



THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF HERALDRY: A GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY

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FIFTY YEARS AGO, in New Orleans, Louisiana, a “hardy band of vagabonds”¹ came together to form The American College of Heraldry. As one of the co-founders of the College, as well as its longtime President (until his untimely passing in 2004), Dr. David Pittman Johnson wrote in the introduction to the first volume of *The Heraldic Register of America*:

Several private heraldic societies were organized through the years in this country, but none were sufficiently strong enough to survive.²

The Founding Fathers

Before detailing the history of the College itself, we might do well to understand why heraldry was not part of the “foundations” of the United States in the late 18th century. Dom William Wilfrid Bayne noted:

The “Founding Fathers” of the American republic having at first considered the establishment of a college of arms, in the end rejected the idea as inconsistent with the ideals of the new government. And so the bearing of arms which had been brought to the colonies with the other traditional usages of the mother country was set adrift to shift for itself. In the reaction against monarchical ideas and the trappings of privilege, heraldry suffered a temporary eclipse, and in this period of neglect the heraldic traditions of some undoubtedly armigerous families were either obscured, or altogether lost.

The appetite for social distinction has no doubt something to do with the revival of interest in heraldry. For better or worse the coat of arms has come to be regarded as a mark of social distinction, and has about it something of the glamour that attaches to titles of nobility. In spite of equalitarian theories the average American has a respect for these things.³

Bayne, writing from the British “perspective” in 1963, concludes:

For lack of any official sanction and control of the use of arms, heraldry in the USA presents a somewhat confused picture. The arms actually in use may be classified roughly into the following categories: 1, arms borne traditionally since colonial times; 2, arms arbitrarily assumed (for the most part institutional); 3, arms brought in by more recent armigerous immigrants; 4, arms granted to individual Americans by a foreign college of arms; 5, arms that have been ignorantly pirated.

To all of the colonies came persons of “quality”, usually younger sons of county families, some of whom had taken temporarily to trade. With them they brought the traditions and customs of their class, among these traditions frequently that of an ancestral coat of arms. Land was easily obtained by men of their social position, and they readily established themselves in a manner of life not unlike that lived by their kinsmen in the mother country.⁴

So, despite the Founding Fathers having abandoned the thought of an heraldic office as part of the new government’s structure, heraldry itself was already instilled in those “persons of ‘quality’” who made up the upper echelons of society. And that upper class was not likely to give up its symbols of status too readily.

The lack of regulation also allowed heraldry (in the United States), especially civic heraldry, 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/ghastly end-results. ➔



[Ed. note: Full disclosure - This article borrows heavily from my own earlier article, “Why Would Americans Want Armorial Bearings?,” which was originally requested by Burke’s Peerage & Gentry International Register of Arms, and appeared in their newsletter, Volume 1, Issue 2; it later appeared in *The Armiger’s News*, October 2006.]

American Heraldic “Milestones”

Rather than delve too deeply into the specifics of ALL heraldic endeavors in the “newly minted” United States, perhaps a simple timeline of major events will suffice:⁵

17th century

- The first English Grant of Arms to an American colonist: Francis Nicholson, of Maryland, in 1694. Woodcock, T. & Robinson, J.M. (1988). *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry*

18th century

- Queen Anne establishes a Carolina Herald, and a local aristocracy of landgraves and cassiques, for the Carolina colony in 1705 – Lawrence Crump (at the College of Arms) is Carolina Herald but does not appear to have granted any arms. Woodcock, T. & Robinson, J.M. (1988). *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry*
- It is worth noting that in 1705 the Lords Proprietors of Carolina appointed a ‘Carolina Herald’. The office went to Lawrence Crump, who as York Herald was already a member of the College of Arms. By his patent of appointment Carolina Herald was authorized “to devyse, give, grant and assign” coats of arms and certain other distinctions to inhabitants of the Carolinas. He was also authorized “to regulate all Publick and Solemn Processions and Meetings” (i.e., to marshall funerals of armigers and regulate precedence) and “to register the Pedigrees and Descents of the Several Families” of the Carolinas. These would be exercises of his ‘voluntary’ jurisdiction: exercises of his will, rather than of judgment. But he was authorized to exercise his critical faculty as well. His patent empowered him “to hold a Court of Honour and to cite and cause to appear before [him] all such person or persons as shall presume to use any coat or arms that they cannot make out their due right to”.
- The first Scottish Grant of Arms to an American colonist: Rhode Island governor Samuel Cranston, in 1724.
- President George Washington states in 1788 that heraldry is not “unfriendly to the purest spirit of republicanism”.^[5] “American Heraldry Society”. American-heraldry.org

