

A NEW FLAG FOR KANSAS



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APRIL 2024

LAST MODIFIED: MAY 20, 2024

From about 1978 to 2002, I subscribed to *The Flag Bulletin*, a scholarly journal about vexillology published by the Flag Research Center in Winchester, Massachusetts. Around 1996, one issue had an article about US state flags. If memory serves, the author asserted that some state flag designs were not distinctive enough for people to know what they represented. Thus, it might be said that they failed in their primary mission, which is to visually communicate the essence of their state, its history and its people. In addition, many of these flags were simply blue fields embossed with the state's coat of arms; and to the average citizen, it's not easy to tell which arms go with which state.

Some even had the name of the state written right on the flag. While this may have been done to rectify the problem of identification, in the author's eyes this was a sure sign that the design was inadequate. Examples included Idaho, Illinois (which at least has a white field rather than blue), Kansas, Maine, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Oregon ("State of Oregon" in big letters).

Part of the reason for this is that Americans are far more attached to the Stars and Stripes than their state flags, which are relatively unimportant. (With the probable exception of Texas.) And the author may have mentioned that there are similar problems with certain national flags, which are not only undistinguished, but even copies of other nations' designs. These include Andorra and Chad (whose vertical blue-yellow-red tricolors are the same as Romania's), Indonesia (whose red over white bicolor is the same as Monaco's) and Rwanda (which adopted the same red-yellow-green vertical tricolor as Guinea, except the Rwandans added a big black 'R' on the central stripe to make it different).

In any case, I started looking at some of our state flags, and coming up with alternate designs. One of the first I drew was a new design for the flag of Kansas. The current flag (Figure 1) is a fairly typical blue field embossed with the state arms, and "Kansas" written below. But it had a couple of elements that I liked very much; the sunflower crest at the top, and the three arches of stars within the coat of arms.



Figure 1. The current flag of Kansas, from 1961.

I thought the star-arches would look good over the sunflower, so I combined these symbols, enlarging them and placing them in the center of the flag. Then I turned the yellow "Kansas" into a yellow stripe under the central emblem. Its color would match the yellow sunflower, could represent the importance of agriculture to Kansas' economy, and also serve as a substitute for the yellow and blue bar under the sunflower in the crest. To make the design even more different, I drew another version in which the sunflower and stars were moved off-center, toward the hoist; and a third in which the stars were ringed around the sunflower.

To me, this design seemed much more distinctive. But it remained a few simple pen drawings until the spring of 2023. That's when I finally got around to making a proper digital version of it, in Microsoft Paint. At about the same time, I discovered that an earlier flag of Kansas (1925 to 1927) was in fact a sunflower in the center of a blue field. So I downloaded that flag, and used its sunflower in my version. (Figure 2.)



Figure 2. First version of the proposed new flag of Kansas, the "Sunflower and Stars". Proportions 2:3.

While I liked the result, it seemed a little on the plain side, and the yellow sunflower and yellow stripe under the white stars appeared 'unbalanced', somehow. Perhaps because in the current design, the yellow sunflower is at the top, and the yellow "Kansas" is at the bottom, which sort of evens things out. Anyway, I decided to put in another element that I liked; the state motto, *Ad Astra Per Aspera* ("To the Stars through Difficulties"). At first, I colored the motto brown, and placed it on the yellow stripe, to match the brown center of the sunflower.



Figure 3. Second version of the Sunflower and Stars. Proportions 2:3.

Then I thought about making the stripe white, and the motto blue. That matched the white stars in blue over the sunflower (albeit by reversing the colors), and thus seemed to 'balance' the design better.



Figure 4. Third version of the Sunflower and Stars, proportions 2:3.

This version was satisfactory, but my next thought was that maybe I should restore the bar under the sunflower. In the current arms and flag, the bar represents the origin of Kansas as part of the Louisiana Purchase, and retaining it would therefore make historical sense. (Figure 5.)



Figure 5. Fourth version of the Sunflower and Stars, proportions 2:3.

I had given all these flags the proportions 2 by 3, to maximize the size of the central emblem. But the proportions of Kansas' current flag are 3 by 5. So my final version used that ratio.



Figure 6. Fourth version of the Sunflower and Stars, proportions 3:5.

It's a little ironic that, in my desire to remove the state name from the flag, I ended up adding three more words instead! But I am happy with the result, and hope that others will like it, too.

For those who may be interested, the off-center version I originally conceived would look like this. (Figure 7.) But after some reflection, I decided against this arrangement. The state of Kansas is in the geographic center of the continental US, and this fact would best be symbolized by having the sunflower and stars in the center of the flag. This also stays true to the current flag, whose arms are in the center.

