

★ A RATTLESNAKE FLAG ★ OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By Andrew Gaerte,
Education Manager, Fort Pitt Museum

Of the hundreds of flags created and carried during the American Revolution, fewer than three dozen survive, scattered in collections worldwide.¹ Of those, few are as rare as the Westmoreland County flag on display in the Fort Pitt Museum in Pittsburgh. Unique not only because of its remarkable condition, it is the only surviving rattlesnake flag from the colonial period.

**Rattlesnake Flag of Colonel John Proctor's
1st Battalion, Westmoreland County,
Pennsylvania, American Revolution.**

Courtesy of the State Museum of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Historical and
Museum Commission, photo by Paula Andras, HHC.



★ **ALTHOUGH** the canton reveals the colonists' sympathy towards the crown, the painted design in the flag's field shows the colonists' willingness to fight for their American identity. ★

News of the battle of Lexington and Concord reached Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, in early May 1775. On May 16, a crowd gathered at Hanna's Town, the county seat, to draft a series of resolves. The citizens of Westmoreland County feared that the "same system of tyranny and oppression" at work in Massachusetts could easily spread throughout the colonies. The resolves were drafted to show solidarity with the patriots in New England, establish a military force for the county's protection, and declare the colonists' willingness to re-establish ties with Great Britain once the conflict ended.² Like most colonists in 1775, Western Pennsylvanians considered themselves loyal subjects of the crown. Identifying themselves as "Americans" within the resolves, the colonists viewed the conflict outside of Boston a result of Parliament's actions rather than a failure of the King.

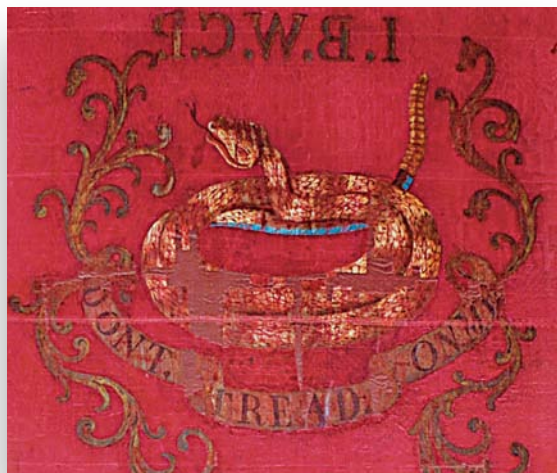
A week following the signing of the Hanna's Town Resolves, the inhabitants of Westmoreland County congregated again to choose officers for their newly created militia. County sheriff John Proctor was chosen as colonel of the regiment to be formed. It was

probably around this time that the rattlesnake flag, representing the regiment, was created. Whether Proctor chose the design himself is unknown. The flag conveyed the resolves' strong message. Nearly square, in typical 18th-century style, the 6'4" by 5'10" flag was constructed from fine crimson silk. The upper corner is dominated by the British Union (a commonly used device in flags carried by patriot forces until the Declaration of Independence in July 1776). The flag's maker is unknown; however, although the construction is simple, the painted design is obviously skillfully executed.

Although the canton reveals the colonists' sympathy towards the crown, the painted design in the flag's field shows the colonists' willingness to fight for their American identity. A painted scrollwork surrounds a coiled rattlesnake (a symbol of the American colonies since the mid-18th century when Benjamin Franklin satirically suggested that Americans should send rattlesnakes to England to thank Britons for sending convicts to America).³ The highly detailed rattlesnake, with 13 rattles, raises its head in striking position toward the British Union, while below the snake, a message on a banner warns "Don't Tread on Me." Above the

snake in script is the regimental designation, "J.P." for John Proctor, and "I.B.W.C.P" for "1st Battalion, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania" (the I represents the roman numeral 1).

No wartime descriptions of the flag have been found. The earliest description comes from a review of the Second Annual Westmoreland County Agricultural Fair in 1855, when the flag was displayed as a relic of the American Revolution. It was noted that Mrs. Margaret Campbell Craig, the daughter of an officer of the Westmoreland County militia, possessed the flag. In 1880, more clues revealing the flag's history were published in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, which reprinted a letter from Mrs. Craig detailing how she came to have the flag. Early in the 19th century, the flag arrived in the mail for her father, Alexander Craig, an honor due him as the last surviving officer of the Westmoreland County Militia. Mrs. Craig recalled that "my sister Maria was almost three years older than myself, and I have heard her say that she could remember seeing Father bring the flag home from the post office."⁴ In 1914, the family donated the flag to the state of Pennsylvania.



