been a principal headquarters and drilling field for the Maine Militia prior to and immediately after Statehood. In addition, it is interesting to note that the branch of service does not appear on this panel (except for the final abbreviated letter “y.”), perhaps so that any branch could be inserted by the painter—“Infy.,” for example, as on the existing panels, or “Cavly.” or “Arty.”

Registering the several colors was a very complex and significant problem. The technology had not advanced very far by 1822, making it difficult to hold a number of plates in place for exact registration of the colors. Although the records in the Maine Archives are silent on the subject, examination of the extant colors reveals that the solution was relatively simple.

The coat of arms panels are finely printed in what appears to be four colors: black, red, green and blue. However, close observation (and the Annin and Smith receipt) indicates only a single plate was used in the production of the prints. This is very clear from the flag of the Third Regiment of Infantry, Second Brigade, First Division, now in the possession of the Maine Historical Society.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the best preserved of these flags and the only one more or less completely intact with a printed panel sewn on each side, this flag's arms show some ink migration between the four colors, indicating that each of these colors was printed from the same plate. Ink was applied selectively, probably with narrow thin-bladed knives, to different areas of the metal plate before the prints were struck. The fabric was carefully spread over the plate and



Finial of the Third Regiment Infantry,  
Second Brigade, First Division, Maine  
Historical Society.

a roller was used to ensure good contact and transfer of the ink to the silk.

The flags, which were made separately, had the panels appliqued by hand onto each side and appropriate numerals for each of the regiments hand-painted onto each panel of the arms. The existing intact flag is composed of two complete widths of very thin, shear woven silk, matching the white fabric of the printed panels exactly. The white fabric originally measured about twenty and a quarter inches in width, making the finished width of the flag about forty inches. The finished flag is about fifty two inches in length from edge to edge, with a pole sleeve composed of the field fabric stitched into the header, measuring approximately one and a half inches. All stitching is very fine and small and done by hand. The selvage edge was left on the top and bottom of the flag without any hem, and the fly end was finished with a very narrow hem of approximately one quarter inch.

Not much is known of these flags, except that the flag of the Third Regiment of Infantry, Second Brigade, First Division, according to the *Portland Press Herald*, represented "the local militia in Buxton and Hollis." The Maine Historical Society records indicate the flag may have been presented to the regiment by the Honorable Stewart L. Woodford, U.S. District Attorney. The flag of the Second Regiment of Infantry, Second Brigade, Fifth Division was reputedly used by the Militia of the Gorham area.<sup>12</sup> The flag of the Second Regiment of Infantry, First Brigade, Fourth Division, now in the possession of the Maine Historical Society, is still mounted on its original pole with brass finial.<sup>13</sup> The pole is a hand-made, apparently of ash, measuring approximately three-quarters of an inch in thickness. It is roughly sanded and was apparently

painted white, with a brass finial mounted on the top and secured by a brass nail. The finial is of the British military type with an open cross and measures approximately twelve inches in length. There is no ferrule at the foot of the pole; nor does it appear there ever was one. The entire piece—flag, pole and finial—was designed to be extremely light and the flag was meant to fly in the lightest of breezes.

According to records in the Maine State Archives, the legislature purchased a second run of the panels in 1827, and it was perhaps one of these flags that the same records describe as captured during the First Battle of Bull Run in 1861. These, then, were the flags that Maine troops carried into battle during the Civil War. If it hadn't been for a clever Quarter Master General trying to save money for the new state, Maine would not have used a new flag technology to produce a rarity in nineteenth-century America: a uniform flag design—and a beautiful one at that!

## NOTES

1. Maine State Constitution, article X, sections 1, 2, 5. These so-called “secret provisions” are not secret at all, but they do not appear in printed copies of the Maine Constitution because of their length. They may be read at the Maine Archives or the Maine Legislature's Law Library in Augusta. Special thanks to Joyce Butler of the Maine Historical Society, to the Maine State Museum, and to the University of Maine.

2. Whitney Smith, *The Flag Book of the United States* (New York: Morrow, 1970), p. 154.

3. This reference and much of the following material, especially the accounts, can be found at the Maine State Archives for the dates cited in the Military Files.

4. *Eastern Argus*, September 12, 1820.

5. *Eastern Argus*, July 9, 1822.

6. *Eastern Argus*, July 9, 1822; *Portland Gazette and Maine Advertiser*, June 10, 1811; Maine State Museum *Broadside* 17 (Spring 1994): 1-2.

7. Maine State Museum *Broadside* 17 (Spring 1994): 1-2.

8. Rumor of a eighth panel or fifth flag is currently being investigated.

9. Maine Historical Society accession number 1772, donated by Mrs. Martha P. Sanborn of Acworth, New Hampshire, in 1928; Maine Historical Society accession number 1998.1.49, found in the Maine Historical Society Collection in 1998, accession date and donor unknown; Maine Historical Society accession number 1995.94.3, donated by the estate of Harriet S. Sherman in 1995, acquired at the Reuben Colburn House in Pittston, Maine.

10. Maine Historical Society accession number 1995.94.3.
11. *Eastern Argus*, July 9, 1822.
12. *Portland Press Herald*, March 11, 1995; Maine State Museum Collections; Maine State Museum *Broadside* 17 (Spring 1994): 1-2.
13. *Portland Gazette and Maine Advertiser*, June 10, 1811.