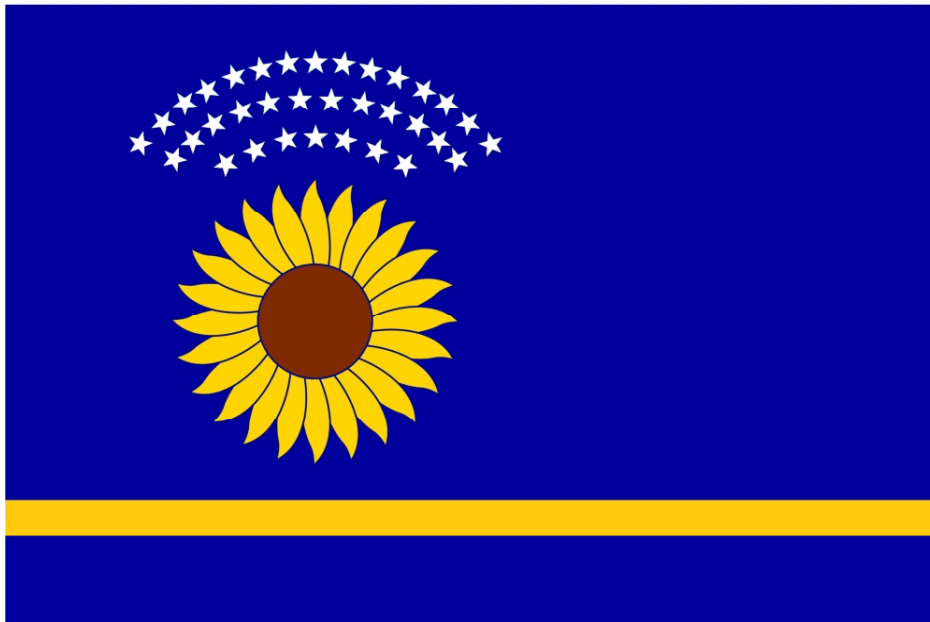


Figure 7. Original off-center conception of the Sunflower and Stars, proportions 2:3.

I also decided against drawing a digital version of the sunflower circled by a ring of stars. And that's because two recent changes to other state flags include such rings. The first is Georgia, which adopted a new state flag in 2003. (Figure 8, left side.) This is a Stars and Bars-type design, with the state arms in a blue canton, surrounded by a ring of 13 stars. The second is Mississippi, which adopted a new state flag in 2021. This has a central vertical stripe of blue, with stripes of gold and red on either side. The blue stripe is embossed with a white magnolia, surrounded by a ring of 21 stars, plus the phrase "In God We Trust". (Figure 8, right side.)



Figure 8. New flags of Georgia (2003) and Mississippi (2021).

In my opinion, both designs are excellent, but a little research showed that several other states, including Rhode Island, Indiana, and Missouri, also have star-rings in their flags. But star-arches are rare. The only current state flag with these is North Dakota. It contains two arches of stars over a bald eagle, topped by an arch or 'glory' of sun rays. So the three arches in the Sunflower and Stars design would seem to be unique, or at least very unusual, granting that North Dakota's flag has three arches in total.

Earlier this year, Utah also adopted a new state flag. (Figure 9, left side.) Their design is far superior to the ideas I drew in the mid-1990s, so I'm glad I never made a digital version of that one! Minnesota has adopted a new flag, too, which became official on May 11, 2024. (Figure 9, right side.) In addition, Illinois has just started the process of designing a new flag, while legislators in Massachusetts and my own state of Michigan have begun to make moves in that direction as well. Assuming these efforts continue, I very much look forward to seeing what designs they come up with.

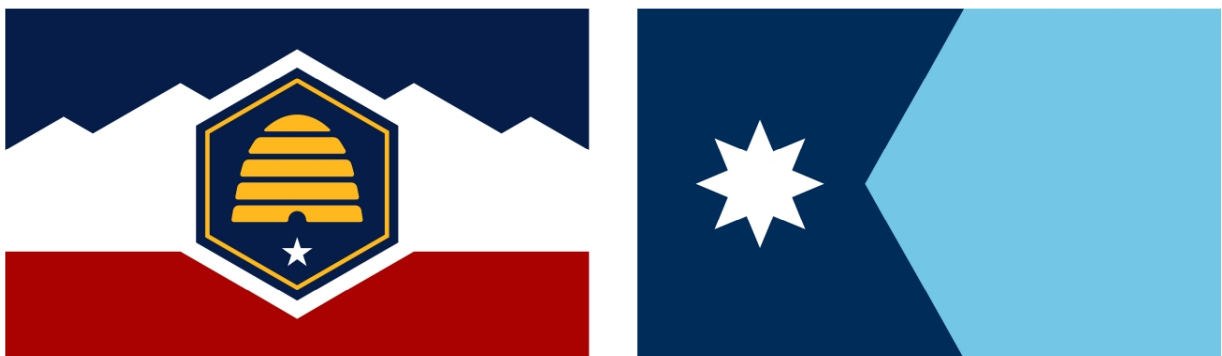


Figure 9. New flags of Utah and Minnesota, 2024.

So, it looks like the author of that old *Flag Bulletin* article is finally getting his wish, as new state flags have begun to appear, particularly in the last few years. If Kansas ever joins what is hopefully a new trend toward updating state flags, I would like to offer my Sunflower and Stars designs as candidates.