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“We Live in the Future and Not in the Past”: Mississippi Chooses a New State Flag

By Katie Blount

The Old Flag

On Wednesday, July 1, 2020, shortly after 3 o'clock, Lieutenant Governor Delbert Hosemann and Speaker Philip Gunn walked down the steps of the state capitol. I walked between them. Each of us carried one of the three state flags that had flown over the capitol. The flags were being retired in a dignified ceremony, and we were to deliver them to the Two Mississippi Museums, where they will be preserved for posterity.

The flags had been handed to us by members of the Mississippi State Highway Patrol Honor Guard. As I watched the troopers descend from the door of the capitol to the landing, where we stood, I noticed that they trained their eyes down, eyeing each step carefully. Concerned about making it down the steps in heels, I did the same.

When I had dressed that morning, I had not known that the ceremony would take place that day, or that I would be part of it. I had not known, really, any of the challenges that the next few months would bring.

Just a few days earlier, on June 28, the Mississippi Legislature made history. By a vote of 92 to 23 in the House and 37 to 14 in the Senate, the legislature passed House Bill 1796 and retired the flag that had flown over Mississippi since 1894. The legislation established the Commission to Redesign the Mississippi State Flag to “develop, design, and report to the governor and the legislature its recommendation for the design of the new state flag no later than September 14, 2020.” The Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Speaker were to appoint three commissioners each. The legislation further directed that there be a statewide special election to determine whether the flag recommended by the commission “shall be the design for the official Mississippi State Flag.” The special election would be held on the same date as the

KATIE BLOUNT is the director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. She oversaw the work to open the Museum of Mississippi History and the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum. Blount earned her B.A. from the University of Michigan in English and history and her M.A. in southern studies from the University of Mississippi.

regular election, November 3.

The act also specified that the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) would provide “clerical support” to the commission. The legislation then directed MDAH to “develop a plan for the prompt, dignified, and respectful removal of the former official Mississippi State Flag.” With little time to plan this ceremony, we turned to event planner Holly Lange, who in 2017 had coordinated the opening of the Two Mississippi Museums, the largest, most complex, and highest-pressure event in the department’s history. She agreed to help, and she began work immediately. Lange stayed with us to the end, coordinating the commission meetings and planning the flag-raising ceremony in January 2021.

We planned a flag-lowering ceremony to be held Thursday, July 2, with Lange coordinating logistics for the capitol staff, the Speaker and lieutenant governor, the Mississippi State Highway Patrol, and other participants. As we gathered for a dress rehearsal mid-day on July 1, I received a call from Lieutenant Governor Delbert Hosemann. Concerned about legislators who would not be in Jackson the following day, Hosemann asked that we hold the ceremony at 3 p.m. that day, July 1. So we did.

After carrying the flags down the capitol steps and through a small crowd of legislators, media, and the public, Lieutenant Governor Hosemann, Speaker Gunn, and I got in a car that would take us to the Two Mississippi Museums. As we drove through downtown, the Speaker and lieutenant governor talked quietly about the magnitude of the event and the history represented by the 126-year-old flag. Arriving at the Two Mississippi Museums, we carried the flags to the front door and presented them to MDAH board president Reuben Anderson and Two Mississippi Museums director Pamela D.C. Junior.

In brief remarks, Hosemann noted that this occasion was just one moment in our state’s history, declaring, “In this second, we chart a future, our collective future, for centuries to come.” Judge Anderson spoke too, noting the presence of former representative Robert Clark and his wife. In 1967, Clark became the first African American elected to the Mississippi Legislature since Reconstruction, and in 1992, he was elected House Speaker Pro Tempore. Anderson also thanked former governor William Winter, who had been appointed by Governor Ronnie Musgrove in 2001 to lead a commission to design a new state flag. That flag was defeated in a statewide election April 18, 2001, but

Governor Winter remained a strong and public advocate for changing the flag.

An interesting note—five people rode in the car from the capitol to the Two Mississippi Museums that day. Three of us soon tested positive for COVID-19, the pandemic that began sweeping the globe in 2020. The two state troopers were spared, and the lieutenant governor, Speaker, and I had fully recovered by the time the commission meetings began three weeks later. COVID remained a factor in all the decisions we made about how to organize the commission’s work, arrange the meetings, and engage the public safely.

In HB 1796, the legislature had emphasized the importance of public participation in the flag transition. On July 13, MDAH issued a press release inviting the public to submit designs for the commission’s consideration. The press release specified two requirements made by the legislature: the flag must include the words “In God We Trust,” and it must not include the design of the Confederate battle flag. The press release also included a list of basic flag design principles set forth by the North American Vexillological Association.

