



Marshalling of Arms in America: Some Practical Considerations

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Introduction

The marshalling of arms, that is the combination of arms of different families in either temporary or permanent forms, is a subject of special complexity in American context, not only because many different heraldic traditions are practiced in the United States, but also because the inheritance of arms is not necessarily patrilineal. However, various families with heraldic traditions may wish to combine the arms of various lines of forebears, and such a desire to honor one's ancestry is quite reasonable.

The present article cannot present any rules for the marshalling of arms in the United States in the absence of an official heraldic authority, but rather advances a number of guidelines that will, it is hoped, assist the armiger in avoiding practices that are confusing or misleading. As in all things, the individual armiger in America must use good judgment and rely on clarity, taste and common sense in any marshalling decisions.

Context

As might be expected, the matter of marshalling arms in America is not a new topic of discussion. In his 1895 opus, *Heraldry in America*, Eugene Zieber attempted to reconcile the varying heraldic traditions already long in evidence in the United States. His general recommendation was that English practice should be preferred, and from the perspective of the late 19th century, such a suggestion seemed reasonable. He advanced the following key points:

1. A dominant system has to be chosen.
2. 90% of armigerous ancestors of Americans at that time were British.
3. The original 13 colonies were English possessions.ⁱ

One may well dispute the percentage given in point 2, and Zieber gives no references or statistics to back up this assertion, but it seems likely that at least a considerable majority of armigerous ancestors of Americans in the 19th century were, in fact British. As for point 3, we might just as easily point out that considerable territories in what is now the United States were originally Spanish, French or Dutch possessions, but the governmental system (including heraldic rules) of the 13 Colonies that became the United States was extended eventually to these former possessions of other European countries, so the assertion does have some merit. While there are no specific heraldic rules per se, there is an implicit preference for British conventions.

A problem arises, however, when we attempt to impose English conventions on the more flexible American system, which is neither strictly patrilineal nor concerned with primogeniture. Since arms in America may descend through male or female lines as the family chooses, there is literally no limit to the number of coats of arms that could theoretically be quartered. The confusing and aesthetically unsatisfactory results of simply vacuuming up any and all ancestral coats of arms must be avoided. Further, in Germanic and other traditions, arms of the various territories ruled or claimed are quartered, and since there are no recognized titles of nobility in the United States, it is best to avoid display of arms that might suggest territorial rule.

While a specific explanation of the mechanism of quartering in the English system is beyond this article (the author suggests Friar and Ferguson's *Basic Heraldry*, Chapter 8, for an excellent overview of the topic ⁱⁱ), it is sufficient to state that the English system places no restriction on the ultimate number of

quarters that might be obtained. However, to inherit and quarter maternal arms, one must be descended from an heraldic heiress, i.e. a woman whose only siblings are sisters, or whose brothers have no offspring. Such a woman is an heraldic heiress and transmits those arms, quartered with the arms of her husband, to her offspring. Several sisters in this position are equal co-heiresses.

For example, Frederick Day Knight (1869-1940) was a direct, male-line descendant of Richard Knight (1603-1683), early settler of Rhode Island, and bore Gules, two bars Argent, in chief three wolves heads erased of the Second.ⁱⁱⁱ ([Figure 1](#)) As we are considering this in an American context, we will not take up the matter of cadency, assuming all male offspring to inherit the undifferenced arms (Frederick was, in fact, the second son and fourth of nine children). His first wife, Catherine McDowell, could theoretically have born McDowell of Ulster, Azure, a lion rampant Argent crowned Or and gorged with a ducal coronet Gules. ([Figure 2](#)) She had two brothers who never married, and two sisters, one of whom died young and another who also did not marry. Catherine McDowell was thus an heraldic heiress.

The couple had two children, Andrew, who died young, and Mary Eunice Knight (1892-1983). Mary Eunice Knight (and her brother Andrew, who died young) thus inherited the quartered arms of Knight of Rhode Island with McDowell of Ulster. ([Figure 3](#)) As Andrew died young, Mary Eunice Knight herself became an heraldic heiress, transmitting both the Knight and McDowell arms to her offspring.

And now we are on course for an eventual conflict. The McDowell of Ulster arms are ultimately Scots arms in origin (though with the difference of being gorged with a coronet Gules), and recorded in Ulster's Office. Even so, it seems logical to follow Scots guidelines for these, and Lyon Office limits the number of quarters to four on any shield (unless grand quarters are used more on that momentarily). If Mary Eunice Knight were to marry an armiger with already quartered arms, the maximum number of quarters (the two for her husband plus Knight, plus McDowell) would be reached, and any grandchildren quartering arms with spouses would not be able to display all quarters in Scots usage.

A way around this is the use of grand quarters, i.e., the quartering of a quarter of the shield. This can only be done with quarters 2, 3 and 4 in Scots usage, as the first quarter must always be the paternal arms alone. However, this becomes busy very quickly.

As it happens, Mary Eunice Knight was my paternal great-grandmother, and married Michael Joseph O'Shea, for whom were registered the arms of O'Shea of Tipperary (ACH No. 1615)^{iv}. ([Figure 4](#)) Michael's mother, Catherine Jane Wayland of Clonkelly, Tipperary, bore the arms of Wayland of Kent (Azure a lion rampant Argent, overall a bend Gules) quartered with Smithwick (Argent, three crosses formy fitchy Sable, 2 and 1), as her own mother, Martha Rebecca Smithwick-Manning, was an heiress. However, Catherine Jane Wayland was one of eleven children, several of whom were brothers with offspring, so she did not transmit the Wayland/Smithwick arms to her descendants.

