



The Phenomenon of Flag Homes: Musings on Meanings

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Many years ago, preparing to teach a senior seminar as an introduction to vexillology, I asked Whitney Smith if he had any useful educational materials on hand at the Flag Research Center to emphasize the many diverse ways flag studies might be approached in an interdisciplinary fashion, to help students get thinking about the multitude of varied roles that flags can play. He generously passed along a table he had compiled of the wide range of Flag Manifestations in human interactions, a table he meant not as prescriptive but suggestive. First he separated Flag Manifestations into six contextual categories, moving roughly from the broader to the specific: Activities, Display Locales, Display Media, Gestures, People, and Words. Within the second category, Display Locales, he listed thirteen general topics, and among them the eighth was “homes.”¹

In citing that particular topic, Smith was pointing to the study of the many different ways flags can be used in domiciles, where people live, and what effect that usage might have on primary or secondary socialization. Recently, though, I became intrigued by what is going on culturally when a flag is not just present somewhere within the home, but when it *becomes* the home—when an individual or group literally lives *within* the flag. Admittedly, this is not a commonplace phenomenon, but it is certainly noteworthy, inevitably drawing attention and making a powerful visual statement. One might do a broad study of flag homes across many different cultures using a wide variety of banners, but for a deeper probing of cultural significance, this evaluation will be limited primarily to flag houses using the flag of the United States. Let us briefly consider the practice, reflect on any recurring themes that might emerge, and try to put this distinctive use of architecture into larger philosophical, cultural, and historical contexts.

To begin, it is useful to consider the psychological component of living within a flag. When early proto-vexilloids became the first flags carried around or revered in sacred ceremonies, they were certainly used in supplications for protection from some sort of higher power or powers, whatever the cultural group involved understood such to be. Down through the millennia, I would argue, flags have maintained this semiotic component, even in some cases if only on a subconscious level, of serving not only as identifiers but also as talismans.² Think of the historic connections between heraldry and vexillology, and how in many European cultural traditions of the High Middle Ages at least, one's flag was derived from one's coat of arms, and that latter symbol's practical purpose was not only to identify but to literally protect a knight—this was what was emblazoned on the shield he held up should an attack occur.

A flag home, then, can also operate as a talismanic shield. It serves the psychological function of a giant protective enclosure, providing shelter not only from wind, rain, and storm in a meteorological sense, but also from forces aligned against the national community in a spiritual sense. There's a lot more going on at the same time, though, when someone decorates a house in this fashion. In an American culture that traditionally touts itself as highly individualistic and that has often celebrated the notion that bigger is better, painting your entire home to be a giant American flag presents a bit of bravado that can claim conformity while simultaneously separating oneself from the herd; it shouts not only "I'm a patriot!" but also "look at me!" and "Aren't I special?"

The term "patriot" is of course related etymologically to the Latin word "patria" which means "fatherland." To be a patriot places one in the affiliative position of child. Some language or cultural traditions might favor referring to the home country as fatherland, others as motherland, still the relationship remains essentially the same—we are children of not only our parents but of our collective society, our nation. Seeing the emphasis on the parent/child relationship this way, the protective shield the flag home offers might also be seen, on a psychological level, as a womb, the place within the living parent where our life begins, the retreat in which one finds sustenance, comfort, and security.

This idea of flag home as womb is strengthened when we consider the origin and subsequent use of two important flag houses: the Betsy Ross Flag House in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and the Flag House and Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. Both of these edifices have been regularly referred to as

flag houses, although it should be noted neither is itself painted as an American flag. Both were designated as civil religious sites of special significance at a time when the gender role dichotomy known as the cult of domesticity dominated American culture—throughout the society, home was associated with the feminine and men, who entered the outside world to do the necessary work of earning a living, returned there for moral cleansing and spiritual uplift. These two flag houses are the Ur-wombs, if you will, the sites that become hallowed in civil religion through the process of a female creating a primal banner for the nation.

