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THE BRANDYWINE FLAG

by John M. Hartvoisen

An unusual and relatively unknown historic American flag (**front cover** and **Fig. 10**) hangs in the Army-Navy Museum, Pemberton House, part of the Independence National Historical Park complex in Philadelphia. Known as the Brandywine Flag, this is regarded as a military color from the American Revolution. Richard Wilson Harrison, its last private owner, donated it to Independence Hall (today also part of the Independence National Historical Park) in 1923. In a letter that accompanied the flag, Harrison related that it had been carried at the Battle of Brandywine on 11 September 1777 by one of his ancestors "named Wilson." The original letter has been lost and is mentioned only briefly in a newspaper article.¹ Harrison died in June 1925.

In 1931 James G. Longfellow, an acquaintance of Harrison's, researched the background of the flag and provided Independence Hall with a page of handwritten notes detailing what he believed to be its history. Unfortunately, Longfellow's research contained an error that has resulted in the flag being incorrectly attributed to the Seventh Pennsylvania Regiment, which had been commanded by a different Robert Wilson. Reference books published before 1923 — as might be expected — do not mention the flag, but it is also omitted by most sources published since then. Two more recent volumes² do include the Brandywine Flag but, based on Longfellow's notes of 1931, they misidentify the flag as belonging to the Seventh Regiment. Research by the author of this article has led him to conclude that in fact it belonged to the Chester County Militia.

Preble, America's leading flag historian of the 19th century, stated flatly that "beyond a doubt, the thirteen stars and stripes were unfurled at the Battle of Brandywine..."³ Canby and Balderson⁴ also indicate that Brandywine was "the first time the flag could have been used in a pitched battle..." Later historians have doubted or disputed such claims. If authenticated, the Brandywine Flag's significance is twofold. First, it would be established as one of the few extant military colors of the

**Fig. 1: ANCESTRY OF RICHARD WILSON HARRISON,
DONOR OF THE BRANDYWINE FLAG**

ROBERT WILSON* = Elizabeth Grier

b. 6 July 1735

d. 25 November 1783 d. c1825

↓
MATTHEW WILSON = Jenny Fulton

b. 27 July 1762

d. 19 January 1797

d. 10 January 1838

↓
JOHN F. WILSON = Ann Boon

b. 7 December 1794

d. 31 December 1842 d. c1822

↓
JANE WILSON = James Harrison

b. c1822

↓
RICHARD WILSON HARRISON

b. 3 March 1856

d. 12 June 1924

	ROBERT WILSON	ROBERT WILSON*
Birthplace	Unknown	East Nottingham, Pennsylvania
Born	Circa 1754	6 July 1735
Died	10 September 1835	25 November 1783
Place of Death	Jefferson County, Kentucky	East Nottingham, Pennsylvania
Wife	Jane Elliot	Elizabeth Grier
Military Service	Wounded at the Battle of Paoli a few days after Brandywine, Wilson resigned his commission in the early part of 1778.	As a sub-lieutenant of Chester County he raised, equipped, and trained the militia. He gathered sustenance for Washington's men at Valley Forge.
Rank	Captain	Lieutenant Colonel
Unit	Seventh Pennsylvania Regiment	Chester County (Pennsylvania) Militia

Fig. 2: THE TWO ROBERT WILSONS

American Revolutionary War. Perhaps more importantly, since it includes a canton composed of stars and stripes, it would be one of the earliest uses of a flag incorporating that design. Although the flag is a military color and not a national flag, it could help determine if the Stars and Stripes was displayed as a national flag at or before the Battle of Brandywine — which occurred three months after Congress approved the national flag on 14 June 1777.

The author's interest in the flag began when he first saw it in 1972. Initial inquiries brought no concrete information. In the course of preparing some articles for publication, the author began research on the Brandywine Flag in earnest in 1980 at Independence Hall (the historian's office), the National Archives, and the Library of Congress. Additionally, he searched for clues in many areas — tramping through cemeteries to examine headstones, tracing newspapers for relevant articles and obituaries, checking current phone listings for Wilsons, Harrisons, and Longfellows (the names of major participants in this story). The author interviewed an 84-year-old woman in her hospital bed. He read wills, inventories, tax records, pension applications, and maps; he even called a mortuary for information on a burial conducted 65 years before. Each of these efforts produced a piece of the puzzle.

