

The University of Wisconsin World War I Service Flag

The original service flag, often called the son in service or blue star flag, was designed and patented during World War I by Army Captain Robert L. Queissner, who had two sons serving in the war. Although the War Department initially rejected Queissner's design, the flags quickly became popular and were later endorsed by the government. Basically the flag consisted of a blue star for each family member serving in the war mounted on a white background with a red border. The practice quickly developed of overlaying or replacing the blue star with a gold one if a serviceman died. The flags were usually displayed in home windows. Soon industrial plants, companies, civic organizations, etc. were creating larger service flags.'

In November 1917 the *Daily Cardinal* noted that the idea of a service flag in every fraternity and sorority was being talked about on campus, and that one fraternity already had a flag up.² In March 1918 White Spades, a junior men's honorary society, and Sigma Delta Chi, an honorary "journalistic" fraternity, approached the Board of Regents and Board of Visitors with the idea of a service flag for campus. The Regents and Visitors endorsed the idea and asked the Executive Committee of the Regents to handle funding.³ The hope was to have the flag ready for dedication on Decoration (Memorial) Day in May of 1918.⁴ On March 27 the Women's Self Government Association (S.G.A.) voted to help by embroidering names on the flag. Work on the flag started on May 6 with men from the University stenciling names on the 4-inch stars and various women's organizations embroidering them. The stars were embroidered on campus and then sent to a company in Chicago where the flag was assembled. Work progressed very quickly since the stars all had to be in Chicago by May 16 in order to have the flag ready for Decoration Day. As more stars were added, the original 15 by 30 foot size was increased to 20 by 30.⁵

On May 28 the *Daily Cardinal* reported that arrangements were nearly complete for the dedication ceremonies for the service flag on Memorial Day, May 30, 1918. The original plan was to have the flag unfurled on the east face of the library, now the Wisconsin Historical Society Library. The flag arrived from Chicago on May 28, and a few additional stars were sewed on. Bad weather and muddy conditions on the lower campus field in front of the library caused the dedication to be moved to Main (Bascom) Hall, and the ceremony was reduced to one hour. President Van Hise spoke as did Miss Helen Smith for the S.G.A. and Mr. Harold M. Groves for White Spades. The crowd numbered nearly 3500. After the presentation, there was a review of cadets. According to the *Cardinal*, the flag at that time was the largest of its kind, presumably meaning a university flag, in the country. It was made of white wool bunting, had a 24 inch red border, and included approximately 1750 blue stars. Five gold stars were contributed by the Burdock and Murray Dry Goods company. Total cost of the flag was \$200. The flag hung on Main Hall all of Memorial Day and then was taken down to be placed later in the reading room of the library. According to the *Cardinal* the ceremonies were filmed by M.E. Diemer, well known Madison photographer, and were to be shown in Pathe's Weekly for the second week of June 1918.⁶

The original flag was used again at the 1918 commencement in the stock pavilion. The *Press Bulletin* reported that the stars represented only students who had enrolled on or after April 6, 1917 and that the records were incomplete. Alumni and former students were not included. During 1919, due to inactivity of White Spades, the S.G.A. took over the work of trying to update the flag, adding more blue stars and adding and replacing gold stars.' The revamped flag, which was unfurled during the Victory Commencement activities of 1919, contained about 2600

blue stars and 59 gold ones. On July 24, 1919, during Alumni Day ceremonies, the service flag was unfurled and the gold star roll of University men killed in the war was read aloud while 125 women students "...clad in white, each bearing a gold star wreathed in laurel, marched around Lincoln's statue, and as each name was called, placed a wreathed star at its base."⁸ [There are 107 gold star men in the "Honor Roll of the University of Wisconsin" booklet printed in June 1919. The 125 evidently includes others killed by the time of the Alumni Day activities] The Lincoln Terrace also was dedicated during these ceremonies, and there are photos which show the service flag hanging from Bascom Hall, with the Lincoln statue moved from lower down on Bascom Hill to its new home, and two victory columns erected in front of it.