The story of the Betsy Ross House demonstrates in many ways the sheer power of myth in shaping and influencing behavior, and its persistence even if facts should arise to suggest elements of the myth might not be true—not only whether the actual event occurred but also if that is even the correct location for where Betsy Ross lived. I mention this not to disparage the admirable, hardworking woman we know to have been Betsy Ross but to emphasize how great was the American need for a myth around a mother creator of the flag in the second half of nineteenth-century America. The subsequent appropriation of that concept in the civil religion of states—such as Texas—or others nations—such as Haiti—is also worthy of deeper analysis.³

In connecting the powerful Betsy Ross myth to the idea of a flag house, a key figure is Charles H. Weisgerber, artist of the famous and ubiquitous 1893 painting of Betsy creating the new flag, the stars arranged in an attractive, circular pattern. He did this massive 9 by 12 foot work, *Birth of our Nation's Flag*, originally as an entry in a contest to represent Philadelphia at the grand Columbian National Exposition in Chicago. After he won the contest—and the oil painting went on to create such a stir at the exposition in Chicago, with lithograph prints widely circulated—he became a man with a mission. In 1898 he incorporated the American Flag House and Betsy Ross Memorial Association, selling certificates of membership in the association at ten cents apiece, with smaller copies of the print available to groups who signed up collectively as a club of thirty or more. A main target audience was schoolchildren, and over two million certificates were eventually distributed in this fashion.⁴ Weisgerber used the collected funds against the mortgage of the dilapidated, but now hallowed, flag house at 245 Arch Street, the reputed location of that inaugural sewing, which he bought in 1899 and set up as a patriotic tourist site, the display room where Betsy supposedly sewed the flag and a tourist shop on the first floor, living quarters for his family, including a brother, upstairs. By 1900 it was known as “the First Flag House.”⁵ (Figure 1)



Figure 1. The Betsy Ross Flag House, Philadelphia, Penn. Source: Beyond My Ken (username), commons.wikipedia.org.

Weisgerber lived in that flag house, running the tourist shop, until his death in 1932. After being closed for renovations for seven years, it was reopened through the efforts of philanthropist A. Atwater Kent who had Weisgerber's son continue on as curator until his own death in 1959. That son, born in that very building in 1902, and destined to spend much of his life working there, in honor of his father's obsession, was given the striking name of Vexil Domus Weisgerber. That's right, faithful students of Latin—his father named this man “Flag House”! A 1908 *New York Times* description of a visit to the site reported on young Vexil's dramatic performances of patriotic oratory, dressed in an Uncle Sam suit, declaiming atop the tourist shop counter.⁶ Since 1941, the House has been maintained by the city of Philadelphia, and despite debate over the validity of the Betsy Ross legend, it remains the third biggest tourist attraction in this fifth largest city in the United States, surpassed there only by Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell.⁷

The most sacred actual physical representation of the national flag would certainly be the Star-Spangled Banner which rests in renovated and chapel-like solemnity at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. It is not surprising that, following the phenomenal popularity of the First Flag House and Betsy Ross Memorial Association (which today has transposed its name to be the Betsy Ross House and American Flag Memorial Association) a movement should emerge to recognize and honor the home in Baltimore where seamstress Mary Young Pickersgill sewed the Star-Spangled Banner. Because it was the Fort McHenry flag associated with the poem that became

the song that became the national anthem, the sacralization of this banner led to Pickersgill's home becoming a revered flag house as well. The influence of the attention the Betsy Ross house received in Philadelphia, approximately one hundred miles to the north, was surely a factor. So too, was the heightened patriotism associated with the site after the massive weeklong National Star-Spangled Banner Centennial celebration of 1914.⁸ Therefore, after the city of Baltimore acquired the home in 1927, the Star-Spangled Banner Flag House Association established a museum there, delineating the creation, history, and heritage of this actual cloth flag and those who first sewed it.⁹

Although called flag houses, neither of these homes was entirely painted as a flag—however, one does see a giant flag on the museum complex wall to the left when standing in front of the former Pickersgill home today. (Figure 2) Perceptions of appropriate usage of the flag vary over time, and given the aesthetic tastes and sense of propriety of many of the participants of the cult of the flag in late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American society, painting one's entire home as a flag, if considered at all, would no doubt have been seen as vulgar, tawdry, disrespectful, and certainly inappropriate. This was in accord with the growing voice of the flag protection movement, itself a reaction to changes rapidly occurring in the emergent corporate capitalist society.¹⁰



Figure 2. Star-Spangled Banner Flag House and Museum, Baltimore, Md. Source: Rose Hammitt, Travelling Adventures of a Farm Girl blog, 2 May 2013.