Although research has not yielded direct written documentation of the Brandywine Flag, it has built a plausible circumstantial case linking the flag to the Battle of Brandywine. Nothing in the findings disproves or discredits the family tradition related by the flag's donor in 1923; rather the evidence supports his claim. The flag itself is perhaps the best substantiation of the Harrison family tradition: its design, material, and workmanship fit patterns we could expect from a Brandywine flag if it were genuine.

THE GENEALOGICAL RECORD

In checking the tradition of the Brandywine Flag, the first problem was to trace the genealogy of the donor back to an ancestor named Wilson who was present at the battle and who could reasonably be expected to have obtained the flag after-

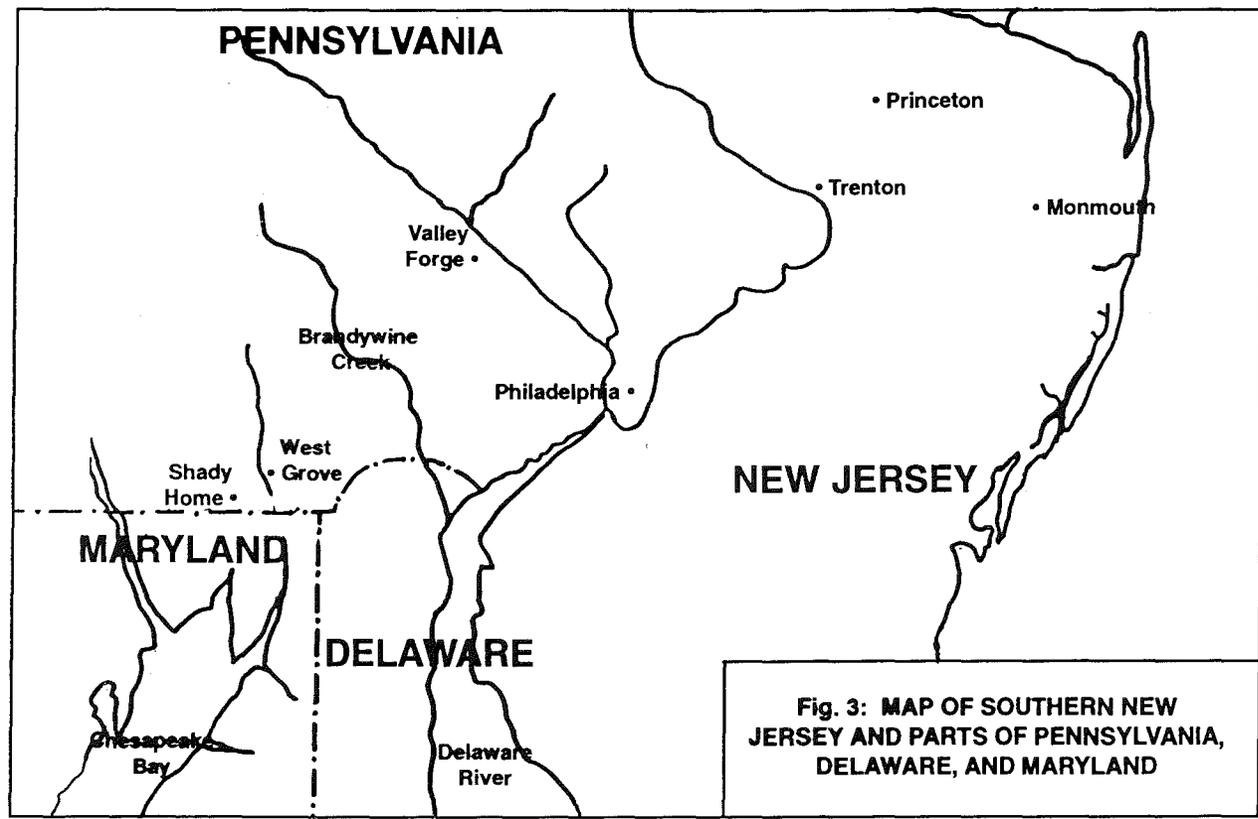


Fig. 3: MAP OF SOUTHERN NEW JERSEY AND PARTS OF PENNSYLVANIA, DELAWARE, AND MARYLAND

wards. **Fig. 1** traces the ancestry of donor Richard Wilson Harrison back to Robert Wilson of East Nottingham Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania. Each link in this family chain has been verified by reliable genealogical sources. It shows not only a direct lineage, but also a main line of inheritance. Matthew Wilson was the eldest surviving son of Robert Wilson. He inherited his father's entire estate, which he eventually divided between his two sons, John and Robert. John, the elder son, passed his share of the inheritance to Jane, his only child.

Jane, the wife of James Harrison, was the mother of Richard Wilson Harrison who donated the flag to Independence Hall in 1923. James and Jane Wilson Harrison sold the land she had inherited to her uncle Robert Wilson in the mid-1850s and moved to West Grove, also in Chester County, where Richard was born. Later they left Chester County and the two branches of the Wilson family lost contact. The tradition of the flag was apparently not handed down in the branch of the family that remained in East Nottingham Township. Richard Wilson Harrison worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad between 1873 and his retirement in 1921. He was living in Wilmington, Delaware, when he donated the flag to Independence Hall. The author has been unable to locate any descendants or relatives of his in the Wilmington area.