We were brand new at this process, and right away we made three mistakes. We set a submission deadline of August 13, which was too late given the enormous volume of designs commissioners would have to consider. We later changed that deadline to August 1. We failed to limit the number of designs each person could submit, and some submitted dozens. And we instructed the public to submit their designs to the email address of my assistant, Emma McRaney. Her email soon filled with hundreds of submissions, making it nearly impossible for her to keep up with her other work. McRaney played a significant role in the flag transition, handling the submissions, taking the lead on communications with commissioners, and providing constant technical support to those of us unfamiliar with Dropbox, Facebook, and other technology tools.

When we wrote that initial press release, we had no idea how broad and deep public interest in the flag transition would be. People were engaged from the start, people all over Mississippi and all over the world. The passionate public interest in the process was its greatest strength. But for those of us managing the process, it was our greatest challenge.

The media were as consumed by the process as the public. Multiple reporters appeared at each meeting, seeking interviews

with commissioners, and requesting background information from the department. Media coordination was handled by MDAH public relations director Michael Morris, who has a total commitment to transparency with the media, balanced by excellent instincts about how to answer even the most complex and sensitive questions.

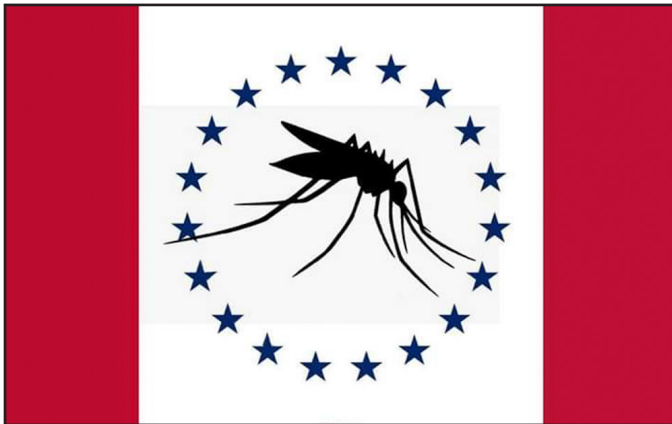
The Designs

Flag submissions came flooding in, from across Mississippi, other states, and other countries. Many came from children, drawn in crayon or marker or cut and pasted. Some submissions were mailed, but most were emailed, having been designed on computers. Some people submitted multiple variations of the same design, or multiple different designs. Hundreds of people submitted new ideas even once the deadline had passed. Only those that met the deadline and the legislature's two criteria were included in the online gallery that we created for the commissioners and the public to see.

Popular symbols included the magnolia blossom and tree, the shape of the state, and the Mississippi River. Mockingbirds made multiple appearances, as did eagles, crosses, guitars, and the state seal. Nearly all the flag submissions were red, white, and blue, with a few green, yellow, and purple ones in the mix. In several designs, racial unity was suggested through intermingled white and black hands. Most designs were simple and clean, while others were busy and impossibly complex.

Some of the submissions reflected playful ideas of what Mississippi represents. Elvis appeared, once alone and once calling "In God!" as B.B. King responded "We Trust!" One flag featured a catfish, another a caramel cake. In one flag, a teddy bear played a guitar as a smiling Kermit the Frog peaked over his shoulder. Perhaps the most unusual flag featured University of Mississippi football player Elijah Moore celebrating a touchdown scored against rival Mississippi State. As the resulting penalty cost the University of Mississippi the game, it is hard to say which school's fan submitted the design.

One designer submitted a crawfish flanked by Michelob Ultra beer cans. Another submitted a giant mosquito encircled by stars and flanked by two red stripes. A mini-scandal erupted when the mosquito flag advanced from the first round to the second, prompting accusations that the commissioners were not taking the process seriously.



These are three of over three thousand flag designs submitted to the commission.

MDAH soon issued a statement explaining that a commissioner had transposed the numbers of two flags when submitting his top twenty-five, and the mosquito flag was dropped from the second round.

As the public would soon see, the commissioners were taking the process seriously, as were most of the designers, who submitted flags featuring dignified symbols widely associated with Mississippi. Among the more than three thousand submissions, the commissioners had hundreds of strong designs to consider. And they gave the process the careful consideration that it deserved. None of the appointed commissioners missed a single meeting. Mary Graham had a community college to run—during COVID. Robyn Tannehill was mayor of the bustling city of Oxford. Cyrus Ben led the largest Native American tribe in the state, a population that had been hit hard by COVID. All of the commissioners were busy, and yet each of them fully committed to this critically important work.

