



The Flag Monument in Rosario, Argentina

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Introduction

In the city of Rosario, province of Santa Fe, Argentina, a monument of pharaonic proportions commemorates the creation of the national flag of Argentina. The structure evokes nationalist expressions typical of the period in which the monument was built, but also reflects the country's pre-Colombian past, pan-American brotherhood, and Hispanic heritage. The Monument to the Flag is located on the bank of the Paraná River on the site where in 1812 Colonel Manuel Belgrano hoisted Argentina's first national flag.

Historical Background

In 1808 Carlos IV, the sovereign of Spain and overseas dominions of the royal house of Bourbon, was forced to abdicate in favor of his son, Fernando VII who, in turn, was lured to Bayonne by Napoleon Bonaparte. There Fernando VII saw his father resume the throne and then assign it to Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon's brother, who was then crowned King of Spain and overseas dominions as José I. In Spain's American colonies, the authorities appointed by the former King Carlos IV then ceased to have any legal standing. However, subjects loyal to the House of Bourbon and its legitimacy formed juntas to govern and legislate in the name of the Bourbon king until his legal and royal standing could be reinstated.

In Spain itself, a junta for this purpose was established in Seville, calling itself the Central Junta of Seville.¹ In the same manner, in May of 1810 the citizens of Buenos Aires, assembled at the *Cabildo* (City Hall) to form their own junta and challenge the legal authority of the viceroy of the River Plate. The objectives of the Junta of Buenos Aires were similar to the junta formed

¹ The Central Junta was dissolved and fled Seville in 1810. The same year a new Government was formed in Cadiz replacing the junta, called the Council of Regency.

in Seville and in many other American colonial capitals, such as Santiago and Caracas. All these juntas were governing in the name of the House of Bourbon; however the Junta of Seville wanted to rule all the other American juntas as the 'mother' junta, hence the word 'Central' added to its name.

The Junta of Buenos Aires challenged that position, arguing that since all the juntas were governing in the name of the King, there was no legal or logical reason for the Junta of Seville to impose its authority on the other 'sister' juntas. In consequence, different political opinions were expressed in the River Plate region (modern Argentina and Uruguay). The supporters of the autonomy of the Junta of Buenos Aires opposed those arguing for submission to the Central Junta of Seville. Parallel to this conflict, a very strong political group encouraged total independence, and yet another position promoted crowning other royal houses to rule over the colonies. This last group was further divided: some favored the House of Bonaparte, the Carlotistas favored Carlota (daughter of deposed King Carlos IV, who was married to John VI, Regent of Portugal, and residing temporarily in Brazil); still other groups favored other royal houses or minor pretenders.²

Amid this complex political situation, Colonel Manuel Belgrano commanded an expeditionary military force to the banks of the Paraná River at the heights of the Chapel of the Rosary above the settlement of Rosario. His mission was to install artillery batteries to halt the transit of ships providing weapons, forces, and provisions to the city of Montevideo, which was subordinated to the authority of the Council of Regency.³

The Flag, 1812-1816

On 27 February 1812, Belgrano notified the Junta of Buenos Aires of the successful installation of the batteries. His letter began: "At 6:30 in the afternoon..." and continued with details on the inauguration ceremony of these artillery installations: the battery *Libertad* on the banks of the Paraná River, and the battery *Independencia*, across the river on the island of Espinillo. The names given to the batteries clearly indicated Belgrano's political affiliation. The most interesting part of Belgrano's letter is the third paragraph, in which he said: "Seeing the need of hoisting a Flag and having none, I ordered to make one of white and 'celeste' [sky blue] in accordance with the colors of our

² The English monarch was also approached as a possible King for the Spanish-American colonies.

³ In 1811 the Council of Regency appointed a new viceroy for the River Plate, who resided in Montevideo.

national cockade.”⁴

The inauguration of the batteries with the flag-hoisting thus became a nationalist event not planned or foreseen by the Junta of Buenos Aires. The government answered Belgrano, requesting in very subtle and diplomatic language to *ocultar desimuladamente* (hide carefully and put away) the flag he had hoisted on that occasion. This reaction by the Junta of Buenos Aires is understandable, given the debates then raging between the various political factions and its reluctance to provoke any type of reaction that might jeopardize its ambivalent position while it awaited information about events in Europe.

