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The History of the City of Chicago Flag

In 1915, Alderman James A Kearns proposed to the city council that Chicago should have a flag. Council approved the proposal and established the Chicago Flag Commission to consider designs for the flag. A contest was held and a prize offered for the winning design. The competition was won by Mr. Wallace Rice, author and editor, who had been interested in flags since his boyhood. It took Mr. Rice no less than six weeks to find a suitable combination of color, form, and symbolism. Mr. Rice's design was approved by the city council in the summer of 1917. Except for the addition of two new stars—one in 1933 commemorating "the Century of Progress" and one in 1939 commemorating Fort Dearborn—the flag remains unchanged to this day. In explaining some of the symbolism of his flag design, Mr. Rice says:

It is white, the composite of all colors, because its population is a composite of all nations, dwelling here in peace. The white is divided into three parts—the uppermost signifying the north side, the larger middle area the great west side with an area and population almost exceeding that of the other two sides, and the lowermost, the south side. The two stripes of blue signify, primarily, Lake Michigan and the north Chicago River above, bounding the north side and south branch of the river and the great canal below.

There are four red stars, red standing for fire and festivity. The stars reading from the hoist outward—Fort Dearborn, the Great Chicago Fire of October 8-10, 1871, the World's Colombian Exposition of 1893, and the Century of Progress of 1933.

Each of the six points of the stars has an independent meaning. A six-pointed star was used because, as Mr. Rice tells us, "Five pointed stars in the language of flags stand for a sovereign state." The points of the Fort Dearborn star commemorate the historical development of the Chicago Territory. The points represent (1) the period of French domination, (2) the period of English domination, (3) the period as a territory of the state of Virginia, 1763-1778, (4) the period as a part of the Northwest Territory, 1778-1798, (5) the period as part of the Indiana Territory, 1798-1802, and (6) the statehood of Illinois in 1818.

The Chicago Fire star's points stand for (1) transportation, (2) labor, (3) commerce, (4) finance, (5) populousness, and (6) salubrity.

The Colombian Exposition star's points stand for (1) religion, (2) education, (3) esthetics, (4) justice, (5) beneficence, and (6) civic spirit.

The Century of Progress star's points symbolize (1) the world's second largest city (3rd as of 1990), (2) the city's motto "Urbs in Horto [city in a garden]," (3) the city's motto "I will," (4) the Great Central Market, (5) the wonder city, and (6) the convention city.

Thus the flag as a whole summarizes Chicago's history and achievement, following an ordinance passed in 1939. At this time, the fourth and final star was added. The flag established by this ordinance is the Chicago flag we fly today.