

A Brief History of the Flags of the 28th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry

*"Then raise the harp of Erin, boys, the flag we all revere
We'll fight and fall beneath its folds, like Irish volunteers!"*¹

I. Introduction. During the Civil War, US Army Regiments, both Regular and Volunteer, carried a set of colors consisting of a National Color and a Regimental Color. These symbols were a source of identification and inspiration to the men of the Regiment. They were carried into battle at the center of the Regiment's line and marked the place of the Regiment on the field. Capturing the colors of an enemy unit was a high honor; conversely, losing one's colors was a high shame. It was a great honor to be selected as a Regimental Color Bearer and men often risked their lives to pick up fallen colors lest they be captured.



The 28th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was issued nine flags during its Civil War Service. Three of these were National Colors; the other six were Regimental Colors. Five were issued by the Office of the Adjutant General of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, three were given to the regiment by the City of Boston, and one was presented by Brig. Gen. Thomas Francis Meagher, who commanded the Irish Brigade during 1862 and early 1863. Eight of these colors have been preserved in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Flag Collection in the State House in Boston.

The purpose of this short paper is to provide a brief history of these flags.

II. Army Regulations. Like many things military, both then and now, Regulations provide relevant guidance. Accordingly, period US Army Regulations had an entire Article dedicated to "Flags, Colors, Standards, (and) Guidons." These Regulations establish that each Infantry Regiment "shall have two silken colors."²

The first, or the national color, of stars and stripes, would have thirteen horizontal stripes of equal breadth, alternately red and white, beginning in red. In the upper quarter, next to

¹ Stanza from "The Irish Volunteer" Words by Joe English, Melody Traditional, 1864.

² Article L, Revised United States Army Regulations of 1861 with an Appendix containing the Changes and Laws Affecting Army Regulations and Articles of War to June 25, 1863. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1863. Retrieved 25 June 2025 from: <https://thirdregiment.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/us-army-regs.pdf>

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the staff, (e.g. on the upper left quadrant of the flag) is the Union, composed a number of white stars, equal to the number of States, on a blue field, one-third the length of the flag, extending to the lower edge of the fourth red stripe from the top. The Regulations dictate that Infantry Regiments would have the number and name of the Regiment embroidered with silver on the center stripe.

The second, or regimental color, was to be blue, with the arms of the United States embroidered in silk on the center. The name of the regiment in a scroll, underneath the eagle. As we shall see, the 28th Massachusetts never had the traditional blue infantry color.

The Regulations also specified in paragraph 1466 that the size of each color was to be six feet six inches fly (length) and six feet deep on the pike (height). The length of the pike, including the spear and ferrule, was to be nine feet ten inches. The fringe of both flags was to be yellow, cords and tassels, blue and white silk intermixed.

III. The National Colors of the 28th Massachusetts. The 28th Massachusetts received three National Colors during its Service (December 12, 1861 – June 29, 1865.) We shall discuss each in turn.

First National. The Regiment's First National Color was presented to the Regiment by Massachusetts Governor John Albion Andrews on January 10, 1862, while the Regiment was completing its training at Camp Cameron, Massachusetts.³

The 34-star Flag was made by Charles Eaton and was silk, painted, and measured 53 by 69.75 inches, the blue canton measuring 29 by 31.75 inches – slightly smaller than the dimensions prescribed in the 1861 Regulations. It is preserved in the Massachusetts Flag Collection along with its one piece, 10-foot wooden staff with a brass finial.⁴



³ The Regiment would depart the next day, January 11, 1862, for duty at Fort Columbus in New York Harbor.

⁴ Hill, Steven W. "Colors Carried by the 28th Massachusetts Volunteers in the Civil War", Massachusetts Archives Division, Boston, MA, 1995, page 1.