The Public

Public interest was reflected not only by the large number of submissions, but also by the volume of emails, text messages, and phone calls that poured in to the department and to commissioners. Many times I was stopped in the grocery store or while walking my dog, and I know that the commissioners would say the same. The conversation on Facebook was passionate throughout. Early on, people expressed frustration with the choices commissioners were making—“My favorite didn’t make it.” “I don’t like any of these.” “Awful choices, try again.” A small number declared their allegiance to the old flag: “I choose the current flag.” “None of them.” “The flag should never have been changed.” “Stop trying to change history.”

But by the end of the process, Facebook commenters were on board, expressing preferences for one design over another, or suggesting minor changes to individual flags. “I’m confused why the plain choices, # 1 and # 5, are getting more votes. # 1 needs a thin gold border or something.” “I also think our flag should have 20 stars.” Others urged consensus: “Y’all all just hush and get behind what is chosen.” “Be thankful that a new flag will be flying to represent the state.”

My favorite comment came from someone watching a commission meeting on Facebook Live: “KATIE BLOUNT!! STOP TOUCHING YOUR MASK.”

The Commission

By mid-July, we had received hundreds of flag submissions, six of the nine commissioners had been appointed, and the lieutenant governor directed me to call the first meeting.

Meeting One: July 22

Days until decision: 41

Flags under consideration: 600+

The first meeting was held in the auditorium of the Two Mississippi Museums, as all five of the subsequent meetings would be. With the governor’s appointments not yet made, the commission comprised the lieutenant governor’s appointees, MDAH board president Reuben Anderson of Jackson, Singing River Health System community relations liaison Sherri Carr Bevis of Gulfport, and Vicksburg attorney J. Mack Garner, and the speaker’s appointees, Mississippi Gulf Community College president Mary Graham, Oxford mayor Robyn Tannehill, and Speaker Gunn’s policy advisor TJ Taylor.

Graham and Tannehill participated through Zoom, while the other commissioners were present in the room, along with staff, media, and a small number of interested citizens. The meeting was broadcast live on Facebook, as was each subsequent meeting. Thousands of people watched that Thursday, and the audience grew for subsequent meetings.

Speaker Gunn opened the meeting, thanking the commissioners for their willingness to serve. He reminded the commissioners of the weight of what they were about to do. “We need a flag that represents us and says who we are as a people. You are making history. I hope you take this responsibility seriously.”

This first meeting was planned hastily; the room setup was awkward and the sound quality poor. But two important developments came on that day. First, the commission chose a leader. An attorney at Phelps Dunbar LLP, Reuben Anderson had been the first African American to graduate from the University of Mississippi Law School, the first African American state Supreme Court justice, and the first African American president of the MDAH board of trustees. He presided over the commission with grace, dignity, and gravitas, and his leadership signaled to the public the importance of the work at hand.

The second development came when I proposed a general framework through which the commission could proceed. With more than 600 designs already submitted, we had anticipated that commissioners would want a streamlined process. Right away, Mack Varner set the tone, explaining, "I want to make the time," and directing that we share all the submissions with the commissioners. The other commissioners agreed, and from that moment, it was clear that the commission was fully invested in the process and was willing to give the time necessary to make the strongest decision for the state. Varner's plain-spokenness continued throughout the process, many times cutting through the noise to make a simple and clear point.

Commissioners voted to approve a deadline of September 2, twelve days earlier than the deadline in the legislation. The election would be held November 3. The Secretary of State's office was required to print and distribute ballots before the election, and the law required the ballot to include "a color picture or drawing of the new design for the Mississippi State Flag on all ballots." The Secretary of State's office had notified me that the September 14 deadline would not allow them to print absentee ballots in time for the election. I explained that to the commissioners, and they voted to set the new September 2 deadline. This deadline issue was the subject of much discussion at the final commission meeting.

It was also clear at this first meeting that commissioners took seriously the legislature's direction that the public should be fully engaged in the process. As she would many more times, Sherri Bevis spoke about the importance of the public's voice, and all the commissioners agreed. Mary Graham too would remind the commissioners many times of their obligation to listen to the people. Throughout the process, they would demonstrate their commitment to ensuring that they chose a flag that the public would support.

Finally, commissioners made two requests: first, that a vexillologist, or flag expert, be invited to speak at the next meeting about basic principles of flag design, and second, that before the final vote, each flag be flown on a pole for commissioners and the public to see.