19th century

- The Committee on Heraldry of the New England Historic Genealogical Society is established in 1864.
- Publications include Edgar de V. Vermont’s *America Heraldica* in 1886, and Eugene Zieber’s *Heraldry in America* in 1895. [Ed. note – more to this below]

20th century

- Publications include William A. Crozier’s *Crozier’s General Armory* in 1904 and John Matthews’ *A Complete American Armory* in 1905.
- An early example of an English Grant of Honorary Arms to a US citizen descended from a pre-1783 colonist: Alain C. White, in 1920. Woodcock, T. & Robinson, J.M. (1988). *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry*
- Publications include Charles K. Bolton’s *Bolton’s American Armory* in 1927; the first volume of the New England Historic Genealogical Society’s *A Roll of Arms* in 1928; and Eugene Spofford’s *Armorial Families of America* in 1939.
- Film star Douglas Fairbanks Junior obtains an English Grant of Arms in 1951.

- A private American College of Heraldry & Arms is established in 1966 – it closes in 1970.
- A new, private, American College of Heraldry is established in 1972.

21st century

- The Society of Scottish Armigers is founded in 2001 – it obtains a Grant of Arms from The Lord Lyon in 2004.
- The American Heraldry Society is founded in 2003 – it launches a journal, *The American Herald*, in 2006.

A Prominent Publication

Eugene Zeiber’s *Heraldry in America* was quite popular when it was first published in 1895. It still is, IF you can find a copy – I found mine decades back in the Barnes & Noble overstock section, along with other now-invaluable heraldic “masterpieces.” The “fever” for “authenticating” one’s pedigree and (presumably, “automatically-inheritable” arms) had resulted in one or more businesses in the trade (see below). So it was that a glowing review of this new book was published. An abridged portion is shown below:

HERALDRY IN AMERICA; An Important Treatise on a Subject of Much Interest.

The Macon Telegraph

One of the important publications of the holiday season is the handsome volume upon “Heraldry in America” by Eugene Zeiber [*sic*], issued by the heraldry department of the Bailey, Banks & Biddle Company [Ed. note: interesting that this is the name of a chain of mostly-shopping-mall-based jewelers throughout the U.S.]. Mr. Zeiber [*sic*] does not agree with those who think that the bearing of coats-of-arms in this country is unreasonable even though search devices hav [*sic*] no official recognition. “The fact,” he says, “that arms were borne here during colonial times creates of them American arms and a sufficient authority for their use by descendants of the old families.” But it is desirable, if arms are to be used, whether as in personal devices or in architectural or other adornment, that they should be used intelligently and correctly, and to this and Mr. Zeiber [*sic*] has prepared the present work.

The reviewer gives an extensive listing of the widely varied content of the book, including the history of heraldry, monuments, family arms, American vexillology, seals, and coins, ecclesiastical heraldry, colonial and military orders, and then the “technical” side of the subject (at great length, profusely illustrated). He also goes on to note that Zieber makes “some remarks upon the misappropriation of arms, the use and misuse of the crest, and **the laws which should govern heraldry in America** [Ed. emphasis].”

Now that the social organization of the United States has advanced to a point at which family history has become a matter of legitimate pride and care, the interest in armorial bearings as a part of the family record is not unnatural.



Mr. Zeiber's work will be helpful alike as a guide to those who can trace their dissent from armigers and as a warning to those who cannot. It will be useful also those who undertake to devise arms or seals either for themselves or for societies and organization. If we must have such things, and they certainly are useful, it is just as well to have them right; and since there is a grammar of heraldry, which is here intelligibly expounded, there is no more excuse for ungrammatical blazoning, in public or in private, than for ungrammatical language.⁶

So, if heraldry was "making a comeback" in America, we might do well to look at the "private heraldic societies" mentioned in the first quotation and discover why they did (or did not) succeed.

A Fraud Implodes

Not shown in the above timeline, perhaps due in large part to its ultimate notoriety, is "The American College of Heraldry & Arms" (more completely, as shown in later auction documents, "The American College for Genealogical Registry, Family History and Heraldry" – for our purposes, ACGR). A 19th century American "purveyor" of genealogical information, one Albert Welles created this organization with a particular interest in coats of arms and heraldry. He was known to have produced fraudulent pedigrees and armorial bearings for a number of individuals, including, most notably, President George Washington (which was later exhaustively proved out as a forgery). He also wrote articles to bolster his organization's, and his own, "reputation," including *History of the Welles Family in England and Normandy*: [Ed. note – from 794 AD no less!] *With the Derivation from Their Progenitors of Some of the Descendants in the United States* (New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1876), and *American family antiquity, being an account of the origin and progress of American families, traced from their progenitors in this country, connected with their history abroad*, (1880),⁷ the former being an obvious method of validating his own "ancestry."