Outbursts of patriotic activity and expression, and the subsequent introduction of new symbols, rituals, or myths in civil religion, do not occur at random but can be reliably traced to periods of increased anxiety or stress (such as war) or significant celebrations focused upon reinforcement of shared beliefs of national identity. In the last 50 years, there have been two significant

historical events that have triggered upticks in the number of flag homes in the United States: the Bicentennial celebration of 1976 and the events of 9/11.

The occasion of the Bicentennial in 1976 offered an opportunity for a nation sorely divided by the war in Vietnam and disturbed by the revelations of Watergate to try to pull together, to put aside strong partisanship, and find common ground in celebrating a shared heritage. This psychological need, integrated with the force of a culture of consumption and the power of visual media, led to a well-documented outburst of patriotic souvenirs, products, and community displays across the nation, all emphasizing the national flag. As Marc Leepson summarizes, “Throughout the year, Americans painted the Stars and Stripes on locomotives and on fire hydrants. The American flag appeared on countless T-shirts, ties, jackets, sweaters, and other items of apparel, as well as on dishes, coffee mugs, and countless other consumer products”¹¹ (Sometimes this pride was demonstrated in creative new ways. For example, I was in college at the time, and I recall a fellow student proudly showing off her Bicentennial Bong—a very large smoking device, emblazoned with Old Glory!)

Some folks, caught up in the fervor of that celebration, painted their homes red, white, and blue. This is referenced in at least one encyclopedia summary of the American Bicentennial.¹² Such a flag house, now with a front yard overgrown and untended, evoking nostalgia for that earlier celebration, can be found in New Hampshire. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. A New Hampshire flag house celebrating the spirit of the American Bicentennial, photo taken in 2009. Source: Robert Carley.

A quarter-century after the Bicentennial, a very different sort of event would spark another upsurge in demonstrative use of American flag symbolism in American culture, particularly in the everyday life and landscape of general citizens: the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. And just as that horrific episode struck a deeper, more visceral chord, and signaled greater transformations to come in American foreign policy, civil liberty parameters, and sense of shared national identity and direction, so, as has been well documented, did it trigger an incredible outpouring of patriotic symbolism, imagery, and ritual associated with the American flag.¹³ A new cohort of American flag homes soon appeared, and available data suggests the phenomenon this time around was at a far greater level of response than had ever occurred previously.

In a 2005 study entitled “Patriotism and Nationalism? Understanding Post-September 11, 2001, Flag Display Behavior,” University of Chicago social psychologist Linda J. Skitka presents data that demonstrates and reinforces this truism: there is a mixture of complex reasons that people participate in such outbursts of flag usage and display. Though as evaluators we might differentiate in the dichotomy between what Woden Teachout has called “humanitarian patriotism” and “nationalist patriotism,” those involved in the process often demonstrate a mixture of both categories in varying degrees, while tending to see themselves as the former.¹⁴ Skitka reports that the majority of those who took up flag display following 9/11 did it not from a “my country right or wrong” attitude but clearly in a show of unity and affirmation of perceived shared cultural values.¹⁵

Following 9/11, photographer Jonathan Hyman traveled to more than twenty states, documenting the outpouring of varied cultural uses of civil religion in memorials, tributes, and reactions of personal expression to the attacks, which eventually led to his one-man photography show being the first exhibit when the National September 11 Memorial and Museum opened in New York on 11 September 2006.¹⁶ He caught the attention of *Journal of American History* editor Edward T. Linenthal and, in 2007, published an essay there on his photographic ethnography of this phenomenon, which includes within it the documentation of some flag homes.¹⁷ This led to Linenthal co-editing a gorgeous coffee table book of Hyman’s work—*The Landscape of 9/11: A Photographer’s Journey* (published 1 August 2013)—which might interest many vexillologists for its related content and the thoughtful way it places the American flag within the constellation of patriotic symbols used and in the ritualistic process of grieving and memorialization.¹⁸