Having established the genealogical relationship between Robert Wilson (1735-1793) and the Brandywine Flag's last private owner, the next problem was to determine if Robert Wilson was definitely — or possibly — associated with the flag. That Robert Wilson was a common name of the period is the source of the error which incorrectly attributed the flag to the Seventh Pennsylvania Regiment. **Fig. 2** compares two men who bore the name Robert Wilson and shows that they were separate individuals, although the research James G. Longfellow completed in 1931 had incorrectly assumed they were the same person.

The first Robert Wilson, who was in the Seventh Pennsylvania Regiment, died in Kentucky; he was not related to Robert Wilson Harrison, the flag's donor. The second Robert Wilson was Harrison's great-great-grandfather. The Brandywine Flag therefore cannot be the color of the Seventh Pennsylvania

Regiment. The history of Robert Wilson of East Nottingham Township demonstrates that he could have been associated with the Brandywine Flag. Although the author did not find any direct documentary evidence to prove that claim, he also found no evidence to disprove it.

Robert Wilson was born on the family estate in 1735. He built a house at East Nottingham in 1772 which still stands; it was owned and occupied by the Wilson family for roughly two hundred years. The house — known as Shady Home — is easily recognizable by white bricks set in the east gable end which form the initials *RW* and the date 1772. The map (Fig. 3) shows the location of Shady Home, West Grove (where Richard Wilson was born), and the surrounding area. The sites of the Battle of Brandywine and of Valley Forge are also shown.

Robert Wilson was a leading citizen of the township and a firm supporter of the Patriot cause. He took the oath of allegiance to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania on 23 June 1777 and helped provide food for Washington's army when it was encamped at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777-1778. Wilson served in the Chester County Militia and is listed on the militia muster rolls of 11 March 1778 as a sub-lieutenant of the county. That non-military position carried with it the rank of lieutenant colonel in the militia. A county lieutenant, assisted by several sub-lieutenants, had the responsibility to raise, equip, and train the county militia. These men controlled that militia until the unit went into battle, when it was turned over to its field commanders. After the battle, control reverted to the county lieutenant and his sub-lieutenants.

