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Time to fix 88-year-old mistake in Utah flag?

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Rep. Julie Fisher, R-Fruit Heights, says it is time to fix an 88-year-old mistake with Utah's state flag.

"Back in 1922, a woman [Dolly McMonegal] made a finely embroidered copy of the flag for the state," in a time when most flags were handmade, Fisher says. But McMonegal either made the shield on it too small or the word "Utah" within it too big — leaving no room in the shield for "1847" (the year when the Mormon pioneers arrived in the Salt Lake Valley).

"So she put the '1847' beneath the shield, even though the law required it to be in the shield," Fisher says. "Then, facsimiles became popular of that flag, and no one ever corrected the mistake."

So the flag's "1847" remains rather awkwardly spaced and placed.

"It's not the ugliness of the flag, it's simply wrong," says Fisher, who went back and read Utah state law about how the flag is supposed to look. "The '1847' is supposed to be inside the shield. If you look at the state seal — which the flag is based on — it is inside the shield there."

Fisher says Ron Fox, a lobbyist and amateur historian, pointed out the problem to her. She said she figured the state had some choices: ignore the problem; change the law to reflect how the flag actually has appeared the last 88 years; or pass a resolution calling for fixing the error and going back to the original design.

She has introduced a resolution to point out the error and to ask flagmakers to correct the design.

"My resolution would allow people to use the flags they have today as long as they want. Then when they replace them with a new flag, it would follow the actual statute," Fisher said.



File | Salt Lake Tribune Utah's official delegation to the St. Louis World's Fair in 1903 included Utah's new and unofficial state flag. Delegation members include Utah Gov. Heber M. Wells, state commanding Gen. C.S. Burton, Sens. Thomas Kearns and Reed Smoot, the First Presidency of the LDS Church and other civic leaders.

She adds that her resolution may allow the Legislature to have a little fun with the issue and provide some stress relief from dealing with a tough budget. It also comes on the 100th anniversary of the adoption of a state flag by the Legislature.

Fox said the state flag has a fascinating history and notes that the Legislature — long ago — changed the statutory description of the flag to legalize some artistic license taken by another early flagmaker.

Fox said the first unofficial state flag was created in 1903 when the St. Louis World's Fair invited then-Gov. Heber M. Wells to send a delegation to march with a flag in a parade of states — and dedicate the site for a Utah exhibit the next day. The trouble was, the state had no flag.

The Utah State Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution made a flag at Wells' request and presented it to him on March 31, 1903. Some quick alterations were made to that version with the help of artist H.L.A. Culmer and flagmaker Agnes Teudt Fernelius to make it more closely reflect the state seal.

On May 1, 1903, Utah's delegation to the world's fair — including Wells, Utah's two U.S. senators and the LDS Church First Presidency — marched proudly with the flag in the parade of states. Because the Legislature had not formally approved the flag, it was called the governor's flag or his regimental flag until it was eventually adopted by lawmakers in 1911.

Fox said the Legislature in 1911 approved making a copy of that flag to be sent to the battleship USS Utah, but it took two years to raise the money for it. In 1913, the state had the Wm. H. Horstmann Co. of Philadelphia finally make that flag.

“When they opened it, they were stunned to see that Horstmann had added a gold ring around the flag, using artistic license,” Fox said.

Instead of ordering a new flag, the Legislature in 1913 changed the legal description of it to include the gold ring. But it continued to require — and still does — placing the “1847” within the shield.

“When Dolly McMonegal made her flag in 1922, she made the shield too small for that,” Fox said. “So she placed it below the shield, using more artistic license.”

“And it's like no one noticed the problem over all of these years,” Fisher said. Fox said he noticed it during a search he began two years ago for the original 1903 flag — finally discovered this year in a forgotten box within a box at the Utah Historical Society.

The state flag won't be the only state symbol that will be debated in the upcoming Legislature. Rep. Carl Wimmer, R-Herriman, previously set off a minor firestorm by saying he is planning to introduce a bill for an official state firearm — the Browning model 1911 .45-caliber handgun — to honor Utah firearms maker John Moses Browning on the 100th anniversary of that gun.

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