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A BRIEF HISTORY OF HERALDS AND HERALDIC ORGANIZATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA FOLLOWING INDEPENDENCE.

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In the summer of 1776, thirteen of the nineteen colonies of British North America declared their independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain, an independence recognized in the 1783 Treaty of Paris. Up until that time, American subjects of the British Crown had recourse to the College of Arms in London for grants of arms and heraldic advice. Following the 1776 Declaration of Independence, as Dom William Bayne has said, in America “the bearing of arms ... was set adrift to shift for itself.”¹

Beginning from that time and continuing to the present, I will offer a chronological look at some of the attitudes about the use of heraldry in the new republic, the books and articles that have been published regarding it, and the organizations that have been founded to educate, guide, or assist Americans in their use and creation of coats of arms. I will restrict my review to books and pamphlets published in the United States for a North American audience as it would fall outside the scope of this review to consider the various European armorials which are well-known and regularly referenced by American heraldists.

During the United States' War of Independence, five of the thirteen seceding former colonies assumed official arms: New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware in 1777, New York (**Figure 1**) in 1778, and Massachusetts in 1780. In 1782, a committee, the fourth established to do so, submitted a proposal which was accepted by the Continental Congress, creating a great seal for the United States with its coat of arms.² In 1783, following the end of the Revolutionary War, the Society of the Cincinnati was founded to perpetuate the remembrance of the achievement of American Independence, “to preserve inviolate those exalted rights and liberties of human nature,” and to render permanent the cordial affection subsisting among the officers of the Continental Army during the war. Its membership was largely restricted to those officers who had served in the Continental Army and their descendants. Because of that restriction, it received wide criticism as it was seen as an attempt at establishing a hereditary elite in the new republic, excluding as it did the enlisted men of the army and the officers and men of the militias. This criticism is important, as it affected the later response to the idea of establishing an official heraldic office in the U.S.

In 1788, William Barton, who had studied heraldry in England, and was a consultant on the third committee created to design a seal for the United States, published his *Concise Account of the Origin and Use of Coat Armour; with Some Observations on the Beneficial Purposes by which Heraldry May be Applied, in the United States of America*.³ In it, among other things, Barton proposed that a new officer, a “Herald-Marshall, be invested with the sole & exclusive right of registering, Marshalling and Confirming family Coats-of-Arms, etc. of granting them to those individuals to whom they might be decreed by Authority; and of recording Genealogies.”⁴

Later that same year, Barton wrote to George Washington, enclosing a copy of the treatise for his review, and said:

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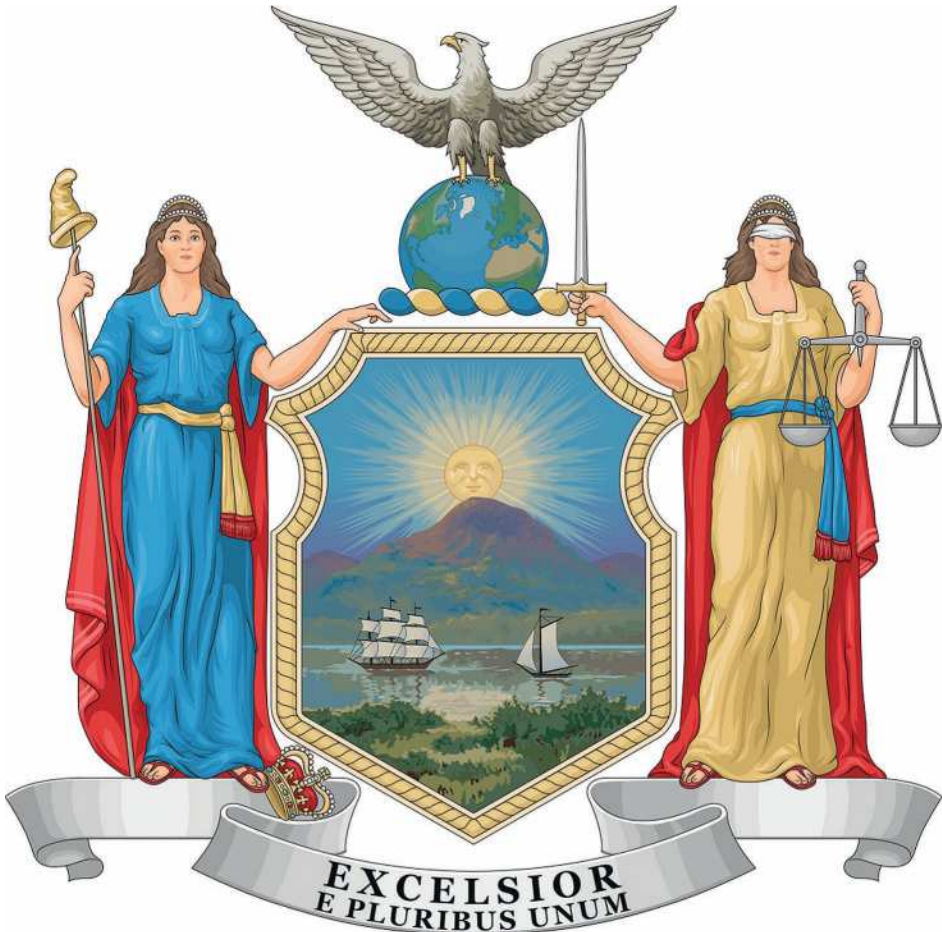


