George Washington and the Origin of the Arms and Flag of the United States. *Joseph McMillan writes*: Paul A. Fox's article [CoA no.236 (2019) pp. 60–83] offers a novel approach to the age-old question of whether and how the personal arms of George Washington influenced the design of the flag and arms of the United States. The two most interesting and original theses in the article are:

A.That the red and white colours of the striped field of the American flag derive from the tinctures of Washington's personal arms.
B.That the union of the American flag adopted by Congress in June 1777, thirteen white stars on a blue field, was taken from Washington's headquarters flag.

This is a refreshing change from traditional versions of how the American flag must have derived from the Washington arms, which can be summarized as 'They both have stars and stripes, QED.'[1] Nevertheless, as innovative as Dr Fox's hypotheses are, they are without any compelling foundation and, indeed, are based on several incorrect assumptions.

The Public Stature of George Washington, 1775–1782 Dr Fox's argument that Washington must necessarily have had a role in the design of the U.S. flag and arms rests in part on the contention that both national symbols 'were approved at a time when George Washington was the effective leader of his nation.' Unfortunately, the formula 'at a time when…' effectively compresses seven highly eventful years into a single moment. By the time the Confederation Congress approved the seal and arms of the United States in June 1782, eight months after the decisive victory at Yorktown, there can be no dispute that Washington was far and away the republic's preeminent figure, but this was certainly not the case when decisions were taken on the key elements of the flag's design, the red and white stripes (November-December 1775) and the blue canton with white stars (June 1777).[2] As to the coat of arms, since every known proposal drawn up after the adoption of the flag was unmistakably derived from the flag,[3] it follows that shaping the design of the arms would require Washington to have first shaped the design of the flag.

If we recognize that ascribing Washington a paramount role in governing the new country during the period 1775–1777 is anachronistic, then logically any influence he might have exerted over the design of the flag must have been by virtue of his official duties as commander in chief of the Continental Army. Let us turn, then, to the circumstances in which the critical design choices were made and whether Washington could plausibly have been responsible for them.

[1] Fox also discusses the possible influence of masonic symbolism on the design of the U.S. seal. The opposing case can be found in R. S. Patterson and D. Richardson, *The Eagle and the Shield* (Washington, 1978) pp.529–532.

[2] The exaggeration of Washington's prominence and influence beyond the military realm during the early years of the Revolution reflects Fox's reliance on Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency* (New York, 2004), which contains multiple such assertions, few if any of them substantiated.

[3] Patterson and Richardson pp.35–43, 56–70, 74–81, 109.

The 'Grand Union' (*recte* Continental) Flag[4] The Continental flag, a field of thirteen red and white stripes with the British Union emblem in the upper hoist, was first hoisted in early December 1775 aboard the *Alfred,* the flagship of the Continental Navy that had been authorized by Congress on 13 October. Dr Fox posits that it was General Washington who chose the colours of the stripes on this flag, deriving them from the tinctures of his own arms. He frames the issue by stating (p. 62), 'It is not known who designed the Union Flag [*sic*], but Congress did not involve itself in this military matter, and the only other authority was that of the commander in chief of the army.' While the first clause of the statement is correct – the designer of the Continental flag is unknown – the other two are not.

To address the second assertion first, it is not true that Washington, the commander in chief of the Continental Army, was also in charge of the Continental Navy. It is easy to see how one might get that impression from James Thomas Flexner's description of Washington's manning of the armed schooner *Hannah* on 2 September 1775 as 'inaugurating the American navy.'[5] In fact, however, the maritime force Washington created to support his operations around Boston was emphatically an element of the army and remained so even after the establishment of the Continental Navy.[6] That the Continental Navy was not placed under Washington's authority was a conscious decision by Congress, stemming in part from emulation of the British model and in part from concerns about the risk of concentrating power in the hands of a single military commander.[7] The two services had separate personnel cadres, rules and regulations, and chains of command and reported to two different Congressional committees. The navy's commander in chief, Commodore Esek Hopkins had no authority over Washington's flotilla off the New England coast and Washington, conversely, had none over the fleet Hopkins was forming in Delaware Bay. The Continental flag was adopted specifically for the latter.

Reverting to the first assertion, to say that Congress was not involved in the development of the flag is to misunderstand that body's working methods. While major policy decisions were addressed by Congress as a whole, implementation was handled by committees established for specific purposes. The Naval Committee, created by the same resolution that authorized the Continental Navy itself,[8] combined on a more modest scale the functions of the British Admiralty and Navy Office. Among other things, it selected and assigned officers, supervised the acquisition and arming of ships, purchased supplies, promulgated regulations, determined strategic and operational objectives, and issued sailing orders to accomplish those objectives.