Only in 1816, when the National Congress assembled in the city of Tucumán and declared independence, was a particular flag officially adopted for the United Provinces in South America, later known as the United Provinces of the River Plate. The language of the 1816 declaration describes the flag and its status very curiously, calling it of three horizontal stripes of “...celeste, and white in the center ... as currently in use”. This supports the idea that such a flag was already in use before 1816, but does not clearly indicate that it was the one hoisted by Belgrano in 1812.

To which flag was Congress referring? In 1812 the Junta reprimanded Belgrano for having hoisted a “Flag”, which could indicate that Belgrano’s flag was distinct from the one that was “currently in use” in 1816. This declaration of 1816 provides evidence that the Government of Buenos Aires had indeed already been represented unofficially by a flag of three stripes, celeste, white, and celeste.⁵ Current Argentine historians agree that Belgrano’s design of 1812 was of two horizontal stripes. By the same token they also agree that the Belgranian design of 1812 caused alarm within Buenos Aires political circles since it was of a profound national character, conflicting with the ambivalent political agenda of the Junta of Buenos Aires. The three-stripe design used by Buenos Aires and its troops had factional functions and character and was probably used in conjunction with the traditional Spanish regimental flags (*coronelas* and *milicianas*) of each regiment.⁶

Even with the declaration of independence, the government was still very

⁴ Belgrano writes the word *bandera* (flag) with capital “B”, which indicates that this flag was to be “The Flag”, and not just a flag.

⁵ In the secret 1815 instructions of the Junta of Buenos Aires, the flag design described to be used by licensed privateers (such as Bouchard, Aury, and others) is the same one approved in 1816.

⁶ *Coronelas* were white with the arms of the King at the center. *Milicianas* were white with the saltire Burgundian cross in the center. The arms of the region or province where the unit was originally from were placed at the corners of the flag.

cautious on the status of the flag. The remainder of the 1816 text legislating the flag mandated that the adopted design would be the Lesser Flag of the United Provinces, serving as the Greater Flag until a form of government could be adopted, setting the proper agreed symbols for a national Greater Flag.⁷ Although Manuel Belgrano, present in Tucumán during all the events of 1816, was not then recognized for his role in the flag's design, Argentine history honors him as the creator of the first national flag. While the approved design of 1816 was not the same design he had hoisted in 1812, Belgrano first established the importance of a distinctive flag functioning as a permanent symbol of the Argentine national character.

The Idea of a Monument, 1872

With so much evidence about the site, time, reason, and protagonists of the hoisting of the first national flag, a monument was inevitable. In 1872 an architect, Nicolas Grondona, and other citizens of Rosario proposed two flag monuments, one at each battery site. Grondona's idea found a receptive audience in the city's charismatic reform mayor, Luis Lamas.

The mayor created a committee to identify the exact sites of the batteries and the flag-raising.⁸ Old residents of Rosario remembered that the battery *Libertad* had been placed on the river bank in the back yard of the Chapel of the Rosary, which had stood on the same site much longer than had the actual battery. Grondona suggested raising an obelisk on the island of Espinillo and a more elaborate construction on the river bank in Rosario—no longer the insignificant settlement Belgrano found in 1812. Both monuments would be funded by popular subscription and the enthusiasm of the population helped to propel the project forward.

In September of 1872 construction of the obelisk began on the island of Espinillo. Marking the site where the battery *Independencia* once stood, it had two square bases, a smaller one atop a larger one. This pedestal supported the obelisk, which was painted white with four memorable dates inscribed in blue on each side: 1810 (the formation of the Junta), 1812 (the creation of the flag), 1816 (the Declaration of Independence), and 1853 (the adoption of the National Constitution). The inscription read: "Here in 1812 the battery *Independencia* was located, where for the first time the national flag was hoisted."

At that time it was believed that a flag had been hoisted over each battery.

⁷ In 1818, Congress added a sun to the center of the white stripe for the War Flag and Ensign.

⁸ Dr. Carlos D. Giannone wrote a detailed essay narrating the sources and elements considered to determine the precise spot where the flag was hoisted.

However, later investigation revealed that the *Independencia* fired only a gun salute when the flag was hoisted from the opposite battery, the *Libertad*. In 1878 a torrential storm flooding the banks of the river destroyed the island monument. The second part of the project, on the Rosario side of the river, would have to wait another 30 years.