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This Flag was carried by the Regiment throughout 1862, before being returned to the Massachusetts Adjutant General on January 10, 1863. Accompanying the return was a letter by Captain Charles Sanborn of the Regiment, reporting that the flag was carried at “James Island” (E.g.: – Near Charleston, SC, including the Battle of Secessionville, June 16, 1862); “Bull Run” (E.g.: the Second Battle of Bull Run, August 30, 1862); “Chantilly” (September 1, 1862); “South Mountain” (September 14, 1862); “Sharpsburg & Antietam” (16-17 September 1862); and “Fredericksburg” (December 12-13, 1862.) Captain Sanborn further states that the “color was nobly carried and faithfully supported.” In these engagements, the Regiments suffered 515 casualties – Killed, Wounded, and Missing – “nobly carried and faithfully supported” indeed.

Second National. The Second National was issued to the Regiment on January 20, 1863. Again, the maker was Charles Eaton. The 34-star flag was again silk, painted, and measured 71 by 60.5 inches, with the canton measuring 38 by 37 inches. It too is housed in the Massachusetts State Flag Collection, along with a one-piece, wooden staff without a finial; the staff measuring 118.5 inches.⁵

The Second National (At Right) was returned to the Massachusetts Sergeant-at-Arms on January 5, 1865.

This then was the National Color carried by the Regiment throughout 1863 and into early 1864, when the Third National was issued (more below). The date of issue suggests that it was not carried by the Regiment during the infamous “Mud March” (January 20-24, 1863) but was certainly carried at the Battle of Chancellorsville (May 1-5, 1863); on the Gettysburg Campaign (June-July 1863), including the Battle of Gettysburg where it was carried in fight at the Wheatfield (July 2, 1863); at the Battle of Bristoe Station (October 14, 1863); and in the Mine Run Campaign (November-December 1863) - battles and engagements where the Regiment suffered a total of 151 casualties.



⁵ Ibid, Hill, “Colors Carried...”, page 2.

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Third National. The Regiment received its third, and final, National Color on April 24, 1864, likely, while the Regimental Commander Richard Byrnes was back in Massachusetts recruiting replacements for the Regiment.⁶

This hand sewn, 34-star flag was again made by Charles Eaton; was again silk, pigment, and measured 70 by 50 inches, with the canton measuring 38 by 35 inches. Also in the Massachusetts Flag Collection, the State Archive notes that the present color of the canton is only partially due to fading, and that the original color of the canton was either sky blue or federal blue, but not navy blue. The accompanying staff was wood, one-piece measuring 116 inches, with a brass spontoon finial.⁷



The Third National (At Right) was returned to the Massachusetts Sergeant-at-Arms on December 22, 1865. This then was the flag carried by the Regiment throughout the fierce fighting of the 1864 Overland Campaign (encompassing the Battles of the Wilderness (May 5-7), Po River (May 9-10), Spotsylvania Courthouse (May 12-18), Cold Harbor (June 3), Petersburg (June 16-19), and in small actions as part of the Siege of Petersburg, such as Jerusalem Plank Road (June 22-23), Deep Bottom (July 27-28 and August 13-14), Charles City Crossroads (August 16), Ream's Station (August 25), and Hatcher's Run (October 27-28). In these 1864 battles and skirmishes, the Regiment suffered 409 casualties.

The Third National was also carried by the much-diminished Regiment in the Spring 1865 Appomattox Campaign including fighting at Hatcher's Run (March 31) and Sutherland Station (April 2) where the Regiment suffered an additional 76 casualties. This flag was present at the Battle of Sailor's Creek (April 6) and Farmville (April 7). It was subsequently

⁶ Colonel Byrnes, accompanied by 4 of his officers, recruited 288 new soldiers to the Regiment Between February and May 1864. This brought the Regiment's strength over 500 in time for the 1864 Overland Campaign. Many of the Recruits were neither Irish nor from Massachusetts; at least 90 were Canadian.

⁷ Ibid, Hill, "Colors Carried...", page 2.