Hyman is concerned with the larger phenomenon of varied folk culture reactions to 9/11, and he has made something of a career out of collecting these images and reflecting on that process, with anniversary exhibitions at various universities, appearances on NPR, and a State Department-sponsored tour of Europe.¹⁹ Robert Carley, another photographer, saw the billowing smoke come across Long Island Sound from his third floor office window in Stamford, Connecticut, on the day of the attacks.²⁰ Carley, too, became fascinated with the outburst of patriotism following 9/11, but in his photography of patriotism he eventually zeroed in specifically upon the phenomenon of flag homes, leading to an exhibit of his work in this regard in Kent, Connecticut, in September and October 2011, entitled “America . . . Home Sweet Home: Photography of Flag Houses Since 9/11.”²¹ (Figure 4)



Figure 4. Photographer Robert Carley next to one of his flag house images at a photography exhibit. Source: Robert Carley.

Carley heard about the first flag house he visited from a man who had painted some trees red, white, and blue, and once Carley saw this first house in Kent, Connecticut, which was painted one week after 9/11, it started him upon a quest to find more.²² (Figure 5)



Figure 5. A flag house in Kent, Connecticut, painted by its owner following a dream he had one week after 9/11. The house has subsequently been sold, repainted, and now functions as a furniture store. Source: Robert Carley.

As a photographer with a very specific sub-focus, his collection of images of different American flag houses in the United States continues to grow, and he is planning another trip through the Southwest in search of more in 2015. Presently he has collected images and data (when available) on more than thirty of them.²³ For his collection, he likes to travel to the site of the flag home, get the image with his old Nikon camera himself, and whenever possible, speak briefly with the owners. This has been going on for a period of years now, and when asked what type of people create and live in these homes, he responded: "I have found that many of them are former military people. Also, several are artists. They are all from middle to lower middle class backgrounds. I have only met a handful of really wealthy people with dramatic patriotic displays. The flag house people are not crazies, they are thoughtful and creative. They are both Republicans and Democrats."²⁴

Between one-third and one-half of all the flag house images Carley has amassed come from New England and the Mid-Atlantic states. Certainly having his home in Darien, Connecticut, could be a logical factor here, but so are three other crucial influences: those states that make up the original thirteen colonies have the longest history of association with celebrating the collective national identity, the use of the national flag in such celebrations has until recent decades traditionally been stronger in what were the former Union states during the Civil War, and the horrors of 9/11 happened there in New York, Pennsylvania, and a suburb of Washington, D.C. A review of some of Carley's stunning photography reveals the diverse ways Americans have adapted the image and parsing of the national banner into their home architecture and display not only in this part of the United States, but from coast to coast, and in the interesting subset of apartment housing as well. (Figures 6–20)



Figure 6. A flag house in Maine in 2013, when the current owner was planning to repaint it. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 7. A flag house in Maine in 2014. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 8. A flag house in Connecticut in 2014 with a Twin Towers mural painted after 9/11. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 9. A flag house in Paterson, New Jersey, in 2014, a city where some of the 9/11 hijackers lived. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 10. A flag house in New York State in 2013. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 11. A flag house in West Virginia in 2012. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 12. A Florida family posing in front of their flag home in 2009. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 13. A flag house in Michigan in 2013. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 14. This Michigan flag home in 2013 opted to use American flag shutters. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 15. This single male owner of a flag house in Minnesota in 2013 was getting pressure from his neighbors to paint it. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 16. A flag house in Kansas City, Missouri, from 2010. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 17. This flag house in Nebraska, photographed in 2011, actually pre-dated 9/11, but following that event the owner, an artist, vowed to keep it this way to honor the memory of those who died that day. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 18. The owner of this flag house in Washington State, photographed in 2011, had his face tattooed red, white, and blue. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 19. A flag apartment house in Queens, New York, in 2008. Source: Robert Carley.



Figure 20. A flag apartment house in New Jersey in 2012. Source: Robert Carley.