Since the Chester County Militia fought in the Battle of Brandywine, it is entirely plausible that Robert Wilson, as a county sub-lieutenant and a lieutenant colonel of militia, could have obtained the unit's color after the battle. If Wilson did retain the militia color, it could have been handed down through the generations to Richard Wilson Harrison. Thus the Brandywine Flag may have been the color of the Chester County Militia. Unfortunately, the flag is not mentioned in Robert Wilson's will nor in the inventory of his possessions, made shortly after his death, although it should be noted that only utilitarian items were included in that inventory. It is also pos-

sible that Robert Wilson gave the flag to his son before his death.

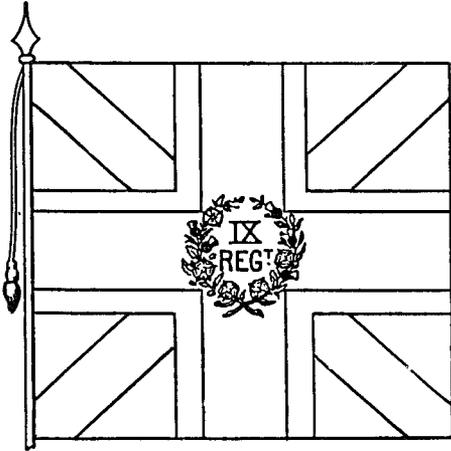
THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Since the evidence concerning the Brandywine Flag is circumstantial, the flag itself becomes a major item of documentation. If evidence derived from the flag dates it to a later period, then any clues supporting the claim are superfluous. If, on the other hand, the flag is a genuine 18th century artifact, then the clues provide a reasonable explanation of the flag's history. As a historical artifact, the flag must be examined in the context of the military colors of the American Revolution. Not all flags will fit neatly into such a framework. Liberty poles, liberty trees, liberty caps, snakes, and numerous unique flag designs were employed; many symbols and designs were popular which later fell into disuse. Nevertheless many designs do fit into established patterns which aid in understanding the design of the Brandywine Flag.

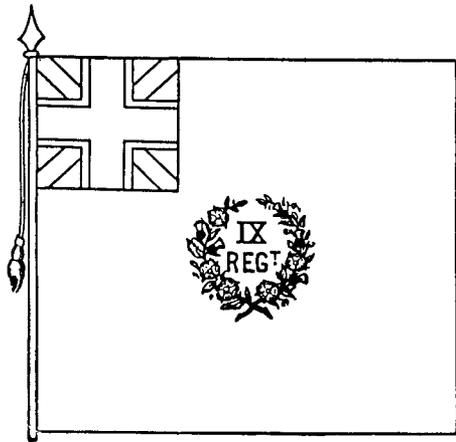
Colonial leaders not surprisingly borrowed much from British usage. Many of them, including George Washington, had received their military training during the French and Indian War (1754-1763). The British used a two-color system for their infantry units. (The term color here refers to flags used by military units.) While there were exceptions, the basic concept is as illustrated in **Figs. 4 and 5**, showing the colors of the 9th Foot, which fought for Britain in the American Revolution. The King's Colour (**Fig. 4**) represented the sovereign of the country as a whole. Its design was also used as a canton in a separate color (**Fig. 5**) representing the individual regiment. The King's Colour, based on the Union Jack, was equivalent to the "national color" which replaced it in American usage. The regimental color for the Second New Hampshire Regiment of 1777 (**Fig. 6**) follows this pattern.⁵

The US Army has used a two-color system throughout most of its history. In the early decades, however, the national color was not (necessarily) identical to the national flag. Only gradually did military units replace other designs with the Stars and Stripes for use as their national colors. Today all US military services use national and unit colors, similar to the two-color

**Fig. 4: KING'S COLOUR
9TH REGIMENT OF FOOT**



**Fig. 5: REGIMENTAL
COLOUR, 9TH REGIMENT
OF FOOT**



Note: When the 9th Regiment served in the American Revolution its colors had slightly different central emblems from those illustrated above, which were in use circa 1743-1772. (See pp. 71 and 106-108 in Samuel Milne Milne, *The Standards and Colours of the Army...* [Leeds: Goodall and Suddick, 1893].)

system Washington learned from the British in the French and Indian War. Baron von Steuben's drill manual for the American forces, published in 1779, prescribed a two-color system but the Continental Army never had a uniform system with definitive designs for the national and unit colors. At best, there may have been certain ideal patterns which never attained universal application. Old patterns continued in use after new ones were adopted; even the erratic supply of fabric was a factor in the existence of military flags. As a result there was a bewildering array of colors, most of which eventually were captured, lost, or deteriorated such that vexillologists today have a difficult problem reconstructing exact usages.

