

“OH, COULD THEY BUT SPEAK...”

The history and importance of Michigan's Civil War Battle Flags

Resources:

Flag Poem

Portions of a poem from The Flags of Michigan, compiled by John Robertson, Adjutant General, Lansing: W.S. George and Company, 1877.

(Note: The title and author are unknown. The eleven stanzas (2-8 lines each) are presented here exactly as they appear in the book.)

For the hand that has woven those colors of light,
And sent it aflame thro' the World's every zone,
That has led, and has kept it thro' storm and thro' night
Is the hand that has blest us, sweet Liberty's own!

Thin curling in the morning air
The wreaths of failing smoke declare,
To embers now the brands decayed
Where the night watch their fires had made.

True to the last of their blood and their breath,
And like reapers advance to the harvest of death.

Sleep well, O sad-browed city,
Whatever may betide;
Not under a nation's pity,
But 'mid a nation's pride.
The vines that round you clamber,
The brightest shall be, and best;
You sleep in the honor-chamber,
Each one is a royal guest.

Their bugles sang truce for the night cloud had lowered,
And the sentinel stars set their watch in the sky;
And thousands has sunk on the ground overpowered,
The weary to sleep, and the wounded to die.'

We rose, and rushed unto her aid,
White faces sank into the grave,
Black faces, too, and all were brave.
Their red blood thrilled Columbia's heart;
It could not tell the two apart.
From our dead foeman comes no chiding forth;
We lie at peace; Heaven has no south or north;
With roots of trees and flowers and fern and heather,
God reaches down, and clasps our hands together.

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I saw the soldiers come today
From battle-fields afar;
No conqueror rode before their way,
On his triumphal car;
But Captains, like themselves, on foot,
And banners sadly torn,
All grandly eloquent, though mute,
In pride and glory borne.

Those banners soiled with dust and smoke,
And rent by shot and shell,
That through the serried phalanx broke,
What terror could they tell!
What tales of sudden pain and death-
In every cannon's boom-
When e'en the bravest held his breath,
And waited for his doom.

Thank God! there beams o'er land and sea,
Our blazing star of victory;
And every where from main to main,
The 'Old Flag' flies and rules again.

Columbia e'er will know you
From out her glittering towers,
And kisses of love will throw you,
And send you wreathes of flowers,
And e'en in realms of glory,
Shall shine your starry claims;
Angels have heard your story,
And God knows all your names.