

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

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## EXCELSIOR

Three patriotic holidays come at this season of the year. Memorial Day is just behind us, Flag Day is coming up the fourteenth of June and Independence Day is a month from now.

Perhaps we can appreciate our patriotic heritage if we can better understand our patriotic symbols and their meanings. Let's take the word Excelsior which is used as a motto on our state flag. It means "Ever Upward", loftier or higher, hence its use on the flag. But the dictionary notes a second meaning: "fine curled wood shavings used especially for packing fragile items"; two entirely different and seemingly unrelated meanings for the same word.

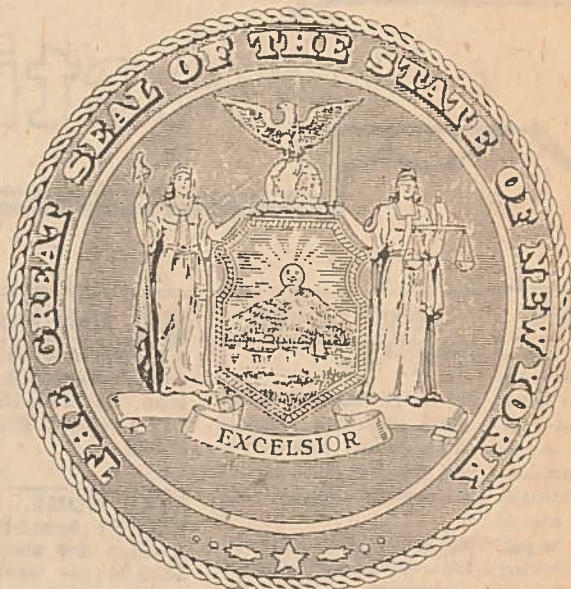
However, as patriotic holidays bring to mind "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness" in a democratic republic we might take another look at the second meaning. What we have in America is really something which is quite fragile. Such fragile items that we prize like rare crystal, delicate porcelain and fine china, we protect in excelsior. When it comes to patriotism and devotion to America and its ideals, we are not as appreciative sometimes as we are of our fine antiques. Symbolically we need to use a little excelsior now and then.

Our state was the eleventh of the original thirteen to ratify the Federal Constitution. When the New York Provincial Congress of 1777 met, they appointed a committee "to prepare a proper device for a great seal for this State." Since that date there have been minor changes in the seal several times. The seal of today, adopted in 1882, is the fifth and last.

Within the shield, which represents protection, the rising sun on the Hudson River indicates the dawning of a new world, and also that this river is an important feature of the state. Ships on the river stand for commerce. A globe with an eagle perched on it forms the crest above the shield. The globe represents America as part of the world. The eagle with outstretched wings, an emblem of the United States, faces West toward the new world and away from the old. Symbolically the eagle proclaims "Westward the course of empire takes its way." New York was the first state to use the eagle in her seal and coat-of-arms.

Liberty represented as an ethereal female at the left of the shield, holds a liberty pole with the cap of freedom on it, and at her feet a discarded crown signifies the end of British rule. In ancient times when Roman slaves were freed, they were given a cap to wear signifying their freedom. And locally, we have a Liberty Pole on the grounds of the Cobblestone Museum at Childs.

On the right hand side of the seal another ethereal female appears. Here Justice, blindfolded, holds the scales of mercy in one hand, in



the other a sword ready to strike against tyranny. The blindfold suggests equal justice under law. Beneath is the state motto Excelsior.

Here is some history behind all of this: During the Revolutionary War the Third New York Regiment had a blue flag with the arms of the State in the center. This flag, flown at Yorktown according to tradition, is one of the few colors from the Revolution still in existence. It dates from 1778 or 1779, i.e., just after the creation of the State arms in 1777. Since then the same flag, often with inscriptions, has been used by the armed forces of the State. New York is unlike most states, however, in that it very early adopted a state flag for general use in addition to its military banners. The first reference we have to such a flag dates from 1858, although this flag appears to have been in use before then. It was specified by the General regulations for the military forces of the State of New York to be "of white bunting, twelve feet fly by ten feet hoist, bearing in the center the arms of the state." No legislative sanction for this flag is known.

Major Asa B. Gardiner was instrumental in obtaining approval for a new flag on April 8, 1896 with the seal of 1882. This flag differed from the old one in having a field of buff, the color of the facings on New York uniforms during the Revolution. The buff field was contrary to the custom of the time, however, and on April 2, 1901 the present flag with its field of blue was approved.

As we celebrate our patriotic holidays let us bring to mind a little Excelsior, both in the attitude of its loftiness and also with the idea that America needs to be handled with care. Use a little Excelsior!