
Mississippi's State Flag and Coat of Arms

History of the Advisory Commission on the Mississippi State Flag and the Coat of Arms

Supreme Court Ruling

The Mississippi Supreme Court ruled on May 4, 2000, that Mississippi did not have an official state flag and coat of arms because the Legislature did not bring the laws pertaining to these symbols forward in the 1906 codification. Therefore, the Supreme Court ruled the state flag and the coat of arms used were not the official state symbols. The Court's ruling stated that these symbols could continue to be used by political subdivisions until such time that official designs are adopted.

Executive Order No. 833

On May 5, 2000, Governor Ronnie Musgrove issued Executive Order No. 833 creating the "Advisory Commission on the State Flag and the Coat of Arms" (hereinafter referred to as the Commission). The Governor charged that the Commission be a time-limited commission to gather facts, obtain citizens' input, and advise the Legislature as to a recommended course of action based upon its findings.

The Advisory Commission has provided a forum for comments from citizens of our state, but it has no authority to take any action. Only the Legislature may take action on the Mississippi state flag and the coat of arms.

Advisory Commission Activities

Monthly Meetings

The Commission held four monthly meetings prior to the release of this report. These meetings were held on August 21, September 18, October 18 and November 20, 2000. In order to work in an expeditious manner and in the best interest of the citizens of Mississippi, the Commission utilized the following committees to address different areas critical to its charge.

Committee on History and Heritage

This committee was charged with conferring with appropriate organizations and individuals with special interest in and knowledge of the state's history and the relationship and interpretation of that history through its flag and coat-of-arms. During the course of its work, the Committee on History and Heritage met and discussed the flag's role and impact on Mississippi's history and heritage with the following groups:

- Mississippi Civil War Preservation Society;
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Mississippi Chapter;
- National Association of Social Workers, Mississippi Chapter;
- Sons and Daughters of U.S. Colored Troops;
- Sons of Confederate Veterans; and,
- University of Mississippi's Institute for Racial Reconciliation

The Committee extended an invitation to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, but the group did not respond.

The Committee on History and Heritage concluded that while the 1894 flag can represent Mississippians' courage and honor to some of our state's citizens, it can also be a symbol of oppression to others. Representatives of all groups shared a deep affection for our state and its well being and advancement.

Committee on Economic Impact

This committee was charged with conferring with appropriate organizations and individuals with concern about, and understanding of, the long-term economic impact on the state of controversies involving the state flag. The Committee on Economic Impact worked in conjunction with the Mississippi Economic Council (MEC). The state flag was one of the issues addressed and discussed at focus groups conducted around the state by the MEC.

The Committee on Economic Impact also consulted with the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce regarding their experience with the Confederate Flag in that state. The committee also exchanged ideas with the State of Georgia, which is considering the removal of the Confederate battle flag from its state flag.

The Committee on Economic Impact found that businesses have a desire to do business in a state that is united in its efforts for progress. Mississippi business people expressed an interest in moving the state forward and avoiding any action that could serve to be detrimental to Mississippi's economy.

Committee on Design

This committee was charged with the responsibility of conferring with appropriate organizations and individuals who are knowledgeable in the design of flags and coats of arms and who have an understanding of the role and significance of such symbols. The committee invited citizens to submit proposed designs for a new state flag as well.

Recognizing that high school students will shortly be the leaders of our state, the Committee on Design also involved students in its work in an effort to increase students' understanding of what the flag stands for and the history of flags in Mississippi. The committee invited all public, private and parochial high school students in the state to submit specific flag designs, essays and papers on what the flag should symbolize and views as to whether the old flag should be. The committee received 1,180 submittals from students in 51 of Mississippi's schools.

After receiving public comment and input, the Committee on Design recommended the attached design to the Commission as the design for Mississippi's official state flag. The red canton symbolizes the sacrifice that Mississippi military personnel have displayed in all wars throughout the state's history, as well as the courage and sacrifice that numerous Mississippians have continually displayed in endeavoring to bring equality and justice to all the citizens of our state. The blue stripes represent justice, loyalty and perseverance, while the white stripe represents liberty, purity and virtue. The thirteen stars in the outer circle represent the thirteen original United States. The six stars in the inner circle represent the six nations or republics that have claimed dominion over Mississippi: Native American tribes and nations, France, Great Britain, Spain, the United States of America and the Confederate States of America. The middle star represents Mississippi and its varied history as a territory, republic and state. It also represents the unity that Mississippians strive to achieve. The grand total of stars in the canton is twenty, symbolizing Mississippi's admission as the twentieth state in the Union.