[4] The misleading term 'Grand Union' was not applied to this flag until 1853. Contemporaries referred to it as the Continental flag, colours, or ensign or, some months later, as the American flag. See P. Ansoff, 'The Flag on Prospect Hill,' *The Raven,* vol 13 (2006) p.89.

[5] J. T. Flexner, *George Washington in the American Revolution* (Boston, 1968) p. 53.

[6] As made clear in Washington's instructions to the commander of his first armed vessel, *Hannah,* as well as in similar instructions to commanders of other vessels, including well after the creation of the Continental Navy. See Washington to Capt Nicholson Broughton, 2 Sept 1775, *Founders Online,* National Archives.

[7] G. C. Daughan, *If by Sea* (New York, 2008) pp. 49–51.

[8] Resolution of 13 Oct 1775, *Journals of the Continental Congress,* 3 (Washington, 1905) pp.293–94.

On 5 January 1776, this committee delegated to Esek Hopkins the authority 'to devise or adopt…such signals and other marks and distinctions as may be necessary,'[9] 'marks and distinctions' generally referring to a warship's ensign, jack, and command flag or pennant. To some degree, this was retroactive validation of what Hopkins had already done a month before, but it should not be inferred that he had been acting at any time without the committee's knowledge and at least tacit approval. This is demonstrated by records of the committee's payment of supplier's bills for ensigns, jacks, and other flags and pennants (some of them described in sufficient detail to be identifiable as the Continental colors)[10] and by one member's letter to the authorities of a state where the fleet was intended to operate, in which he describes the appearance of the Continental ensign.[11]

These points alone should suffice to rebut the notion that Washington must have influenced, or would have been in a position to approve, the design of the Continental flag. One other piece of generally accepted history associating Washington with this flag must also be addressed, however, namely his alleged raising of it on Prospect Hill outside Boston on 1 January 1776, often interpreted to imply his sanction of the design.

In 2006, the flag scholar Peter Ansoff dropped a bombshell at the annual meeting of the North American Vexillological Association by presenting a compelling case that the flag Washington ordered hoisted on Prospect Hill was not the striped Continental flag at all but rather precisely what Washington and two other eyewitnesses said it was: the 'Union Flag.' This was a term so familiar as to require no explanation. It invariably referred, then as now, to the flag with the combined crosses representing the component parts of the United Kingdom. As Ansoff argues, had the flag raised on Prospect Hill been anything other than what Washington called it, the fact surely would have been highlighted by the two British observers who wrote about it at the time, using the same term to describe it. Moreover, Washington's statement that the British and their loyalist supporters in Boston had misconstrued the display as an expression of submission to the crown (rather than, as he intended it, a compliment to the unity of the colonies) would make no sense if what was flown had been something other than a well-known and unmistakably British emblem.[12]

Conversely, if the Prospect Hill flag had indeed been the striped Continental colours, this would be the only occasion on record that that flag was ever described simply as 'a Union Flag.' No one – British or American, naval or civilian – who left an account of seeing the new flag flying on a ship or fortress in the ensuing months fails to mention the stripes, the flag's most distinctive element. These include 'English Colours but more Striped;'[13] 'thirteen Stripes of Red and White alternately, with the English Union

[9] 'Orders and Directions for the Commander in Chief of the Fleet of the United Colonies,' *Naval Documents of the American Revolution,* 3 (Washington, 1968) 637 (hereafter *NDAR*).

[10] *NDAR* vol.3 pp.1205, 1377 ff.

[11] Richard Henry Lee to the Virginia Convention, bef 23 Dec 1775, P. H. Smith, ed, *Letters of Delegates to Congress,* 2 (Washington, 1977) pp.543–44.

[12] Ansoff, 83–86. See also his rebuttal to a critique of the original paper, 'The Flag on Prospect Hill: A Response to Byron DeLear,' *The Raven,* vol.22 (2015) pp. 1–26.

[13] Report from a British source in Philadelphia, 4 Jan 1776, *NDAR* vol. 3 p.615.

cantoned in the corner;'[14] and 'red and white striped, with a Union next the Staff,'[15] among others. If Ansoff is correct, as he almost certainly is, Washington can hardly be said to have given his imprimatur to a flag he did not hoist.