Further still – though not surprisingly – he was also author of a number of wondrous genealogical "reference" works, as detailed in the auction catalog of the organization's collection post-shuttering. These included the *History of the World before Christ (being a "Genealogical Chronology" of the Earliest Races of Mankind, traced from Adam)*; the *History and Genealogy of the Washington Family (derived from Odin, the Founder of Scandinavia, B.C. 70. down to the present time)*; as well as the *Life of Jesus The Messiah (a Sacred Poem)*, among many other books and articles.

This wholly fraudulent enterprise was ultimately exposed by the *New York Tribune*, and while the entire exposé is quite lengthy in the original paper (link to scans of the original issue included in notes), I include herebelow the first few paragraphs, giving telling, "red flag" details as one might notice were one not so inclined to hand over money to someone so readily to obtain their "genuine" pedigree.

New York Tribune, 7 Feb. 1881

A COLLEGE IN ONE ROOM EXPOSING A SHAM IN HERALDRY.

A BOARD OF TRUSTEES AND A COUNCIL OF REGENTS WITHOUT ANY DUTIES—MANY PROMINENT CITIZENS DELUDED INTO LENDING THEIR NAMES TO THE CONCERN - MR. WELLES'S INGENUOUS SCHEME FOR GETTING \$50 [Ed. note - @ US\$1400 as of January 2022] FROM EACH OF THEM—A SURPRISING STATE OF IGNORANCE AMONG LIFE MEMBERS,

A careful investigation shows that the "American College of Heraldry" in University-place, which is using the names of many prominent citizens as regents and life members, is a pretentious sham. Albert Welles, who seems to be not only the president but all the rest of the faculty also, has succeeded by ingenious devices in getting \$50 each from those regents and life members, who have no duties and no privileges of any value. Inquiries have been made among leading citizens whose names Mr. Welles is using, and it is found that they have either not authorized him to do anything of the kind, or have not investigated the matter and know scarcely anything about the so-called college. There are many amusing features in the exposure given herewith of this scheme for playing upon credulity and vanity.

PRESIDENT WELLES AND HIS COLLEGE.

A large gilt sign over a window of the building No. 67 University-place displays the words "American College of Heraldry." Near the top of the building cut in atone are the words "Society Library." This latter sign, however, is not conspicuous, and strangers unfamiliar with the building suppose it to be devoted to the purposes of the College of Heraldry. At least one "Regent" of this "College," a prominent banker of this city, labored under this error until within a few days.

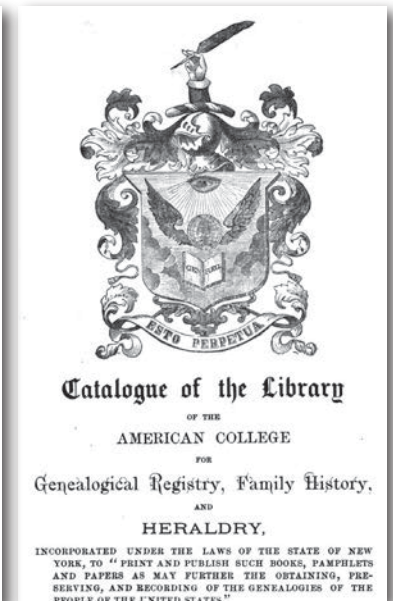
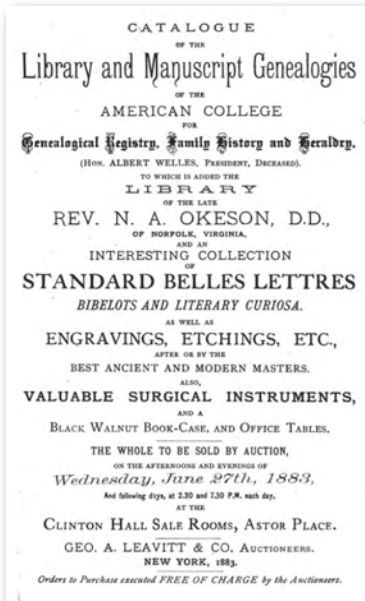
In order to ascertain what demand there was in this democratic community for heraldic honors, a TRIBUNE reporter called at the building recently. Over a door in the hall was a sign "Genealogical Registry," and other signs on the same door bore the inscriptions "Americana: College of Heraldry" and "Doomsday [*sic*] Book." The door was locked, but a slate was hung out with the notice: "Albert Welles, president—write your name and address." This slate was evidently for the use of persons so stricken with the heraldic fever that they could not wait for the college faculty to return. As the reporter was not suffering in this way he returned the next day, and was rece[ived] pleasantly by a genial man with side whiskers, Who announced himself as President Welles. The reporter stated his errand—to learn something about the college.