Public Comments

Written Comments

The Commission announced at its second meeting that it would receive written public comments at a designated address. The Commission received approximately 500 pieces of correspondence from citizens. The Commission received thirty-three petitions from citizens in favor of retaining Mississippi's traditional state flag. The Commission also received phone calls from citizens expressing support for both retaining the traditional flag and recommending the development of a new design for the state flag.

Public Hearings

Knowing that input from the public, both in the form of hearings and through written comments, was essential to its work and its purpose, the Commission held a public hearing in each congressional district in order to obtain the public's comments and opinions on this matter. The Commission hosted these five public hearings on the following dates in the following sites:

- October 19, 2000, The University of Mississippi, Tupelo
- October 26, 2000, Meridian Community College, Meridian
- November 2, 2000, Mississippi Delta Community College, Moorhead

- November 9, 2000, Gulf Coast Community College-Jefferson Davis Campus, Gulfport
- November 13, 2000, Millsaps College, Jackson

Approximately 1,700 citizens attended these five hearings. Although a number of citizens spoke both for keeping and changing the state's flag, an overwhelming number of comments at the hearings and in writing are seeking a public referendum. Public comments at these hearings gave evidence of passionate opinions for both positions.

Conclusions

Coat of Arms

The Commission did not receive public comments indicating that the coat of arms is a controversial symbol for Mississippians. There is no indication from the people of the state that the coat of arms traditionally used should be changed.

State Flag

The public hearings, personal and written communications to the Commission, and conferences with representatives of several organizations confirmed the Commission's original supposition that the Mississippi flag controversy is a significant and complex issue for which there is no simple or easy resolution.

From the time of its establishment the Commission's purpose has been to seek a solution that will recognize and honor the genuine feelings of those holding differing positions regarding the state flag and to make recommendations to the Legislature.

The Supreme Court's ruling has placed Mississippi at one of those rare moments in history when what we do today, the decisions we make now, will have a major impact for many years to come. Mississippi has made great economic progress and has enjoyed enormous success in race relations and in developing our human and natural resources. We must not let our differences over the flag interrupt and distract from that progress.

The Commission acknowledges that the Confederate battle flag symbolizes for some the southern soldier's uncommon courage and his devotion to duty, characteristics that transcend the causes of the Civil War. The Commission also acknowledges that the Confederate battle flag symbolizes for others the opposition to civil and human rights and that the martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement are also heroes worthy of respect and are a part of our noble heritage.

The Commission believes that in making our recommendation we should endeavor to recognize that these differences are not irreconcilable and indeed can be mutually supportive. The Commission believes that the 1894 flag should be honored, protected and displayed appropriately.

Recommendations

Based on months of discussion and deliberation, the Commission recommends that the Legislature:

1. Enact legislation approving and adopting the design of the Coat of Arms as adopted in 1894.
2. Provide for a referendum within ninety days of the conclusion of the 2001 Legislative Session on the question of a state flag which would have the following choices:
 - (a) To adopt the state flag design presented by the Commission as the official state flag and to designate the 1894 flag as an official historic flag to be honored, protected and flown wherever historic flags are flown.

OR

- (b) To adopt the 1894 flag as the official state flag.
3. Enact legislation that no Revolutionary War, War of 1812, Mexican War, War Between the States, Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, Persian Gulf War, Native American or African-American History monument or memorial erected on public property of the State or any of its political subdivisions may be relocated, removed, disturbed or altered. Further, that no street, bridge, structure, park, preserve reserve or other public area of the State or any of its political subdivisions dedicated in memory of or named for any historic figure or historic event may be renamed or rededicated. Further, no person may prevent the public body responsible for the monument or memorial from taking proper measure and exercising proper means for the protection, preservation and care of these monuments, memorials or nameplates. The provisions of this section may only be amended or repealed upon passage of an act which has received a two-thirds (2/3) vote on final passage in each house of the Legislature.