

Commentary: The little-known secessionist history of the SC state flag

- By Ruth Miller
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The crescent and palm tree on a field of blue flies all over the Palmetto State. Thus, I wondered at the headline about a “new state flag” on the Dec. 29 Post and Courier front page.

The story is really about what eminent historians have recommended as our official state flag. Experts have studied history and determined, right down to the Pantone color, exactly what our flag should look like.

Fat crescent? Skinny crescent? Horns up? Horns canted?

Paragraph after paragraph in the article was dedicated to the fact that it’s not a moon in the upper left-hand corner. But why no good explanation of the palmetto tree, which unveils so much more of South Carolina’s very complicated history?

The article leads one to believe the crescent has been accompanied by its palm tree since the British pounded the log and sand fort on Sullivan’s Island in 1776. Not so.

The South Carolina Encyclopedia, edited by acclaimed historian Walter Edgar, describes Moultrie’s flag in the general’s own words: “I had a large blue flag made with a crescent in the dexter corner.” Any kind of tree? No, not a single palm in sight.

In the 1840s, during our war with Mexico, a palmetto did appear on a flag of the Palmetto Regiment. Yet this is a military unit banner, not the state flag.

Then came the 1860 Secession Convention in Charleston. A committee was created to “devise a South Carolina national flag.”

The winner? Robert Barnwell Rhett Jr.’s design. Adopted on Jan. 28, 1861, “the National Flag or Ensign of South Carolina shall be blue with a white palmetto tree upright thereon, and a white crescent in the upper corner.”

Yes, as the newspaper article states, the palmetto tree honors the defeat of the British fleet on the eve of the American Revolution. But that's only part of the story.

The Secession Convention added the palm to make their statement: The Palmetto State defeated the British and now South Carolina will win her next war, this time against the Union.

Do I want the palmetto tree removed from our state flag because of its Civil War origin? Absolutely not. We have a great-looking flag that tells a great story. But part of that story is recognizing the palm tree arrived on our flag as a powerful statement of the Secessionists at the beginning of the Civil War.

History is complicated. What we don't like to hear should not be overlooked, hidden or deliberately buried. No fake news here.

The primary source is available for all to read. And now you know the how and why that tree jumped onto our state flag. The Secessionists lost, but the palmetto tree stayed.

Ruth M. Miller, a local historian, has been sharing the Lowcountry as a licensed tour guide, teacher and speaker for more than 40 years. Her books include "Touring the Tombstones: Charleston's 18th Century Graveyards," "The Angel Oak Story" and most recently, the highly illustrated "Slavery to Civil Rights: A Walking Tour of African-American Charleston."