"Write your name and address here," said Mr. Welles. The name being duly recorded to the "visitors' book," the first thing required of all callers, the president produced some pamphlets and circulars for inspection, and said they would tell the story. He also invited the reporter to inspect the room, which was the only one occupied by the College,

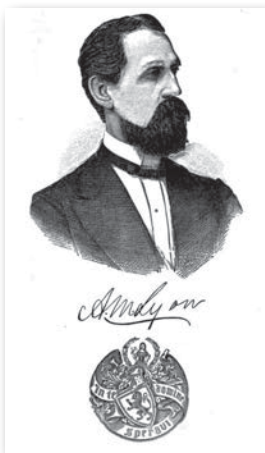


after which he would answer any questions, although, apparently, he was not eager to “rush into print.”

The room occupied by the “College of Heraldry” is not a large one. In the centre was a large table littered with papers, letters, etc., and bearing a big photograph album with the photographs of “Regents and Life Members.” This was exhibited with pride by the president, as it contained the photographs of some of the best-known citizens of New-York and other cities, including the President of the United States. These photographs were contributed, Mr. Welles said, by the members themselves. A glass case at one end of the room contained Townsend’s “History of the Rebellion” in a number of bulky volumes. In another small book-case at the other end of the room were works on Heraldry and Genealogy. An upright desk was occupied by the president. A young woman was working at a small table. A number of heraldic designs hung about the wall, among which were the armorial bearings of the twelve tribes of Israel, which Mr. Welles explained were engraved by his special artist, not on the spot, but from descriptions contained in Holy Writ. The floor of the room was nearly covered with bundles of papers unopened, and with manuscript matter and various other things, the whole presenting a scene of wild confusion.⁸



(Above and below) Select pages from the auction catalog for all materials held by “The American College for Genealogical Registry, Family History and Heraldry.” Note below The Domesday Book thrown in to add some “heft” to the collection, as well as the stern and stoic gaze of Mr. Welles himself, along with his (purported) armorial bearings. (New York Tribune, 7 February 1881)



As stated, such glaring “red flags” as appear merely in the text above would, ideally, warn off modern-day potential clients. But, given the state and number of heraldic “bucket shops”[†] still operating today, one might be surprised. The ACGR was dissolved almost immediately upon the publication of this exposé, and Mr. Welles appears to have passed away shortly thereafter, as he is noted as “deceased” in the auction catalog of the contents of the ACGR.

The auction catalog itself was no less superfluous in its estimation of the overall value of the collection, stating in merely the first page of the listing that the collection illustrates “the honors and personal merit of our most eminent men, and trace their Pedigree back to the most REMOTE TIMES ascertainable from our ANCIENT HISTORIES.” And, detailing the contents of the then-published works to date:



Volume the First contains the pedigrees and heraldry of the families of WASHINGTON, BARRON, BUELL, CARY, PAGE, FROST, STOKES, DUNBAR, and GRACE; Volume the Second of KYP, COOKE, LYON, KENDALL, FLOWER, STARIN, CONNOR, and MORTIMER; and Volume the Third of SNOW, WHEELER, MARTIN, CONOVER, FISH, WATERBURY, and BABCOCK.

The late Mr. Welles' position as President of the Genealogical College of this city, enabled him to obtain correct pedigrees, and history of foreign families, some of whose descendants are in this country. This work was published by subscription, and, as the sale was necessarily limited to those families entitled by their eminence, to have their history embodied therein, the cost to subscribers was \$10 per volume of about 250 pages, and from \$50 to \$200 (according to the number of pages occupied by families respectively) for inserting their family history. As each family history was brought down if possible, to some representative individual, his engraved portrait adorns the volumes whenever furnished for that purpose. These were inserted without charge. The work was published in consecutive volumes, in elegant style of binding, and on gilt edged plate paper, quarto size.

The value and importance of such a series of Volumes—unique in this country—can only be estimated by comparison with similar works in England, which contain the history of that country for over one thousand years, and of China for upwards of forty-four centuries. The preservation in this form of family history makes the history of the country. To the family memorials of the Hebrew race we owe the Bible, and to similar sources we are indebted for the history of the most ancient kingdoms of the earth as China, Chaldea, Egypt, Babylonia, etc.⁹

Please note that he quite modestly compares the importance of his own work to *The Bible*, as well as the histories of the world's most ancient civilizations (not least of which the 4,400-year history of China). Such modesty and humility boggles the mind.