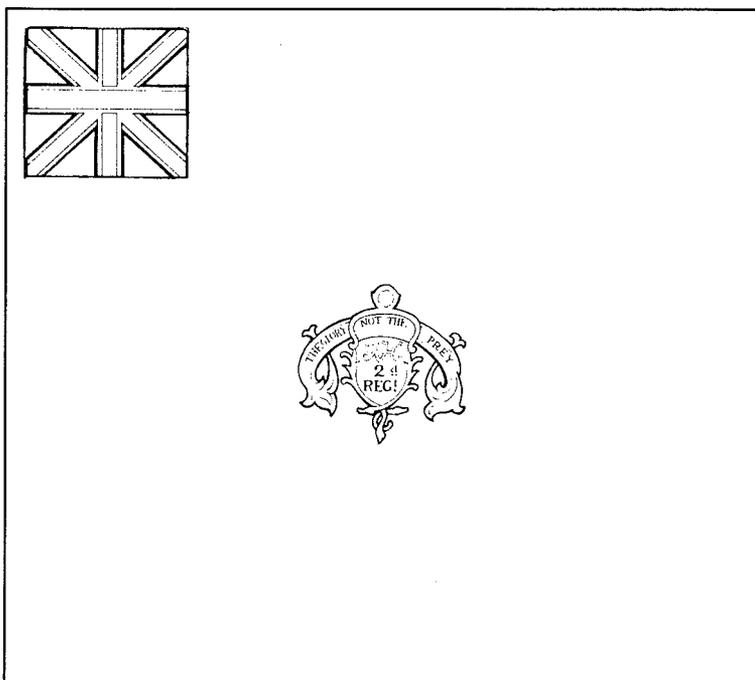
The British pattern was modified by American usage since, after the July 1776 Declaration of Independence, the Union Jack was no longer appropriate. One important design influence in American colors was a flag known to the British as "the rebellious stripes." Consisting of 13 red and white horizontal stripes, this is often considered to have been strictly a naval flag yet its origin and much of its usage can be tied to the land. Committees of Correspondence, established early in the revolutionary struggle, were later known as the Sons of Liberty. They used many symbols, including liberty poles and liberty trees. The Massachusetts Sons of Liberty — and perhaps other groups — used a striped flag.

Since it represented a unity of purpose among the thirteen colonies, it is possible that this striped device may have been thought of as a "union flag." Numerous 18th century illustrations depict land forces carrying striped flags (Figs. 7). Even if we concede the inaccuracy of many prints, the weight of repeated illustration suggests that the thirteen-striped flag was used as a "continental flag" and, hence, may have served as an American national color to replace the British King's Colour.

If this was the case, then we could expect to see some regimental colors bearing cantons of stripes. The color of the First Troop, Philadelphia City Cavalry (known as the Philadelphia Light Horse Troop), shows such a canton; it had thirteen silver and blue stripes. Close observation shows that these stripes were painted over a British Union, suggesting a symbolic equivalence between the two. A Delaware militia color (the

**Fig. 6: COLOR OF THE
2ND NEW HAMPSHIRE REGIMENT OF 1777**

R/Au/B-



Au, R, N/B-

**(ORIGINAL ON DISPLAY AT THE
NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, CONCORD)**

"Dansey Color"; Fig. 8) captured a few days before the Battle of Brandywine also shows a canton of stripes. Delaware and Philadelphia are both close to Chester County: we might well, therefore, expect to see similarities between these flags and a color carried by the Chester County Militia.

