



The Flag on Prospect Hill: A Response to Byron DeLear

Peter Ansoff

Introduction

On 1 January 1776, a flag was hoisted on Prospect Hill, outside Boston, to mark the establishment of the American Continental Army. Since 1849, histories of the Revolutionary War have stated that the flag was the so-called “Grand Union” flag, consisting of 13 red and white stripes with the British union crosses in the canton. (Figure 1) In 2006, at a meeting of the Flag House Symposium in Baltimore, I presented a hypothesis that the flag raised on that historic occasion was actually a British union flag. (Figure 2)¹ In October 2013, Byron DeLear presented a paper at the NAVA 47 conference in Salt Lake City that challenged my hypothesis, and asserted that the historical facts support the “conventional history.”² This paper will show that DeLear did not fully address the arguments presented in my original paper, and that the evidence he presented fails to support his conclusions and in some cases actually contradicts them.

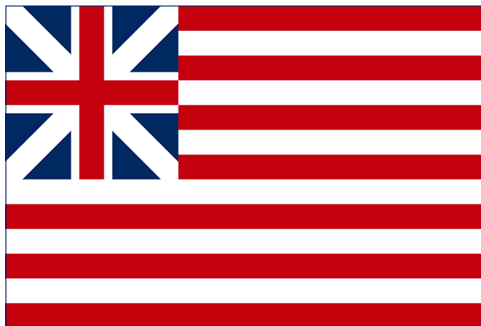


Figure 1. The “Continental Colors.” Source: Yaddah Hoshie, commons.wikimedia.org.

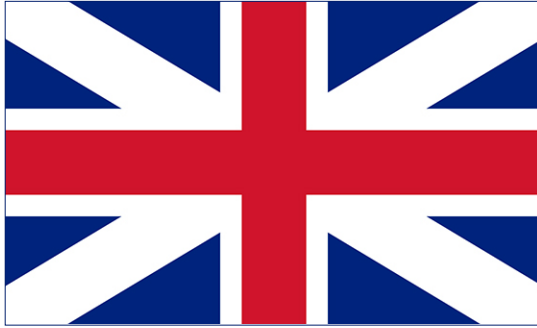


Figure 2. The pre-1801 Union Flag. Source: Yaddah Hoshie, *commons.wikimedia.org*.

This paper first addresses two background issues that DeLear claimed to be the “two legs” of my original hypothesis.³ It then reviews the primary accounts of the incident and their context, and discusses DeLear’s analysis of those sources. DeLear devotes only a few of his fifty-two pages to actual analysis of the primary accounts; the bulk of his paper consists of background material, most of which is neither new nor controversial nor relevant to the subject at hand. The first three appendices to this paper address some of those background topics. The final appendix provides some corrections and updates to my original paper.

As noted in my original paper, the term “Grand Union” is an anachronism that was accidentally coined by nineteenth-century historians. DeLear nevertheless uses it in his paper to refer to what contemporary writers frequently called the “Continental Colors.” This paper will use the latter term except when quoting DeLear.⁴

Background: The “Union Flag” in the Colonies

DeLear states that

Ansoff’s theory rests primarily on two legs: (1) In the years leading up to the revolutionary era, English colonists flew British Union Jacks in an *ad hoc* manner with words like “Liberty” emblazoned on them as a “symbol of united resistance to British policies”; and (2) George Washington and other eyewitnesses used the term “union flag” to describe the events that had transpired on Prospect Hill, New Year’s Day, 1776.⁵

These are not the primary “legs” of my argument, although both are indisputably true. The first one was presented to show that it would have been *reasonable* for the Continental Army to raise a British union flag as a symbol

of unity and resistance, because the Americans had done so on many previous occasions. DeLear implies that changing American attitudes would have made this unlikely by January of 1776:

In light of the seriousness of the occasion, Washington's attention to issues of formality, and the aforementioned deliberate "acts of sovereignty" [e.g., the organization and governance of the Continental Army] that had originated with him, it would be wholly uncharacteristic for him to hoist the King's colors, a British Union Jack—a flag completely English in design—in celebration to commemorate the Continental Army's new establishment. Doing so would seem haphazard, nay, even capricious, and is plainly not supported by the surrounding circumstances.⁶

DeLear is certainly correct about Washington's "attention to issues of formality," but he is wrong about how that characteristic would have manifested itself in the context of January 1776. Throughout the Revolution, one of the guiding stars of George Washington's behavior was that he was subordinate to the Congress that had appointed him, especially with regard to political questions. Congress's official position at that time was that the United Colonies were still subjects of the King, and that their quarrel was with Parliament and the Ministry. For Washington, it would have been a grave breach of the "issues of formality" for him to imply otherwise in an official context, regardless of his personal opinions. This is amply documented in his general orders and official correspondence, in which he carefully continued to refer to the "United Colonies" and the "Ministerial troops" until as late as June 1776.⁷ Raising the King's flag to mark the establishment of the Continental Army would have been anything but haphazard or capricious. It would have restated the official positions of loyalty to the King and opposition to the "Ministerial" army facing him in Boston.⁸

With respect to the second point, DeLear proposes that the eyewitnesses (Washington and two British observers) could reasonably have used the term "union flag" to refer to the Continental Colors. To support his contention, he presents eight examples of such usage in late 1775 and early 1776. (Table 1)

Based on these examples, DeLear concludes that "it was entirely suitable for Washington and others to have referred to the Grand Union flag as a 'Union Flag' . . . he [Washington] was summoning the most available descriptive term at the time—the striped continental colors was a 'union flag.'"¹⁰ However, DeLear's own examples show that his statement is incorrect. In seven of the eight that he cites, the writer qualified his description to make it clear that

**Table 1: References to the Continental Colors as the “Union Flag”
Cited by DeLear⁹**

Description	Source	Date
“Union Flag”	Wharton Account Book	12 December 1775
“UNION FLAG of the American States”	Virginia Gazette	17 May 1776
“Union flag, and striped red and white in the field”	Richard Henry Lee letter to the Virginia Convention	ca. December 1775
“Continental Union Flag”	Resolution of the Virginia Convention	11 May 1776
“1 Union Flag 13 Stripes Broad Bng . . .”	Wharton Account Book	8 February 1776
“union flag with thirteen stripes in the field emblematical of the thirteen United Colonies”	Virginia Gazette	2 March 1776
“a Continental Union Flag”	Virginia Gazette	20 April 1776 and 20 June 1776
“striped under the union with thirteen strokes”	Various British newspapers	ca. May 1776

he was *not* referring to a normal British union flag, but to an “American” or “Continental” version and/or one that contained stripes.