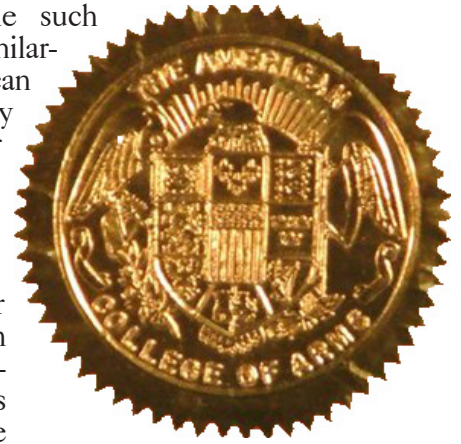
As a matter of interest, some 20 years ago I received – quite out of the blue – contact from someone who owned a (poor) photographic poster of the original “charter” of the ACGR. I was happy to accept same, merely out of curiosity. It lies framed, sitting somewhere in my storage unit, festooned with all sorts of official-looking seals, imagery, and signatures. These signatures presumably belonged to the “Regents” previously mentioned, who doubtless had no clue their names were being used to bolster such an enterprise until the publication of the article, or that all of the precious manuscripts and genealogies they handed over to Welles as proof of their

ancestries remained bundled and unopened, strewn about the ACGR's “headquarters.” Those interested in the breadth of this “library” may wish to spend a quiet month or two scanning the 182-page catalog detailing everything (see note 9).

But There Was Also The Occasional Success...

There have certainly been examples of private American organizations which have been successful, albeit for short tenures. One such

entity was a similarly-named American College of Heraldry and Arms, Inc. (for our purposes, the ACHAI) – an organization which one may still Google, and with which our own organization was, and is, mistaken for over the years (the names of the earlier organization and this one are so



Seal of The American College of Arms, Inc. [Wikipedia]

“interchangeable” as to cause even more confusion for those researching our own College). The ACHAI was established in 1966 to – once again - promote heraldry in the United States. Based in Baltimore, Maryland, and was composed of two “divisions:” the American College of Arms researched inherited arms, verified genealogy, and granted new arms to individuals across the country; the College of Arms of the United States assisted corporate entities, such as businesses and municipal heraldry. The college was established by Donald Franklin Stewart, William Henry Lloyd, Charles Francis Stein, Jr., and Gordon Malvern Fair Stick. Their (somewhat lofty) titles were, respectively, Chief Herald Marshall, Herald Genealogist, Herald Chancellor, and Telorum Rex.

At the very least, the ACHAI hired art students from the Maryland Institute College of Art to paint the armorial achievements and create grant and matriculation documents. Doubtless, none of these students had any heraldic expertise, but one hopes they were correctly guided to form and proportion when producing their work. The ACHAI even achieved the lofty goal of “granting” arms to then-President Lyndon B. Johnson (the arms blazoned *Azure on a Saltire Gules fimbriated between four*

† During the 1820s, street urchins drained beer kegs which were discarded from public houses. The street urchins would take the kegs to an abandoned shop and drink them. This practice became known as bucketing, and the location at which they drained the kegs became known as a bucket shop. Later in the same century, unlicensed taverns cropped up throughout London that sold the selfsame discarded alcohol. So, it was only fitting that the same term would be applied to a business engaged in heraldic (or financial) fraud - the sale of illegitimate (or illegally appropriated) heraldic credentials. It was included in the legal proceedings of a London court case in 1901 involving the Norroy King of Arms and the College of Arms (which will be covered in more detail in the next issue of this publication).

From that point forward, the term “bucket shop” entered the heraldic “lexicon,” referring to a company that will sell a coat of arms (often referred to by the misnomer “family crest”) associated with the customer’s surname, regardless of whether the customer can actually claim a relation to the original armiger. Bucket shops may work from a database of surnames and shields sourced from manuscripts, armorials, and various journals (to include, among many such resources, Burke’s *The General Armory of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales: Comprising a Registry of Armorial Bearings from the Earliest to the Present Time* or Debrett’s *Peerage & Baronetage*, regardless of publication year; Crozier’s *General Armory: A Registry of American Families Entitled to Coat Armor*, etc.). A common indicator of “bucket shop” arms is the display of the surname within what should be the motto scroll. [Some details from Wikipedia: “Heraldic Fraud”] →

