

Creating the Canadian flag

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Following its 1963 election campaign promise of a distinctive Canadian flag within two years of election, the newly elected Liberal government of Lester Bowles Pearson (1897-1972; prime minister from 1963-68) set the wheels in motion for this to happen.

Pearson (shown in Figure 1 on the 6¢ red definitive of 1973, Canada Scott 591) rejected the concept used by many other British Commonwealth countries of including the Union Jack within the design. He well remembered his days as external affairs minister when, in 1956, he had proposed a United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) to help keep the peace in Egypt until a political settlement to the Suez Crisis was worked out. President Nasser of Egypt had objected to Canadian troops being included in UNEF because the flag at the time, the Canadian Red Ensign, was too British-looking.



Figure 1. Prime Minister Lester Bowles Pearson served from 1963 to 1968. In 1973 he was pictured on a 6¢ definitive stamp.

The Suez Crisis pitted Egypt against France and Great Britain over control of the Suez Canal. This made a lasting impression on Pearson, and he vowed that, if he had the opportunity, there would be a made-in-Canada flag with a uniquely Canadian symbol. Also, at the time, there was increasing debate about Canadian unity and a growing separatist movement in Quebec.

Pearson felt that a new Canadian flag might help unify the country.

At the same time, the Post Office Department was preparing to celebrate the centennial of Canadian Confederation that would occur July 1, 1967. The government thought that the two ideas could be combined, and a series of 5¢ Provincial Coats of Arms and Flowers stamps was issued from 1964 to 1966, with the later addition of the 5¢ Canadian Coat of Arms and Maple Leaf stamp (Scott 418-429A, Figure 2).

To introduce the series, a 5¢ Canadian Unity stamp was produced that shows three joined maple leaves on a blue background (Scott 417, Figure 3).

It is an eerie precursor of what would be called the "Pearson Pennant" (Figure 4), Prime Minister Pearson's favorite candidate for the new Canadian flag.

The three maple leaves, joined on a single stem, appear on the lower part of the Canadian coat of arms and symbolize Canadian unity. Their appearance on a white background was authorized

by a 1920 order-in-council (a legislative instrument approved by the governor general). On the stamp the leaves appear on a blue background because the Post Office Department was introducing postal mechanization during that period, and it was difficult for its machines to recognize a white stamp on a white envelope.

As a staff designer at the Canadian Bank Note Company, Harvey Thomas Prosser (Figure 5) designed 64 stamps for Canada from 1959 to 1971. Born in Ottawa on December 12, 1930, Prosser trained at the Children's Program of the National Art Gallery, the High School of Commerce and the Ottawa School of Art. He apprenticed under Herman Herbert Schwartz at CBN from 1947 to 1952, as well as at the American Bank Note Company from 1954 to 1958.

His first design for the Canadian Unity stamp, likely produced in fall 1963, was a watercolor essay with gouache showing the English and French coats of arms used in colonial Canada, united by the three maple leaves on a single stem (Figure 6). The essay's paper edges are cut to simulate perforations.

The Post Office and the government presumably found that the proposed design had too much of a colonial look to it, and Prosser was asked to try again.

His second attempt, again created with watercolor and gouache, retained only the three maple leaves on a single

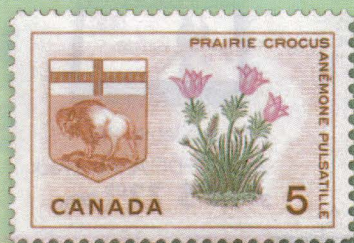


Figure 2. Two stamps from Canada's Coats of Arms and Flowers series of 1964-66: Scott 422 (representing the province of Manitoba) and Scott 429A (picturing the maple leaf and the arms of Canada).



Figure 3. The introductory stamp to the Arms and Flowers series, Scott 417, symbolized Canadian unity with three maple leaves emanating from a single stem.



Figure 4. The "Pearson Pennant" was Prime Minister Pearson's personal choice for a new Canadian flag.

stem concept. Two designs with different typographical elements were submitted on November 22, 1963 (Figure 7). Changes to the wording and positions of the word "UNITY" and "UNI" are indicated by ballpoint pen writing on one of these designs.

A revised watercolor essay with gouache following the new instructions was submitted on November 27, 1963 (Figure 8, top). The words "POSTAGE" and "POSTES" were added in pencil at the bottom of the card bearing the essay. The approval model was submitted to the postmaster general, Azellus Denis (1907-91; postmaster general from April 22, 1963, to February 2, 1964). The model removed the words "UNITED" and "UNI," replacing them with "POSTAGE" and "POSTES," and reverted to the straight-line "CANADA" inscription that appeared previously on the essay at top in Figure 7.

The design received the postmaster's approval on December 20, 1963 (Figure 8, bottom). He later approved a die proof on January 20, 1964.

Final approval for printing was not given until March 3, 1964, and came



Figure 6. Prosser's preliminary design was rejected for being too "colonial."
Courtesy of the Canadian Postal Archives.

from William Hugh Wilson (deputy postmaster general from 1961-68).

