



# WHY WOULD AMERICANS WANT ARMORIAL BEARINGS?

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From *The Armiger's News*, October 2006

*This article was originally requested by Burke's Peerage & Gentry International Register of Arms, and appeared in their newsletter, Volume 1, Issue 2*

One of the more consistent threads that run through various internet newsgroups – and one of the more common questions I am asked in general conversation – revolves around Americans' seeming obsession with all things heraldic. Why in the world would a country who “threw off the yoke of oppression” over 200 years ago want to glom onto an archaic system of armor, shields, helmets, etc., that is still prevalent throughout the United Kingdom and, in fact, the greater part of Europe?

After all, when America's founding fathers laid out the ground rules for the new country, they went out of their way to deny the use of armorial bearings by the new country's citizenry, presumably to “de-noble” the whole class strata prevalent on the other side of the Atlantic. All well and good – at least for the first few dozen decades.

This is not to say that heraldry was non-existent in the Colonies – in fact, heraldry flourished in the new United States, albeit without government sanction or regulation. Most of the early gentry proudly displayed their ancestral arms – essentially defeating the purpose (at least in public display) of “leveling the playing field” as far as the founding fathers' concept of “all men [being] created equal” was concerned. Armorial bearings continued their “institutional” purpose, representing colleges, businesses, organizations and the like – all without the regulation of a sovereign power. And perhaps that is precisely what allowed heraldry to flourish in the United States – freedom to display what you wanted, where you wanted.

That being said, the lack of regulation also allowed heraldry (in the United States) to go off on some rather ludicrous tangents. Examples of “bad” heraldry are rampant throughout American institutions – most notably in the government itself. States' and cities' “armorial bearings” are quite often examples of lumping as many elements as possible into one achievement, often with gaudy end-results.

In the 230 years since the signing of the *Declaration of Independence*, there have been several attempts to establish heraldic institutions in the United States. More often than not, these organizations – all non-official – were established by wealthy businessmen wishing to establish private “clubs,” with the exclusivity of armorial bearings as a membership restriction. As one might expect, these entities usually fell by the wayside not long after their inauguration.

However, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a seeming groundswell of renewed interest in heraldry by Americans. Perhaps it was tied to the bicentennial celebration, or perhaps merely coincidence. It can doubtless be shown that the greater availability of genealogical materials, especially with the rise of the internet in the last decade of the last century, piqued the interest of individuals wishing to track down their ancestry – and it was there that they would have run across heraldry for perhaps the first time. In any event, books on the subject became more available – they had obviously always been around, including Eugene Zieber's 1895 work *Heraldry in America*, but now they were being reprinted and available (often in volume overrun editions) to the general public.

My own interest in heraldry was fostered at a young age by my parents, who also ignited a genealogical fuse that resulted in many years of my own research work on my various family lines and the ultimate publication of a modest tome on my various family lines. Through that research, one of my maternal lines strayed into the Bouchier family, which is where I first ran into armorial bearings. The next step is one which is too-often leapt upon by the novice heraldist – I took all 4 of my primary lines (maternal and paternal grandparents), grabbed a copy of Burke's *General Armory*, looked them up, and began furiously researching and rendering a quartet of arms which I painted and presented to my parents (who displayed them in their home for years afterward). How I decided which of the specific arms to latch upon out of each surname escapes me, but I'm sure my logic followed that of most arms-hungry neophytes who happen upon Burke's and say to themselves, “Aha! My name is Smith. I've found my arms! Now which one looks the handsomest? That's the one I'll use...”

Further, in my own genealogical research, I came across a couple of tomes by predecessors trying to link my own surname to famous historical individuals – and these works were “common” as the definitive works on the Wooten line. As it turns out, my own surname developed from Watton (Northamptonshire), and while there are numerous Wootens throughout England, I was not related to them (which brings up the subject of “bucket shops” and the problems that arise from their existence – more on that later). It took a fellow genealogist to source out the true lineage of our family, rather than the numerous books individuals had published erroneously linking us to a Dr. Wooten who served as a surgeon at Jamestowne. As it happened, this famous surgeon, to whom everyone desperately wanted to link genealogically for the sake of notoriety, served one year in the Colonies, then returned to England *decessit sine prole legitima* – a bit difficult to descend from someone who had no children. And the previous “researchers” compounded the problem further by adorning their publications with the arms of a Wooton of Kent (wholly unrelated to our lineage or the Jamestowne surgeon).

Thankfully for me, the American College of Heraldry was established in 1972 as part of the renewed interest in the subject. Albeit a small organization with little public exposure, it nonetheless took a more serious, “regimented” approach to the matter, attempting to establish rules and standards of practice for registration of arms. It should be noted that, in its infancy, the College toyed with the idea of “granting” arms – or at least calling the reg-

istrations they produced (without government oversight) grants. The notion was dropped in short order, as the founding members of the organization saw a need for international “acceptance” of their work – or at least that the newly-formed organization did not attempt to lay claim to more than its humble origins would allow.

The College later had the advantage of being listed in Stephen Friar’s *A Dictionary of Heraldry*, which became a bible, of sorts, for those who could find it – usually in the reference section of most larger public libraries. It was here that I first ran across the American College of Heraldry, during my aforementioned furious heraldic “research,” and decided to write to them to register arms which I was quite certain would be easily recorded in my name. I had the fortune of meeting – through correspondence – Dr. David Pittman Johnson, the then-President and life blood of the organization, who politely pointed out the error of my ways, and directed me in the correct course to a final registration of arms.