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carried in the Grand Review in Washington DC (May 23) and remained with the regiment until its mustering out in Massachusetts (June 29).

IV. The Regimental Colors of the 28th Massachusetts. The 28th Massachusetts received six Regimental Colors during its Service. We shall discuss each in turn.

We have previously noted that the 28th Massachusetts never received the standard US Army infantry regimental flag of blue silk, with the Arms of the United States embroidered at its center. One can only surmise that their status as State Volunteer Regiment gave them the leeway required; it should be recalled that the Federal government kept its prewar “Regular” formations intact as a conscious decision. Accordingly, most – if not indeed all - Federal Volunteer units were started from scratch, under a Colonel appointed by the Governor, before the unit was accepted into Federal Service.

Before we explore further the six different flags carried by the 28th Massachusetts, it is pertinent to note that the regiment was specifically recruited as an “Irish” Regiment. Per the pictured recruiting poster, efforts in the Fall of 1861 to recruit soldiers were aimed at the abundant Irish/Irish-American (E.g.: “first generation”) populations in the Boston area. This would naturally give the Regiment a distinct Irish nature and influence the selection of the Flags the Regiment would carry.



First State Color. The First regimental Flag issued the regiment was presented by Massachusetts Governor John Albion Andrews on January 10, 1862, certainly in tandem with the issue of the First National. It was made by Charles Eaton and was made of silk, was painted, and measured 44.5 by 53 inches, significantly smaller than the 6 foot 6 inches (78 inches) by 6 feet (72 inches) prescribed in the Regulations. Centered on the white field was a version of the Coat of Arms of Massachusetts, which includes a depiction of a native American with a bow and arrow.



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The upper scroll carries the State's Latin motto "*Ense Petit Placidum sub Libertate Quietem*" ("By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty.") The Red ribbon at the bottom reads "28th Regiment Massachusetts."

This flag is today found in the Massachusetts State Flag Collection. Importantly, there is no record that this flag was ever actually carried by the Regiment.⁸

First Irish Color (Pilot Flag). This flag was presented by the Mayor of Boston Joseph Wightman on 10 January 1862. The flag was silk, measuring 44 by 50 inches, again much smaller than the prescribed size by Army Regulations. Its maker is unknown.⁹

This flag came to be known as "the Pilot flag" after an article appeared in the Boston Irish-Catholic newspaper *The Pilot* describing the presentation ceremony and providing an accurate drawing of the obverse side of the flag. (Pictured, at right¹⁰). The Pilot flag was replete with Irish and American imagery and was somewhat unique in that the two sides of the flag were not identical.

The modern ("Recreated") 28th Massachusetts, Company B, has had the Pilot flag replicated in exact detail. Images from that flag will be used to explore the details of the Pilot Flag.



⁸ Ibid, Hill, "Colors Carried...", page 1.

⁹ Ibid, Hill, "Colors Carried...", page 1.

¹⁰ Pilot, Volume 25, Number 3, 18 January 1862, Boston, MA, pg 1. Boston College Libraries, Accessed 1 July 2025 at: <https://newspapers.bc.edu/?a=d&d=pilot18620118-01.1.6&>. A full text transcription of the Pilot article can be found at <https://www.28thmasscob.org/boston-pilot-article/>

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Obverse Side: The Obverse (or front) side of the Pilot Flag is pictured at right. This side has both Irish and American imagery. The Pilot Flag was carried by the Regiment through late November 1862 when the 28th Massachusetts joined — as originally intended — the Irish Brigade and received



the “4th Regt Irish Brigade” Tiffany color. (More below). There is however some indication that Regiment did not abandon the Pilot Flag and maintained both in active use.

At a minimum, the Pilot Flag was carried by the Regiment, along with the First National, in its first 5 battles — Secessionville¹¹ (June 1862), 2nd Bull Run (August 1862), and Chantilly, South Mountain, and Antietam (all Sept 1862.)

