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‘No Union With Slavery,’ ‘God Armeth the Patriot’ and other flags of America are visiting the Revolution Museum

An exhibition of historic flags and documents brings the nation's often-contentious and violent history into view in time for the high days of the patriotic season.



The Museum of the American Revolution is exhibiting a display of historic flags, opening June 12.

TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer



by Stephan Salisbury

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The tattered 13-star flag that welcomes visitors to the [Museum of the American Revolution](#)'s new special exhibit, "Flags and Founding Documents, 1776-Today," evokes the smell of gunpowder, the whistle and thud of musket balls, and the threadbare birth of a scrappy new nation.

The final flag, made during the nation's Bicentennial, bears 56 stars — reflecting optimism that the nation would eventually embrace its imperial holdings around the world.

That, of course, hasn't happened, nor has there been any great consensus in the territories or in the motherland to make it so.

Flags reflect the tension between dreams and realities, which the museum's exhibition, opening Saturday for a run through Sept. 6, makes manifest.

The exhibition is just in time for the nation's patriotic season, which kicks off on Monday, Flag Day.

The 13-star banner that opens the exhibit by calling to mind British men of war bombarding Fort McHenry in Baltimore, never flew there, may never have seen any battle at all, and could owe its tatters to moths and poor care.

Yes the flag inspires nostalgic dreaming: the dawn's early light and all that.

But this is a history exhibition — 43 historic flags and 43 historic documents — so just around the corner is an 1861 abolitionist flag featuring stark black-and-white stripes and only 23 stars surrounding a swooping eagle in the corner, or "canton." Beneath the eagle is written, "**No Union With Slavery.**" (**This flag and virtually all others are on loan from York County antiques dealer Jeff Bridgman.**)



An abolitionist flag from around 1861 on display at the Museum of the American Revolution. The flag has 23 stars, excluding the 11 states that had joined the Confederacy. TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

"There's 23 stars on here at a time when there were 34 states — 11 states are removed from its star count," said Matthew Skic, the museum's curator of exhibitions.

Those would be the states of the Confederacy.

"This is something that Lincoln was against, removing stars, because he wanted to keep the union together," said Skic. "But flag makers didn't necessarily listen to that. And this one is, of course, making a statement."

A bit further along, the Confederacy enters the historical picture with an 1861 flag that bears a circle of 12 stars, broad stripes, and a slogan: "God Armeth the Patriot." While 11 states seceded to form the Confederacy, the 12th star represents the slaveholding border state of Missouri, which Jefferson Davis, Confederate president, admitted to the fold in 1861.

The flag is an example of the Confederacy's first national flag, one of the actual "stars and bars," and not the battle flag that has been removed from state houses and public spaces as a racist symbol.

There was some discussion about whether to include the Confederate flag, said Skic. "The decision to display a Confederate flag in this exhibit," he said, "is because this is one of the conflicts that the American flag is going [through] during its history."

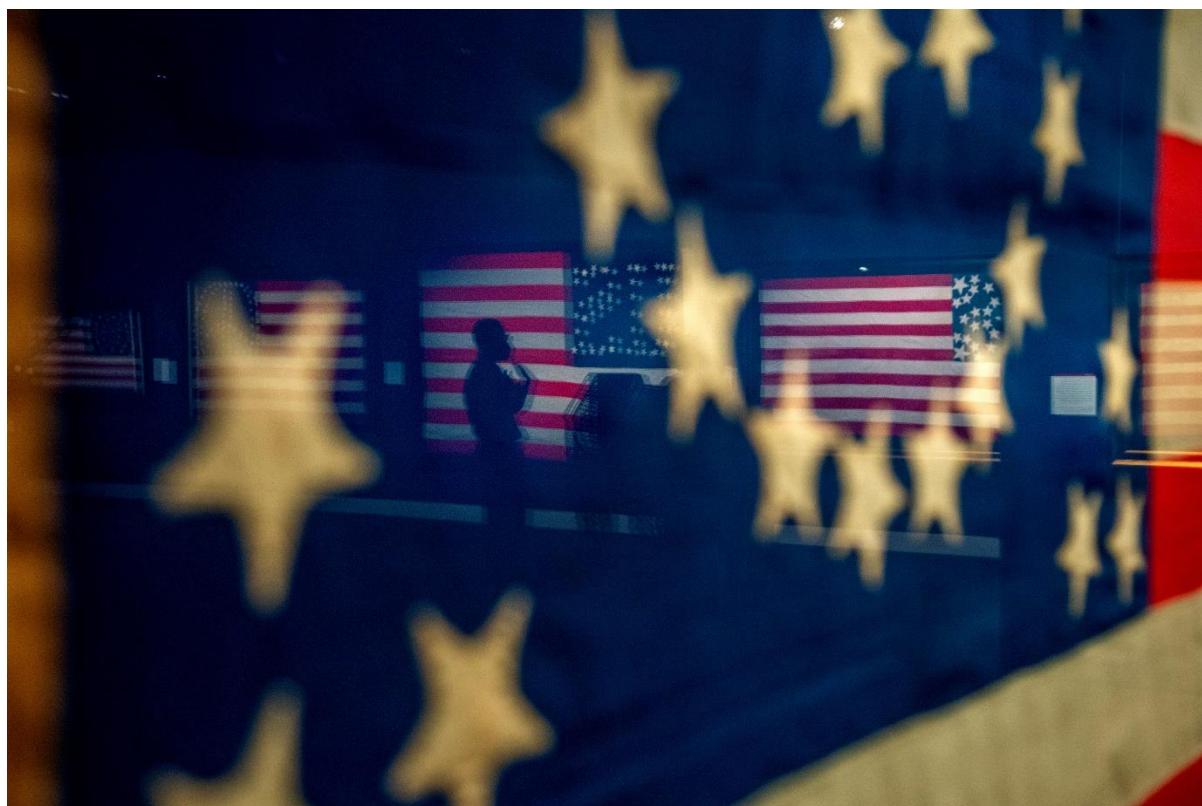
"Of course, the stars and bars is directly referring to the stars and stripes, and is in its form," he continued, a context the exhibition underscores. And before visitors encounter it, "we've already encountered a couple exclusionary flags that remove the southern states from the star counts."