Figure 1: arms of the State of New York, 1778. The lower second motto was added in 2020. Wikimedia Commons.

“I have endeavoured, in my little tract, to obviate the prejudice which might arise in some minds, against Heraldry, as it may be supposed to favor the introduction of an improper distinction of ranks. The plan has, I am sure, no such tendency; but is founded on principles consonant to the purest spirit of Republicanism and our newly proposed Fœderal Constitution. I am conscious of no intention to facilitate the setting up of any thing like an order of Nobility, in this my native Land: far from my mind, is such a design.”⁵⁵

Part of Washington’s reply is often quoted:

“[I]t is far from my design to intimate an opinion, that heraldry, coat-armour, &c., might not be rendered conducive to public and private uses with us; or that they can have any tendency unfriendly to the purest spirit of republicanism. On the contrary, a different conclusion is deducible from the practice of Congress and the States; all of which have established some kind of Armorial Devices to authenticate their official instruments.”⁵⁶

But Washington further noted:

“I make these observations with the greater freedom, because I have once been a witness to what I conceived to have been a most unreasonable prejudice against an innocent institution, I mean the Society of the Cincinnati. I was conscious, that my own proceedings on that subject were immaculate. I was also convinced, that the members, actuated by motives of sensibility, charity, and patriotism, were doing a laudable thing, in erecting that memorial of their common services, sufferings, and friendships; and I had not the most remote suspicion, that our conduct therein would have been unprofitable, or displeasing, to our countrymen. Yet have we been virulently traduced, as to our designs; and I have not even escaped being represented as short-sighted in not foreseeing the consequences, or wanting in patriotism for not discouraging an establishment calculated to create distinctions in society, and subvert the principles of a republican government.”⁷

In 1814, still attempting to place the use and regulation of heraldry on a statutory footing, Barton published his *Observations on the Advantages to be derived from a proper use of Coats-of-Arms, in the United States*.⁸ In 1819, Washington’s belief “that heraldry, coat-armour, &c., might not be rendered conducive to public and private uses with us; or that they can have any tendency unfriendly to the purest spirit of republicanism”⁹ is counter-balanced by a quote from John Quincy Adams, later the sixth President of the United States, who wrote:

“..as there is no heraldry in the United States, seals-at-arms are an absurdity, used by a public officer of this country. I have used a seal-at-arms in Europe, as my father [John Adams] had done before me. [Indeed, his father used such a seal on the 1783 Treaty of Paris.] But so far as there is any significance in such seals, they are utterly inconsistent with our republican institutions. Arms are emblematical hereditary titles of honor, conferred by monarchs as badges of nobility or gentility, and are incompatible with that equality which is the fundamental principle of our Government”.¹⁰

And there, for the next three decades, the matter of heraldry in the United States sat quietly, until in 1851 T.W. Gwilt Mapleson published *A Hand-Book of Heraldry*, whose purpose was “to throw a little light on the subject of Heraldry generally, and to correct many preconceived notions concerning it, which are frequently entertained by persons in this country”.¹¹ This marks the early beginnings of a new era of interest in heraldry and armorial bearings. On February 3, 1864, in the middle of America’s ‘Great Civil War’, The New England Historic Genealogical Society’s (NEHGS) Committee on Heraldry was established to “collect and preserve information in regard to heraldry” and to otherwise deal with all matters to do with that subject for the Society. Its members included William H. Whitmore, Abner C. Goodell, Jr., Augustus T. Perkins, and William S. Appleton [no relation to me].