Green Field: The Green silken field of the flag represents Ireland. The golden edging is likely for dramatic or artistic effect. The choice was in stark contrast to the dark blue of standard US Army Infantry Regimental flags and the white field of the previously issued Massachusetts flag. Green had over the previous half-century become increasingly identified with Ireland, a deliberate outcome of the United Irish movement of the 1790s, who had adopted the color as a symbol of Irish Nationalism.

Upper Symbolology – the Scroll, the sunburst, and the American Eagle: The upper scroll, resting upon rays of golden sunshine, combines American and Irish sentiment. The golden sunshine is likely a reference to the Fenian movement to free Ireland from British occupation as that movement had adopted a sunburst as their principal symbol. Alternatively, it could suggest glory. The words on the scroll “Fostered under her wing, we

¹¹ 28th Massachusetts Color Sergeant John J. McDonald, originally from Prince Edward Island, Canada, was killed at Secessionville on June 16, 1862. Correspondence from him in March and May from first to the Boston Pilot newspaper and then to his wife, to his wife Henrietta have been transcribed and placed online at <https://www.islandregister.com/letters/johnjmacdonald.html>. The page includes subsequent correspondence from his Company Commander, Captain Charles Sanborn to his widow.

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shall die in her defense” is a reference to the promise of the United States, the adoptive home of many — most— in the Regiment. That the scroll is unfurled from a bald eagle holding arrows and an olive branch, and a shield with 13 stripes, representing the original 13 colonies – AKA the Great Seal of the United States — further underscores this point.

Center Symbology – The Harp, Shamrock wreath, and American and Irish Icons: Centered on this side of the flag, is a golden Irish harp with a ribbon reading “*Fág a bealach.*” The harp is a late-medieval Gaelic harp (a *cláirseach*) and has long been the heraldic symbol for Ireland – the Arms of the Republic of Ireland to this day contains an identical one. *Fág a bealach* is an Irish battle cry meaning “Clear the way.” Surrounding the harp and ribbon is a shamrock wreath, another classic Irish icon, one especially associated with Saint Patrick, who used the three-leaves of the shamrock as a metaphor for the Holy Trinity.

To the left of the Harp are American Flags fronting a cannon; to the right sits an Irish Wolfhound fronting Irish and Fenian flags, also fronting a cannon. In combination, the symbology is strikingly a combination of American and Irish sentiments and history.

The lower scroll proudly proclaims the Regiment as the “28th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers -1862.”

Reverse Side: The Reverse (or back) side of the recreated Pilot Flag is pictured below. This side has both mostly American imagery, although some Irish symbology – the green field and the sunburst – remain prominent.

The symbology on the reverse side of the Pilot Flag is simpler than the



obverse. The scroll proclaims the city of Boston as the presenters of the flag. Against the green backdrop and under the Fenian starburst are a trio of ovals containing the seals of the United States (upper), Boston (left) and Massachusetts (right). Centered on the seals are stacked rifles, the principal weapon of an infantry Regiment. Draped over the triangle of seals is the American flag, which, as on the obverse, shows the mouths of cannons

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peeking out, left and right. The lower scroll repeats the Regimental name and year from the front as well.

The First Pilot flag was returned to the City of Boston on 26 December 1862. It was turned over to the Massachusetts Sergeant at Arms on December 22, 1865, along with a one-piece wooden staff, measuring 108 inches. The staff lacks its finial – which would have been an eagle – apparently shot off at the Battle of Secessionville (June 16, 1862.) The Flag remains in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts State Flag Collection in Boston.

Second Irish Color (Tiffany Flag or Irish Brigade Flag). Perhaps the most famous of the Flags carried by the Regiment, the Second Irish Color was the only one not presented to the Regiment by either the State of Massachusetts or the City of Boston. It instead came to the 28th from the hands of the first Commander of the Irish Brigade, Brigadier General Thomas Francis Meagher (Pictured in a Mathew Brady photo, at right.)