With the meeting adjourned, the direction was clear: the commissioners would lead a thorough and careful process with the public's wishes guiding every decision. And there was no time to waste.

Meeting Two: July 28
Days until decision: 35
Flags under consideration: 3,000+

At the second meeting, the commission welcomed three new members, appointed by Governor Tate Reeves to represent three organizations specified in the legislation. Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians chief Cyrus Ben represented the Mississippi Economic Council, Gulfport insurance agent Frank Bordeaux represented the Mississippi Arts Commission, and New Albany real estate broker Betsey Hamilton represented the Department of Archives and History.

First on the agenda was approval of a new work plan, which I presented for consideration. MDAH staff would create a publicly accessible web gallery featuring all eligible submissions. By August 7, each commissioner would select 25 flags to advance to the second round. Once commissioners' votes were tallied and duplicates removed, the second round would include 200 or so flags.

Each round could also include flags designed by commissioners or submissions that were altered by commissioners. MDAH had contracted with designer Dominique Pugh to assist in this work. Pugh is a talented graphic artist who had worked on contract for MDAH for years, designing publications, invitations, and advertisements. Her work proved critical over the coming weeks as designs were created and refined.

Round two flags would appear in the online public gallery by August 10. By email ballot, commissioners would select their top ten flags. MDAH would tally the votes, with the ten winners advancing to round three and being displayed in the public gallery. At the August 14 meeting, commissioners would vote on the five top flags, which would then be manufactured and flown on a pole on August 25. The public gallery including the final flags would then move to the MDAH website, where people could comment and share their preferences. On September 2, commissioners would gather for a final meeting to select the flag that would appear on the November ballot.

Commissioners heard a presentation by flag expert Clay Moss, who had advised MDAH for years on the historic flags in the department's collection. Sharing basic principles of flag design, Moss emphasized this one: "Simplicity is the first rule of flag design. A small child should be able to draw it from memory. Less is more...keep it simple." Moss

consulted with commissioners throughout the process, and they invited him back to a later meeting to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the final five designs. He also lent his expertise in making final refinements to the top design. His sound advice was critical to the process, and he was generous in sharing it.

The second meeting set the tone for all those following. Holly Lange had designed a much more effective setup for the room, we had ordered microphones for each commissioner, greatly improving the sound, and our IT staff were fully in command of the technology required to accommodate commissioners in the room and those participating by Zoom, while also streaming live on Facebook. With some problems solved, and others yet to emerge, we were three days from the deadline for flag submissions.

At the end of this meeting, several commissioners took the opportunity to tour exhibits in the Museum of Mississippi History. They took special note of the Native American galleries and the gallery that exhibits a small sample of MDAH's large collection of historic flags.

Meeting Three: August 14
Days until decision: 18
Flags under consideration: 11

Judge Anderson opened the third meeting by congratulating TJ Taylor and his wife on the arrival of their new baby. Participating on Zoom from the hospital, TJ showed admirable dedication to the commission's work. He was tired but focused and cheerful, appearing in a t-shirt instead of his usual sharp suit and tie.

The commission's charge on August 14 was to consider the top ten flags on which they had voted by email (actually, eleven because there was a tie) plus alternates and additional designs created by commissioners. By the end of the meeting, they were to narrow the field to five flags.

At the third meeting commissioners really began to dig in to the design process, discussing each flag in detail and calling on designer Dominique Pugh to make alterations. Pugh stunned all of us with the quality and speed of her work, and with her composure while making multiple changes in real time and in public view.

Equally impressive was the work of Joshua Watson, IT coordinator at the Two Mississippi Museums. It was Watson who handled IT at the

meetings, responding to commissioner requests to show on the large screen dozens of flags in different stages of design. His competence and calm demeanor were critical to the process. Supporting him were IT director Torome Porter and his highly capable staff, who worked around the clock to determine the best way to receive and organize flag submissions from the public, display them during meetings, and receive and track public comments. I could not have asked for greater dedication or a stronger performance from the MDAH IT team.

As commissioners began discussing the flags, a new dynamic became apparent. They were getting to know one another, becoming comfortable working as a team. So comfortable, in fact, that they began sparring in a friendly, almost familial way.

Two symbols appeared on multiple flags—the Mississippi River and the magnolia blossom. With this salvo, Mack Varner sparked a river vs. magnolia debate:

VARNER: Being from Vicksburg, I’ve heard a lot of comment about the Mississippi River, not too much about the magnolia. What is our state named for? The river.

CHIEF BEN: I’ve not grown up in the western part of the state, so when I think of rivers, it’s the Pearl River.