From its very small beginnings, College membership grew, and a regular newsletter began to be circulated – “The Armiger’s News,” still produced today and in its 39<sup>th</sup> [as of 2017] year of publication. The quarterly newsletter details ongoing registrations with the College, as well as articles on the subject of heraldry – historical and contemporary, American and international – submitted by members as well as heraldic experts worldwide.

So back to the original question - why would Americans want armorial bearings? Primarily, because they are proud of their heritage, and whether they are of German, Spanish Hungarian, English, Irish, whatever descent, heraldry is a tie to their past – or at the very least a nod to their origins. Most individuals who contact our organization have come to understand (through the growing wealth of solid information about heraldry available in print and online) that the odds of their being entitled to bear historically granted arms are essentially nil. Thus, with a little explanation, they are pleased to be able to establish a new armorial tradition in their own family to pass down to their descendants.

A second, and less often acknowledged, reason for the popularity of heraldry in the United States is, to put it politely, ego. And that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Assumption of armorial bearings is certainly a “noble” practice, and while there will always be those individuals who believe that assumed arms are not on par with granted arms (an argument I will not go into at this time), the mere fact that one displays armorial bearings somehow raises one’s status (at least in one’s own mind). Given the prevalence of armorial usage in personal stationery, business cards, heraldic jewelry, etc., the practice (which has no “practical” purpose) is certainly a way to show off a bit.

Do these registrations carry the same weight as a grant? No, of course not. But, most of the individuals who contact our organization either a) don’t have sufficient genealogical proofs (positive or negative) to pass along to the College of Arms (or similar heraldic entity) for verification of entitlement to bear existing arms; or b) don’t have the often-exorbitant fees necessary to obtain a legitimate grant of arms (a grant of arms from England, Scotland, etc. can easily BEGIN at \$7,500US). Thus, they come to the American College of Heraldry, ideally with eyes wide open (we do not pretend to be anything more than a registering and publishing entity), in hopes of obtaining sound advice on “proper” heraldic usage, so that the arms they ultimately assume and are registered meet with commonly “acceptable” form.

True, there are organizations (both in the U.S. and abroad, but primarily in the U.S.) that will offer heraldic advice at no cost, and these organizations are to be lauded for their contributions to the art and science of heraldry. But, those entities neither publish the arms in print, issue registration certificates, nor offer hand drawn renderings of the newly-devised armorial bearings. The College’s current fee of \$325.00 covers the costs of an artist for the rendering, publishing the registration in *The Armiger’s News*, as well as the compilation volumes of *The Heraldic Register of America* (which includes a chronological listing of all registered arms with the College), soon to be in its 18<sup>th</sup> Volume, as well as administrative costs including advertising, website maintenance, etc.

To quote from the College’s website ([www.americancollegeofheraldry.org](http://www.americancollegeofheraldry.org)), the College has “the aim of aiding in the study and perpetuation of heraldry in the United States and abroad. Registrations are restricted by policy to American citizens or residents, as well as to others with significant personal or business connections in America.”

Our further goal is to educate the public so that, ultimately, all heraldic “bucket shops” are extinct. Bucket shops do nothing but damage to the public’s understanding of true heraldry. As I mentioned previously, these vendors sell to individuals who may or may not know the true etymology of their surname, and if, as with the case of my own surname, the name changes through the decades (whether by error of spelling or on purpose), the name which a bucket shop assigns to you may have nothing whatsoever to do with arms to which you may legitimately be entitled. Again, to quote from the College’s website:

*“The notorious ‘Coat of arms for the Name of Jones, Smith, or whatever,’ purchasable by mail order or in one’s local shopping mall, represents no more than improper and illegitimate armorial bearings. To buy and bear these commercially produced arms is to claim for oneself a direct kinship which has only the most remote possibility of validity and is thereby to deny one’s own legitimate and rightful line of descent. Such infraction of armorial regulation and custom constitutes a flagrant abuse of arms which no knowledgeable and honorable person would intentionally commit.*

*“Sadly, most of the heraldic abuse in this country is done by honest, well-meaning persons. They greatly admire the heraldic tradition, but in their desire to participate in that tradition they inadvertently abuse heraldic arms due to a lack of familiarity with heraldic regulations and customs. While such armorial abuse does not apparently violate state or federal statute in this country at this time, still to usurp the use of another person’s coat of arms is highly improper and is a dishonest practice. Such conduct disregards the regulations of all recognized heraldry and violates the rights of the legitimate owners of the arms.”*

The American College of Heraldry welcomes anyone interested in learning more about heraldry and/or registering arms – whether already assumed, or arms in need of development – to visit our constantly-evolving website ([www.americancollegeofheraldry.org](http://www.americancollegeofheraldry.org)) and review the materials found therein. Our extensive FAQs page often answers most of the commonly asked questions about what our organization can and cannot do, as well as providing detailed information on heraldic usage. I can be reached by email at [dwooten@americancollegeofheraldry.org](mailto:dwooten@americancollegeofheraldry.org).



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