DeLear’s eighth example (the first one in the table) does indeed mention a “Union Flag,” without qualification. The specific reference is to a flag that was delivered to the *Columbus*, one of ships of the first Continental squadron. However, DeLear fails to note that the flag mentioned in this reference was not the *Columbus*’s ensign. A later entry in Wharton’s account book on 23 December 1775 lists the delivery to the *Columbus* of “1 Ensign 18 feet by 30,” which was presumably the Continental Colors for that vessel.¹¹ It is quite likely that the flag mentioned in DeLear’s citation *was* a normal British union flag, or possibly a British red ensign. It was common practice in the eighteenth century for warships to carry the flags of potential opponents for deceptive purposes.¹²

DeLear also asserts that

the problem with interpreting Washington’s account from a strictly modern and/or literalist point of view, is that there are numerous references to the Grand Union flag during the months preceding and following Prospect Hill that utilize the *exact same language*—albeit some more descriptive and

complete than others. This establishes, through primary source records, the linguistic convention of referring to the Grand Union as a “union flag.” (Emphasis in the original)

As we have seen, DeLear’s own examples show that these statements are simply false. Only one of the “primary source records” he cites used the term “union flag” without elaboration, and that one probably did not refer to the Continental Colors in the first place. His implication that the term “union flag” is “strictly modern” is also questionable. That term was arguably more common on the eighteenth century than today, when “Union Jack” is more often used.

In summary, while DeLear’s purported “legs” are not the only (or even the primary) points of my hypothesis, he does not present any information that refutes either one. The evidence that he presents against the second “leg” actually undermines his own argument concerning the contemporary meaning of the term “union flag.”

The Primary Accounts

There are three primary accounts that refer to the flag raising on Prospect Hill: George Washington’s letter of 4 January to Joseph Reed, an anonymous transport ship captain’s letter of 17 January to his owners in London, and British Lieutenant William Carter’s letter of 26 January to “a friend” (published by Carter in 1784). As far as is known, these are the only first-hand references to the event, and they are the basis for all subsequent accounts.¹³ The conclusions in my original paper were based on an analysis of these sources and their context. We will first review each of these documents, and then discuss DeLear’s analysis of them.

The most detailed source is Washington’s letter:

Cambridge, 4th Jany 1776

Dear Sir

... We are at length favour’d with a sight of his Majesty’s most gracious speech, breathing sentiments of tenderness and compassion for his deluded American subjects; the echo is not yet come to hand, but we know what it must be, and as Lord North said, and we ought to have believed (and acted accordingly,) we now know the ultimatum of British justice. The speech I send you; a volume of them was sent out by the Boston gentry, and farcical enough, we gave great joy to them (the red coats I mean,) without knowing or intending it, for on that day, the day

which gave being to the new army, (but before the proclamation came to hand) we had hoisted the Union Flag in compliment to the United Colonies; but behold! It was received in Boston as a token of the deep impression the Speech had made upon us, and as a signal of submission, so we learn by a person out of Boston last night. By this time, I presume, they begin to think it strange that we have not made a formal surrender of our lines.¹⁴

Washington began the paragraph with a sly comment about the King's September 1775 speech to Parliament, which denounced the colonists as traitors and accused them of preparing for a "general revolt."¹⁵ He anticipated, correctly, that the result of the King's position must ultimately be a complete break between the colonies and the mother country. He then described how his army had unintentionally given encouragement to the "red coats" by raising the "Union flag in complement to the United Colonies" *before* hearing about the King's speech. He was amused by the fact that the British assumed that the flag raising to be *reaction* to the speech, and therefore interpreted it as a sign of submission.

The point of this paragraph was the "farcical" contrast between the intended symbolism of the Union flag and the antagonistic content of the King's speech, and how the timing of the event caused the Bostonians to misinterpret the meaning of the flag raising. The obvious implication was that the flag Washington raised was a symbol of the King.

The second source is the anonymous transport captain's letter of 17 January:

I have the pleasure to acquaint you of my safe arrival here [in Boston] on the 1st instant, having one continued storm of wind since my last letter to you, dated at sea, November 6th.

... I can see the Rebels' camp very plain, whose colours, a little while ago, were entirely red; but, on the receipt of the King's speech, (which they burnt,) they have hoisted the Union Flag, which is here supposed to intimate the union of the Provinces.¹⁶

The captain assumed that the flag-raising was a reaction to the King's speech. He indicated a general belief in Boston that the flag-raising was an act of defiance, "supposed to intimate the union of the Provinces." He also stated that the flag the rebels hoisted was the "Union Flag," without any qualification. The captain was describing the flag to a correspondent in London, who had never seen the Continental Colors and had probably never even heard of it. It seems overwhelmingly likely that the captain's reference to the "Union

Flag” meant what it would normally mean to a British subject in the winter and early spring of 1776. His comment that the flag was “*here* supposed to intimate the union of the Provinces” (emphasis added) reinforces this. He probably thought that his correspondent would wonder why the Americans expressed defiance by raising the King’s flag, and he therefore explained the flag meant something different to them.

The third primary source is Lieutenant William Carter’s letter of 26 January 1776:

Boston, 26th January 1776.

The Provincials have entered on the new year with spirit.

The King’s speech was sent by a flag to them on the 1st instant. In a short time after they received it, they hoisted an union flag (above the continental with the thirteen stripes) at Mount Pisga; their citadel fired thirteen guns, and gave the like number of cheers.¹⁷

Carter also saw the flag-raising as a symbol of defiance. Like the transport captain, his description was written for a British audience, to whom “union flag” would normally mean the King’s colors or one of the standard British ensigns.