VARNER: Oh my goodness.

BETSEY HAMILTON: For me it’s the Tallahatchie. . . I think we’ve opened up a whole can with everybody’s rivers.

Discussing a flag that showed the river dividing a blue field representing Louisiana on the west and Mississippi on the east, another conversation began:

VARNER: A lot of people say, “I don’t want to look at Monroe and Shreveport and Baton Rouge.” That’s Vicksburg. I don’t want to look at Louisiana on our flag.

HAMILTON: I saw Louisiana before Mississippi!

Later, Varner returned to the river issue:

VARNER: Y’all are good with rivers, right? Everybody’s good with the river, even from the Coast?

HAMILTON: It only touches eleven counties.

VARNER: Good thing the state’s named for it.

None of the flags depicting the river made it to the final round, but the exchange revealed the commissioners' regional allegiances, their close attention to comments they were hearing from the public, and their emerging preferences for particular designs, themes, and colors.

The magnolia blossom appeared in multiple flag designs. Some saw it as the most appropriate symbol for the Mississippi flag. Sherri Bevis reminded commissioners that the flag should represent Mississippi. People "need to look at it and they need to think Mississippi. That's part of my attraction to the magnolia because I think Mississippi."

Betsey Hamilton agreed, arguing passionately for a green magnolia flag. "Green is the color of warmth, nature, peace, and of rebirth, renewal, growth, which is so apropos. Driving down from the north, I look at our fields, our pastures, all of the green around us. We are a green state. More than half of our state flags are red, white, and blue. There's one green. Automatically with green in the flag, we're distinctive. If they were all lined up and a child were looking for the Mississippi flag, she or he would only have to choose between two."

In spite of Hamilton's advocacy, no green flag made the final round. Chief Ben met with more success in promoting Native American representation on the state flag. He appeared at this meeting wearing a Choctaw beaded necklace and carrying a basket and other Choctaw crafts. He displayed these items, pointing out key symbols and proposing that one of them be included in the flag. One such symbol was the diamond.

The chief commanded great respect on the commission, and he and Frank Bordeaux formed a close alliance to advocate for native symbols in the flag. A strong proponent of the Great River flag, Bordeaux suggested that the star at the top of the shield in the flag's center be replaced with a new star composed of diamonds. Micah Whitson, who had designed the Great River flag, submitted the new diamond star, which met with universal approval. Ultimately, each of the final flags included this star representing Mississippi's First People.

The Great River flag would advance to the final round, although at this meeting and later, detractors would point out its similarity to the City of Tupelo flag, the Union Pacific Railroad emblem, and the logo of the K-Swiss tennis shoe company.

Before the discussion closed, commissioners returned to the magnolia blossom, with TJ Taylor noting that many people resist that symbol. Taylor asked me, "Do they just not like it, or is there

some symbolism behind it that we’re not aware of?” I replied that I had received dozens of communications from people who believed that the magnolia blossom symbolized the Old South, evoking the most troubling aspects of our state’s history. Judge Anderson had heard that as well, although he saw the magnolia blossom not as a representation of the Old South, but as a symbol of Mississippi’s rich natural beauty, as he would note in his eloquent and memorable closing remarks at the final meeting.

As the discussion wound down, commissioners decided to postpone the vote on the final five flags, setting a new meeting date four days later at which they would take the vote. Before adjourning, commissioners took up two final items.

The first was the issue of intellectual property. TJ Taylor, an attorney, had contacted me days earlier to warn that the commission needed a legal contract that designers would sign to transfer their intellectual property rights to the state. I found such a contract online and sent it to Taylor, prompting him to reply, “Katie, we need a lawyer.” Indeed we did. Clearing the property rights proved complicated, time-consuming, and critically important.

MDAH deputy director Robert Benson coordinated the copyright clearance. He has a background in accounting and was previously our finance director. But his specialty is thorny problems, and this was one. In addition to his efforts on intellectual property rights, Benson and I worked closely together on every aspect of the flag transition process just as we were accustomed to doing on other high-priority initiatives at MDAH. We had a list of goals we hoped to accomplish for the department before we retired. The flag transition was not on the list, but each of us welcomed the opportunity to contribute. It was good for the state and good for the department. We were in.

Benson worked closely with Whit Raynor, an attorney with Jones Walker who specializes in intellectual property issues, and Tommy Goodwin, the attorney with the Attorney General’s office who was assigned to MDAH. At the third meeting, Raynor addressed the commission, presenting an intellectual property agreement that he had drafted for all designers, commissioners, and Clay Moss to sign. Raynor and Goodwin came to every subsequent meeting, guiding the commission in making clear decisions that resulted in no legal challenges.

