



PHOTO: Jess Kraft/Shutterstock

A curious chronicle of peculiar pennants.

Here's a piece of minutiae for all you trivia buffs: the study of flags is called *vexillology*, from the Latin word *vexillum*, a banner carried by ancient Roman cavalry.

In 2001, the North American Vexillological Association (NAVA) invited flag nerds everywhere to weigh in on U.S. and Canadian flag designs. These vexillologists voiced vehement views over various vexilla (try saying *that* three times fast). They decried the uninspiring “seal-on-a-bedsheet” patterns—usually set against a blue background—found on so many of them (the standings are listed here, although to be fair, last-place Georgia has since redesigned its standard).

Behind these emblem assessments, though, are unusual tales of their creation and history.



CALIFORNIA REPUBLIC

PHOTO: Donald Graeme Kelley Vectorization: Devin Cook [Public domain] / Wikimedia Commons

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California

The first version of this state's easily-recognized Bear Flag was raised in 1846 in Sonoma—then controlled by Mexico—declaring California an independent republic. The banner was modified and adopted as the state's official banner in 1911, with its final version set in 1953. The “poster bear” for that one was a grizzly named Monarch, captured at the behest of publicity-hungry newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. Monarch spent his years behind bars at San Francisco's bygone Woodward's Gardens and later at Golden Gate Park. His taxidermied remains are stored at the California Academy of Sciences.



PHOTO: Commonwealth of Virginia [Public domain] / Wikimedia Commons

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Virginia

You'll be shocked—scandalized, even!—to learn that the Commonwealth of Virginia's flag features nudity. Despite its partially-naked figure, the goddess Virtus, it's positioned low in NAVA's survey. Virtus stands depicted as a warrior victorious over the fallen character of Tyranny. One of her breasts is exposed, as in the classic Greek and Roman illustration of mythical Amazonian women. And to think that the seal was designed by a signer of the Declaration of Independence, George Wythe. Tsk, tsk.



PHOTO: User:.... [Public domain] / Wikimedia Commons

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Louisiana

Speaking of breasts, the Pelican State depicts its namesake bird vulning, a term perhaps unfamiliar to most. The word means to wound oneself by biting at one's breast, which in medieval times was how pelicans were thought to feed their young. The flag shows a mama tearing at her chest, which shows three drops of blood, hovering over a trio of nested chicks. This, evidently, indicates Louisiana's willingness to give of herself for the sake of her inhabitants. Unfortunately, they still have to pay taxes.



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Alaska

Listen up, all you slacker teens: get off your phones and design a flag already. Thirteen-year-old Benny Benson did (okay, so cell phones weren't invented yet, but still). This seventh-grade Alaska Native won a contest sponsored by the Alaskan American Legion in 1927. His inspiration came from the Big Dipper, aka the Great Bear, symbolizing Alaska's strength, and its North Star, for its future and northernmost location in the country. The background epitomized the Territory's azure sky as well as the commonly-found forget-me-not (now the state flower). NAVA's survey takers awarded the flag the #5 spot.



PHOTO: John Eisenmann, SVG code by SiBr4 [Public domain] / Wikimedia Commons

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Ohio

For 99 years after admission to the Union (a dispute over the actual date which wasn't settled until the Eisenhower administration), Ohio didn't have a state flag. When it did get one, it was distinctive. Ohio has the only U.S. pennant that's not rectangular, but a swallowtail, or burgee, design. The "O" references the state's first letter as well as its nickname, the Buckeye State. As you might imagine, folding the flag was tricky. Youth, again, came to the rescue: a teen earned Eagle Scout rank by developing a symbolic technique that became state law in 2005.