At first glance, Carter’s description could be interpreted as a single flag that had stripes under the union. However, a careful reading of his phraseology makes it more likely that he was describing two flags—a “union flag” above a separate flag that he called “the continental.”¹⁸ This distinction was noted by Schuyler Hamilton in the first book-length history of the American flag, and he attributed it to confusion on Carter’s part.¹⁹

In summary, the primary sources provide these main points of evidence:

1. All three of the observers described the flag as the “union flag” without any qualification. As we have already seen, this was not the way that the Continental Colors was typically described in early 1776 by either the Americans or the British. The fact that two British observers, addressing correspondents in Britain, used this description makes a strong case that they were referring to the British union flag rather than a continental variation. One of the British observers also commented that the flag was “*here* supposed to intimate the union of the Provinces.” This would imply that he was differentiating between the flag’s meaning to the Americans and the British.

2. The point of Washington's paragraph was the "farcical" contrast between the Americans' intent in raising the flag Prospect Hill, and the way it the British interpreted it. The contrast arose because of the timing: by Washington's own statement, he raised the flag before learning of the contents of the speech. At the time he raised it, the message that he probably intended was the same one that British Lieutenant Barker expressed back in May 1775: "The Rebels have raised the Standard at Cambridge; they call themselves the King's troops and us the Parliaments."²⁰ That was still the official stance of the United Colonies in January 1776, despite Washington's personal opinion that it was absurd.
3. Washington's observation that the flag-raising "was received in Boston as a token of the deep impression the Speech had made upon us, and as a signal of submission" strongly implies that he thought the Bostonians interpreted the flag as a symbol of the crown.
4. Lieutenant Carter's description is undeniably ambiguous, and if his were the only primary account then there would be a stronger case that the flag might actually have been the Continental Colors. However, the cumulative evidence provided by all three accounts would appear to make this unlikely.

DeLear's Analysis of the Primary Accounts

As noted in the introduction, DeLear directly addresses the primary sources in only a few paragraphs of his paper. Concerning Washington's letter, he writes:

Washington relays that the British mistakenly thought the King's speech made the Americans have a change of heart. As a consequence, the rebel's colors transition from an "entirely red" flag—a common signal used for protest, duress or rebellion—toward that of a British Union (albeit striped in the field). From a British perspective, it must have been the weight of royal authority wielded by their Sovereign that precipitated the shift from rebellious red flag to the loyal "union flag."

As indicated by Washington, this was confused, and perhaps, wishful thinking on the part of the British. It was an emotionally satisfying interpretation—sighting the British Union atop the rebel's camp gave the red coats the false hope that they might not be forced to carry out a bloody campaign after all.

... Washington was *surprised* by the British reaction to Prospect Hill and found it hilarious—to wit, if he had hoisted a wholly English flag,

of course it would be seen as a token of submission and/or loyalty to the British. It wouldn't be ironic—it would be obvious. But the humorous tone of his January 4 letter to Reed was based on the confusing message the new flag unwittingly transmitted (being composed of both British and American elements.) Washington was delighted to report the unintended effect that the new flag had on the “red coats” . . . (emphasis in the original).²¹

As DeLear himself points out, interpreting the flag as a sign of submission would be natural if the flag were a British union flag. To assert that it was something else, he is forced to add meaning to Washington's words that is simply not there. Washington said that “we had hoisted the Union Flag . . . [and] . . . It was received in Boston as a token of the deep impression the Speech had made upon us, and as a signal of submission.” There is no indication that Washington was “surprised by this,” or that he thought that the Bostonians were “confused.” The straightforward meaning of this statement is that the flag was a symbol that would naturally be interpreted as submission to the King.

DeLear proposes two hypotheses as to why the Bostonians might have viewed the Continental Colors as a symbol of submission. The first is the idea that the Continental Colors implied loyalty because it was less hostile than the red flag that had been displayed previously. The second is a rather elaborate psychological explanation based on the idea that the British yearning for an American capitulation caused them to hallucinate: “the British were so focused on the Union flag that the Americans raised, it's quite possible they simply didn't see the stripes.”²²

The first hypothesis is conceivable. As DeLear correctly notes, the red flag that the transport captain mentioned was probably the color of the 3rd Connecticut Regiment, which was displayed on Prospect Hill back on 18 July 1775.²³ The second hypothesis is highly speculative. However, neither of them is particularly relevant. The question is not why the Bostonians *actually* thought the flag indicated submission, but why *Washington thought* they would make that assumption.²⁴ It is conceivable that Washington might have made the mental connection between the red flag and its replacement by the then-current flag, but needless to say there is no evidence for such an assumption. And, although Washington was a reasonably good judge of character, it is not likely that he was familiar with modern neurology and psychology. Both of these hypotheses seem farfetched compared to the obvious one: Washington assumed that they would interpret the King's flag as a sign of submission to the King.

In summary, DeLear's analysis attempts to twist Washington's words to imply meaning that is not there, and by concocting speculative explanations in place of the most straightforward one. DeLear himself states "if [Washington] had hoisted a wholly English [*sic*] flag, *of course* it would be seen as a token of submission" (emphasis in the original).²⁵ Occam's razor would suggest that this is exactly what Washington did. Washington's amusement arose from the Bostonians' misperception of the Americans' intent: they thought that the flag was a *reaction* to the speech, while Washington knew that it was raised "in complement to the United Colonies" *before* "the proclamation came to hand."

Secondary Sources

DeLear writes "it is not only 'all modern accounts' of the event at Prospect Hill that depict the Grand Union flying there, but all the secondary sources of the period, newspaper articles, etc. report the same conventional history, and, if erroneous, nowhere were they later corrected until Ansoff."²⁶

As I showed in the original paper, there are actually only two, or possibly three, contemporary accounts, and none of them state that the flag had stripes and a British union. I also showed that the first known mention of the Continental Colors in connection with Prospect Hill was in a footnote in Frothingham's 1849 history of the siege of Boston, which he based it on the same sources that I reviewed in my paper, and that his information was propagated in subsequent histories of the American flag. Secondary sources are just that—secondhand information that is derived and frequently distorted from primary sources based on the author's assumptions and inclinations. The fact that secondary sources repeat the same conventional story is not evidence of the validity of that story.

Summary and Conclusions

My original hypothesis concerning the flag on Prospect Hill was just that, a hypothesis. There were no photographers present on that winter morning, and there is no "smoking gun" evidence of what the flag was. However, I believe that an impartial reading of the primary accounts, and a correct understanding of their context, supports my hypothesis better than it does the conventional story. In my opinion, DeLear has not presented any information that would change this conclusion.