The final issue had been raised in previous days by a number

of commissioners. Aware that their flag selection would be on the November ballot for the voters to approve, the commissioners wanted to lend their efforts to a public education campaign that would inform voters of the process that had produced the design. The commissioners voted unanimously to approve a resolution to this effect, which Judge Anderson then sent to the governor, lieutenant governor, and speaker.

With that, Judge Anderson adjourned the meeting, which proved to be the longest of all, at one hour and fifty minutes.

Meeting Four: August 18

Days until decision: 14

Flags under consideration: 9 (plus 14 commissioner alternates)

The task on August 18 seemed simple—to choose five flags from among the nine that had emerged from the previous round. But because commissioners had spent the weekend working with designers to create multiple alternates for each of the nine, it was not simple at all.

As each flag showed on the screen alongside its alternates, commissioners dug in. One topic that emerged and never really went away was the number of stars surrounding the magnolia. Should it be twenty because Mississippi was the twentieth state? Or twenty-one, with the gold star at the top representing the First People. Over TJ Taylor's objection, twenty-one prevailed.

By this point, nearly 50,000 people had voted in the online poll, and commissioners clearly had been paying attention. The poll would become a major topic of debate at the final meeting, but commissioners were already looking to it as an indication of which flags had the best chance to win the popular vote in November.

As the meeting proceeded, Joshua Watson juggled multiple versions of multiple flags, showing them on screen as the commissioners requested. Dominique Pugh and Kara Giles, Mayor Tannehill's assistant and an accomplished graphic artist, made changes to various flags in response to commission direction.

With the vote drawing near, some commissioners seemed reluctant to proceed. I reminded them that the vote must take place in public before the meeting adjourned. They agreed. With Zooming commissioners voting by email and phone, and commissioners in the room listing their top five on paper, the vote took place.

We had a tie for fifth place, with two flags receiving ten votes each. One showed the actual western border of the state, and the other a stylized version of it. Throughout the process, Judge Anderson had resisted engaging in the back and forth between various flags. As he explained, “When the flag came down, it was one of the greatest days of my life. So what came up made little or no difference to me and I didn’t vote. But we’re at the point now where a decision needs to be made, and I’m going to break the tie. I vote for the one on the left [with the actual border].”

The eliminated flags were the green and white magnolia flag, the white flag with red Mississippi and blue border, and the blue and red flag with the stylized western border.

Five flags moved forward to the final round, which are shown below.





Meeting Five: August 25
Days until decision: 7
Flags under consideration: 5

On a warm summer day that was mercifully overcast, commissioners gathered in front of the historic Old Capitol to watch each flag fly. A small crowd joined commissioners, including Lieutenant Governor

Delbert Hosemann and several state legislators. Excitement rose as each flag flapped in the breeze. Having seen each fly, commissioners moved to the auditorium at the Two Mississippi Museums to discuss the final five.

Mack Varner opened the discussion by asking who had designed the top five flags, and what we knew about them. Attorney Tommy Goodwin reported that the attorney general’s office had done a public background check on each and had no concerns about any of them.

Because commissioners had now seen the flags in action, they had a clearer sense for which designs stood out effectively against the sky. Now they were interested in refining and improving the strongest designs, and they called on Clay Moss to evaluate each according to the design standards that he had set forth at the second meeting.

One of the final flags featured the western border of the state with a magnolia in the center of Mississippi. Frank Bordeaux raised a question about the state appearing reversed (Alabama!) on the back of the flag. Moss confirmed that without an expensive two-sided manufacturing process, this flag would not work. With that, the western border flag fell out of the running.

A second long-running issue re-emerged. Prompted by Chief Ben, Betsey Hamilton made the case that the diamond star at the top of the circle in each flag represents the First People and should not be considered one of the twenty stars representing statehood. Discussion followed, with TJ Taylor strongly objecting to twenty-one stars given that Mississippi was the twentieth state. Ultimately, twenty-one stars prevailed again.

After commissioners voted to eliminate the magnolia tree and western border flags, only three remained. After brief discussions of which color yellow was best and which font was appropriate for “In God We Trust,” commissioners seemed ready to move to the final round with three flags. But Taylor made the case for a head-to-head competition between the Great River flag and one of the two remaining magnolia flags. Commissioners voted, and we were down to two—the Great River and the blue and red magnolia flag.