The Monument of Lola Mora, 1909-1925

The National Committee for the Centennial Celebration signed a contract with the famous Argentine artist Dolores 'Lola' Mora for the construction of a monument to the flag. The artist, wanting to give to the nation a group of sculptures worthy of the spirit of the time, consulted other eminent personalities and artists and sketched a project in several components. A column of 18 meters would stand as the central motif of the monument. At its capital, an angel representing the "Spirit of the Homeland" would hold the flag. Another section of the column would show a female figure of Liberty, with broken chains. At the column's base would be various sculptural groups representing Belgrano with a flag, soldiers, a mother with a child, a priest in the act of benediction, peasants, and common people.

The sculpture of Lola Mora was inspired by the romantic trends and architectural styles seen in the monuments of the great European cities. Lola Mora's design evoked Delacroix's: "Liberty Guiding the People", a painting from the romantic era. Further, the central column recalled the Arc de Triomphe of Paris. Lola Mora labored in Italy for 15 years, sending her works, sculpted from Carrera marble, back to Argentina, piece by piece.

In 1923 a new centennial committee took possession of the sculptures and declared that they lacked artistic value. Furthermore, unlike the Grondona project, which was municipal in scope, this project was a national one and subject to the committee's authority. In 1925, to defuse the ensuing scandal, Argentina's president Marcelo T. de Alvear ordered the committee to rescind the contract with Lola Mora. This unjust treatment of an artist of Lola Mora's stature was widely condemned. Although the Monument Committee got its way, the adverse public reaction forced the resignation of its members and in that stormy manner (a different kind of storm this time!) the project for the second monument ended.



The Current Monument, 1957

A long and accidental process that would take 85 years brought the monument effort to a happy ending. The city of Rosario once again took on Grondona's original idea, and in 1936 proposed a contest for a flag monument, to be sponsored by the city's government and citizens only and without any national intervention. The winning design, by architects Angel Guido and Alejandro Bustillo, experienced setbacks and other difficulties, but all of them were resolved and by 1943 the idea of the monument was a reality.

The gargantuan National Monument to the Flag, constructed entirely of marble from the Province of San Luis, showed surprising harmony, structural equilibrium, and unusual design. Angel Guido, with profound nationalist ideals, proposed not a simple monument, but something more like a temple with a great plaza and stairs, which would also serve as a museum. He sought inspiration in pre-Columbian and colonial motifs, rejecting the romantic- and European-bound aspects of other monuments and styles that he considered decadent. The structure evokes pre-Columbian constructions such as those at Tiahuanaco (Bolivia) or Machu Picchu (Peru), with large spaces and plazas, and structures of flat and angular shapes without any ornamentation. The Flag Monument was built with contributions from across Argentina, espe-

cially from schoolchildren, and was inaugurated 20 June 1957.⁹ Grondona's original idea to raise another monument in Espinillo Island was abandoned.¹⁰

The monument itself is shaped like an “imaginary ship of state advancing in the sea of eternity”, and covers a sloping area of 10,000 square meters. It has three main parts: the Tower, the Great Civic Courtyard, and the Propylaeum. The Tower is flanked by an important group of 19 sculptures by Aldo Bigatti and José Fioravanti, representing historical allegories of abstract symbolism. In the geometric center of the tower wall, a silhouette of the sun represents the Incas but is shaped as it appears on the Argentine national flag. The Tower, 70 meters high, is the main mast of the ship in whose prow is a statue representing the homeland as a standard bearer with a phrygian cap. Under this sculpture and on top of the prow a rose of the winds sets the ship, according to Guido, towards peace and progress. The bronze and marble figures around the Tower represent the Pampas, the Andes, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Paraná River.



On the Tower, four figures oriented in the cardinal directions symbolize the East, represented by the sunrise (an element taken from the national coat of arms), the West, represented by the Andes Mountains (which also appear on the shield of the Flag of the Andes), and the South and the North, represented by mineral and oil riches. Ample marble reliefs depict three important episodes in the flag's history: Rosario, when the flag was first hoisted; Jujuy, the second hoisting in May of 1812; and the hoisting of the Flag of the Andes in February of 1817 by General Jose de San Martin in Mendoza.¹¹

⁹ Manuel Belgrano died that day in 1820, and since 1938 by presidential decree it has been Flag Memorial Day.

¹⁰ The island is in the province of Entre Rios, for which the Paraná River serves as the border with Santa Fe, and is therefore beyond Rosario's municipal jurisdiction.