DeLear's analysis of the primary sources ignores two key contextual factors: the official position of the United Colonies toward the Crown and the Ministry on 1 January 1776, and Washington's fundamental policy of following

the lead of the Congress with respect to political issues. He also misrepresents the evidence regarding the contemporary use of the term “union flag,” distorts the meaning of the key primary source, and offers speculative explanations instead of accepting the most obvious ones.

DeLear states in his introduction that “Revising history without clear and unambiguous primary source interpretation should not be taken lightly.”²⁷ This is true enough when the primary sources are unambiguous, but unfortunately they rarely are.²⁸ The historian’s job is to analyze the primary sources and their context impartially, follow the evidence wherever it leads, and draw the conclusions that are best supported by the evidence. Instead, DeLear privileges the traditional history of Prospect Hill simply because it *is* the traditional history, and he defends this position by trying to make the primary accounts say things that they do not actually say. Like many previous writers, he *wants* the “conventional narrative” to be true. It is an appealing story of how the heroic Americans celebrated the creation of their new army by raising a symbol of defiance in the face of the British enemy, with George Washington himself playing a central role in the drama. As often happens in history, the reality appears to have been more nuanced than the legend.²⁹

In DeLear’s defense, the primary sources are certainly *not* unambiguous, and there is clearly more research to be done. The most significant issue is Lieutenant Carter’s mention of a striped flag. Even if he was accurately reporting that he saw two flags (“an union flag above the continental with the thirteen stripes”), this would be the earliest mention of such a flag anywhere outside of Philadelphia.³⁰ Conversely, it is notable that Carter did not publish his letters until 1784, when the war was over. It is conceivable that he edited them retroactively to include information that was common knowledge by then.

My original paper included a section titled “The Story of the Story” that analyzed the origins and growth of historiography on Prospect Hill. I thank DeLear for contributing to that story, and I look forward to the next chapter.

Appendix A: The Origin of the Continental Colors

I stated in my original paper that “the Continental Flag was created in Philadelphia for use by the embryonic Continental Navy. It was never officially adopted or promulgated.”³¹ DeLear challenges these statements: “Firstly, we don’t have direct evidence about the Grand Union’s provenance; therefore, its creation story should not be narrowly confined solely to the purpose of ‘use by the embryonic Continental Navy.’ If this was true, the Grand Union flag would not have been used as a garrison flag in February 1776 at Fort Mifflin (Fort Island), or the standard hoisted by the American troops during July in New York.”³²

DeLear is of course correct that there is no specific official record of who created the Continental Colors, or why it was created. However, there are two reasons that we can be fairly certain about the reason for its creation. First, as DeLear himself shows in his extensive collection of quotations, the earliest references to the flag in December 1775 and January 1776 are in the context of the ensign of the Continental squadron. Second, there is an obvious reason why it would be created at that time and place. The men who outfitted the Continental squadron would have known, as a matter of course, that the ships needed a distinctive flag for identification at sea and in foreign ports. This was the primary function of a national flag in the eighteenth century and, arguably, the reason that the concept of a national flag arose in the first place. It is not coincidental that the stars-and-stripes flag of the United States was probably designed by the chairman of the Navy Board, and that the resolution adopting it in 1777 appears in the Journals of Congress among other naval-related matters.

The fact that the Continental Colors was created as a naval ensign did not preclude its use as a garrison flag, or flying it ashore on memorable occasions. The British union flag was used ashore as a garrison and command flag, and also to celebrate holidays such as the King’s birthday, although this non-Naval usage was not codified until the late nineteenth century.³³ There would be nothing surprising about the Americans doing the same thing with their naval ensign.³⁴

DeLear continues: “Additionally, it would be inaccurate to claim that the Grand Union flag ‘was never officially adopted or promulgated,’ only that we don’t have *direct evidence* of its adoption. On the other hand, its promulgation throughout the colonies is self-evident.”³⁵ (Emphasis in the original) When one is speaking about the adoption of a flag, it is normally understood to involve a decree, resolution or some other official action by the governing body that the flag is to represent. In the fall of 1775, this would logically have been the Continental Congress. There is no evidence in the records of the Congress

that it adopted, or even discussed, a national flag prior to 14 June 1777. The Continental Colors was obviously promulgated by correspondence, press and word-of-mouth, but it was not *officially* promulgated by any law or decree. If it had been, the resolution would have appeared in the Journals of the Congress, and also been gazetted in the press, just as the flag resolution was in 1777. In this case, the fact that we don't have direct evidence makes it overwhelmingly likely that it did not happen.³⁶ The existing evidence strongly suggests that the Continental Colors was created as an expedient to provide a distinctive ensign for the Continental Navy squadron in the fall of 1775.³⁷

DeLear writes, "it is an ongoing and fascinating mystery that history has yet to discover any primary source evidence of when the Grand Union flag's adoption was decided upon, or more importantly, the purpose behind its design."³⁸ He wants the creation of the Continental Colors to be an exciting and meaningful story, replete with subtle symbolism. The primary source evidence that we do have suggests, however, that the Continental Colors was created as utilitarian response to a military requirement. There is no evidence of a deep and significant "purpose behind its design," probably because there wasn't one.

Appendix B: Joseph Reed, George Washington, and the Continental Colors

Colonel Joseph Reed was the recipient of Washington's letter of 4 January 1776. Reed was Washington's former secretary; he had left this position in October 1775 and returned to his home in Philadelphia. With respect to our topic, the most relevant facet of his relationship with Washington was that they were friends. The comments expressed in Washington's letter (e.g., that independence was inevitable) represented Washington's personal opinions, rather than his official position as Commander-in-Chief of the Army. A subtext of his letter was the dissonance between the two.