At the close of the fifth meeting, the two final flags were posted on the MDAH website. While the public had participated since the beginning, commenting on Facebook Live feeds and social media, this was their first chance to post comments that would appear on the MDAH website alongside the flags. Many people took the opportunity

to share their thoughts.

Most commenters advocated for one flag or criticized the other. The “magnolia flag is exquisite with the Choctaw diamond star centered on top.” The Great River flag “evokes a forward-thinking dignity to which the people of Mississippi should aspire.” Or the magnolia flag is “something you’d see in your grandmother’s china cabinet and not even notice,” while “the shield looks like a t-shirt pocket.”



These are the final two flags chosen by the commission.

Some commenters questioned the reliability of an online poll, while others said they were glad to have a chance to participate. “It’s good to be able to speak our minds and say what we think.” The words “In God We Trust” drew praise and criticism. A few defended the old

state flag, but many more said either of these choices would better represent Mississippi. Finally, many commenters praised the process and thanked the commissioners. “The commission has done a good job making its selection. I appreciate the work and effort they have put into this and especially the openness with which they have conducted their work. I can vote for either one of these flags to fly as our new flag of the future.”

Meeting Six: September 2
Days until decision: 0
Flags under consideration: 2

By the final meeting, public attention was at a peak. Media outlets far beyond Mississippi were following the process and reporting progress toward a new Mississippi flag.

The meeting began with a brief discussion of the refinements Clay Moss had made to the top two flags. One more time, commissioners revisited the twenty vs. twenty-one stars question, and again twenty-one prevailed. Chief Ben pointed out that Micah Whitson, designer of the Great River flag, had designed the First People star and thus should be recognized as one of the designers of the magnolia flag too.

Led by Sherri Bevis, several commissioners expressed regret that both flags could not appear on the November ballot. Mack Varner reminded them that the law required the commission to select one flag, not two.

With final changes approved, commissioners seemed ready to vote. But a plot twist lay ahead. Robyn Tannehill took the floor, saying, “I’m always the one to throw a wrench in things, but just for thought. We have two choices that are stately and handsome and represent our state well, and we’ll gladly support either. I do believe that Mississippians deserve the chance to vote between two. I also believe that it’s critical that this flag passes in November. The law states that we should have this decision made by September 14. We have twelve days before we have to have the decision made. I would like to see us do a poll of Mississippi registered voters to see how Mississippians respond to that.” Mary Graham, who had often emphasized the importance of public participation, immediately agreed.

Asked about the date in the legislation, I said I did not know why it had been selected, but I explained that the Secretary of State’s office

had given September 2 as the final date that would allow them to print absentee ballots showing the flag. Following a discussion of the online poll and its shortcomings, Betsey Hamilton took a firm position: "Don't delay, we need to vote on this."

TJ Taylor explained that a firm could be hired to conduct a scientific poll, but Sherri Bevis stated, "If the flag can't be on the ballot, it's a nonstarter." Taylor again advocated for a delay to allow polling, while Bevis urged that commissioners to go ahead and vote.

Finally, Robyn Tannehill concluded, "I very much wish that these two fabulous designs could go on a ballot. I understand that that's not how the legislation was drafted. We can move forward, I will take back my motion." Commissioners voted to proceed with the final vote, with Taylor voting no.

Once again, this discussion demonstrated that public participation was critical to this process, and that the public's will was foremost in the minds of commissioners. Several of them now thanked the public for engaging in the process and affirmed their reluctance to make a decision that the people would not favor.

Just before the vote, Taylor took the floor: "At the first meeting, Mr. Chairman, you said something I've thought about throughout this process. More than at any other time in our country, we need the mercy and grace of God. I wanted to see what the commission thought about, whichever flag wins today, branding it the 'In God We Trust' flag." Varner chimed in "100 percent," and all the commissioners agreed, voting unanimously to designate the winning flag the "In God We Trust" flag.

At long last, they voted. With the commissioners, the media, and the public watching, MDAH staff counted the votes. The winner was... the magnolia flag, eight to one, with Taylor casting his vote for the Great River flag. Judge Anderson asked for a motion that the magnolia flag be adopted unanimously, and a moment later that was done. Commissioners and the public applauded as the magnolia flag, now known as the "In God We Trust" flag, appeared on the screen. The winning flag was designed by Rocky Vaughan, with contributions by Sue Anna Joe, Kara Giles, Dominique Pugh, Micah Whitson, and Clay Moss.

Before adjourning, Chairman Anderson walked to the podium, removing his mask before delivering closing remarks.