Eagles displayed a Mullet Or), and later to then-Maryland Governor (and later Vice President to President Richard M. Nixon) Spiro T. Agnew (blazoned *Azure on a Cross between four Horses Heads couped Argent a Cross botony Gules*). According to Wikipedia, by January 1969 the ACHAI had refused over 1,000 requests for arms [Ed. note – a rather staggering number, if genuine]. The petitions were ostensibly denied because they were assumed arms or armorial petitions with errors in their genealogy. The ACHAI also excluded, rather unusually, helmets from their armorial “grants,” as well as coronets. Lasting a mere 4 years, the ACHAI closed its doors in 1970.¹⁰

It is interesting to note that in a much-dated article on heraldry on Britannica.com’s website, they state (without apparent question) about the above enterprise:

The American College of Heraldry and Arms, Inc., was established in the state of Maryland in 1966. It has two divisions: the American College of Arms, which is concerned with the arms of individuals, their registration, and, more importantly, the granting of arms; and the College of Arms of the United States, which deals with such items as arms, crests, and standards for corporate concerns... The work of the American College of Heraldry and Arms may be said to invalidate in America the historic relationship between arms and nobility, an argument which may lead to the concept of two classes—American arms, which are non-noble, and classical arms, which are noble.¹¹

And A Continuing American Success Story

The most notable – and perhaps even singular - success story of an organization such as has yet been described, is the New England Historical and Genealogical Society (NEHGS). Founded in Boston in 1845, the NEHGS remains the oldest continuously operational genealogical society in the United States, and its collections house one of the largest privately-held libraries of genealogical records in the U.S. Though, as its name implies, its focus is primarily on genealogical research, they readily note that heraldry and genealogy are quite often intertwined, one discipline aiding the other in ancestral research (note that in the above timeline the NEGHS publishes its first armorial in 1928).

In the introduction to that first *Roll of Arms*:

Taking into consideration the early history of coat armour there seems to be no reason in this country at least, why anyone, provided he observes the simple rules of blazon and does not appropriate the arms of another; may not assume and use any coat he desires.

And, in the introduction to the 1932 2nd Volume of the same publication:

There is certainly no legal reason, perhaps no reason at all, why an American gentleman should not assume in more majorum any new coat that pleases his fancy, but he should not assume an old coat, for if he does, he is very likely denying his own forefathers and he surely is affirming what he has no sufficient reason to be true.

As noted by Nathaniel Taylor, PhD, FASG, Vice Chairman of the NEHGS Committee on Heraldry, in the introduction to a lecture on heraldry in America:

Heraldry is a sister discipline to genealogy. Coats of arms— inherited graphic designs on a shield—have been used as signals of personal identity from the Middle Ages to the present. Because they are inherited, they can be indicators of a particular ancestry, connecting anyone who uses a particular coat of arms with the ancestor who originally bore it. There are many resources available for the study of heraldry as an art form, both to create heraldic art and to interpret and appreciate heraldry.¹²

So, as we have seen, there have been a few failed attempts (one or more scandalous) at creating a reputable, lasting organization for the study of heraldry and registration of Armorial Bearings in the United States.

In the late 20th 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. As previously mentioned, 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.

David B. Appleton in his article “A Coat of Arms in 21st Century America!?!?” states that a coat of arms is, to an individual:

...effectively, a graphic name tag; what you might think of as the medieval equivalent of a photo ID. A coat of arms states, every bit as much as a signature or business card might, that “I am so-and-so” and, by extension, that “I belong to such-and-such a family”.¹³

And further:

A coat of arms can be a lasting symbol of a family, one that can be passed down and used by each succeeding generation. And that visual family connection is something that is as relevant in the 21st Century as it was in the 12th Century.¹⁴

Thence Cometh The College

Again quoting Dr. David Pittman Johnson:

It was in response to this heraldic vacuum that The American College of Heraldry was established. The College’s intent was to bring some semblance of order into the American heraldic arena and to begin meeting the quite pressing heraldic needs of the public in this country. The first few years of the College were marked by creative experimentation and modification in heraldic modes. In time, experience led the way toward a more conservative standardized approach, compatible with heraldry existing in other nations.¹⁵

The “creative experimentation and modification in heraldic modes” which Dr. Johnson described referred to an “aligning” of the standards, rules, and regulations which the College followed in its Registrations of Armorial Bearings. Indeed, the earliest foundational documents referred to the College’s “end products” as Grants, ➔