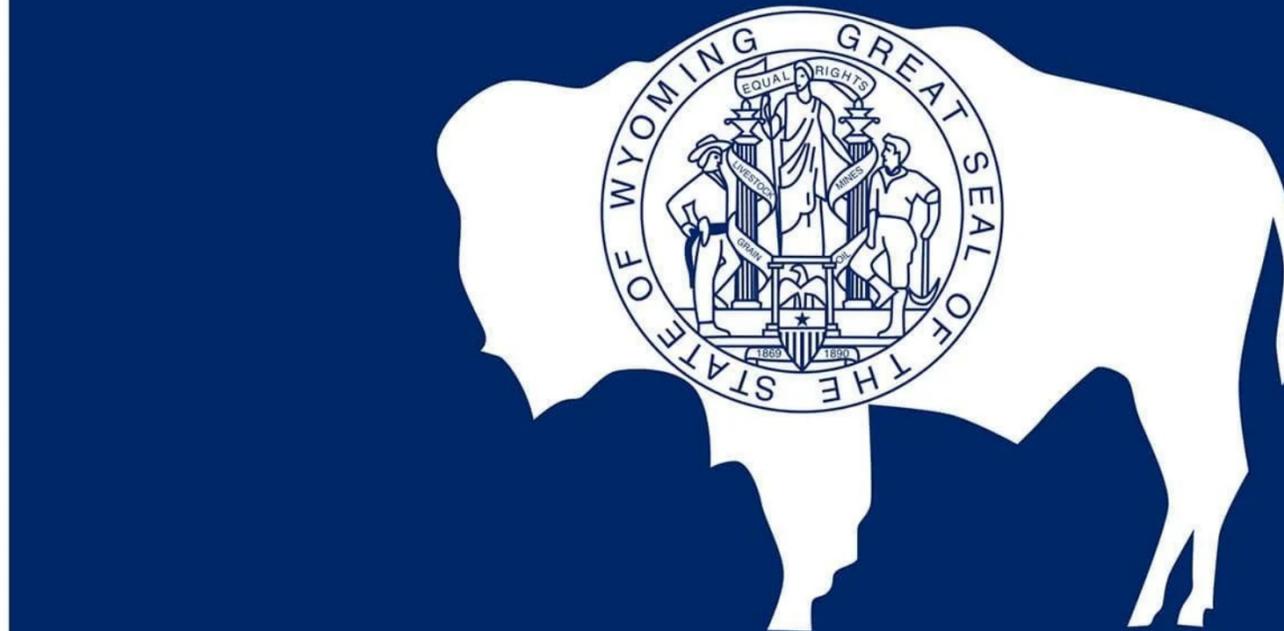


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Wyoming

Score another one for creative young people. For 30 years after it became a state, Wyoming also put off producing a flag. The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) state chapter decided to end the disgrace with a competition in 1917. Twenty-three-year-old art school graduate Verna Keays claimed she woke up with the winning design fully formed in her head. The white bison branded with the state seal originally looked outward, but University of Wyoming professor, suffragist, and DAR regent Dr. Grace Raymond Hebard suggested the animal should face into the wind instead. Although the change was never formally approved, the bison today does indeed stand nose-to-pole.



PHOTO: Xrmap Flag Collection [Public Domain] / Wikimedia Commons

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North Carolina

North Carolina's first flag, designed in 1861, recorded not just the date of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, a document supposedly signed by a group of that county's inhabitants, asserting freedom from Great Britain, but also the day the state withdrew from the Union. Historians now label that text a fraud, yet May 20, 1775, remains on the Tar Heel State's flag. The secession date, however, has been replaced with a less controversial one: April 12, 1776, when a statewide resolution calling for independence from England was adopted.



PHOTO: User:-xfi- [CC0, Public Domain] / Wikimedia Commons

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District of Columbia

Okay, not a state, but still part of the U.S. In 2014, the D.C. voter guide came out with the District's flag printed upside down. When asked about the mistake, the Board of Elections offered up a "we meant to do that" explanation, describing it as "a conscious ploy to generate voter interest in the election," according to the [Washington Post](#). Later the Board [admitted](#), "Well, we messed up. BIG time," while assuring the public the rest of the guide's information was correct.



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Tennessee

Inverted flags seem to be a persistent problem. In the Volunteer State, residents have to be reminded just how to fly their flag properly: the trio of stars, denoting the state's "Grand Divisions" of West, Middle, and East, are supposed to be displayed at the quirky clock positions of 10:30, 2:30, and 6:30. If the state's own denizens have trouble getting it right, is it any wonder the Postal Service did, too? On its 1976 Bicentennial commemorative stamp series of state flags, the USPS turned the emblem oopsie-daisy. The agency redeemed itself with its 2011 Flags of Our Nation: Tennessee Forever stamp.