From 1865 through 1868, *The Heraldic Journal; Recording the Armorial Bearings and Genealogies of American Families*, was published in Boston, Massachusetts under the direction of the Committee of Publication, consisting of the same members as the Committee on Heraldry of the NEHGS.¹² *The Heraldic Journal* can thus be seen as “a quasi-official first publication of the Committee” on Heraldry.¹³ In 1866, William H. Whitmore, an active member of both the NEHGS’ Committee on Heraldry and the Committee of Publication, published the book *The Elements of Heraldry*, subtitled *An explanation of the principles of the science and a glossary of the technical terms employed and with an essay upon the use of coat-armor in the United States*.¹⁴ Next, in July 1868,

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Whitmore published his pamphlet “reasons for the regulation of the use of coat armor in the United States, including a plan for taxing the employment of such insignia.”¹⁵ This proposal was further explained and propounded by him in the September 1868 issue of *The Historical Magazine*.¹⁶

If the publication of books on heraldry can be taken as an indication of a general enthusiasm for the subject, the 1880s began an era of explosive interest. In 1886, *Dame Heraldry* was published by an author known only by his initials, F.S.W., with the aim of introducing heraldry to young people.¹⁷ The following year E. de V. Vermont published *America Heraldica: A Compilation of Coats of Arms, Crests and Mottoes of Prominent American Families Settled in This Country Before 1800*.¹⁸ From the next decade we have Eugene Zieber’s seminal work, *Heraldry in America* (1895)¹⁹, Edward S. Holden’s *A Primer of Heraldry for Americans* (1898)²⁰, and the NEHGS’s *Report of the Committee on Heraldry* (1899). The Report included, among other things, the recommendation that, “As there is no person and no institution in the United States with authority to regulate the use of ... coat[s] of arms, your Committee discourages their display in any way or form.”²¹

In October 1900, an article entitled ‘Who May Bear a Coat-of-Arms in America’ was published in the monthly magazine *The Spirit of '76*, which was reprinted into a 12-page booklet that same year.²² Countering the advice of the Committee on Heraldry, their answer was “Everyone.” The first decade of the twentieth century saw no diminution in heraldic interest. It saw the publication of *The American Heraldic Journal, An Eclectic Quarterly Magazine* (1901 and 1902) edited by Horace W. Whayman, Wm. Rupert Elliott, and Alexander W. MacKenzie²³; Henry Stoddard Ruggles had his article on the “Right to Bear Arms” published in the *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* (1903)²⁴; in the same year was John Matthews’ *American Armoury and Blue Book* (with additional volumes coming out in 1907 and 1911–23)²⁵; again in 1903 (a very busy year for American heraldry!), the Order of Americans of Armorial Ancestry was founded as the only lineage organization based on the right to bear arms as a qualification for membership:

“The objectives of the Order... are to promote genealogical, biographical, and historical research with emphasis on the ancestry of American families of armorial descent and as far as possible the publication of results stemming from such research.” “Any person aged eighteen or over, of good moral character and reputation is eligible for membership in the Order provided the candidates prove descent from an immigrant ancestor who settled on or before 04 July 1776 within a territory that became the forty-eight contiguous states of the United States of America and who had a proven right to bear arms in the settler’s country of origin.”²⁶

In 1904, there was the publication of William Armstrong Crozier’s *General Armoury: A Registry of American Families Entitled to Coat Armor*.²⁷ He followed this in 1908 with his *Virginia Heraldica: Being a Registry of Virginia Gentry Entitled to Coat Armor with Genealogical Notes of the Families*.²⁸ In 1909, the Department of Heraldry of The Bailey, Banks & Biddle Company of Philadelphia produced a booklet, *Rules for the Proper Uses of Heraldry in the United States and Other Extracts From the Popular Authority “Heraldry in America”*.²⁹ Printed in the booklet was a notice that you could purchase a fine copy of Eugene Zieber’s *Heraldry in America* from The Bailey, Banks &

Biddle Company for \$5.00. Also enclosed was a bifold from the company's Department of Heraldry promoting their heraldic engraving and embossing services.