Aside from Washington's mention of the union flag in this letter, there is no evidence whatsoever that connects Reed to the Prospect Hill story. However, DeLear develops a line of reasoning that Reed was somehow deeply involved: "To further understand Washington's choice of words it is important to take in to consideration the intended recipient of the letter. Was Washington attempting to make an exact description, like a historian or flag-expert to a neutral party? Or was the recipient sufficiently familiar with the issues at hand? And if so, how familiar?"³⁹

This is, of course, a straw man question. Obviously, Washington did not provide a detailed technical description of the flag, and he assumed that Reed would understand his reference to it. Every American was familiar with the British union flag, and if that is what the flag was, then there would be no issue—Reed would indeed have understood Washington's reference. To assert that it was something else, DeLear must create a plausible story about how both Reed and Washington had prior knowledge of the Continental Colors, so that Reed would correctly understand Washington's casual reference. DeLear first tries to establish that Reed had a special interest in flags:

Ten days before departing Cambridge for Philadelphia, Reed wrote one of only a handful of surviving explicit flag directives of the period. Addressing Colonel Glover and Stephen Moylan Esq. at Salem, Reed makes the suggestion of utilizing the Pine Tree Flag so "our vessels may know one another." He describes the "particular Colour" as a flag "with a white ground, a Tree in the Middle, the motto (Appeal to Heaven). This is the flag of our floating Batteries."

Clearly, this shows Washington and Reed were not only aware and concerned with the colors the continentals would be flying, but were also involved in deciding which flags would be used.⁴⁰

The context of this letter was that two of Washington's armed schooners were preparing to depart on a commerce-raiding cruise, and Reed was giving final instructions to the officers who were outfitting the ships. Reed knew that an armed vessel needed a distinctive flag for identification; he suggested that they use the flag that had already been created for the floating batteries that supported Washington's army. Two of the batteries were stationed at Army headquarters in Cambridge, and it is not surprising that Reed was aware of their flag. Contrary to DeLear's assertions, this does not show that Reed had any particular interest in the design of the flag, but only that it was a military requirement that somehow had to be filled. His mention of the Pine Tree flag was a suggestion, not a "directive."⁴¹ The letter also does not "clearly" show that Washington was involved in the discussion about the flag, or even that he was aware of it.⁴²

DeLear continues: "When Washington wrote Reed on 4 January relaying the story of the Prospect Hill flag raising ceremony, we can safely assume Reed would know exactly what Washington was referring to. . . . Their close working relationship on these matters may have obviated the need for additional clarifying detail."⁴³

Again, this is obvious if the flag was a British union flag. If it was the Continental Colors, then DeLear needs to provide evidence that both Washington and Reed had prior knowledge of it, and that they had discussed it previously. He cannot do this, because there is no such evidence. However, he presents a hypothesis that there would be, if only we had access to Reed's letters to Washington. He states, correctly, "We know these letters existed because Washington references them in his correspondence with Reed and they have never been found."⁴⁴ He provides a detailed discussion of how Tobias Lear, who had custody of Washington's papers after his death, is believed to have destroyed some of those papers. He implies that Reed's letters could have been among the destroyed material, and states that "the twelve missing Reed letters from November to December 1775 . . . could very plausibly have contained historical details about the Grand Union flag"⁴⁵

This is true of course; the letters *could* also have contained many other things. However, this is certainly is not the "unambiguous primary interpretation" that DeLear demands elsewhere in his paper.⁴⁶

In summary, DeLear cannot accept the prosaic explanation that Washington was referring to a flag of which both he and Reed certainly had prior knowledge, namely the British union flag. Instead, he creates a highly speculative hypothesis that hinges on what Reed might or might not have said to

Washington, in letters that most probably no longer exist, concerning a subject that was not of particular interest to either of them. DeLear's conclusion that the Continental Colors was "a flag . . . which Reed was most certainly well aware of"⁴⁷ is both a *non sequitur* and beside the point. The real question is whether or not he mentioned it in his letters to Washington, and we have no evidence that he did.⁴⁸

Appendix C: Did Washington Mention the “United States of America” on Prospect Hill?

DeLear recently discovered what may be the first known use of the term “United States of America.”⁴⁹ The source was a letter from Col. Stephen Moylan, written from Continental Army Headquarters in Cambridge, to Joseph Reed in Philadelphia on 2 January 1776. DeLear announced his discovery in a contribution to the *Christian Science Monitor* on 4 July 2013, in which he commented: “The Grand Union flag was raised by Washington on Boston’s Prospect Hill in a ceremony to commemorate the inauguration of the Continental Army of ’76—the reformed army that Washington had worked tirelessly to build. It must have been a heady occasion, and perhaps the phrase “United States of America” was sounded that day.”⁵⁰

In December 2013, DeLear published a follow-up online article entitled “Was America’s name first uttered on Prospect Hill on New Year’s Day 1776?”⁵¹ After quoting his own previous article, he repeated the same idea: “The debut of Washington’s reboot of the Continental Army—what he referred to as the “new establishment”—in addition to the New Year and the new flag, might have been the perfect venue for previewing the new name of our nation, which, evidently, was immediately put into documentary practice the following day [i.e., in Moylan’s letter to Reed].”

It is extremely doubtful that Washington referred to the “United States of America” on Prospect Hill on New Year’s Day 1776, for three reasons:

1. There is no evidence that Washington was present at the flag-raising. No contemporary account mentions it.⁵²
2. As discussed in the main paper, it would have been completely out of character for Washington to advocate the independence of the Colonies without the sanction of the Continental Congress. The fact that the phrase was used by one of his subordinates in a private letter does not in any way suggest that Washington would have used it publically in an official context.
3. The record of Washington’s writings at the time makes clear that he did not use the phrase “United States of America” in any official context. In his “General Orders” on 1 January, he was careful to speak only of “the great Cause we are engaged in . . . when our unnatural Parent is threat’ning of us with destruction from every quarter.”⁵³ Two days later, his orders stated that “The Continental Rules and Articles . . . for the better Government

of the Troops of the Thirteen United Colonies are now to take place.”⁵⁴ One day after that, he wrote privately to Reed that “we had hoisted the union flag in complement to the United Colonies.” He continued to use similar forms through June of 1776.⁵⁵

The idea that Washington might have used the phrase “United States of America” in public on Prospect Hill is contrary to both his fundamental apolitical policy and the evidence of his own writings at the time, assuming that he was even there in the first place.