PHOTO: Denelson83 [Public Domain] / Wikimedia Commons

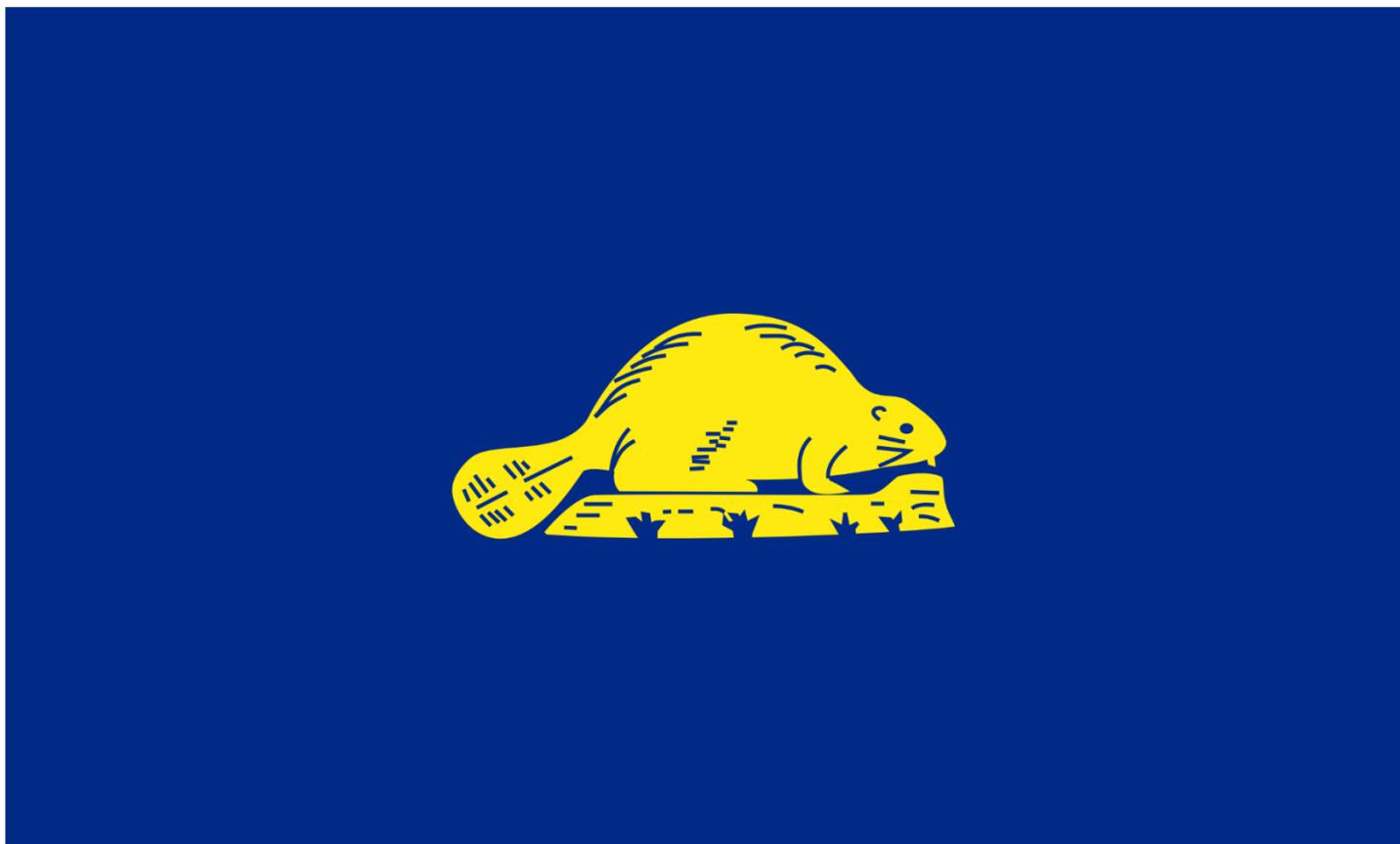


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Oregon

Oregon is the lone state with a flag exhibiting different images on either side. On the front is the shield from the state seal, along with the year Oregon achieved statehood. The reverse portrays the state animal, the beaver, in gold. Even with this distinction, NAVA survey respondents didn't think very highly of the flag—it ranked #62 out of 72. But residents don't seem to give a hoot. When The Oregonian presented entries for a flag redesign in honor of the state's 2009 sesquicentennial, "None" received the most votes. A 2013 state senate bill to make changes died in committee. Guess they got the hint.



PHOTO: Denelson83 [Public domain] / Wikimedia Commons

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South Dakota

For a long time, the Mount Rushmore State declared itself the Sunshine State on its flag, something Floridians undoubtedly didn't take kindly to. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [sunlight data tracker](#) for 1979-2011, this northern state falls short in average daily kilojoules of solar radiation per square meter compared to the state much farther south that claims the same nickname. So while South Dakota's flag's ubiquitous state-seal-on-a-blue-backdrop still shows the sun and its rays, in 1992 it traded the confusing slogan for the moniker of its most famous landmark. Good thing—otherwise snowbirds might get mixed up and head *there* for the winter.