General Meagher, a famous Irishman before the Civil War – due his role in the failed Young Irelander uprising in 1848, his daring escape from exile in Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania), and his public oratory on Irish causes in America – was the creator of the Irish Brigade, one of the first “ethnic” Brigades authorized by the Department of War. As originally envisioned, the Irish Brigade was to have four ethnic Irish Regiments – three from the State of New York and one from the State of Massachusetts.



In anticipation of this unit structure, General Meagher commissioned four Regimental Colors from Tiffany & Co., a luxury jewelry and specialty design house founded in 1837 in New York City. (During the Civil War, Tiffany & Co. supplied the US Army with swords, flags, and surgical instruments.) As the names of the three New York Regiments - the 63rd, 69th, and 88th NY Volunteers – were known, their Regimental flags bore their Regimental name and number. Knowing that Massachusetts was raising the fourth Regiment but not knowing what its designation would be, Meagher had the fourth flag simply embroidered with “4th Reg't Irish Brigade.”

Using a non-specific Regimental name would prove to be a fortunate choice, as the 28th Massachusetts did not initially join the Irish Brigade as intended. Instead, the Regiment was dispatched to the Carolinas for much of 1862, and the 29th Massachusetts – a “New

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England Yankee” Regiment – replaced the 28th Massachusetts in the Irish Brigade. This Regiment, not being ethnically Irish, elected not to take an Irish Brigade color.¹²

Finally, in November 1862, the 28th Massachusetts joined the Irish Brigade in camp near Falmouth, Virginia – across the Rappahannock from the town of Fredericksburg. General Meagher then presented the Regiment with the Green Tiffany flag as originally intended.

The Tiffany Flag in the Massachusetts Battle Flag collection is not the full original flag, being somewhat reduced over the years. The flag in the collection measures 40.5 by 47.5 inches and is missing its lower scroll (with the words in Gaelic: “*Riamh nár dhruid ó sbairn lann*” (Who never treated from the clash of spears)). The original flag is estimated to be 60 by 60 inches – smaller than the 78 by 72 inches of Army Regulations. The flag itself



was fully embroidered by hand. As a result, the lettering appears backwards on the reverse side. The flag also was bounded by a yellow silk fringe.

Not in the Massachusetts collection, reportedly the original flag staff was also from Tiffany & Co. and had the unique design of being hinged, with lower three feet being capable of being bent upwards which under normal use was covered by a plated metal sleeve. The staff had silver furnishings and was topped with a pike point.¹³

The Tiffany Flag was carried by the Regiment throughout 1863 and likely to the end of the war in 1865. It famously was at the center of the Irish Brigade’s fateful and futile assault on

¹² In my research, I came across reports that Meagher had prepared a Irish Brigade flag reading “29th Massachusetts” and that when it was refused, he simply had the “2” removed and gave it to the 9th Massachusetts, which was also an ethnic Irish Regiment. This does not bear out, as the 9th Massachusetts was formed six months before the 28th, and further, its green Regimental bore no resemblance to the Tiffany Colors of the Irish Brigade.

¹³ Ibid, Hill, “Colors Carried...”, page 2.

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Maryes Heights during the Battle of Fredericksburg (December 13, 1862).¹⁴ There, the brave advance of the green flag was seen and noted upon by both Armies. The artist Don Troiani captured this well in his 1987 painting “Clear the Way” (pictured). The original 28th Massachusetts “4th Reg’t Irish Brigade” Tiffany Flag in the Massachusetts Battle Flag Collection was used as the model for the painting. This then was the flag carried by the Regiment in the Wheatfield at Gettysburg (July 2, 1863) and on the 1864 Overland Campaign.



The Tiffany flag was returned to the state of Massachusetts on 22 December 1925 and is in the State Battle Flag Collection.

The modern (“Recreated”) 28th Massachusetts, Company B, has had the Tiffany “4th Reg’t Irish Brigade” flag replicated in exact detail. An image from that flag will be used to explore the details of the Tiffany Flag.

