
Mississippi's State Flag and Coat of Arms

A Report to the Governor and the Legislature

Advisory Commission on the Mississippi
State Flag and the Coat of Arms

Transmittal Letter from Commission

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History of the Advisory Commission on the Mississippi State Flag and the Coat of Arms

Supreme Court Ruling

The Mississippi Supreme Court ruled on May 4, 2000, that Mississippi did not have an official state flag and coat of arms because the Legislature did not bring the laws pertaining to these symbols forward in the 1906 codification. Therefore, the Supreme Court ruled the state flag and the coat of arms used were not the official state symbols. The Court's ruling stated that these symbols could continue to be used by political subdivisions until such time that official designs are adopted.

Executive Order No. 833

On May 5, 2000, Governor Ronnie Musgrove issued Executive Order #833 creating the "Advisory Commission on the State Flag and the Coat of Arms" (hereinafter referred to as the Commission). The Governor charged that the Commission be a time-limited commission to gather facts, obtain citizens' input, and advise the Legislature as to a recommended course of action based upon its findings.

The Advisory Commission has provided a forum for comments from citizens of our state, but it has no authority to take any action. Only the Legislature may take action on the Mississippi state flag and the coat of arms.

Advisory Commission Activities

Monthly Meetings

The Commission held four monthly meetings prior to the release of this report. These meetings were held on August 21, September 18, October 18 and November 20, 2000. In order to work in an expeditious manner and in the best interest of the citizens of Mississippi, the Commission utilized the following committees to address different areas critical to its charge.

Committee on History and Heritage

This committee was charged with conferring with appropriate organizations and individuals with special interest in and knowledge of the state's history and the relationship and interpretation of that history through its flag and coat-of-arms. During the course of its work, the Committee on History and Heritage met and discussed the flag's role and impact on Mississippi's history and heritage with the following groups:

- Mississippi Civil War Preservation Society;
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Mississippi Chapter;
- National Association of Social Workers, Mississippi Chapter;
- Sons and Daughters of U.S. Colored Troops;
- Sons of Confederate Veterans; and,
- University of Mississippi's Institute for Racial Reconciliation

The Committee extended an invitation to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, but the group did not respond.

Committee on Economic Impact

This committee was charged with conferring with appropriate organizations and individuals with concern about, and understanding of, the long-term economic impact on the state of controversies involving the state flag. The Committee on Economic Impact worked in conjunction with the Mississippi Economic Council (MEC). The state flag was one of the issues addressed and discussed at focus groups conducted around the state by the MEC.

The Committee on Economic Impact also consulted with the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce regarding their experience with the Confederate Flag in that state. The committee also exchanged ideas with the State of Georgia, which is considering the removal of the Confederate battle flag from its state flag. The committee also sampled chief executive officers and presidents of national businesses as to whether a state flag influences their interest in doing business with a state.

Committee on Design

This committee was charged with the responsibility of conferring with appropriate organizations and individuals who are knowledgeable in the design of flags and coats of arms and who have an understanding of the role and significance of such symbols. The committee invited citizens to submit proposed designs for a new state flag as well.

Recognizing that high school students will shortly be the leaders of our state, the Committee on Design also involved students in its work in an effort to increase students' understanding of what the flag stands for and the history of flags in Mississippi. The committee invited all public, private and parochial high school students in the state to submit specific flag designs, essays and papers on what the flag should symbolize and views as to whether the old flag should be. The committee received 1,180 submittals from students in 51 of Mississippi's schools.

Public Comments

Written Comments

The Commission announced at its second meeting that it would receive written public comments at a designated address. The Commission received approximately 500 pieces of correspondence from citizens. The Commission received thirty-three petitions from citizens in favor of retaining Mississippi's traditional state flag. The Commission also received phone calls from citizens expressing support for both retaining the traditional flag and recommending the development of a new design for the state flag.

Public Hearings

Knowing that input from the public, both in the form of hearings and through written comments, was essential to its work and its purpose, the Commission held a public hearing in each congressional district in order to obtain the public's comments and opinions on this matter. The Commission hosted these five public hearings on the following dates in the following sites:

- October 19, 2000, The University of Mississippi, Tupelo
- October 26, 2000, Meridian Community College, Meridian
- November 2, 2000, Mississippi Delta Community College, Moorhead
- November 9, 2000, Gulf Coast Community College-Jefferson Davis Campus, Gulfport
- November 13, 2000, Millsaps College, Jackson

Approximately 1,700 citizens attended these five hearings. Although a number of citizens spoke both for keeping and changing the state's flag, an overwhelming number of comments at the hearings and in writing are seeking a public referendum. Public comments at these hearings gave evidence of passionate opinions for both positions.

Conclusions

Coat of Arms

The Commission did not receive public comments indicating that the coat of arms is a controversial symbol for Mississippians. There is no indication from the people of the state that the coat of arms traditionally used should be changed.

State Flag

The public hearings, personal and written communications to the Commission, and conferences with representatives of several organizations confirmed the Commission's original supposition that the Mississippi flag controversy is a significant and complex issue for which there is no simple or easy resolution.

From the time of its establishment the Commission's purpose has been to seek a solution that will recognize and honor the genuine feelings of those holding differing positions regarding the state flag and to make recommendations to the Legislature.

The Supreme Court's ruling has placed Mississippi at one of those rare moments in history when what we do today, the decisions we make now, will have a major impact for many years to come. Mississippi has made great economic progress and has enjoyed enormous success in race relations and in developing our human and natural resources. We must not let our differences over the flag interrupt and distract from that progress.

The Commission acknowledges that the Confederate battle flag symbolizes for some the southern soldier's uncommon courage and his devotion to duty, characteristics that transcend the causes of the Civil War. The Commission also acknowledges that the Confederate battle flag symbolizes for others the opposition to civil and human rights and that the martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement are also heroes worthy of respect and are a part of our noble heritage.

The Commission believes that in making our recommendation we should endeavor to recognize that these differences are not irreconcilable and indeed can be mutually supportive. The Commission believes that the 1894 flag should be honored and protected and displayed appropriately.

Recommendations

Based on months of discussion and deliberation, the Commission recommends that the Legislature:

1. Enact legislation approving and adopting the design of the Coat of Arms as adopted in 1894.
2. Provide for a referendum on the question of a state flag which would have the following choices:
 - (a) To provide for the 1894 flag to be honored, protected and flown wherever historic flags are flown; to protect all historic sites, monuments and memorials from removal, destruction or desecration; and, to adopt the state flag design presented by the Commission, as attached, as the official state flag;

OR

(b) To adopt the 1894 flag as the official state flag.

The Commission provides the following draft legislation for the Legislature to authorize the referendum:

(Draft bill will be inserted here. I have not received the revised bill pursuant to our conference call yesterday. I would include the draft referenced in the conference call, but it does not provide for the public to choose between (a) and (b) above. It only provides for a vote on (a).)