Ocean County Women Make 28 Service Flags

By: Nicholas Woods



Figure 1: Children's War Activities, Plainfield, NJ. *Making her service flag,* Mrs. W. Durrant, Photographer, RG 165-WW, 178C13, National Archives, College Park, MD.

Today we recognize service flags as a symbol of one family's service and sacrifice, but this specific meaning was not the only one these humble flags possessed during the United States participation in The Great War (1917 – 1919). The flags were originally designed much as we see them today, with blue stars on a white field and a red border. A gold star, often stitched atop of a blue star, was added to represent a soldier who died while in service after President Wilson endorsed the request of the Women's Committee of the Council of National Defenses. Their Gold Star Mothers program was also taking shape alongside the adoption of service flags.

The Service Flag was patented by Robert L. Queisser of Cleveland, Ohio on November 6, 1917 and received almost immediate recognition nationally. It was adopted less than two weeks later by the New York Telephone Company at their Newark Office to represent their 180 telephone men already in the service. The hanging of the company's New Jersey service flag followed closely behind the installation of a 24' x 40' flag at the company's main office in New York City. Other prominent New Jersey businesses, such as the Prudential Life Insurance Society in Newark, quickly added their own flags.

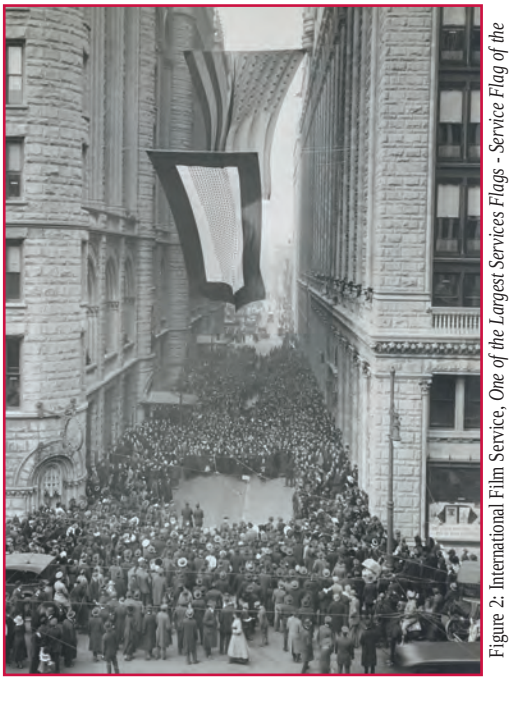


Figure 2: International Film Service, *One of the Largest Services Flags - Service Flag of the Prudential Life Insurance Society flying with stars and stripes from their building in Newark, NJ, 1917.* RG 165-WW, 168B29, National Archives, College Park, MD

Not to be left behind, the people of Ocean County quickly adopted the practice of community service flags with the residents of Tuckerton hanging their first flag funded through popular subscription on December 13, 1917. The Presbyterians of Toms River, following suit the next week, unveiled a flag dedicated to members of their congregation. They even went so far as to

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publicly list each of the local men in foreign or national service in the presentation. This trend toward greater inclusiveness in those who served would continue throughout the war to encompass those serving both at home and abroad in all manner of martial pursuits. Every few months there was a fresh effort in the local papers and among civic groups to re-survey those who were in the service. By the end of the war, a number of towns had to re-issue larger, more complex flags as the number of service members increased. Due to their patriotic nature, the service flags were often displayed prominently outside, marched in parades, and displayed in civic spaces - helping to explain why so few of them survive today.



Figure 3: *Service Flag on parade, May 30, 1919,* W. Brown Collection, Lakewood Historical Society.

Other Types of Patriotic Flags

Many other local organizations also rallied around flags in an effort to promote unity and public participation in the war effort. Liberty Loan Flags, for instance, were issued by the Treasury Department for towns that met or exceeded their quota. These flags can be identified by the number of stripes they contain denoting the third or fourth campaign or bold V in the case of the Victory Loan campaign. The Red Cross was also quick to adopt the symbol as well, casting their banner in the same format but with red crosses substituting for the stars for military service.



Figure 4: *Red Cross flag on parade, May 30, 1919,* W. Brown Collection, Lakewood Historical Society.

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Ocean County's Centennial Service Flags

As Ocean County has long been proud of its veterans and patriotic activities, the Commission has sought to capitalize on the Centennial to re-engage the public with the World War I era. A ready and enthusiastic partner was found in the Seaport Stitchers, a local quilting guild, who agreed to recreate service flags for the 28 municipalities that contributed soldiers to the war effort.

The Commission agreed to fund the material costs of the project and provide the number of the soldiers who served from each town. Because most accounting attempts during the war period were voluntary, numerous sources were consulted to create the contemporary list of soldiers: Newspapers accounts, Muster Rolls, genealogical indexes, and a survey of all known monuments in the County. The reconciliation of these disparate sources was certainly not an easy task, but created a list of 2,433 service members, or roughly 10.5% of Ocean County's population at the time. An existing service flag was located and examined in Cape May to serve as a basis for the contemporary efforts.



Figure 5: *April 26, 2016 visit to the Cape May Historical Society with the Seaport Stitchers,* Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission Collection.

The Seaport Stitchers have been hard at work on the flags they designed and everyone looks forward to their unveiling to the public. The Centennial Service Flags were designed by Anne Flynn and Betty Maguire based on the Cape May Flag as well as examples from Lumberton and Newark. The contemporary flags bear 13 blue stars to represent the original colonies and when appropriate a gold star in the center. Numbers are emblazoned in corresponding colors to denote the total number who served or perished from each municipality. This practice harkens back to the New Jersey flag of the New York Telephone Company in Newark that utilized a similar solution to the dilemma of having to cut and stitch hundreds of stars.

The Commission would like to extend an invitation to all readers to attend the formal unveiling of the Centennial Service Flags on April 6, 2017. Limited bus funds are available for local schools and senior citizen centers wishing to attend.