Like the Pilot Flag, the Irish Brigade Tiffany flag is replete with Irish symbology.

Green Field: The Green silken field of the flag represents Ireland. The choice was in stark contrast to the dark blue of standard US Army Infantry Regimental flags. Interestingly, green only became associated with Ireland in the late 1790s, when the United Irish movement aimed at overthrowing the British occupation of Ireland, adopted it as their color, and began to promote the “wearin’ of the green” to represent Irish



¹⁴ The other Regiments of the Irish Brigade lacked their green Regimental Colors as the three New York Regiments had sent them back to New York for replacement following the Battle of Antietam, and the 116th Pennsylvania never had a Green Regimental. Thus Brig. Gen’l Meagher placed the 28th in the center.

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nationalism and their fight against British imperialism.¹⁵ Previously, the predominant color for Ireland was, ironically, blue.

Upper Scroll: The Upper scroll simply reads “4th Regt Irish Brigade.” This is due Brigadier General Meagher not knowing what units would be assigned to the Brigade. The wisdom of this generic choice was born out when the 28th Massachusetts — originally intended for the Irish Brigade — was detailed away for separate service in the Carolinas, and did not actually join the Irish Brigade until 23 November 1862.

Sunlight Bursting from Clouds: Centered on the flag, immediately below the upper scroll, is an embroidered depiction of sunlight bursting from clouds. This is a Fenian symbol and by the late 1850s, commonly seen on their flags. The sunburst — “after the clouds, sun” — symbolizes a new day.

“Fenian” is an umbrella term for the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and its American counterpart, the Fenian Brotherhood. Fenianism had two basic principles — 1) That Ireland deserved its independence, and 2) that such independence could only be gained by armed revolution. The name originated with groups of legendary Irish warrior-bands — the Fianna — due their association with *Fionn mac Cumhail* (Finn MacCool), a hero of Irish mythology. The Fianna referred to themselves as either *Gal Gréine* or *Scal Ghréine*, which both mean sunburst — hence the symbology.¹⁶

The Golden Harp: A golden harp has long been the heraldic symbol of Ireland. References to the harp as being the arms of the King of Ireland can be found as early as the 13th century. The modern coat of arms for Ireland is the golden harp on a blue field. The version used on the Tiffany flag — and indeed in modern Ireland today — is a late-medieval Gaelic harp (a *cláirseach*), sometimes referred to as a “Brian Boru” harp after a legendary High King of Ireland circa 1000 AD, or the Trinity College harp, as one dating from the 14th or 15th Century is on display at Trinity College. Dublin.

Wreath of Shamrocks: Below the Golden Harp is a wreath of embroidered shamrocks. A shamrock is a type of clover, normally of three leaves, used as a symbol of Ireland. Saint Patrick, one of Ireland’s patron saints, is said to have used it as a metaphor for the Christian Holy Trinity. The shamrock has roots in ancient Celtic culture, where it was

¹⁵ On the modern tricolour of the Republic of Ireland — originally presented to Thomas Meagher in 1848 and modeled on the French Tricolor — green represents the Catholic population of Ireland.

¹⁶ Wikipedia contributors. (2025, June 27). Fianna. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved July 2, 2025, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Fianna&oldid=1297657772>

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believed to represent fertility, rebirth, and the interconnectedness of life. It was considered a sacred plant and often featured in various folklore and traditions.

Lower Scroll: The phrase on the lower scroll is: “*Riamh nár dhruid ó spairn Lann*”¹⁷ which is generally understood to mean “Those (or Who) Never Retreated from the clash of spears.”

The phrase was taken from the poetry of the legendary ancient Irish warrior-bard *Oisín* (the son of Finn MacCool) — specifically from the “*Agallamh na Seanórach*”¹⁸ (In English variously “*Tales of the Elders of Ireland, The Dialogue of the Ancients of Ireland, etc.*”) from the 12th Century which included a poetic debate between Oisín and St Patrick.