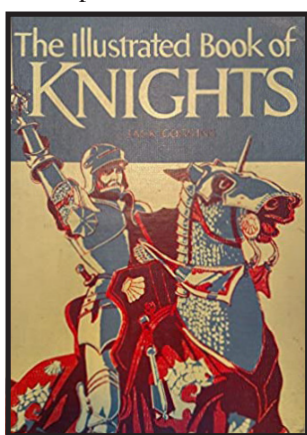
and not Registrations. This bit of zealous adoption of the language of existing international heraldic granting bodies (The College of Arms [UK], The Court of The Lord Lyon, et al) was soon modified to the less “ostentatious” mode of Registration, which has been the practice ever since. Still further, the College’s “doors” swung wide open as far as what could be included in a granted/registered set of Armorial Bearings. Helms of all manner, attitude, or style were included in early Registrations, despite established standards to the contrary, as evidenced by some of the few authoritative works on the subject. Supporters for gentlemen were not out of bounds, nor badges, suspended insignias of various Orders of Chivalry (an entirely different hornet’s nest of contention over the years), and more.

As noted, though, these were fortunately pared well back in short order, and only where such augmentations were present in actual Grants obtained from one of the aforementioned bodies authorized to issue same were they included when an American armiger wished to register with our own organization.

The College has been fortunate enough to retain the services of numerous internationally recognized heraldic artists through the decades to render emblazonments of the Achievements registered, including, but not limited to such brilliant heraldists as Hans Dietrich Birk, Dennis Endean Ivall, Richard McNamee Crossett, D. James Krepp, John Bates Stuman, and Dr. Robert Bray Wingate.

And I cannot emphasize strongly enough the invaluable ongoing contributions made by Russian heraldic expert Cmdr. Valery Pavlovich Yegorov (former head of the Collegium Heraldicum Russiæ and vice-president of The Russian College of Heraldry) and his wife, Natalia Rostislavona Egorova, who have been exclusively emblazoning achievements for the College’s Registrations for decades now. Without their unflagging assistance we would not be able to offer the value and quality of heraldic artwork that is reflected in our publications and Registration certificates.

My own interest in heraldry was fostered at a young age (quite coincidentally, roughly around the founding date of the College) 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. I also readily acknowledge many hours poring over a book on knights, targeted at children, entitled *The Illustrated Book of Knights* by Jack Coggins (Grosset & Dunlap, January 1, 1957), published a little over a year before I was born. I believe I wore its pages out (and I would not be surprised if many of our members also had or read same). Through that research, one of my maternal lines strayed into the

Bourchier 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...”

Thankfully for me, the American College of Heraldry was ultimately established in response to an obvious growing curiosity about all things heraldic. 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 furious heraldic “research,” and decided to write to them to register arms, which I (naively) was quite certain would be easily recorded in my name. I had the fortune of meeting – through correspondence – Dr. 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 (TAN)* - still produced today and in its 44th (as of 2022) year of publication. The quarterly newsletter was originally a literal cut-and-paste production, with Dr. Johnson typing up text, cutting it out, and gluing it into place. He would then hand a stack of paper over to the University of Alabama’s printing office for copying. Longtime members will also remember the “frontpiece” of every issue was usually a drawing by artist Larry McNutt, who also came up with some heraldic “punning” cartoon for each issue. It was only after I contacted Dr. Johnson and offered my very modest desktop publishing (as we called it back in the olden days) skills that we converted to a somewhat more uniform layout and format.

These days *TAN* 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 why has our own organization succeeded for half-a-century when others have fallen by the wayside? Primarily, because we have held to international “standards,” and we have published all Registrations. Americans 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 that the odds of their being entitled to bear historically granted arms are essentially nil. This knowledge has come through the growing wealth of solid information about heraldry available in print and online, including the online ability to find the “rarer” go-to heraldry books once only available in library reference sections, such as *Heraldry Custom, Rules and Styles* by Carl Alexander von Volborth, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry* by Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, as well as Stephen Friar’s *Basic Heraldry* and *A Dictionary of Heraldry*, among others. 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 US\$9,300 as of this writing).

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.

“Like-Minded” American Heraldic Organizations

There are now several organizations (both in the U.S. and abroad, but primarily in the U.S.) that have arisen out of the spread of the internet. Some of those with a “larger presence” on the internet include:

- **College of Arms Foundation**
 - Founded in New York in 1983, “originally for the purpose of raising funds towards the upkeep and renovation of the College of Arms building in the City of London and to promote the study of heraldry. In 2001, the Foundation’s focus was changed to promote knowledge of, and interest in, English heraldry in the United States;”¹⁶
- **American Heraldry Society**
 - Founded in 2003 “to study and promote the proper use of heraldry in America. The Society seeks to educate the American public about the art and practices related to personal and organizational heraldry.”¹⁷ - it publishes

a newsletter (*The Courant*) and a journal (*The American Herald*), and hosts an internet forum, as well as maintaining a vibrant presence on social media;