Other continental regiments displayed colors with striped cantons. One flag was carried by the Second Light Dragoons, Continental Line; the Forster Flag from Massachusetts is another example surviving from the Revolution. Combining stripes with the British Red Ensign had created the Continental Colors (the so-called Grand Union Flag) which was used unofficially as the first American national flag, although apparently not as a national color.

The adoption of the Stars and Stripes on 14 June 1777 was bound to an impact on military flags. The two unanswered questions facing vexillologists have always been: when was this impact felt and to what extent? The source of the stars has never been firmly established and some of the details do not fit together neatly. Nevertheless it appears that a blue flag with stars was used in several instances. The flag regularly identified as Washington's headquarters standard at Valley Forge may instead have been an army national color of the period.⁶ Consider William Mercer's view of the Battle of Princeton: this painting⁷ by the son of General Hugh Mercer, who was killed in that engagement, shows a blue flag strewn with thirteen white stars. The painting is an 18th century depiction of a battle fought six months before the Stars and Stripes was adopted.

Starred blue flags show up repeatedly in paintings of the late 18th century. A detail from a panorama of the surrender of the British at the Battle of Yorktown⁸ in 1781 shows two banners, one obviously blue with white stars, the other a surprisingly correct illustration of a complex French regimental color belonging to the Royal Deux-Ponts Regiment. Another interesting clue is found in the design of a flag usually described as Washington's Life Guard Standard.⁹ In the original, the blue color depicted on that standard shows thirteen stars in a circle. These and other examples indicate that blue military flags containing stars were used during the Revolution.

If we consider these flags to have been national colors, then

Fig. 7: AMERICAN GENERAL HORATIO GATES ACCEPTING THE SURRENDER OF GENERAL JOHN BURGOYNE 17 OCTOBER 1777 AFTER THE BATTLE OF SARATOGA (NOTE THE "REBELLIOUS STRIPES" AMERICAN FLAG)



anonymous British cartoon "The Yanke's [sic] Triumph, or B---e Beat"

they would fit into a two-color pattern with the corresponding regimental flags showing cantons of stars. There are indeed examples of military colors from the late Revolutionary War era with 13 stars in the canton. Two well known flags from Rhode Island have stars of white and gold, respectively, on blue cantons; similarly, the Bucks of America color (Fig. 9) has white stars on blue and the canton (only) associated with the New Hampshire troops of General John Stark fits the same pattern. The stars appeared directly on the background in the upper hoist of the "Headman color" and 12 other "Gostelowe standards."¹⁰ No exactly corresponding national colors are known, however, for any of these flags.

Washington's influence on the development of American military colors was strong. Trained under the British system during the French and Indian Wars, he and his fellow revolutionaries began by fighting for their rights as Englishmen and it is logical that we would have continued many British usages. His interest in military flags was not merely frivolous pageantry: flags were important military equipment in 18th century warfare. They were used to communicate orders to the troops during the heat of battle; the position of a color and the way it was flourished was a significant part of battle drill. Additionally, an army without flags and uniforms was regarded as (and indeed considered itself) a rabble or mob. It is not surprising, therefore, that Washington spent a great deal of effort trying to procure flags for his army.

THE FLAG AS EVIDENCE

Against this background, the Brandywine Flag can be considered. It is made of silk, as are most surviving 18th century colors. The hoist measures 53" (1.35 m), the length is 52" (1.32 m). The canton is 24" (61 cm) wide and 27 ³/₄" (71 cm) long. Its field is pieced together, with the canton inset into the background material, touching neither near edge of the field. That its design was not painted with oils indicates local manufacture, as does the roughness of the sewing in the canton. The stars are arranged in rows of four, five, and four — a pattern used in the last quarter of the 18th century, as can be seen in

It has been suggested that the Brandywine Flag may originally have contained stripes only, like the Dansey Flag, the stars being added at a later date.¹³ This is possible, but direct observation of the color leads the author to believe otherwise. The canton appears to be inset into the field of the Brandywine Flag, not appliquéd to front and back. The small starry field and the top three stripes are made of a single piece of white cloth. To add stars after the flag's original manufacture would have required removing the top three stripes. A single new piece of cloth, showing three short stripes attached to the small white canton, would then have had to be inserted into the flag's canton. This would have been very difficult.