Word-for-word breakdown:

- Riamh means “ever or never”
- Nár is a particle of speech with several applications but generally is suggests a negative. “Riamh” plus “nár” doubles down as “Never”
- Dhruid (the actual word is “druid” which means “to shut” but has applications where it means to move away from/move back. (The “h” in the spelling here is a thing in Irish called a “séimhiú” (‘softening’) where an “h” sometimes inserted as a second letter.)
- Ó is another word with multiple applications — in this case meaning ‘from’
- Spairn means “fight or struggle.”
- Lann means “blade.” (spairn lann “a fight with a blade” – armed conflict – poetically a clash of spears or swords.)

The literal translation is approximately: “Never moved away from a fight with a blade” or more poetically “Those who never retreated from the clash of spears.”

Third Irish Color. The Battle Flag Collection in Massachusetts does not contain the Third Irish Color. Its existence is not 100% verified.

What is known is that after the Battle of Fredericksburg, Captain Charles Sanborn of Company K returned to Massachusetts bearing their battle-torn 1st National colors and the Pilot flag. As previously discussed, Massachusetts, on January 20, 1863, issued the

¹⁷ Pronunciation for English speakers is along the lines of “Reeve naw-r ghríd oh spairn lon” (Munster accent).

¹⁸ Wikipedia contributors. “Acallam na Senórach”. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved July 2, 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Acallam_na_Sen%C3%B3rach&oldid=1273440681

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Regiment its 2nd National. Apparently, no new state color was issued, rather, once again the city of Boston sent a 2nd green Irish flag back with Capt. Sanborn. When Sanborn returned with the new flags in February, Peter Welsh¹⁹ (At right, soon to named color bearer) remarked in a letter dated February 15, 1863, that “our Captain has got back and brought a new green flag for the regiment.”²⁰



It is not certain what this flag looked like but, it has been assumed that it was likely a carbon copy of the Pilot flag. However, and somewhat confusingly, there a surviving green flag in Massachusetts is identified as the “third Irish color carried by the regiment” but which does not bear much resemblance to the original Pilot flag. Moreover, this “third” Irish color was reportedly presented in May 1864 and not in 1863.

Second State Color. A second white State of Massachusetts color was issued to the Regiment on April 22, 1864. This flag was again made by Charles Eaton, was hand-sewn of white silk. It bears a slightly different version of the Massachusetts Coat of Arms along with a red ribbon proclaiming the regiment’s name and number. Unlike the First State Color, there is no upper scroll bearing the State Motto.

The Second State Color measured 48 by 58 inches, nearly a third smaller than Regulation size. With a two-inch gold fringe, the Flag is in the Massachusetts Battle Flag Collection, along with a one-piece staff of 98 inches length



(nearly two feet shorter than regulation). Like its predecessor the First State Color, there is

¹⁹ While serving as Regimental Color Bearer, Sergeant Peter Welsh, also originally from Prince Edward Island, Canada, was fatally wounded on May 16, 1864, at Spotsylvania. He died of his wounds at Carver Military Hospital, Washington DC on 28 May 1864. He was a month short of his 34th birthday.

²⁰ Kohl, Lawrence and Richard, Margaret Cosse. “Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant, 28th Massachusetts,” Fordham University Press, NY, NY, 1 January 1986, page 71.

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no evidence that this flag was ever carried by the Regiment. It was returned to the state Sergeant at Arms on January 5, 1865, along with the Second National. ²¹

Fourth Irish Color (Grainger Flag). This flag was presented to Colonel Richard Byrnes, Commanding Officer of the Regiment on May 5, 1864, by Boston Mayor Frederic W. Lincoln Jr. ²² It was clearly intended to replace the Pilot flag as the two flags were nearly identical. It was likely both flags were created by the same unknown maker, Notable to the Grainger flag is the addition of some of the Regiment's battles in its gold painted border. The battles listed – Fredericksburg, Antietam, and Sharpsburg – clearly correlate to the letter written by Captain Sanborn pursuant to the return of the First National in early 1863 (especially given that “Antietam” and “Sharpsburg” are the same battle.)