The May 9, 1926 *Cardinal* said that the flag had been hung from Bascom Hall for Memorial Day in 1924 and 1925.⁹ We know that the flag was used on campus during WWII—there are photos in the *Wisconsin Alumnus* with it as a backdrop, and the July 1943 *Alumnus* mentioned that the service flag was hung in the Field House for graduation that year. The *Summer Cardinal*, June 4, 1943, had a photo of the flag hanging for commencement with the number 9000 added at the bottom to honor the 9000 Wisconsin men and women in the service at that time."

On May 8, 1946 the University held a special memorial service to honor the men and women who gave their lives in WWII, and the flag was used during the ceremony. President E. B. Fred referred to the "large service flag overhead" in his speech, and both he and the *Daily Cardinal* from that day reported that 12,500 men and women from the University had served in WWII. The current flag has the number 12,500 at the bottom, which was evidently added for this event. The flag appears to have also been used as part of a memorial service during commencement ceremonies on May 26, 1946.¹¹

What happened to the service flag after World War II and how the Mazomanie Historical Society acquired it, remains a mystery.

“Tolliver, Rachael. “The Return of the Service Flag.” *Soldier* 57 (7, July 2002): 46-47; “Tells of Service Flag.” *New York Times*, November 30, 1918, p. 4; “Service Flags: Rulings On How to Denote Men Killed and Wounded in Country’s Service.” *New York Times*, June 2, 1918, p. 58.

²“Service Flags” *Daily Cardinal*, November 3, 1917, p. 8.

³Letter from Paul F. Cranefield from Sigma Delta Chi and White Spades to Board of Regents. *University Archives. Board of Regents. Secretary. Papers.*. Series 1/1/3 Box 31, Folder March 3, 1918 (2). Minutes, Joint Meeting of the Board of Regents and the Board of Visitors, March 6, 1918. *University Archives. Board of Visitors. Minutes.* Series 2/1/1 Box 1, Folder March 6, 1918.

⁴“Monster Service Flag with 1,300 Stars Planned.” *Daily Cardinal*, March 9, 1918, p. 5.

⁵“S.G.A. Endorses Senate Motion.” *Daily Cardinal*, March 28, 1918, p. 6. “Start Work on Service Flag.” *Daily Cardinal*, May 6, 1918, p. 1+. “Girls Aid Men As War Banner Nears Reality.” *Daily Cardinal*, May 7, 1918, p. 1+.

⁶“Plans Complete for Dedication of Service Flag.” *Daily Cardinal*, May 28, 1918, p. 1; “Giant Service Flag is Here.” *Daily Cardinal*, May 29, 1918, p. 1; “Service Flag to be Dedicated on Upper Campus.” *Daily Cardinal*, May 30, 1918, p. 1+; “Dedicate Service Flag Thursday.” *Daily Cardinal*, June 1, 1918, p. 3.

⁷“Banner of 1,750 Stars Unfurled by Students.” *Press Bulletin* 10(#46, June 5, 1918). “Service Flag Ready With 950 New Stars.” *Daily Cardinal*, April 5, 1919, p. 1.

⁸“The Gold Star Roll and the Unfurling of the Service Flag.” *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine* 20 (1, August 1919): 276. See also the program for the Victory Commencement in the *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine* 20 (8, June 1919).

⁹“Memorial Flag Has 2,678 Names; First Used At Commencement.” *Daily Cardinal*, May 9, 1926, p. 2.

¹⁰*Wisconsin Alumnus* 44 (4, July 1943): cover and title page [289]. Same photo used in “Memorial: World War II.” *Wisconsin Alumnus* 50 (2, November 1948): 10. “Flag Honors 9,000 in Service.” *Summer Cardinal*, June 4, 1943, p. 1. See also “Dykstra, Class of ’43 Pay Hommage to 9,000 University Alumni Now Serving Country.” *Summer Cardinal*, June 4, 1943, Section II, p. 1, 6.

¹¹“700 Attend U. W. Memorial Service” *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 27, 1946. Fred, E. B. “The Honor Roll” speech given at Memorial Service, May 8, 1946. *University Archives. E. B. Fred Papers, Series 4/16/5 Box 2.* “Memorial Convocation to Honor War’s Dead” *Daily Cardinal*, May 8, 1946, p. 1.