

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Flag Day at the State House

June 14 was Flag Day, a holiday that is often marked for schoolchildren with stories about Old Glory and a ceremony around the school flagpole. In East Longmeadow it is the day selected by the American Legion to dispose of tattered, faded flags with a solemn burning service. This year, however, the State House in Boston gave a whole new meaning to the day.

Last year Gov. Weld invited every municipality in Massachusetts, all 351 of them, to provide a town flag to the state. Those flags would fly in the Great Hall of the State House, and they were to be presented on Flag Day, 1994.

The call went out to each city and town to provide a flag, and most of the towns responded that no such flag existed. Each community had developed a town seal for the nation's bicentennial in 1976, but they did not own a flag. The response from the state was, "You have plenty of time. Create one." Many towns used the intervening year to design, commission or otherwise create hometown flags, and Flag Day was greeted with representatives from 162 towns presenting banners.

I checked with town halls in our legislative district and encouraged them to participate, but each town responded that they did not have a flag. I understood that municipalities have higher priorities than flags, but nevertheless I regretted that I would have no hometown flags to present. It was a pleasant surprise to discover as the day approached that both Hampden and Monson had new banners for the occasion.

Hampden ordered a flag to be made from its town seal, a colorful, two-sided banner with illustrations of the town history. Monson approached the task differently, holding a competition to design a town flag. The winning flag, designed by Elaine Devine, is on display in the State House. In addition to its place of honor in Boston, it has also become a sign of hometown pride, displayed on many town buildings.

Flag Day was sunny and warm in Boston as a truck unloaded the flags outside the capitol building. Organizational skills of the Special events staff were challenged as staffers worked with hundreds of banners and hundreds of children. Finally the flag bearers were matched with the appropriate flag, and the presentation began. As their names were announced on the public address system, children from each town carried their flag up the State House steps and presented it to Adjutant General Vezina of the National Guard. Local legislators also accepted the flags from their districts, so I received the Hampden and Monson banners.

If you go to the State House, be sure to visit the Great Hall. You will see the 162 town flags from all corners of the commonwealth. You will also see that the wooden stanchions have space for many more flags. That means that although Longmeadow is not presently represented, its space is reserved. Whenever the town has a flag to contribute, I look forward to presenting that flag to the commonwealth.