¹¹ In 1814 San Martin replaced Belgrano, and in a letter Belgrano asked him to “maintain the flag I left with you.” The author believes that the Flag of the Andes is a direct descendant of Belgrano's 1812 design.

The Tower and engravings on it recall the structures proposed by Lola Mora, perhaps somehow to render overdue honor to her, although the possible allegorical representations of the historical events are limited. Inside the base of the Tower is Belgrano's Crypt; his statue is behind a composition of blue and white lights. It shows Belgrano as a common man, holding a book and meditating on the destiny of the nation he helped to forge. This image of the hero, together with a cross, give this chamber a sensation of peace and creates an atmosphere for reflection.

The Great Civic Courtyard is a large esplanade, in which public and patriotic events are held. Its massive sloping steps can serve as an amphitheater. It also links the Tower to the third structure of the monument, the Triumphal Propylaeum, a structure that gives the monument the look of a temple. The Propylaeum is an altar paying homage to those who have fallen fighting for the homeland. An urn with a votive flame preserves the ashes of the unknown soldiers of the war of independence, grenadiers of the regiment that San Martín created and commanded.

Also on the Propylaeum are four statues, stupendously executed, representing different historical stages of the evolution of Argentina. Indian America is represented by a robust Indian woman. The second statue, a pristine figure, holding a sword in one hand and a caravel in the other, represents Hispanic America. Republican America is represented by a female figure fighting with a serpent symbolizing oppression, slavery, and colonialism; in her left hand she holds a book representing the American constitutions. A matron holding a child in one hand and a white dove of peace on the other represents the America of the Future.

Under the Propylaeum is the Flag Gallery of Honor, displaying the flags of all American nations with Argentina's flag presiding over the group. Every country is represented by its flag, shield, national anthem, national flower, and a vessel containing soil from that country. All of these elements are displayed inside a big window allocated for each country. These flags are visited



by the authorities or cultural groups of each nation residing in or visiting Argentina, offering a wreath of flowers during different festivities or the national holidays of each country. Another hall honors different Argentine flags, preserved in oak chests, originally hoisted in the Antarctic territories during scientific missions and by Argentine explorers.

Epilogue, 1999

Under the stern and charismatic direction of the Flag Monument's director, Graciela Bernarda Greppi, several important goals for the monument have been achieved. After many years, the Monument needed funds for the upkeep and maintenance, so *Operación Rescate* (Operation Rescue) was launched. The monument was declared a national monument in 1990, which brought the needed funds. Greppi also added the flags of newer American independent nations such as Suriname, Canada, Jamaica, and Belize.

Furthermore, very recently three important modifications have been added to the Monument. One is part of Angel Guido's original design. At the base of the Tower under Belgrano's Crypt, a room had stood partially finished and empty for 40 years, which Guido had envisioned as the *Sala de las Provincias* (Hall of the Provinces). It is now being fitted for that purpose. Delegations of provincial governments are traveling to Rosario bringing the provincial flag and other items typical of each province to be exhibited once the room is completed. During this pilgrimage, the provincial flag is hoisted in a place of honor on the Great Civic Yard during a special ceremony. Also flags of different aboriginal groups are honored by the Flag Monument with a special hoisting. The second project is the creation of a hall for the flag of the *Milicias Rosarinas* (Rosarian Militias) hoisted by squadrons of citizens of Rosario that participated in different military actions in the nation's history. The third addition to the monument, behind the Propylaeum, is a rectangular plaza with a reflecting pool at the center, adorned by sculptures in the pool. These are none other than some of the famous "rejected" sculptures of Lola Mora, finally honoring this great woman and artist by putting her artistic creations in their original intended location.

Conclusion

Argentina's is not the only flag monument in existence. At least five other countries have monuments honoring national flags and serving exclusively as flag monuments. However, Rosario's flag monument is unique in its proportions and extensive symbolism. It is also a museum displaying materials about and from other American countries. As a forum not only for patriotic celebrations and civic meetings, but also for popular gatherings and musical concerts, the monument stays "alive" all the time. Furthermore, it not only honors the national flag of Argentina, but also renders a perspective on its cultural heritage, conveying all aspects of the nation's history. Beyond impressive structures and architectural shapes, it relies on flags as the most eloquent medium to express this symbolism. It also enhances intra-American ties using the countries' flags, perhaps the most striking feature of the Rosario Flag Monument.

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