When the Confederacy seceded, its leaders wrote their own constitution, modeled on the U.S. Constitution. "But the key difference is affirming and solidifying the institution of slavery in those states," said Skic. "We thought it important to include a Confederate flag in this because this is part of that story."

The tensions and contradictions evident between all these flags are just as present in the exhibit's 43 historic documents on loan from the collection of the Dorothy Tapper Goldman Foundation.

On view, for instance, is the Pennsylvania Abolition Society's first constitution, written in 1787 to codify its organizational structure and mission: "promoting the abolition of slavery, and the relief of free Negroes unlawfully held in bondage." The society proclaimed its duty "to promote each other's happiness, as members of the same family, however diversified they may be, by color, situation, religion, or different states of society."

A little further along the wall, past the abolitionist flag and before a visitor reaches the Confederate flag, the infamous Supreme Court Dred Scott decision is on display. In the opinion of Chief Justice Roger Taney, Blacks could never be citizens of the nation.



Staffers at the Museum of the American Revolution are reflected in the glass of one of 43 historic flags. TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

The exhibition also brings together many early state constitutions that show how Jews were excluded in the emerging nation. States routinely barred them from holding political office.

There is also copy of the 1837 Choctaw Constitution, written after the state of Mississippi and the federal government seized ancestral tribal lands and forced the nation to relocate to Oklahoma.

There are no Choctaw flags in the exhibit, but the wrenching history of the relations between imperial settlers and Indigenous peoples comes through.

Flags, so often used to give a gloss of dime-store patriotism, really reflect the nation's robust imperial adventures throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. One of the last flags dates from the Vietnam War era and features the stars arranged as an international symbol of peace.

"Progress is not necessarily linear in the history of this nation," said Skic. "These are important realizations that this is the story. The United States is not just climbing a mountain towards getting better and better. It's been an up and down roller coaster for Americans over the decades."

Adrienne Whaley, the museum's director of education and community engagement, said the disparate flags and documents do not present the nation's story in "a direct linear path in the way that you might expect, if maybe what you have been raised with is a mythological perspective of the American nation."



Matthew Skic, curator of exhibitions, and Adrienne Whaley, director of education and community engagement, pose at the Museum of the American Revolution as they prepare a display of historic flags. To the left, behind them, is a flag with 81 stars arranged to form the dates 1776 and 1876 that was made for the Centennial International Exposition of 1876 in Philadelphia. 38 of the stars form the 1776, which reflects the addition of Colorado in 1876 as the 38th state. TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

"We know that sometimes we take steps forward and then we take steps back when it comes to sort of reaching or living up to some of the ideals that we've set as an American nation," she said. "So you're gonna see that through the course of this exhibit. But we're going to be asking people to grapple with that further with, for example, our Juneteenth Celebration."

Whaley added: "We carry a through line from Juneteenth all the way through July 4 when we're asking people to think about what does freedom mean? What does equality mean? What does liberty mean? How do we maintain these things?"

Whaley also noted that the museum has now instituted a free membership program for anyone who has a Pennsylvania Access Card.

A "guest book" with signatures of those who have viewed a rare, original copy of the first public printing of the Constitution, published by John Dunlap and David Claypoole, including, at left, Ed Rendell, Bill Clinton, and Jimmy Carter. At the center is John Lewis, and three names above him is Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The guest book and the rare printing are on view in an exhibition at the Museum of the American Revolution. TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