In summary, there is no contemporary evidence that Washington had a role in the design of the Continental flag and no reason he should have. The only reasonable conclusion, therefore, is that the presence of Washington's red and white livery colours in the striped field of the new flag is indeed pure coincidence. We cannot know for sure, but it seems likely that the design of this flag was a product of an interaction between an established flag culture (shared by all English-speaking mariners), political considerations, and expediency. For longer than anyone could remember, an ensign in the English-speaking world had consisted of a field, varying in colour and pattern depending on the user, and a 'union,' a term deriving from the placement of the royal Union emblem in the upper hoist corner.[16] Producing flags with white stripes added to the field of the British red ensign would have been a relatively simple process and would suffice to differentiate the new flag from those flown by the Royal Navy and British merchant ships. The retention of the British Union was expressive of the official American position at the time, that the colonies' quarrel was with the king's ministers, not the king himself.

The New Constellation Dr Fox's second major thesis is that the union of the American flag, thirteen white stars on a blue field, derived from Washington's personal command flag and ultimately from his use of a light blue ribbon or sash as the insignia of his military rank. The logic offered is that Washington's 'go-ahead [for the design] would have been mandatory in May 1777 prior to Congressional approval' (p. 68), because (a) Washington was the paramount leader of the country, and (b) the Marine Committee of Congress was answerable to him. The first premise would seem to be equally unfounded for 1777 as for 1775, and the second is demonstrably incorrect. Just as with the Continental colors, the new flag was exclusively a naval concern at the time it was adopted, even though both flags later made their way ashore into non-naval contexts. As in 1775 Washington still had no authority over the navy, and certainly none over any committee of Congress. In short, the design of the Stars and Stripes, like the design of the Continental flag, was simply none of General Washington's business.[17]

Even if we cling to the notion that Washington simply *must* have been involved in such a momentous question, for his command flag to have been the inspiration for the union in the Stars and Stripes it must have been in use (and known to the Marine Committee) by June 1777. No contemporary document has ever been found even

[14] Ambrose Searle (secretary to VAdm Lord Howe) describing the flag flying over Governor's Island, N.Y., 25 Jul 1776, *NDAR* vol.5 p.1217.

[15] Capt John Chapman, HMS *Shark*, to VAdm James Young, [29] Jul 1776, reporting an engagement with the Continental brig *Reprisal*, *NDAR* vol.5 p.128.

[16] T. Wilson, *Flags at Sea* (Annapolis, 1986) pp. 15–26.

[17] Washington no longer had his own 'navy' at this point. After his army was driven out of New York in September 1776 and Benedict Arnold's naval squadron on Lake Champlain was destroyed the following month, Washington had transferred his remaining vessels to the Continental Navy. Flexner, op.cit.p.54.

mentioning the existence of a command or headquarters flag,[18] but let us suppose for the sake of argument that such a flag was indeed employed to show Washington's location on the battlefield. The only evidence for its existence prior to the adoption of the Stars and Stripes is James Peale's 1782–83 painting of the Battle of Princeton, which was fought in January 1777.

Recognizing the logical difficulty of proving something alleged to have taken place in 1777 based on a painting created more than five years later, Dr Fox offers the following argument. First, he notes that James Peale, then a captain in the Continental Army, was personally present at Princeton and therefore 'must have been very well familiar with Washington's command flag' (p. 68). He also contends that James (unlike his elder brother, Charles Willson Peale) was meticulous about accurate depiction of military accoutrements such as uniforms, insignia, and flags as of the time of the event portrayed. He then points out that the stars on the command flag on James Peale's painting are arranged in straight rows, rather than in the circular arrangement found on most post-war depictions of the flag. Because the stars are also arrayed in rows on the artifact traditionally known as the Valley Forge headquarters flag (so called because it is alleged to have flown over Washington's headquarters tent during the army's 1777–1778 winter encampment at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania), Dr Fox concludes that this was the 'correct' format for 1777. James Peale's obvious awareness of this pattern therefore supports the historical accuracy of his placing the flag at the Princeton fight.