Carley's assessment and description of what sort of people create and live in flag homes correlate in part with the impressions of cultural geographer Zoran "Zok" Paulović, a Croatian who immigrated to the United States in the late 1990s and considers flag homes within a larger patriotic and regional context. Early on Paulović began noticing what he terms "flagscapes"—"unique landscapes depicting at least some elements of the national flag," as a distinctively American phenomenon, and one that he argues predominates particularly in "the Interior Plains, America's Heartland."²⁵ Paulović suggests there

is an urban-rural dichotomy at work here, with the flagscapes often found in lower-income neighborhoods in this region.²⁶ He adds, “Such ornamentation is common in smaller towns and in association with single family homes near highways.”²⁷ This is, in essence, the patriotic “real America” Sarah Palin tried to both evoke and tap into, politically, when she made her famous speech in that regard during the 2008 presidential election.²⁸

Taken collectively and reviewed, Carley’s data and imagery of flag houses reveal that although the practice did come earlier than 9/11, most notably in response to the Bicentennial, the overwhelming majority of flag houses existent today were created in direct response to the attacks on 9/11 or subsequently as a show of support for the United States in the ongoing “war on terrorism” that event triggered. The earlier homes start to age, owners change, and a question of delicate ethics can eventually arise for those Flag Code fans faced with the practical reality of what should be done with a weathered, on-the-way-to-dilapidated flag house. Is burning it the only proper answer? The question is raised in part as jest but it does remind us that good intentions of making a flag house to honor the symbol can lead to other interpretations and negative reactions if exterior home care is neglected over time.

One fellow took the death of Bin Laden as a sign that the time had arrived to paint over his flag house. And there are some people who just don’t like having a flag house in their neighborhood, as a single man in his early forties from Minnesota discovered. One man in Massachusetts who painted his home into a flag house right after 9/11 had a wife who came to hate it so much she forced him to change it within a year. And then there is the impact of divorce upon joint property: a flag house in Kansas fell into disrepair, the couple divorced, and poor Carley, who journeyed there to photograph it in 2009, discovered that it had been painted over just two weeks before he got there.²⁹

As the years pass by and 9/11 recedes further and further into the past, it is inevitable that, should the flag home phenomenon continue, other tropes might arise to stimulate or modify it. In recent years, one such trope seems to be emerging: the flag home as challenge to restrictive regulation and governmental control. Not coincidentally, this aligns with a growing rise of influence and voice of the Libertarian wing of the Republican Party.

The growth of this trope is evidenced by the widespread dissemination via Facebook in 2013 of an urban myth that a man in Maryland was denied by his homeowner’s association the right to fly a U.S. flag, and in defiance of this behavior he made his home into an American flag. In most versions of this story he is a military vet. Like many urban myths, there is some basis in

truth—the home in question (Figure 21), located in Cambridge, Maryland, was painted this way by contractor Branden Spear, who owned several properties in that community’s historic district and was becoming increasingly frustrated by the number and type of restrictions being imposed upon him by the local historical society, and demand for new windows put him over the top. “It would have cost one-third of the restoration budget just to install those windows,” he said. “Then he realized the building code said nothing about what colors the old Victorians should be painted. So as a show of his anger, and as a protest against what he says are unfair regulations, he painted one home all black, and the adjacent home with an American flag theme. They’ve become something of a tourist attraction since.”³⁰



Figure 21. This Cambridge, Maryland, flag home (photographed in 2010), created as a challenge by a contractor named Branden Spear who owned several buildings in the district and was constantly being restricted by the rules of a historical society, was widely circulated on the internet with a story that a military veteran who was forbidden by a home owners association to fly a flag on his property did this in defiance. Source: Robert Carley.

It should be made clear however, that at no point was Mr. Spear denied the right to fly a flag. Those who do some research will recognize that the urban myth version of the tale is fanning the flames of controversy that the Freedom to Display the American Flag Act of 2005 was intended to mollify, regarding restrictions homeowners associations could place upon flag flying and usage. As Brian Craig pointed out in a thorough analysis of that law in *Raven* 14 in

2007, such ruling bodies may not make unreasonable demands upon those living under their governance, but they may make restrictions based on such things as material of the flag or size of the pole—and this can be stoked for political advantage, as Donald Trump found out when he made national news for being fined for flying a humongous flag on an estate he owned in Florida in 2007, and he is working the same angle at a luxurious golf course in southern California in July 2014.³¹ By intertwining anxiety over what are seen as too heavy government regulations with fear that we are not giving our military veterans their due, and wrapping them together with the symbol of the flag, the urban myth of the flag house circulating the Internet in 2013 demonstrated how symbol, myth, struggles for power, and unease over individual and collective status in the world are all interconnected—and how something like study of a flag home offers opportunity to start probing at so much more going on in America.