If an original canton were to be replaced, it seems more logical that a canton of stars only would have been used; it would also be easier to replace the entire canton. Nothing indicates that the flag has been altered, so we can reasonably conclude that the flag was made after the adoption of the flag resolution of 14 June 1777.

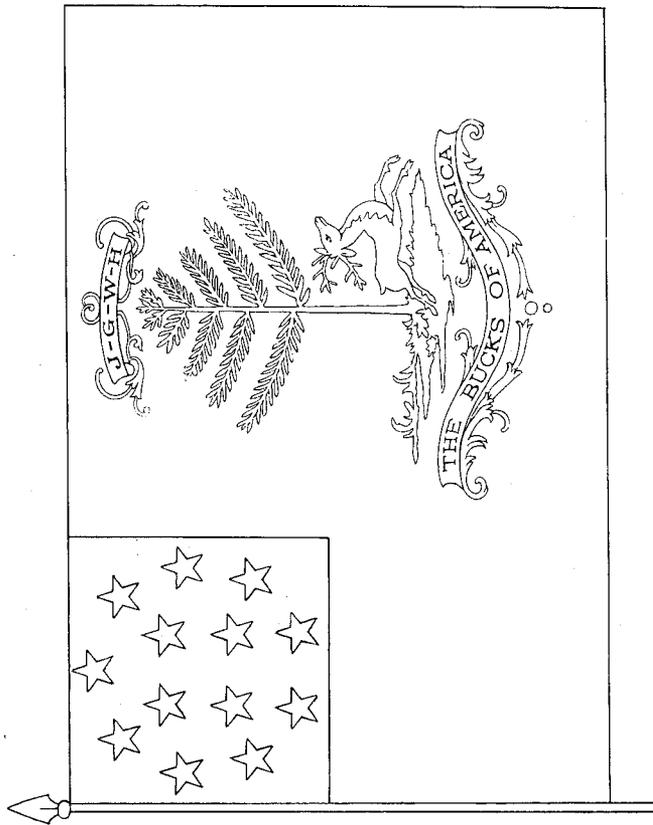
If made between that date and the Battle of Brandywine on 11 September, less than three months later, this color may well have been made before the policy was established of using stars only in the cantons for regimental colors. When the flag of the Chester County Militia is interpreted in terms of the (ideal) two-color system, the corresponding national color must have been a version of the Stars and Stripes, although the author has found no direct evidence that this was the case. On the other hand the unique use in the Brandywine Flag of a canton consisting of the entire Stars and Stripes suggests that this unit color was a bridge between the striped-canton colors that preceded it and the starred-canton colors which followed.

The data found by the author are not definitive and several areas require additional research and evaluation. Nevertheless some conclusions can be drawn which are stronger than the incorrect assumptions about the flag that have been accepted up until now. The combined weight of evidence indicates that the Brandywine Flag (Fig. 10) was the color of the Chester County Militia and that it was carried at the Battle of Brandywine. That would support Preble's assertion that the design of the Stars and Stripes was used in battle just three

Fig. 9: COLOR OF THE BUCKS OF AMERICA
(AFRICAN-AMERICAN MILITARY UNIT CIRCA 1780)

V, M/BUFF

Ag/B



months after its adoption.

On 10 September 1777, on the eve of the Battle of Brandywine, the Reverend Joab Trout mentioned in his sermon the flag displayed over the American encampment, calling it "the flag of our country."¹⁴ It is not certain that the flag he referred to was the Stars and Stripes, but the color of the Chester County Militia strengthens the claim it may have been.

NOTES

1. "Independence Hall Shows Flags Flown in Revolution," *Evening Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), 22 November 1923.

2. Edward W. Richardson, *Standards and Colors of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press and the Pennsylvania Society of Sons of the Revolution and its Color Guard, 1982), pp. 27 and 120, and William R. Furlong and Byron McCandless, *So Proudly We Hail* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981) edited by Harold D. Langley, p. 114.