On July 15, 1915, the National Society Colonial Dames XVII Century was founded, an organization of women who are lineal descendants of an ancestor who lived prior to 1701 in one of the original thirteen colonies that became the United States of America. The Society's work is dedicated to the preservation of historic sites and records, to the support of charitable projects and education, and, important to our subject today, to the promotion of heraldry and coats of arms.

In 1919, just after the end World War I, a Heraldic Program Office within the War Department General Staff was delegated the responsibility for the coordination and approval of coats of arms and insignia of certain Army organizations. This marks the first official governmental involvement in regulating coats of arms and other insignia. Formal staff responsibility for specific military designs was delegated to The Quartermaster General of the U.S. Army in 1924.

From the 1920s we have *Bolton's American Armory*, subtitled *A Record of Coats of Arms Which Have Been in Use Within the Present Bounds of the United States* (1927)³⁰; the first part of *A Roll of Arms Registered by the Committee on Heraldry of the New England Historic Genealogical Society* appeared in 1928.³¹ Parts 1 through 10 were published as a single hardbound volume in 2013.³² And the first part of Part 11 was published in the first quarter of this year, 2022, in the NEHGS's *The NEHG Register*, followed by the second part in July.³³ In 1929, Howard M. Chapin published a new resource of historical heraldry, *A Roll of Arms Used in the English Colony of Rhode Island in New England, 1636–1776*.³⁴

During World War II, the U.S. Army Air Force established a system of unit emblems. In 1947, when it became an independent organization, the United States Air Force, its official arms were approved by President Harry Truman (**Figure 2**). 1949 saw the establishment of the Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA). In addition to its primary role as the repository for U.S. Air Force historical documents, AFHRA also reviews and processes requests for Air Force organization emblems, making sure that the designs meet the standards set by the Air Force for such emblems. Also in 1949, the Munitions Board, acting for the Army, Navy and Air Force, directed the Army to provide heraldic services to all military departments. In September 1957, that program was codified and expanded further as a result of the enactment of Public Law 85–263, “An Act ... to authorize the Secretary of the Army to furnish heraldic services” to the military departments and other branches of the federal government.³⁵ On 10 August 1960, the U.S. Army Institute of Heraldry (TIOH) was established under Army General Orders Number 29, but with its roots, already noted, going back to World War I. Its work encompasses all elements of national symbolism associated with research, design, development, standardization, quality control, and other services which are fundamental to the creation and custody of official heraldic items. TIOH also provides the general public with limited research and information services.

Outside the military sphere, a group of amateur and professional scholars established The Augustan Society, Inc., in 1957 with a remit to focus on the fields of chivalry, genealogy, heraldry, and history before 1700.³⁶ Its Heraldry Committee reviews petitions for registration of arms.



Figure 2: Emblem of the United States Air Force, 1947. Wikimedia Commons.

Coming to the 1960s, in 1961 J.A. Reynolds published *Heraldry and You: Modern Heraldic Usage in America* ³⁷. This decade also saw the foundation of the American College of Heraldry and Arms, Inc., in 1966, based in Baltimore, Maryland. It was founded by Donald F. Stewart, William H. Lloyd, Charles F. Stein, Jr., and Gordon Malvern Fair Stick to promote heraldry in the United States. The titles of the founders were, respectively, Chief Herald Marshall, Herald Genealogist, Herald Chancellor, and Telorum Rex [king of darts]. The College was divided into two administrative divisions: the American College of Arms researched inherited arms, verified genealogy, and granted new arms to individuals across the country; the College of Arms of the United States assisted corporate entities, such as businesses and municipalities, to design and use coats of arms. On 1 June 1968, the College granted arms to President Lyndon Johnson and presented them to him in the White House. It also devised arms for then-Governor of Maryland Spiro Agnew in October 1968, and for President Richard Nixon in 1970.³⁸ The College existed for just four years, closing in 1970.³⁹