I grew up in Mississippi in the 1940s and '50s, and all of my life Mississippi has been at the bottom—fiftieth in whatever category you think of, income, health care, education. On November third, that will take a change. We won't move to the top, but I can assure you that we will move.

How in the world could Mississippi have been on the bottom. . . No reason for us to be on the bottom. We have the greatest people, the most talented and gifted people, the greatest poets, authors and musicians. We are the birthplace of America's music. We have the most fertile soil. From catfish to cotton to watermelons, anything will grow here. We have timber and oil and gas and ninety miles of beaches. There's no reason for us to be on the bottom.

We'll be on the bottom all of my lifetime, but my children and grandchildren will see us ascend. And it will happen because of what you have done...I'm so thrilled that you have decided to take the magnolia tree, a tree that's been around 90 million years. The oldest living organism on earth is the Methuselah tree that's been growing for 5,000 years in a desert in California. Five thousand years from now our flag will be growing and showing and blooming, and we'll send a message to all of America that we're open for business. We'll send a message that we live in the future and not in the past. There was a great philosopher and spiritual leader who lived 3,000 years ago, and he told his people, “We grow trees over rice.” And that's what we're doing, we're growing trees over rice, and we're looking to the future.

The room erupted in a standing ovation, and the flag commission adjourned its final meeting.

During the weeks leading up to Election Day, commissioners stayed in the public spotlight, speaking at events and giving interviews about the flag process. Public service messages appeared in the media to raise public awareness about the election, alongside privately funded advertisements advocating for the “In God We Trust” flag.

The New Flag

On November 3, the new flag was approved by Mississippi voters by a large margin (71.64 percent to 28.36 percent), making headlines throughout the country and abroad. The new flag carried eighty of Mississippi's eighty-two counties. Flag commissioners, elected officials, and the public celebrated the strong vote signifying a more unified future for our state.

The final charge for MDAH and the flag commission was to plan a ceremony raising the new flag over the capitol. On January 6, 2021, the legislature voted to ratify the popular vote and designate the “In God

We Trust” flag as the official state flag. On January 11, in the same room at the Two Mississippi Museums where the flag commission had met, Governor Tate Reeves signed the law with commissioners standing behind him. “Today,” Governor Reeves said, “we turn the page. We commit our former flag to history, and we commit ourselves to the business of the future.” The governor then led commissioners in carrying the flag up the steps of the capitol, joining Lieutenant Governor Hosemann and Speaker Gunn for brief remarks. Both Gunn and Hosemann paid tribute to the many legislators who had cast difficult and courageous votes to change the flag. With spectators and the media watching, the new flag was raised over the capitol.

The old flag is displayed in the Museum of Mississippi History in an exhibit that explores the history of the flag and the circumstances that led to its being retired.

MDAH and the Flag Transition

At the beginning of 2020, MDAH was focused on its strategic goals—major accomplishments our department would work toward over the next few years. We intended to broaden our audience, strengthen our collection, plan for major initiatives at our sites across the state, and develop a strong team of leaders who would carry this work into the future.

Then came the flag. Unexpected though it was, our work with the flag commission became our highest priority. And for several months, it was all consuming. Dozens of staff worked on the flag transition, not just those who appeared at the commission meetings and who are mentioned in this article. Our staff worked hard and fast and smart. We learned a lot about what we could do together. When we emerged, the state had a new flag, overwhelmingly approved by the voters.

I could never express what the flag change meant for the state as eloquently as Judge Anderson did at the final meeting. But what it meant for the department, I know. For a moment, we became part of history. That’s unusual for an agency whose role is to preserve and document our history. But the legislature’s decision to entrust this work to MDAH made sense.

When the legislature voted to retire the old flag, when the commissioners selected a new flag, and when the voters approved it, they did so because they had taken an honest look at our history, and

they decided to set a different course for our future. This link between our past and our future is the basis for all we do at MDAH. Only by understanding our history can we move forward together. That’s why we preserve the state’s documents, historic structures, and artifacts. They show us who we are and how we got here.

This is the work we do. We have done it for over a century, and we will do it for the next century and beyond. The flag transition reminded all of us why this work matters, why our history matters. That’s what the flag transition meant for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. We were proud to be a part of this historic change.



Commission to Redesign the Mississippi State Flag pictured with the “In God We Trust” flag design on September 2, 2020. Pictured from left to right: Katie Blount, Chief Cyrus Ben, Betsey Hamilton, Frank Bordeaux, Mary Graham, Reuben Anderson, Sherri Carr Bevis, Robyn Tannehill, Mack Varner, and TJ Taylor. Photo courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.