Journal of Mississippi History

Volume 84 | Number 1 Article 2

2022

Editor's Note

Dennis Mitchell
Mississippi State University, Meridian

Editor's Note

by Dennis Mitchell

This edition is unusual in that it chronicles a recent subject. It contains an article much longer than the journal usually publishes, and it features a "memoir" article by Katie Blount, director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH). Jere Nash, co-author of *Mississippi Politics: The Struggle for Power, 1976–2008,* conducted a massive oral history project to document the adoption of Mississippi's new flag. As a historian and political operative who understands the operation of Mississippi government, Nash is uniquely qualified to document the remarkable, historic passage of a law setting in motion Mississippi's dismissal of the 1894 flag and the establishment of a process to create a new flag. Blount and MDAH were tasked by the legislature to play the key role in the flag's creation. When Nash offered his manuscript to our managing editor, "Brother" Rogers, Rogers immediately sent it to me. After reading it, I decided that we must publish it along with an account by Blount of the department's part in the process. Her agreement to write the "memoir" and her authority as executive editor of *The Journal of Mississippi History* supported my decision. We also recognize the special contributions of our anonymous outside reviewers as well as the editing of Elbert Hillard, MDAH director emeritus; Valerie Jones, senior project editor with the University Press of Mississippi; and Andy Taggart, co-author with Nash of *Mississippi Politics.* Emily Moore and her team at Moore Media Group developed the layout of the legislative votes in Appendices B and C.

According to University of Mississippi historian David Sansing, the state of Mississippi did not adopt a flag until the Civil War; when the Bonnie Blue flag, which first appeared in the "Republic of West Florida" as the emblem of rebellion among future Mississippians against Spanish rule, reappeared as the popular symbol for Mississippi's secession from the United States. The legislature ignored the popular sentiment for the Bonnie Blue flag and adopted instead a white flag with a magnolia tree in the center and Bonnie Blue in the corner. The Confederate "Stars and Bars" flew over Mississippi during the war, but Mississippians largely ignored the other two flags chosen by the Confederate Congress to replace it. Some Mississippians fought under the "Beauregard" battle flag, which has become the popular symbol of

the Confederacy, and which made its way onto the Mississippi state flag in 1894.

After the Civil War, the Mississippi Constitutional Convention of 1868 assembled to repeal the ordinance of secession. In doing so it repealed the state flag ordinance leaving Mississippi flagless until 1894. In her analysis of the 1894 state flag's adoption, Millsaps College historian Stephanie Rolph emphasized the populist threat: first to the Democratic Party, second to what some historians have called the civic religion that had grown up around the memory of the Civil War, and third to the wave of "white capping" that was sweeping the state. She sees the flag as a powerful symbol reminding the White minority population that they should support the Democratic Party and the Confederate civic religion as their protectors from the Black majority of the Mississippi population. Senator E. N. Scudder's daughter described his design of the 1894 flag to the United Daughters of the Confederacy: "My father loved the memory of the valor and courage of those men who wore the grey. . . He told me that it was a simple matter for him to design the flag because he wanted to perpetuate in a legal and lasting way that dear battle flag under which so many of our people had so gloriously fought."

The 1894 flag remained the legal emblem of the state until 1906 when the legislature inadvertently repealed the law establishing it. No one noticed. In 1908 the *Official and Statistical Register of the State of Mississippi* continued to state that it was the legal flag and in 1916, the legislature made it illegal to desecrate the state flag.

The use of the state flag became a divisive issue during the 1940s as the Civil Rights Movement began to challenge White rule and the Confederate battle flag became the symbol of White resistance. It featured prominently in the Dixiecrat's, or State Rights Party's, campaign against President Harry Truman. University of Mississippi students, who had adopted the flag as the school's emblem, took it to the Dixiecrat's presidential convention in Birmingham. The Confederate battle flag grew to be an international symbol of White supremacy. I saw "Rhodesians" displaying it in Zimbabwe during the 1990s.

The Mississippi NAACP filed a lawsuit in 1993 seeking to disestablish the "state flag," and the Mississippi Supreme Court dismissed the case when they ruled that the inadvertent repeal of the statute in 1906 had left the state without an official flag. Nash and Blount survey the rest of the story in their articles.