



**Town Historian  
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## **POLECAPPING 2015**

In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote the Concord Hymn to be sung at a ceremony at the North Bridge in Concord:

*By the rude bridge that arched the flood,  
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,  
Here, once, the embattled farmers stood  
And fired the shot heard 'round the world.*

Now, when they hear this song, most people picture a line of minutemen facing their enemy across a wooden bridge, muskets raised to fire. But if you live in Bedford, you're picturing not just the battle, but a red flag flying above it all; a brilliant crimson banner with the arm of God brandishing a sword and the words "Vince Aut Morire" painted on both sides. "Vince Aut Morire." "Conquer or Die."

It's the "Old Battle Flag." The Bedford Flag. You see its image here today.

By tradition, this was the flag that Nathaniel Page, Bedford Minuteman, bore with him to the Concord fight. Recounting the story to his descendants, he said that he set the old flag down before the battle so that he might help hide the guns and ammunition that had been stored in the Barrett's barn, and when he came to take it up again, there were some little children playing soldier with it.

At the time of the American Revolution, however, the Bedford Flag was already an antique. It was made not for the Revolution but more than fifty years before, for the French and Indian wars. It was carried by the local cavalry unit of the Massachusetts Bay Militia who

were fighting in the endless struggle to control this land. The cornet, the officer who bore it, was the grandfather of the Minuteman Nathaniel Page. Nathaniel's uncle and father were also commissioned as cornets, and took their turns down the years.

The flag was retired at the end of the French and Indian Wars, but it was still in the Page household. Perhaps Nathaniel's elderly father and uncle urged him to take it with him that April morning in honor of the men in his family who had been cornets. Perhaps the newly formed Minuteman Company had drilled under it as they anticipated the coming revolt. The story is not clear. We do know that the minutemen gathered at the tavern there across the street to await news. Their captain, Jonathan Willson, (spelled with two 'l's," thank you very much) is said to have sworn "It's a cold breakfast, boys, but we'll give the British a hot dinner. We'll have every dog of them before night." Sadly, Captain Willson was killed later that day at a place called the Bloody Angles on the Lexington Road in Lincoln. "And he never came home 'til they brought him home." This park is named in his memory.

That was the first and last appearance of the flag during the American Revolution, but there is a postscript. Nathaniel's youngest daughter, Ruhamah, confessed late in life that she had cut off its fringe when she was a teenager. "I took that silver fringe from that old flag when I was a giddy girl, to trim a dress for a military ball; and I regret nothing so much as that which resulted in the loss of the fringe."

Ruhamah Page notwithstanding, it was passed down from father to son through two more generations and then presented to the Town of Bedford in 1885 as a historical treasure. Textile experts studying the fabric more recently have pronounced it the oldest complete flag in the United States today, dating from the early seventeen hundreds. This very ancient flag rests in the Bedford Free Public Library, where I invite you to join me after the ceremony to view it. And now you know its story.