There are two flaws in this reasoning. First, the authenticity of the Valley Forge flag has been the subject of serious skepticism for more than 40 years. As early as 1981, a Smithsonian Institution textile expert examined the piece and concluded that it had been cut from a larger flag, probably a late 18th century Stars and Stripes.[19] (Dr Fox agrees that it was cut down, but seems to suppose that what remains is the central element of the larger all-blue flag shown in the James Peale painting.) More recently, David Martucci has determined that the piece is hemmed along the upper and fly edges but not the other two, which would be inconsistent with its having been cut on all four sides, as Fox implies. Martucci suggests that it is actually the canton from a regimental colour dating to the latter stages of the war (see below).[20] But the more fundamental issue is that, even if the Valley Forge flag is what it purports to be, its display at Valley Forge could not have begun before the army arrived at Valley Forge on 19 December 1777, six months after the adoption of the flag resolution. This makes it somewhat less compelling as evidence for the display of a similar flag at a battle that took place a year earlier.

Dr Fox's assessment of James Peale's meticulous accuracy concerning details of military regalia might also be questioned, given that in three portraits he produced of Washington at Yorktown, one depicts the stars on the general's epaulettes with six points, another with five, and the third with no stars at all. Taking that into account, and conceding that the artist probably did not invent out of whole cloth (as it were) the

[18] E. P. Williams, Jr, 'The "Fancy Work" of Francis Hopkinson: Did He Design the Stars and Stripes?' *Prologue* 19.1 (Spring 1987) p.51.

[19] W. R. Furlong and B. McCandless, *So Proudly We Hail* (Washington, 1981) p.119 fn.

[20] D. Martucci, "Actually a canton?", *Flags of the World*, 'George Washington's Personal Position Flag,' 11 Aug 2010, <https://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/us-washi.html#cant>.

flag he showed being carried beside Washington at Princeton, is it not conceivable that James first saw the flag borne at a later battle in which he also participated – such as Brandywine, Germantown, or Monmouth – and either intentionally or through a lapse of memory (five or six years after the fact) placed it at Princeton as well?

In summary, the available evidence is inadequate to conclude with any reasonable degree of confidence that Washington's command flag existed before Congress approved the design of the Stars and Stripes. Rather than piling speculation upon speculation, it makes more sense simply to accept the view, now almost universally accepted, that the blue union charged with a "new constellation" was the work of Francis Hopkinson, as Hopkinson himself claimed and no one at the time disputed.[21] As Hopkinson left no explanation of what inspired the design, we will undoubtedly never know, but there is no foundation for attributing it to George Washington. If Washington had actually played a role in the process – despite there being no reason for him to do so – some contemporary record of the fact would surely exist.

Did Washington Really Care About Flag Design? An unstated premise of Dr Fox's case is that Washington was sufficiently interested in the design of flags to insist on having a say in the matter. As we have seen, there is no evidence that he was involved in the selection of flags for the Continental Navy, either in 1775 or 1777, nor any reason he should have been. But there were cases in which Washington could have legitimately dictated flag designs and indeed, had he chosen to do so, mandated the inclusion of references to his personal arms. These were:

1. His own command flag,
2. The ensign of the 'navy' he created in September 1775, and
3. The colours and standards of units of the Continental Army.

There is no evidence of serious involvement or even interest on Washington's part in connection with any of these. We have already addressed the first case; let us turn to the other two. The distinctive mark adopted by Washington's 'navy' was a white flag with a green pine tree and the motto 'An Appeal to Heaven.' It was first used by the army's floating batteries on the Charles River and adopted by Washington's seagoing vessels based on a 20 October 1775 letter from his secretary, Colonel Joseph Reed, directing the captains of two of those vessels to choose 'some particular Colour for a Flag.' Reed suggested that they consider the flag already in use by the floating batteries, which he described, but emphasized that this was only a suggestion; the decision was up to the captains themselves. There is no implication that the matter needed to be referred back to Washington or even to Reed himself.[22] In the event, Reed's suggestion was accepted. The actual use of this flag is confirmed by British records.[23]

As to unit standards and colours, Dr Fox notes the general order of 20 February 1776 in which Washington ordered that each regiment and grand division (a subunit

[21] Williams op.cit.p. 49.

[22] Col Joseph Reed to Cols John Glover and Stephen Moylan, 20 Oct 1775, *NDAR* vol.2 p.538. This flag was never used by the Continental Navy.

[23] *NDAR* vol. 3 pp. 64, 482, 488–9.

of a regiment) should have a flag and that, 'if it can be done,' its colour ought to 'bear some kind of similitude to the Uniform of the regiment.' Washington also directed that the flags should be marked with the number of the regiment 'and such a Motto, as the Colonel [of the regiment] may choose.' Beyond that, the design was left to the colonels and their respective brigadiers, the commander in chief apparently caring more that the flags exist than what they looked like. Similarly, Washington's only contribution to the Board of War's September 1779 recommendation for a new 'national standard' was to add the regimental number.