- **Society of Scottish Armigers**
 - Founded in 2001 “To research, identify, and record Armorial Bearings which have been granted, matriculated, or otherwise recognised by the Scottish heraldic authority, The Court of The Lord Lyon.
 - “To publish and disseminate an historical record of said Armorial Bearings along with biographical information regarding the Armigers.
 - “To educate the public regarding the history and meaning of Armorial Bearings within the Scottish tradition.
 - “To initiate, promote, and engage in scholarly, educational, and information endeavors, and to preserve and disseminate knowledge regarding Scottish heraldry, and to act as a resource center for those seeking information regarding the same.
 - “To support and encourage knowledge regarding Scottish history and cultural heritage through leadership and participation in various cultural activities, such as Highland Games, Scottish Country Dancing, Kirkin’ of the Tartans, St. Andrew’s Society events, and the like;”¹⁸
- **Augustan Society** (*recently “revived”*)
 - Originally founded in 1957 as a “group of both amateur and professional scholars who focus in the fields of chivalry, genealogy, heraldry, history before 1700, and royalty & nobility. They publish a journal titled *The Augustan Omnibus*. As many as seventeen additional titles have been published in specialized areas... Public education is also an ongoing activity, and time spent assisting individual researchers is a big part of that. At any given moment, we might be helping a genealogist with overseas research, a student of heraldry design his own arms, advising a prospect on which orders of chivalry to consider (and avoid), or responding to questions from the press about royal succession.”¹⁹

Some of these offer heraldic advice at no cost, and they are all to be lauded for their contributions to the art and science of heraldry. As of this writing those entities either don’t publish the arms with any regularity, issue no Registration certificates, or offer hand drawn renderings of the newly devised armorial bearings.

Why bother to list our “competition?” I don’t actually consider these groups as such; we all inevitably support each other’s works through the common dissemination of heraldic knowledge and tradition. Thus, we mutually increase public awareness of a centuries-old practice which is invigorated by the various resources now available.

And Yet The Bucket Shops Remain...

Our further goal of the College remains the education of the public so that, ultimately, all heraldic “bucket shops” are eradicated. 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 Dr. Johnson: ➔

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.²⁰

Unfortunately, despite successes on the internet (by “forcing” disclaimers – however tiny in font) noting that armorial bearings did not belong to a surname, etc., remaining stumbling blocks exist in the form of mall kiosks, shops in both international tourist locales and their associated airports, where there are captive audiences spurred to an impulse purchase without benefit of information to “debunk” the wide variety of misappropriated arms on posters, plaques, prints, etc. Our fight in this arena remains ongoing.

In the 1990s (and sporadically before) attempts at regular annual meetings were made. Many longtime members who attended these weekend events will recall they were marked by informative lectures, as well as an heraldic “camaraderie” now too geographically disparate (unlike, for example, the very-well-funded NEGHS, where there is a more concentrated population of membership and thus they are able to draw larger number and attract major speakers). While Dr. Johnson and I made a lengthy, concerted effort at obtaining one or more grants to fund the expansion of the College’s work, we were met with mostly “deaf ears.”

One item of good fortune for the ACH was our early presence in the nascent days of the worldwide web (I created and launched the College’s original, rudimentary-at-best website on January 3 1996, so we’ve been on the web for 26 years!). We were able to obtain (and retain, by virtue of longevity) a higher search engine ranking without paying for ad words, having run the gamut of all manners of search engines, from the now defunct (but wildly popular for its time) WebCrawler, as well as Yahoo, etc. With the much-touted (and often loathed) ever-shifting algorithms employed by such social media platforms as Facebook and Twitter, the College continues to slowly build its position among the hundreds(!) of heraldry groups now active on these platforms.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that none of the College’s success would have been possible without our vibrant member-

ship. Despite an often-revolving door of new members, who sign up for a Registration and remain as a member for a year or so (primarily to see their Registration published in *TAN*), attrition is balanced by potential armigers, both young and old, discovering us for the first time. And there is even a core group of individuals whose membership “tenure” with the College is decades in counting.

These members, as well as our generous Annual Patrons, have been the life blood of The American College of Heraldry, and kept our virtual doors open to any and all seeking to learn more about the ever-evolving world of heraldry.

I would close by asking all members to continue to help raise awareness of the College through friends and associates, making them aware of our website (www.americancollegeofheraldry.org), Facebook page (www.facebook.com/americanheraldry), and Instagram site (www.instagram.com/americancollegeofheraldry/).

With your help we will continue to survive – and expand – in the decades to come!

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