★ **A PAINTED scrollwork surrounds a coiled rattlesnake—a symbol of the American colonies since the mid-18th century when Benjamin Franklin satirically suggested that Americans should send rattlesnakes to England to thank Britons for sending convicts to America.** ★

Visitors to the Fort Pitt Museum will notice that they are looking at the reverse of the flag, so that the writing above the rattlesnake appears backward. Because the words “Don’t Tread on Me” are painted on top of the painted banner running beneath the snake, they read correctly when viewing either side of the flag. Although the backwards letters may seem like a mistake, during the 18th century it was common practice to paint parts of the design

on just one side of the flag. When the flag was conserved and mounted by the state, curators decided to mount the flag with the reverse side up so that the canton would be in the upper left hand corner in accordance with how flags are typically displayed.⁵

¹ Edward Richardson was able to find 25 original Revolutionary War flags while researching his comprehensive book on the subject published in 1982. Since the book’s publication, several more

flags have become publicly known. The overall number of flags to have survived still remains quite low. Edward W. Richardson, *Standards and Colors of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 4.

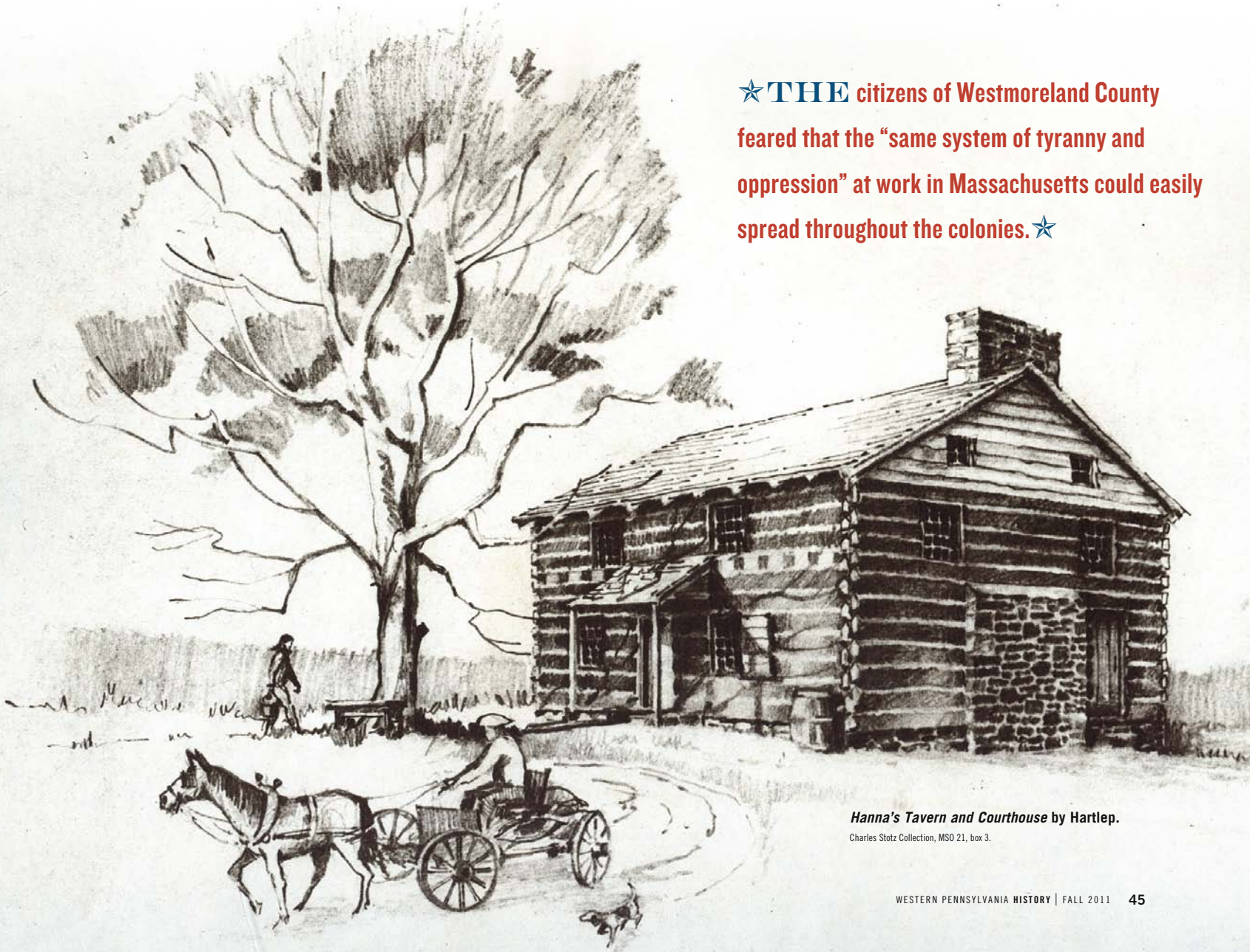
² Peter Force, *American Archives* series 4, vol. II (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Congress, 1837-53), 615.

³ Marc Leepson, *Flag: An American Biography*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 12.

⁴ W.B. Negley, “Letter from Mrs. Craig in Notes and Queries,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 4 (1880): 394.

⁵ For a color photograph of the front of the Proctor Flag see Richardson’s *Standards and Colors*, 216.

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Hanna's Tavern and Courthouse by Hartlep.

Charles Stotz Collection, MSO 21, box 3.