Paul A. Fox responds: I am grateful to my learned friend and confrere Joseph McMillan (JM) for highlighting potential difficulties in my paper on the evolution of the arms of the United States of America, thus affording me the opportunity to elaborate a little further on this important topic, and to correct some small errors. In order to nourish one sacred cow in American vexillology, the contention that George Washington had no involvement whatsoever in the development of *the Stars and Stripes*, JM has happily sacrificed another, which is the long held consensus that as commander of the armed forces Washington flew the new flag of the Continental Congress with the red and white stripes at Bunker Hill in Boston on 5th January 1776. He cites Peter Ansoff's controversial theory that the General flew the British Union Jack and not the Continental flag on that memorable day, omitting to mention that Ansoff has himself since accepted as a tenable interpretation of the available evidence that the Union Jack might have been flown above the Continental flag (referred to in a naval document of 1776 as the Union flag with 13 stripes[24]).[25]

I accept JM's argument that Washington had no direct involvement with the raising of the same flag on the *Alfred* in Philadelphia harbour on 3rd December 1775, but the two flag raising events cannot be unconnected. There must have been an agreement reached to adopt this flag prior to December 1775, encompassing a five month period following Washington's appointment as commander-in-chief of the army. Since the flag was not selected by Congress, nor was any congressional committee involved in its creation at that time (and the committees kept detailed records) we must consider by what sort of process a shared understanding was reached between the army and the navy, especially as Esek Hopkins was not appointed as commander of the navy until 22nd December 1775.

It is frustrating that no known correspondence has survived concerning flag design, but private discussions must have been taking place, and George Washington must have been in the loop. The army was at that time the most important user of flags, and the navy, with the exception of Washington's own vessels, had not yet come into being. Washington was not himself in Philadelphia after 23rd June 1775, and could not personally have participated in any such debate. Given the absence of any surviving letters on the topic in his voluminous published correspondence, the only time point at which the General had the opportunity to discuss the new flag with representatives of Congress was when Dr Benjamin Franklin visited him at Cambridge, Massachusetts for five days between

[24] NDAR vol 3 p.1205.

[25] Peter Ansoff,'The flag on Prospect Hill:a response to Byron DeLear', *Raven* vol 22 (2015)pp.1–26(7).

18th and 24th October 1775.[26] A discussion of flags was not officially minuted at this conference, but a tradition or belief that flags were discussed on this occasion led to a fictionalised account of the conversation being published in 1890.[27] The flag design can only have originated from one of two directions, either from Washington's own command team, or from members of Congress meeting in private in Philadelphia. In either case the link man was Benjamin Franklin. Just as in Westminster, where many important matters of government were debated and decided by MPs in private discussion within the city's gentlemens' clubs, in Philadelphia the equivalent place where the army, the navy and members of Congress came together were the city's Masonic lodges. Both Washington and Franklin were prominent Masons. Had discussions taken place inside the Masonic lodges, given their inherent secrecy we would not expect an account to be preserved. That Benjamin Franklin played a pivotal role in the creation of the later arms of the United States cannot be denied, he being one of the three men given overall responsibility for it, but he left the design work to others. Both Francis Hopkinson and Pierre Eugène du Simitière were brought in as designers because they were friends of Franklin.

Since we don't know who designed the Continental Flag and how closely that person or persons was linked to the General, it cannot be established to what extent his personal livery colours of red and white (the red bars on an argent field from his arms) might have influenced the design. It might be mere coincidence, as JM contends, but if so the true origins of the flag were quickly forgotten, and some of those involved in the design of the new national arms almost certainly assumed a link with Washington's personal arms. This probably helped to ensure that the stripes were retained when the new national arms were approved, in 1782, a time when JM acknowledges that Washington was the preeminent figure in his nation.

Given the paucity of documentary evidence I attempted in my paper to interrogate other types of contemporary evidence. The work of artists who were themselves witnesses to Washington's campaigns has to be taken into consideration. The work of the Peale brothers who had both served in the army is of particular value because they show an evolution of military dress and of flag design over time. The interpretation of this evidence is made more difficult by the number of copies which they made of their own paintings, the originals having been drawn at different periods. James Peale's record of the Battle of Princeton, 3rd January 1777, must be considered as a compelling primary source. Contrary to what JM has stated, it is not known when it was painted, and it is only speculation that it might have been painted in around 1782. It could have been painted as early as the summer of 1779 when James Peale resigned his army commission[28], and when his brother Charles is known to have visited the battlefield of Princeton to make sketches for his own commissioned portrait of Washington. James depicted Washington's command flag of 1777 as a field of stars, while his brother Charles both in 1779 and 1783 painted the same flag as stars arranged in circle. If James was just painting the current flag used by the commander in chief he would surely have painted the same flag that

[26] An error on p.64 of my paper states that Thomas Jefferson represented Congress on this occasion.