Of course, if we were to remove the English limitations of transmission by heiresses only, Michael Joseph O'Shea would have already been quartering O'Shea, Wayland and Smithwick, and would have married Mary Eunice Knight (quartering Knight of RI and McDowell of Ulster). Thus, in the course of three generations, there would be five quarters already (expressed as Quarterly of Six in the English system, with the paternal arms in 1 and 6). At this pace, the system becomes unworkable rather quickly. In the Scots system, five quarters cannot be shown without grand quarters.

To illustrate the difference in approaches, compare the combination of O'Shea-Knight-McDowell in simple quarters ([Figure 5](#)) vs. grand quarters ([Figure 6](#)).



Recommendations for American Usage

So what is the American armiger to do? There are several reasonable approaches. First, for those who bear arms originating in a country with its own heraldic authority and traditions, it is quite sensible to

follow the traditions of that country. Indeed, one cannot alter quarterings in Scotland without a rematriculation of arms with Lyon Office, and that heraldic authority ensures that the quarterings are technically correct for that system.^v For those who have assumed arms in America, or who are combining arms of different countries and traditions, pragmatism should be of utmost importance:

1. Following the Scots example,^{vi} the shield should only be divided into four quarters.
2. Grand quarters are permissible, but should be used with great care.
3. The paternal arms (or the arms of the bearer's surname) should be in the first quarter, and not combined with others arms (i.e., no grand quarters).
4. One may not quarter arms unless the arms of the family through which they descend are also included.

This last point is particularly important. Returning to our practical examples, point four means that the author cannot quarter the arms of McDowell unless the arms of Knight are included. This guideline avoids such absurdities as the quartering of the arms of O'Shea of Tipperary in 1 and 4, and those of O'Brien of Thomond (Gules, three lions passant guardant dimidiated Or and Argent) in 2 and 3, in spite of the fact that O'Brien of Thomond is, in fact, quite remote in the author's paternal ancestry (namely descent from Brian Catha-an-Aonaigh O'Brien, obit. 1400). Even if one dispenses with the tradition of transmitting arms only through heiresses, the O'Brien arms could only be quartered in the author's line if the following were also included: De Burgh, Gabbett, Smithwick, and Wayland. Were this guideline not followed, many, if not most, armigers of European ancestry would be able to quarter the undifferenced arms of England or France, or other monarchies, suggesting a much closer genealogical connection than actually exists.

A Final Plea for the Heraldic Heiress

Although some may reject the tradition of heraldic heiresses and the patriarchal society from which it springs, there is some logic in retaining this tradition in American usage. If, as seems to be the case for the foreseeable future, the transmission of surnames remains a patrilineal phenomenon, the attachment of arms to surname continues to be a practical means of identification. Thus, male offspring will pass surnames (and arms) to their offspring. When a branch of a family has no further male-line descendants, it is reasonable to prefer that arms be transmitted through female descendants so that the tradition is incorporated in later generations, and not lost.

The phenomenon of the heraldic heiress provides at least one reasonable means of limiting which arms to quarter in a system that might otherwise be overwhelming. At the very least, when selecting among possible quarterings, the arms of heraldic heiresses should be greatly preferred in order to preserve the heraldic traditions of those families.

Conclusion

Ultimately, as has often been said, Americans simply may do as they please with respect to heraldry, but that the individual armiger has a responsibility to understand the basic principles of heraldry, and seek informed advice when making heraldic decisions. As Zieber said:

the peculiar conditions of the United States forbid a blind following of the heraldic laws of any one country, and the bearing of arms here can only be governed by a general knowledge of heraldry, an appreciation of circumstances, and the exercise of good judgment and good taste in the treatment of each individual case.^{vii}

In preparing my own arms for registration in Kenya, decisions about quartering were a significant part of the process. Ultimately, absent a specific documented connection to the arms of McDowell of Ulster, and therefore wishing to exercise all due caution, I decided to submit for registration O'Shea of Tipperary quartering Knight of Rhode Island. ([Figure 7](#)) In so doing, the Knight lineage of my great grandmother is honored, a potentially problematic claim (McDowell) is avoided, and the resulting design is clear and distinctive.

The marshalling of arms remains a valid means of memorializing two or more lines of ancestry, but in American context, great care must be taken that the inclusion of quarterings is made with due consideration of both the relevance of the quartered arms and the ultimate aesthetic result. Novice armigers will, no doubt, attempt to draw in all manner of ancestral arms in quarterings, but such efforts

are at best cluttered and confusing, and at worst overtly pretentious. The American College of Heraldry does not attempt to regulate, nor does it register, quarterings, save those that are granted by a foreign heraldic authority. The manner of display, including quarterings, is a matter of choice for each individual armiger. It behooves the armiger to choose conservatively.

NOTES

- i. Zieber, Eugene. *Heraldry in America*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1984 (reprint of 1895 edition), 79.
- ii. Friar, Stephen and John Ferguson, *Basic Heraldry*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1993, 181-187.
- iii. Burke, Sir John Bernard. *Burke's Landed Gentry of Great Britain and Ireland* (with American Families), 16th Edition, London: Burke's Peerage, 1939, 2779-80, Plate LVII.
- iv. David Pittman Johnson, ed. *The Heraldic Register of America: Volume X*, 28.
- v. Innes of Learney, Sir Thomas. *Scots Heraldry*, Revised Ed, London: Johnston and Bacon, 1978, 75.
- vi. *Ibid.*, 76.
- vii. Zieber, 78-79.

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