Appendix D: Corrections and Updates to “The Flag on Prospect Hill”

The following are corrections to my original article, published in *Raven* 13 in 2006:⁵⁶

1. The map of the Prospect Hill area on page 82, and the detail on the back cover, were incorrectly credited to “Sir Thomas Hyde.” The map was actually prepared by Sir Thomas Hyde Page (1746–1751).⁵⁷
2. Footnote 17 on page 98 stated that the captain of the transport ship reported his cargo as including hogs and sheep. His letter did mention both animals; however the sheep were actually brought by another vessel. He stated that “another ship, that had one hundred and thirty sheep, brought in five, and all as thin as you could expect, and, as the sailors say, only fit for lanterns.”⁵⁸
3. It was stated on page 92 that the term “Grand Union” was first applied to the Continental Colors by George Preble in 1872. Fellow scholar Matthew Larsen has identified an earlier use of the term by historian Thompson Westcott in 1852.⁵⁹ In response to a query, Westcott wrote, in part: “A letter from Boston . . . published in the *Penna Gazette* for January 1776, says: ‘The grand union flag was raised on the 2nd (of January) in complement to the united colonies.’”⁶⁰ This is almost certainly a reference to the item that was published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on 17 January, with “grand” accidentally substituted for “great.” Preble cited Westcott as one of his sources, and probably copied the quote without checking it against the original. This also may have been the source of Preble’s “Anonymous Letter” that was discussed in the Appendix.



This paper was first presented at the 48th Annual Meeting of NAVA in New Orleans, Louisiana, in October 2014.

End Notes

1. Subsequently published as Ansoff, “The Flag on Prospect Hill,” 77–100.
2. DeLear, “Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill: Grand Union or Just British?” 19. DeLear’s paper was published in two forms: a glossy booklet that was distributed

at the 47th Annual Meeting of NAVA and an article that appeared in *Raven* 21. The booklet version included an appendix on the relationship between the Continental Colors and the British East India Company flag that was omitted from the *Raven* version. This material will apparently be re-published separately, and I will respond to it in due course. The page references in the present article refer to the *Raven* version.

- 3. DeLear, "Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill," 21.
- 4. Ansoff, "The Flag on Prospect Hill," 91.
- 5. DeLear, "Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill," 21. Strictly speaking, the term "jack" refers to the flag flown at the bow of a warship. In more recent times it has become usual to refer to the British union flag as the "Union Jack" in other contexts, but this usage was not as common in the eighteenth century.
- 6. DeLear, "Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill," 48.
- 7. For example, see the following documents in the Washington Papers:

Date	From Washington to:	Series	Image	Phrase
3 Jan 76	General Orders	3	156	"the Troops of the Thirteen United Colonies"
3 Mar 76	General Orders	3g	196	"the ministerial Troops"
27 Mar 76	Generals Thompson and Alexander	3b	243	"Transports with the ministerial Troops"
15 Apr 76	Continental Congress	2	34	"the Ministerial Army"
18 Apr 76	General Orders	2	223	"the Thanks of the United Colonies"
13 May 76	Nicholas Cooke (Governor of Rhode Island)	2	96	"respecting the state of your Colony"
7 Jun 76	General Orders	2	276	"the Army of the United Colonies"
13 Jun 76	New York Provincial Congress	2	148	"the cause of the United Colonies"

- 8. DeLear, "Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill," 48, citing Dreilinger, "Unfurling History on Prospect Hill," quotes two distinguished historians in support of his position. The late author and Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor, Pauline Maier, noted that "you wouldn't want a flag that was the same flag as the people" you were fighting. This statement is certainly true in the context of a naval engagement or a mobile land battle or campaign, where the flag is necessary to distinguish between friendly and enemy ships or troops. However, it was less relevant during the siege of Boston, which was essentially a static blockade with no significant field engagements. There was no doubt on either side about whose army occupied Prospect Hill on that January morning. Professor Robert Allison, of Suffolk University, is quoted as saying that raising the flag was a sign of differ-

entiation and change in this context, and that “Washington, probably more than any of his contemporaries, knew the importance of symbols.” He did indeed, and that is precisely why he would not have been expected to choose a symbol that contradicted the official position of the Congress. On 1 January 1776 that position was that there had *not* been a “change of context” in the relationship between the King and the Colonies. One suspects that the comments these two authorities provided to Dreilinger were first reactions that did not consider the particular circumstances or the actual arguments in Ansoff, “The Flag on Prospect Hill.”

9. DeLear, “Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill,” 35.
10. Ibid, 37.
11. Clark, *Naval Documents*, volume 3, 1385.
12. DeLear solicited an opinion on this point from Dr. John Hattendorf, an eminent naval historian and authority on the Revolutionary War navy. He quotes Dr. Hattendorf as saying that the “Union Flag for the *Columbus* . . . could only refer to the Grand Union flag, as an ‘old colours’, namely the British Red Ensign or British Union flag, were readily available and not needed for the initial outfitting.” (DeLear, “Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill,” 61n42.) While hesitant to challenge such an authoritative statement, I must disagree with it for two reasons. First, maritime use of the “Great Union” flag, with the union crosses overall, was restricted by law to Royal Navy warships, and an ex-merchantman like the *Columbus* would not normally have carried one. Second, the “union flag” mentioned in the 12 December entry could have been a replacement for, e.g., a red ensign that had been worn out (the *Columbus* had recently returned from a voyage to Britain). As we have seen, this point is irrelevant in any case because the flag in question was not the *Columbus*’s ensign.
13. DeLear states that his paper includes “additional primary and secondary sources,” (DeLear, “Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill,” 19) but he does not cite any primary sources for the Prospect Hill raising other than the ones discussed in my original paper.
14. Reed, *Reprint of the Original Letters*, 35–36.
15. See Ansoff, “The Flag on Prospect Hill,” 83 and 97n.
16. “Extract of a Letter From a Captain of an English Transport To His Owners, In London, Dated Boston, January 17, 1776,” in Force, *American Archives*, 4:710. The source from which Peter Force transcribed this letter is not known. Presumably it was a British newspaper or magazine.
17. Carter, *A Genuine Detail*, 20.
18. Contrast Carter’s words with the description of the Continental Colors that appeared in the *London Chronicle* the following July: “The colours of the American fleet were striped under the Union with 13 strokes, called the Thirteen United Colonies.” (*London Chronicle*, July 1776, Library of Congress, Eighteenth-Century