The Grainger Flag – called such because it was donated in 1925 to the State by a Dr Grainger of New York, whose brother Charles was a Captain in the 69th NY of Irish Brigade, was, like the Pilot Flag, of painted silk. It measured 44.5 by 56.5 inches, making it a bit bigger than the Pilot. The Massachusetts Battle Flag collection holds the flag, and there is no associated staff.



This said, it has been opined that the staff returned with the First State Flag was properly the staff of the Grainger Flag, as it is nearly identical to the staff returned with the Pilot Flag. Lastly, it is unknown how a member of the 69th New York came to hold a flag of the 28th Massachusetts, but in the end, the Flag was returned to its proper home. ²³

²¹ Ibid, Hill, “Colors Carried...”, page 3.

²² As previously mentioned, regarding the issuance of the Third National, Colonel Byrnes was in Massachusetts from February to May 1864, recruiting replacements.

²³ Ibid, Hill, “Colors Carried...”, page 3.

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Which Green Regimental? Considering the issue of the “4th Reg’t Irish Brigade” Tiffany flag in late 1862, and the subsequent issue of the Grainger Flag in May of 1864, it is unclear exactly which green Regimental Color the Regiment carried on a daily basis. Reasonably, one can infer that the Irish Brigade Tiffany was carried through 1863, especially as the Regiment had originally been raised to be part of the Irish Brigade. This view is supported by previous practice– they had carried the Tiffany flag rather than the 1st Pilot flag at Fredericksburg just a few months before, so why not continue this tradition? The laurels and national recognition won by the Irish Brigade no doubt contributed to a preference for the Tiffany.

It is also likely that the somewhat replenished Regiment – with over 500 men due to Colonel Byrnes’ recruiting efforts in the first part of 1864 - likely started the 1864 Overland Campaign with the Tiffany Flag paired with the 3rd National. However, by mid- June 1864, and following the fatal wounding of Colonel Byrnes at the Battle of Cold Harbor, the Regiment was reduced to roughly 100 men under the command of a Captain.



Due its accumulated losses, after the first assault on Petersburg, on June 20, 1863, the Army of the Potomac briefly disbanded the Irish Brigade and incorporated its remaining elements into other II Corps Brigades. Although the Irish brigade was reconstituted in early 1865, it is conceivable that the remnants of the Regiment reverted to carrying the Grainger Flag during this time. (Pictured”: 28th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry” by Michael Gnatek.)

It is not known specifically which green regimental Color was carried by the Regiment in the fighting in 1865, specifically at the battles of Hatcher’s Run²⁴ (March 29) and Sutherland Station (April 2). It may be presumed the Tiffany – as the more famous of the Regimental Colors – was carried in the Grand Review of the Army in Washington DC (May 23).



This short overview of the Flags of the 28th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was created drawing upon the knowledge and expertise of many. Paul Hanna assisted greatly with the research. Notable was Steven Hill’s 1995 paper “Colors Carried by the 28th Massachusetts Volunteers in the Civil War” written while he was the Massachusetts State House Flag collection historian. The pictures of the original flags in this narrative, as well

²⁴ Another 28th Mass color sergeant, Henry Fraser, was seriously wounded at Hatcher's Run.

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as the physical dimensions of the original flags and staffs, are taken from his work. Accordingly, I am grateful to Susan Greendyke Lachevre of the Massachusetts Archives for providing the Hill document. The public websites of the two 28th Massachusetts reenactor units (Company H in New England, www.28thmass.org and Company B in the Washington DC area, www.28thMassCoB.org) proved invaluable sources of information. I alone am responsible for any errors or omissions in this narrative.

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