A more recent incident of a home being painted as a flag in response to code restrictions occurred the summer of 2014 in Brandenton, Florida. Brent Greer lived with his wife and seven adopted children in a house more than a century old in which he had grown up. The community code enforcement received an anonymous tip in the spring that the Greers had a dead Christmas tree on their balcony that was an eyesore. They were told to remove it and they did so, but when this was followed up by a “two page letter, listing several violations at the home,” Mr. Greer took umbrage. “Some of the issues were about missing window screens, painting, pressure washing, loose railings, and trash on the property.”³² What made him furious was to be told “his home’s exterior painting was not up to city standards.” He retaliated by painting the home as pictured in Figure 22.³³



Figure 22. The Brandenton, Florida, flag house in 2014 painted as a challenge to municipal code restrictions. Source: Robert Carley.

How did he achieve this? His challenge made national headlines. Once folks heard of his planned response to create a U.S. flag house, offers of support and volunteering to get his house up to code standards “poured in from all across the country,” including from the Guardian Angels of South Florida, who showed up to help paint and fix windows. On 6 August 2014, the city dropped its case against Greer. And the future of his flag house? “It’s now an attraction. People love it; the response has been overwhelmingly positive. I wouldn’t change it for anything,” he says, “At first it was in protest, but now it’s going to stay.”³⁴

There were flag houses created due to challenges to local ordinances earlier, as evidenced by the Nebraska home pictured in Figure 23. However, the number of these, and the attention they have been getting, have both been accelerating in recent years. There are other flag houses out there to discover and document as well. In keeping with the Texas tradition to do everything bigger and better than others, Richard and Regina Simmons of rural Cherokee County have a home there called the Patriot House where they have fostered more than 40 children over the past eleven years. This home sports a 96 foot-long parsed flag image all across the front, an 8 by 16 foot American flag on the wall to the North, and in the back, a Texas flag so large that the star on it is four feet large, made of ten-gauge metal. When asked why they chose this theme, they said they did it to honor two sons in the military and to share their patriotism.³⁵



Figure 23. A Nebraska flag home, photographed in 2010, created as the owner’s response to complaints of code violations. Source: Robert Carley.

Homes might be painted as American flags in other parts of the world, too, and the rationale behind such action will often reveal some distinguishing or distinctive local connection to the history, culture, or dynamic of the United

States. The small village of Moneygall in County Offaly, Ireland, for instance, had something of a transformative experience when Barack Obama celebrated the Fourth of July there in 2011, and to honor the occasion a home in the village was painted as an American flag.³⁶ This was no doubt strategic on some levels, given the scheduled and specified plan to develop the area as a tourist attraction, and the great number of Irish-Americans who annually make the pilgrimage to visit and spend their dollars on the Emerald Isle.

A different sort of economic relationship is evidenced in the intriguing use of American flags on the homes of Guatemalans in the municipality of Todos Santos, a region of that Central American land where traditional Mayan clothing and rituals still yield considerable influence. Because many families in Todos Santos have at least one relative working in the United States and sending money back home to sustain them, American flags may be found throughout the town on graves as well as homes.³⁷ And here vexillologists would do well to take a lesson from the important points Patrick Ka'ano'i made about how native Hawaiians interpreted and responded to the British flag the first time they saw it approaching them on a ship: people in other cultures will interpret and use flags within their own frameworks of knowledge and understanding. To look at the American flags of Todos Santos and believe this means the political actions of the U.S. government are all totally supported would be foolish, but to try to understand how this symbology integrates into their cultural practices and traditions would yield richer—and more instructive—insights.³⁸ Furthermore, given the startling rise of child migration from Central America to the southern border of the United States in 2014, and crowds of angry anti-immigrants waving American flags to convey a different sensibility should such young Guatemalans on occasion be bused into their locales, it might be interesting to check back in Guatemala in a few years and see what impact, if any, this recent development and interplay has had on usage of American flags there.