- Newspaper Collection, microfilm 1934.) In the latter case, the writer is clearly describing a single flag.
19. See Ansoff, "The Flag on Prospect Hill," 89. It is quite interesting that Carter referred to a striped flag called the "Continental." Even if he was describing a flag separate from the union flag, this is the earliest known reference to a striped Continental flag in the Boston area, and came only a month after the Continental Colors was first raised in Philadelphia. It should be noted, however, that Carter's letters were not published until 1784, after the war was over, and by which time the Americans' use of striped flags had become common knowledge. It is possible that he edited his letters before publication.
 20. Barker, *The British in Boston*, 39–40. See Ansoff, "The Flag on Prospect Hill," 80.
 21. DeLear, "Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill," 40 and 48–49.
 22. *Ibid.*, 41 and 65n60.
 23. *New England Chronicle or the Essex Gazette*, 13–31 July 1775, Library of Congress, Eighteenth-Century Newspaper Collection, microfilm 3213. This event occurred before the installation of the flag pole on Prospect Hill, which occurred on 1 August; the newspaper article stating that "the Standard lately sent to General Putnam was exhibited flourishing in the Air." The color of the flag was coincidental; each of the Connecticut regiments had a different colored regimental color. The color of the 2nd Regiment was green, for example.
 24. We will probably never know what the Bostonians' reaction really was when they saw the flag on 1 January. Both of the British eyewitnesses interpreted the flag (which they believed to be a reaction to the King's speech) as a sign of American resistance, not submission. However, their accounts were not written until several weeks after the incident: the transport captain's on 17 January and Lt. Carter's on 26 January. By that time, it was clear that the Americans did not intend to submit, regardless of what flag they had displayed on the 1st. Carter actually describes, in the same letter, two American raids on the British lines that occurred on the 7th and the 14th. Carter, *A Genuine Detail*, 20–21.
 25. DeLear, "Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill," 48.
 26. *Ibid.*, 39–40.
 27. *Ibid.*, 22.
 28. In a recent book review, Professor Eric Rust, of Baylor University, commented "even the best primary sources and facts never speak for themselves. They require context, interpretation, clarification, discussion, assessment and reassessment." Eric C. Rust, review of Jak P. Mallmann Showell, *Dönitz, U-Boats, Convoys: The British Version of His Memoirs from the Admiralty's Secret Anti-Submarine Reports* (London: Frontline Books, 2013), *The Mariner's Mirror* 100, no. 3 (August 2014): 368.
 29. When this paper was originally presented in Baltimore, Dr. Whitney Smith, of the Flag Research Center, was in the audience. After the presentation, he com-

mented that “as a lifelong Bostonian I don’t like your hypothesis very much, but I think it’s probably right.” At first reading this was simply a humorous compliment; however, I now believe that he was making a serious point: people become attached to and invested in historical legends, and are upset when the “conventional history” is challenged.

30. All previous references to striped flags were related to its use as the ensign of the first Continental squadron, which sailed in early January and did not clear the Delaware River until 18 February.
31. Ansoff, “The Flag on Prospect Hill,” 84.
32. DeLear, “Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill,” 49.
33. Message by David Prothero, Flags of the World mailing list, 17 January 2005, <http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/FLAGS/conversations/messages/87626>.
34. It is interesting that the Americans settled on the naval ensign as the garrison flag, as opposed to the British practice of using their naval jack for that purpose. See Ansoff, “The First Navy Jack,” 1–60, for a detailed discussion of the American jack.
35. DeLear, “Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill,” 49.
36. In response to an inquiry from the New York Committee of Safety, John Jay wrote from Philadelphia on 23 March 1776, “as to Continental Colors, the Congress have made no order as yet concerning them.” See Ansoff, “The First Navy Jack,” 28–29, for the background to this letter.
37. For speculation on who might have created the Continental Colors, see Ansoff, “Sir Charles Fawcett Redux,” 15–17. The design was utilitarian in the sense that it made it easy to convert existing British red ensigns into Continental Colors by adding stripes of readily available white fabric. Ansoff, “The Sign Their Banners Bore,” cites a documentary reference to “an Ensign altered into a Continental one” for the Massachusetts Navy ship *Freedom* in February 1777.
38. DeLear, “Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill,” 50.
39. *Ibid.*, 37.
40. *Ibid.*, 39. Reed’s letter is in Library of Congress, “Papers of George Washington,” series 2, images 113–14.
41. See Ansoff, “The Sign Their Banners Bore,” for the full Reed quotation and details on the flags of the floating batteries and Washington’s schooners. Although the flag that Reed described is commonly equated with the Pine Tree flag, Reed simply called it a tree, and it does not look like a pine tree in the only known illustration of an American floating battery. As noted in “The Sign Their Banners Bore,” it may have been an elm in memory of the Boston “Liberty Tree,” which was cut down by loyalist militia shortly before the floating batteries were built.
42. My original paper stated that Washington was probably not aware that the Continental Colors existed on 1 January 1776. DeLear challenges this statement (DeLear,

“Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill,” 49), asserting that Washington did know about the Continental Colors at that time. He provides a fairly extensive discussion on the flag’s origins and history, but does not cite any evidence that supports his position other than vague speculation. Washington certainly became aware of the Continental Colors at some time during the winter or spring of 1776, and his army flew it from the Battery Fort in New York in July 1776. (“They have set up their Standard in the Fort upon the Southern Point of the Town. The Colors are thirteen Strips of Red and White alternately, with the English Union cantoned in the Corner.” Ambrose Searle to the Earl of Dartmouth, 25 July 1776, in Stevens, *Stevens’s Facsimiles of Manuscripts*, #2040, microfilm #2.) See Appendix A for a related discussion of this issue.

43. DeLear, “Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill,” 39.

44. *Ibid.*, 50.

45. *Ibid.*, 52.

46. *Ibid.*, 22

47. *Ibid.*, 49.