1968 saw the publication by Harry Wright Newman of *Heraldic Marylandiana: A Compilation of Maryland Armorial Families Which Used Coats of Arms in the Colonial and Early Post-Revolutionary Periods Proved by Original Documents and Other Authentic Sources*.⁴⁰ On January 2, 1970, Halbert's Inc. was organized, with its principal office in Bath, Ohio. Halbert's was a company that sold coats of arms and books for surnames. It obtained a list of more than 70,000,000 names of American motorists arranged by zip code, and rearranged the list in alphabetical order by surname. It then mailed a solicitation letter to each person on the list with that surname. The letter offered to sell a research report for the recipient's surname for US\$2. The company compiled a new list of people who had purchased surname research reports, and used it to solicit orders for more expensive genealogical or heraldic products,⁴¹ particularly a detailed collection of information entitled "The Wonderful World of [Surname]" or "All About the [Surname] Family." But these books were "little more than glorified phone books."⁴² Genealogical associations and individuals regularly protested Halbert's misleading

advertising to the U.S. Postal Service, resulting in cease and desist orders issued to Halbert's in 1985 and in 1988. The National Genealogical Society protested again in March 1995 with a 120-page report on Halbert's marketing practices. Halbert's stopped marketing in August 1999 and ended operations September 30 that year.

In 1972 (and thus currently celebrating its 50th year), the American College of Heraldry was established for "aiding in the study and perpetuation of heraldry in the United States and abroad." In the words of its founder, David Pittman Johnson, "The College's intent was to bring some semblance of order into the American heraldic arena and to begin meeting the quite pressing heraldic needs of the public in this country."⁴³ In 1983, the College of Arms Foundation was established "for the purpose of raising funds towards the upkeep and renovation of the College of Arms building in the City of London and to promote the study of heraldry".⁴⁴

A Guide to Air Force Heraldry was written by William M. Russell of the U.S. Air Force Historical Research Center, and published in 1985. Its purpose is to guide the development of design proposals for Air Force organizational emblems and flags. It was revised and updated in January 2013 to conform to changes made to the governing policy on Air Force heraldry.⁴⁵ The American Heraldry Society was founded in 2003 "to study and promote the proper use of heraldry in America. The Society seeks to educate the American public about the art and practices related to personal and organizational heraldry." It formulated and published its Guidelines for Heraldic Practice in the U.S. four years later.⁴⁶ 2005 saw the establishment of the U.S. Heraldic Registry. It is a private enterprise for the registration of contemporary and historical American heraldry for individuals, organizations, and civic institutions.⁴⁷

For those interested in the descendants of settlers from the Netherlands, 2010 saw the publication of the book *An Armory of American Families of Dutch Descent*, a collected series of 36 articles covering 94 families by William J. Hoffman, originally published in *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* over nine years from 1922 through 1941.⁴⁸

In 2017 another on-line registry was founded, the Society of American Armigers, designed "to create a place where Americans can register their arms, but also discuss heraldry with other like-minded members" and "to provide assistance in researching arms, blazons, and history." The Society subscribes to the "Guidelines for Heraldic Practice in the United States Recommended by the American Heraldry Society."⁴⁹ More recently, the on-line social media site Facebook offers the American Heraldry Society Discussion Group and the American Heraldry Society Members group, not to mention the many Americans who regularly participate in the hundred or so other Facebook groups which have a named interest in heraldry.

Finally, we have the publication in June 2022 of the *Golden Anniversary Edition of the Heraldic Register of America*, Series II, Volume 1, a book by the American College of Heraldry. It is a compilation of several articles on aspects of heraldry written by, among others, Sir Conrad Swan, former Garter Principal King of Arms, and artist Anthony Wood, with a forward by Dr. Joseph Morrow, Lord Lyon King of Arms. It also includes registrations of armorial bearings in England and Scotland from September 2009 through June 2022.⁵⁰

Conclusion

In 1776, the United States of America declared its independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain. One manifestation of that independence was the belief that coats of arms were badges of hereditary honor, granted by the monarch, restricted by class and thus incompatible with the stated ideal that “all men are created equal”. As a consequence, there was never a state or national institution for creating and regulating heraldry similar to the College of Arms in London or the Court of the Lord Lyon in Scotland. Nevertheless, there has been for much of the nation’s history a growing interest in the subject by individuals and institutions. As a result, we find in the last 250 years an increasing number of articles and books about heraldry and its use in America, as well as the establishment of a number of shorter- and longer-lived private organizations to educate the public about heraldry and coats of arms, and to help to design and register armorial devices for American citizens. For all that the United States claims it was throwing off the “oppressive yoke” of British rule in 1776, and such trappings of that rule as the use of heraldry, coats of arms have come to be seen less “utterly inconsistent with our republican institutions”⁵¹ and more as symbols of family connection that can be utilized by anyone.

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