How does the general population feel about flag homes in the United States, and how have these perceptions changed over time? At the moment, evidence to respond to this question is at best anecdotal rather than quantitative. Based upon the way stories of flag homes are covered in the news, and the way those creating them respond when interviewed, it might appear that reactions in the particular—especially if it happens in your neighborhood or next door—might vary, but as a general concept, more see it as a sign of patriotism and respect that they support, or if it is done as a challenge to code limitations, a sign of American individualism they also support. Perhaps the growth in number of flag homes following 9/11, at a time when such behavior is generally interpreted as emphasizing shared sense of community,³⁹ has helped

make the practice seem less peculiar and more praiseworthy. Although open online surveys should always be regarded with extreme caution, their results probably taken with a grain of salt if no controls are set on whom is participating or how often they participate,⁴⁰ it is still interesting to note that there has been such a survey inquiring how folks feel about flag homes.

K99 Country is a radio station broadcasting in Fort Collins, Colorado. In August 2013, D. Dennison, one of their disc jockeys, ran an open poll on her webpage entitled: “How Do You Feel about a House Painted Like an American Flag?”⁴¹ Above the cut-and-pasted image of the Maryland flag home (Figure 21) that was then widely circulating as a Facebook post or e-mail rant about a persecuted vet, she ran this prompt that might raise questions of objectivity: “The jury for me is still out on this, but I do think that in the era I was raised it was disrespectful to wrap your body, car or other things [sic] like a house in the flag, what do you think about a house painted like the American Flag?” This was followed by five options: 1) It’s very Patriotic; 2) It’s disrespectful to the flag; 3) Nice, but wouldn’t want it in my neighborhood; 4) Whose crazy idea was this?; 5) What’s next, American Flag underwear?⁴²

The quiz is meant to be playful, obviously. A simple Google search done on “American flag underwear,” for instance, reveals an incredible array, pages and pages of options for both men and women readily available to all interested—we reached that option quite some time ago—though it seems to still lie beyond the realm of possibility for this disc jockey. We might expect country music listeners in the Rocky Mountain region to respond to this survey more heavily than others, and therefore a slightly more conservative than liberal response, but again, it is an open, online survey, so even that is questionable. How did the voting go? A review of ongoing survey results one year and three weeks after it was first posted gives this voting response: It’s very patriotic—48.94%; It’s disrespectful to the flag—25.00%; Nice, but wouldn’t want it in my neighborhood—12.77%; Whose crazy idea was this?—9.57%; What’s next American Flag underwear?—3.72%.⁴³

Clearly, the phenomenon of flag homes has a special resonance in American culture when the flag being used is our national banner, and this resonance is vibrant and evolving in its particulars over time. But the American flag is just one of many flags, the United States just one of many nations. And even in this small subset within one of the nearly one hundred select examples listed on Smith’s Flag Manifestations Chart, there are still plenty more fascinating aspects to research and evaluate. The area of flag usage analysis is ripe and ready for more vexillologists to tackle with investigative probings followed by critical analysis. In closing, let us consider briefly how two other flag homes

currently in the United States can serve very different psychological needs and convey very different cultural aspirations—again, just brief examples of how much there is out there to evaluate.

The first of these two flag homes looks to the past, evoking a powerful political symbol of the nineteenth century with arguments over its conveyed meaning continuing to spark sharp debates in the present day. The Confederate Flag Home in Memphis, Tennessee, demonstrates the durability and continuing popularity well into the twenty-first century of this battle flag of the side which lost a war in the mid-nineteenth. (Figure 24) In “Colors of the Confederacy: Consecration and Controversy,” Catherine Wright argued how powerful this image was and continues to be, as well as the wide range of ways it has been interpreted and utilized.⁴⁴ Strong reactions to this symbol still evident throughout the nation may be demonstrated by the fact that in August 2014 in California, far away from Tennessee, the state legislature passed a law effectively banning the state from endorsing or supporting public use of this image.⁴⁵ Here is the exact wording of the law: “This bill would prohibit the State of California from selling or displaying the Battle Flag of the Confederacy, or a similar image, or tangible personal property inscribed with those images, unless the image appears in a book, digital medium, or state museum that serves an educational or historical purpose.”⁴⁶ The bill passed the state senate on 18 August 2014, with only two no votes, the state assembly three days later with only one no vote—the few no votes being raised due to concerns over first amendment rights. It was signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown on 25 September 2014.⁴⁷



Figure 24. A Confederate flag house in Memphis, Tennessee, photographed in 2012. Source: Thomas R. Machnitzki, commons.wikipedia.org.