48. Curiously, DeLear overlooks the best circumstantial evidence that Reed *might* have been aware of the Continental Colors when he wrote his letters to Washington. In a later paragraph of Washington’s 4 January 1776 letter, Washington comments: “I fear your fleet has been so long in fitting, and the destination of it so well known, that the end will be defeated if the vessels escape.” (Reed, *Reprint of the Original Letters*, 38.) Washington was obviously referring to the Continental squadron, which was preparing to sail from Philadelphia on its mission to the Bahamas. His reference to “your fleet” implies that Reed was involved in some way in the outfitting of the ships, and that Reed had mentioned his in previous letters. Washington mentioned the subject again in his next letter to Reed, dated 14 January: “I am exceeding sorry to hear that your little fleet has been shut in by the frost. I hope it has sailed e’er this, and given you some proof of the utility of it, and enabl’d Congress to bestow a little more attention to the affairs of this army.” (Reed, *Reprint of the Original Letters*, 41.) If Reed really was involved in the outfitting of the Continental squadron, it is possible that he was aware of the creation of the ensign for the vessels. There is still no reason to assume that he was particularly interested in the design, or that he had any reason to mention it to Washington.

49. See DeLear, “Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill,” 59n35.

50. DeLear, “Who coined ‘United States of America?’”

51. DeLear, “Was America’s name first uttered on Prospect Hill on New Year’s Day 1776?”

52. While Lieutenant Carter mentions cheers and cannon firings, there is no primary source that mentions any sort of ceremony on Prospect Hill on 1 January 1776, and early secondary accounts like Frothingham and Hamilton do not mention

one either. The idea that there was one, and that Washington was present, appears to be a later assumption, reinforced by Clyde Deland's heroic painting of 1898. While further research may change this situation, it appears that the 1 January 1776 ceremony may be as mythical as Washington's assumption of command on Cambridge Commons the previous July.

53. Library of Congress, "Papers of George Washington," series 3G, image 154.
54. *Ibid.*, series 3G, image 156.
55. See note 7, above, for other references.
56. Ansoff, "The Flag on Prospect Hill," 77–100.
57. Page was badly wounded at Bunker Hill in June 1775 and was sent home to Britain after having his left leg amputated. See Fuss, "The British Corps of Engineers in America," 298. It would be interesting to know if he prepared the map before the battle, or afterward from data that he had previously collected.
58. Force, *American Archives*, 4:712.
59. E-mails, Matthew Larsen to author, 7 and 8 December 2007. I am especially grateful to Mr. Larsen for sharing his research and to David Martucci for putting Mr. Larsen in touch with me.
60. *Notes and Queries*, 10 July 1852, 41.

Bibliography

- Ansoff, Peter. "The First Navy Jack." *Raven: A Journal of Vexillology* 11 (2004): 1–60.
- Ansoff, Peter. "Sir Charles Fawcett Redux: The Historical Connection Between the East India Company Flag and the Continental Colors." In *Proceedings of the 24th International Congress of Vexillology: Washington, D.C., USA, 1–5 August 2011*, edited by Scot M. Guenter. Trenton, N.J.: North American Vexillological Association, 2011.
- Ansoff, Peter. "The Flag on Prospect Hill." *Raven: A Journal of Vexillology* 13 (2006): 77–100.
- Ansoff, Peter. "The Sign Their Banners Bore, the 'Pine Tree' Flag in the American Revolution." Paper presented to the North American Vexillological Association, October 2004 (publication pending).
- Barker, John, *The British in Boston, Being the Diary of Lieutenant John Barker of the King's Own Regiment from November 15, 1774 to May 31, 1776; with notes by Elizabeth Ellery Dana*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1924. Portions of Lieutenant Barker's diary were printed in the *Atlantic Monthly* in April and May 1877.
- Carter, William. *A Genuine Detail of the Several Engagements, Positions, and Movements of the Royal and American Armies, During the Years 1775 and 1776*;

- with an Accurate Account of the Blockade of Boston, and a Plan of the Works on Bunker's Hill, at the Time it was Abandoned by His Majesty's Forces on the 17th of March, 1776, in a Series of Letters to a Friend.* London: G. Kearsley, 1784.
- Clark, William Bell, et al. *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*. 12 Volumes. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964–.
- DeLear, Byron. “Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill: Grand Union or Just British?” *Raven: A Journal of Vexillology* 21 (2014): 1–70.
- DeLear, Byron. *Revisiting the Flag at Prospect Hill: Grand Union or Just British?* N.p., 2013. Booklet distributed at the 47th Annual Meeting of the North American Vexillological Association to accompany the author's presentation, 13 October 2013.
- DeLear, Byron. “Was America's name first uttered on Prospect Hill on New Year's Day 1776?” Last modified 29 December 2013, <http://www.examiner.com/article/was-america-s-name-first-uttered-on-prospect-hill-on-new-year-s-day-1776>.
- DeLear, Byron. “Who coined ‘United States of America’? Mystery Might Have Intriguing Answer.” *Christian Science Monitor*, last modified 4 July 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2013/0704/Who-coined-United-States-of-America-Mystery-might-have-intriguing-answer>.
- Dreilinger, Danielle. “Unfurling History on Prospect Hill.” Last modified 31 December 2009, http://www.boston.com/yourtown/news/somerville/2009/12/on_jan_1_george_washington.html.
- Force, Peter. *American Archives, Containing A Documentary History Of The English Colonies In North America From The King's Message To Parliament, Of March 7, 1774 To The Declaration Of Independence By The United States*. 9 Volumes. Washington, DC: M. St. Clair and Peter Force, 1837–53.
- Frothingham, Richard. *History of the Siege of Boston and of the Battles of Lexington, Concord and Bunker Hill*. Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1849.
- Fuss, Norman. “The British Corps of Engineers in America, 1775–1783, Part I.” *Military Collector and Historian* 66, no. 4 (2014): 294–311.
- Library of Congress. Eighteenth-Century Newspaper Collection (microfilm).
- Library of Congress. “Papers of George Washington.” American Memory project, online at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html>.
- Reed, William B. *Reprint of the Original Letters from Washington to Joseph Reed during the American Revolution*. Philadelphia: A. Hart, late Carney and Hart, 1853. A carefully-transcribed collection by Reed's grandson and biographer.
- Stevens, Benjamin Franklin. *Stevens's Facsimiles of Manuscripts in European Archives Relating to America 1773–1783*. London: Issued only to subscribers, 1889–98. Contains images of the original handwritten documents. Quotations are from a microfilmed copy.