

Powder House replaces 'George' . . .

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Continental Great Union Flag on Prospect Hill. But Somerville Historical Society President Peter Peterson, who designed the new seal with local historian Doris Donovan, found a couple of things wrong with that old one.

For one thing, he notes, the flag was turned in the wrong direction (it's facing left instead of right). And for another, nobody knows who the man holding it is.

Speculation runs high, of course, that it's George Washington, who was known to have been at Prospect Hill on many occasions. But no one really knows if Washington was there at the flag raising in 1776 — the first time the flag was flown to bid defiance to a foe. The old seal, in fact, was adapted from an 1896 painting in City Hall of someone holding the flag there who is presumed — but not known — to be Washington.

"We thought," Peterson explains, "that the old Powder House was more representative and more in line with the Colonial beginnings of the City, which were, of course, in Charlestown." The Old Powder House is, of course, older than the flag raising. Built in 1703 as a mill for the general area, the Powder House later became a magazine serving the state.

It was also the scene of the first armed movement of British troops against American Colonists — resulting in the first massive uprising of the Minutemen.

But the new seal goes even farther back into Somerville history, with its somewhat curious "Honorably Purchased From The Pawtuckets — 1639" inscription down at the bottom.

"The reason for the 'honorably,'" Peterson explains, "was the fact that there's so much agitation nowadays about the Indians having been given a raw deal."

Admittedly, Somerville's deal wasn't as "raw" as those that took, rather than purchased, land from the Indians. But at that price ("twenty and one coates, nineteen fathom of wampom and three bushels of corne"), the land was obviously "a steal".

Peterson notes, however, that whenever Indians sold land, those were the kinds of prices they got (remember Manhattan Island — \$24 in trinkets and beads). And Squaw Sachem's deed with the settlers in 1639 does "acknowledge to have received in full satisfaction" the above mentioned articles.

-by Helen A. Giffard



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