3. George Henry Preble, *Our Flag* (Albany: Joel Munsell, 1872), p. 201.

4. George Canby and Lloyd Balderson, *The Evolution of the American Flag* (Philadelphia: Ferris & Leach, 1909), p. 70.

5. Richardson, p. 303, provides the explanation of the usage by Americans of the Union Flag (here somewhat modified): "The presence of Americanized versions of British Union cantons on [this New Hampshire color and another one] indicate they date to the early years of the war. Such British Union cantons were gradually replaced with stripes after the Declaration [of Independence] in 1776; then after June 1777, some colors displayed stars in the canton. Such transitions were slow, however."

6. See Donald W. Holst, "Notes on Continental Artillery Flags and Flag Guns," *Military Collector and Historian*, Vol. XLVI, No. 3 (Fall 1994), pp. 122-127, and No. 4 (Winter 1994), pp. 171-174.

7. Richardson, plate 19.

8. *Ibid*, plate 52.

9. Richard S. Patterson and Richardson Dougall, *The Eagle and the Shield* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1976), p. 527, note 23, and the *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria, Virginia), 8 December 1798, p. 3, columns 1-2, quoted in Patterson and Dougall, pp. 527-528. The author has examined the original flag at the George Wash-

**Fig. 10: THE AUTHOR WITH A FULL-SIZE REPLICA
OF THE BRANDYWINE FLAG**



ington Masonic National Memorial in Alexandria, Virginia. The blue standard in the flag's design clearly shows a circle of stars not evident in photographs such as the one appearing in plate 19 of Richardson.

10. Richardson, pp. 42-50.
11. Richardson, p. 104 and plate 8.
12. *Ibid*, pp. 83-84.
13. *Ibid*, p. 27. Richardson gives no reasoning for his statement ("Whether the canton was on the flag at Brandywine or added later is not known.").
14. Cited in *Collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1853), Vol. I, p. 70.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

1. Interview with Florence Fulton Wilson, Oxford, Pennsylvania, September 1982.
2. Notes prepared by James G. Longfellow in 1931, on file in Curator's Office, Independence National Park, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
3. Pension Applications of the Revolutionary War (804 roll, 26009) for Captain Robert Wilson, 7th Pennsylvania Regiment, 13 November 1820.
4. US Census for Pennsylvania, 1850 and 1860.
5. J. Smith Futhey and Gilbert Cope, *History of Chester County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Everts, 1881), p. 768.
6. "Harrison," obituary in *The Delarvia Star* (Wilmington, Delaware), 14 June 1925, p. 10.
7. James Bayard Haley, *The Wilson Family* (typescript at the Chester County Historical Society Library, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, April 1964).

This paper was presented in preliminary form as a lecture at a meeting of the North American Vexillological Association.

COVER PICTURE The "Brandywine Flag" carried by American forces at the Battle of Brandywine on 11 September 1777 is in remarkably good condition. Made of silk, it was pieced by the sewer from three red portions for the field, one white piece for the star background and three upper stripes, plus four additional white stripes and thirteen red eight-pointed stars. There are some irregularities in the size and placement of the elements composing the (inset) canton. Along the hoist there are 16 small whipped eyelets which presumably allowed the color to be bound to the staff in its original condition for use on the battlefield.

Less well known than many flags of the American Revolution because it was held by a private family until 1923, the Brandywine Flag is an important artifact for vexillologists. One of only about 27 known colors carried by Patriot troops during America's war for independence, it is significant in part because its ownership, date of display, and association with a specific military unit and battle are documented. It is also likely the earliest surviving example of the Stars and Stripes, which had been adopted by Congress three months previously, although it is a military color rather than a national flag.

200 YEARS AGO

Troops from revolutionary France overthrew the Bourbon regime in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in January 1799. On 3 February the new Parthenopian Republic adopted a vertical tricolor of blue-yellow-red which flew until the middle of June that year.