To maintain a flag home with such a symbol that others are legislating against suggests a strong allegiance to what it evokes—a sense of heritage and community, surely, but also on many levels as well, a challenge historically with this flag to the power of federal authority. Others might react very strongly when seeing such a flag house, and for the owner, it could well be that strong reactions one way or the other could very well divide evaluators into categories of friend or foe. Essentially still a battle flag, then, the image encourages the passerby to make a decision and take a stance—are you for us or against us?

Another flag house, this one in Topeka, Kansas, conveys a banner that also is about a struggle, but this one looks with hope to a better future, not with nostalgia and disgruntlement to a romanticized past. (Figure 25) The rainbow flag has reached global recognition in symbolizing the struggle for gay rights very quickly, as the lifespan of international imagery is reckoned. According to flag historian James J. Ferrigan III, Gilbert Baker created the first Rainbow Flag to convey this connection in 1978,⁴⁸ while today the banner is readily recognized to stand for gay people and their struggle throughout the world.



Figure 25. The Equality House in Topeka, Kansas. This house is maintained by the non-profit organization Planting Peace and was established directly across the street from Fred Phelps's Westboro Baptist Church to counter his fiery tirades of hate and exclusion with a counter-message of acceptance, equality, and love. Source: Annie Platoff.

The Westboro Baptist Church, a small group of followers mostly made up of the family of founder Fred Phelps, is a Topeka institution that has received international notoriety for its meant-to-shock strategy of staging protests at

the funerals first of AIDS sufferers, then later of military veterans, soldiers killed in battle, and popular celebrities. By preaching hellfire and damnation at the mourners and heckling them while they grieve, the Westboro folks try to trigger violations of their First Amendment rights, thereby capitalizing on the media headlines and lawsuits they get as a result. They thrive on provoking anger, animosity, discord, and the urge to retaliate.

As a wonderful challenge to such a practice, Aaron Jackson, one of the founders of the international nonprofit Planting Peace, which has helped millions in such diverse places as Haiti, India, the Sudan, and North Korea, bought the home directly across the street from the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas in March 2013. He transformed it into Equality House, a flag home that colorfully shouts out its acceptance of all people regardless of sexual orientation, with a reaffirmation of human rights for all.⁴⁹ This is a flag house clearly meant to send a vibrant message, and its location plays heavily into its significance. It also flies both the Rainbow flag and the American flag on its roof, communicating the organization's strong belief in an inclusive United States of America.

The Equality House has adopted an innovative fundraising strategy, as their parent organization explains on the Equality House facebook page: "As a charity Planting Peace is consistently trying to address acts of exclusion and intolerance with those of inclusion and support."⁵⁰ If an organization, at first focusing on Westboro Baptist Church but later expanding to include others, runs a fundraiser promoting exclusion or intolerance, these folks will set up a counter-fundraiser, asking those who support inclusion and acceptance to give to their side as a way of demonstrating their distaste for the other group's message and activities. It is based on the premise that, in the end, acceptance and love will triumph.

My source of this Equality House image is noted Kansas flag history scholar Annie Platoff. (Figure 26) This peace sign from a friend at the front of the Equality House, a flag home looking toward a brighter future, is a positive place to end these musings on the meaning of flag homes. Still, there is so much more to consider and learn about flag homes, let alone flags, in all their resplendent glory as they ripple in the breeze. Vexillologists pondering an area of flag usage they might explore more deeply need look no farther than Whitney Smith's Flag Manifestations Chart for a slew of ideas, and have fun using flags as starting points to gain greater insight into the human experience.



Figure 26. Vexillologist Annie Platoff on the site of the Equality House in Topeka, Kansas. Source: Annie Platoff.



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End Notes

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1. The Flag Manifestations Chart was sent to me by Whitney Smith on the occasion of my putting together an academic seminar on Vexillology to be taught at San

Jose State University in the spring of 2000. He also published it as an appendix in one of his essays for *The Flag Bulletin*.

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