[27] Robert Allen Campbell, *Our flag, or the evolution of the Stars and Stripes* (Chicago IL, 1890) pp. 35–49.

[28] Marjorie A. Walker,'James Peale (1749–1831)', *American National Biography*.

Charles was using. So we have two forms of Washington's command flag attested in the period 1777–79, of which the version with the stars in circle was undoubtedly the later. The change in design might well have been prompted by the formal adoption of the new national flag. It remains a perfectly tenable theory that the white stars on a blue field originated with Washington's personal command team.

There is no dispute between myself and JM that Francis Hopkinson 'designed' the *Stars and Stripes* in 1777, having joined the administration in 1776, but my contention is that this design required little creativity on his behalf because the precursor elements of the flag were already in existence, and both of those elements had been approved for use in the army by George Washington. Had they been imposed on Washington by Congress we would have some record of it. To suggest that he had' no interest in flags' given that he recorded the flag flying at Bunker Hill in his personal diary, and the following month issued a general directive on flags, is nonsense. His command position required him to have an interest, and the expression 'the flag' appears repeatedly in Washington's correspondence in 1775–6.[29] JM places great play on the fact that this was a purely naval matter, but this is simply a bias in perception, because Hopkinson worked for the Navy Board. The Navy did not come into existence until the very end of 1775 when the Continental or Grand Union Flag must already have been agreed.

[29] https://founders.archives.gov/about/Washington.

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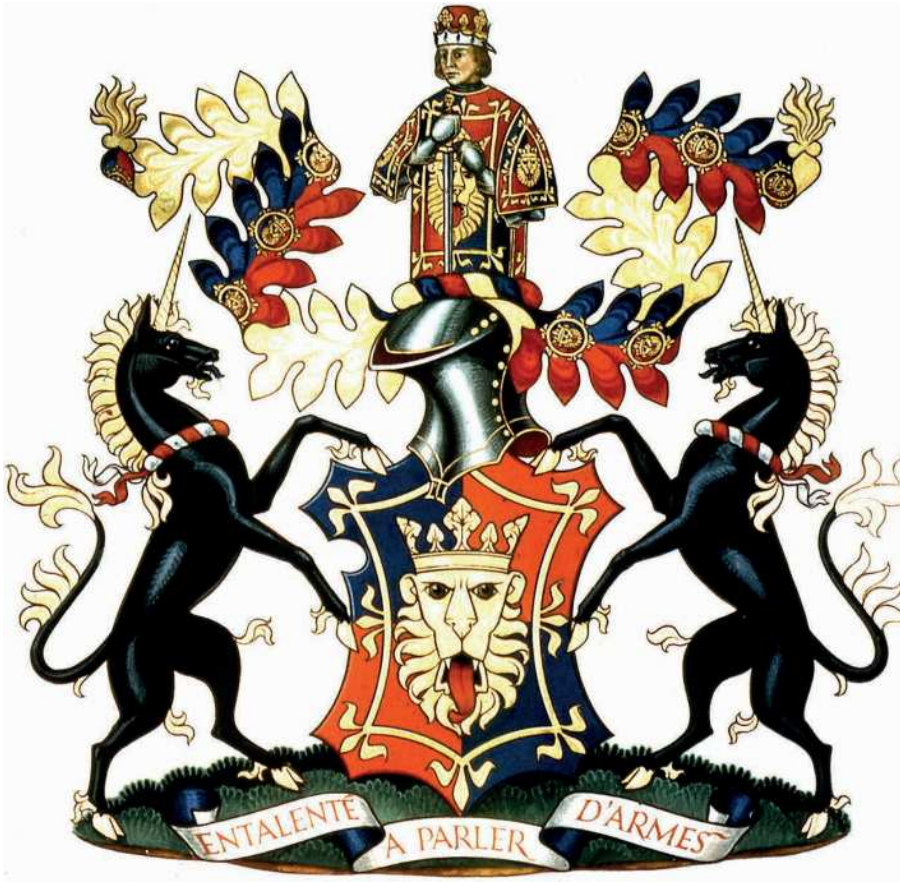

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