The vignette was engraved by Yves Baril, with lettering engraved by Gordon Mash. The stamp, perforated gauge 12, was issued May 14, 1964, with 36,870,000 copies produced in post offices panes of 50. It exists on fluorescent and nonfluorescent papers; the stamp on fluorescent paper is worth about six times the nonfluorescent variety.

Five days later, on May 19, Prime Minister Pearson formally announced his choice for the new flag — the so-called "Pearson Pennant" — which was also known as the "Bow-Tie Banner" in reference to Pearson's proclivity for wearing bow ties.

The flag was to have three red maple leaves on a single stem on a white back-



Figure 5. Henry Thomas Prosser designed 64 Canadian stamps, including the 1964 Canadian Unity issue. *Courtesy of the Canadian Postal Archives*

ground (from the coat of arms) with two blue borders signifying that the country went from "sea to sea."

Artist and heraldist Alan Brookman Beddoe (1893-1975, at left in Figure 9), designed the "Pearson Pennant." His main claim to fame was the supervising of the illumination of the Canadian *Books of Remembrance* for both World Wars. He was the first president of the Heraldry Society of Canada and in 1957 was appointed heraldic advisor to the Royal Canadian Navy.

Beddoe had also designed one Canadian stamp, the 4¢ Canadian Citizen-



Figure 7. Two revised designs by Prosser were submitted in November 1963, varying in typography. *Courtesy of the Canadian Postal Archives.*

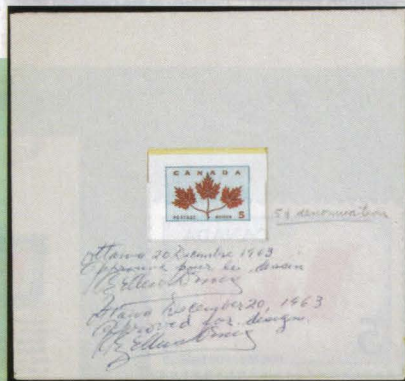


Figure 8. A new revision created in watercolor (top) was modified again, and the approved model (bottom) was submitted to the postmaster general. *Courtesy of the Canadian Postal Archives.*

ship stamp issued July 1, 1947 (Scott 275, at right in Figure 9).

Although correct both in heraldry terms and colors, many decried Beddoe's flag design, but Pearson was enchanted with it.

Prosser, in the meantime, either on his own volition or by commission of the government or the Post Office, prepared a number of watercolors for a stamp showing the "Pearson Pennant."

The essay in Figure 10 shows four different permutations of the proposed stamp with some slight changes in the placement, size and typography of the wording and denomination, and in the positioning of the flag. This watercolor, gouache and

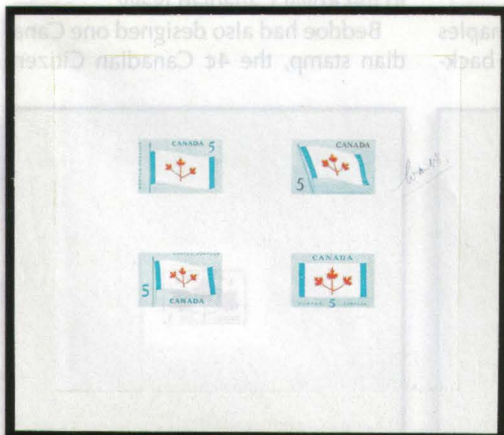


Figure 10. Essays of proposed stamps modeled on the "Pearson Pennant." Courtesy of the Canadian Postal Archives.



Figure 9. Alan Brookman Beddoe designed the "Pearson Pennant" flag. He had designed the Canadian Citizenship stamp in 1947. Beddoe photo courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.

ink essay group in the Canadian Postal Archives bears the handwritten initials "VHW" for William Hugh Wilson.

The flags on the essays are painted on a plastic overlay. The essay's date of May 26, 1964, only 12 days after Pearson's announcement, seems to indicate that the government was planning to issue the stamp, and that officials likely believed the "Pearson Pennant" would be adopted.

It did not turn out that way.

Pearson's government was in a minority position and needed the support of other parties to ensure adoption of the flag. Pearson also wanted the main opposition to be on the same side. But most of the veterans and die-hard Anglophiles were against the "Pearson Pennant" or any flag that did not incorporate the Union Jack or symbols related to Canada's ancestry.

Pearson sent the whole question to a Parliamentary committee. Over a four-week period the committee consid-

ered more than 2,000 designs reported back to Parliament, after debate, that the preferred choice was a modified version of the "Pearson Pennant" with one red maple leaf in a white center square, with a red square on each side half the size of the center square.

The proposal was approved by Parliament, after much filibustering on December 15, 1964. The royal proclamation was signed by Queen Elizabeth II on January 28, 1965.

The flag was officially flown for the first time on February 15, 1965, and made its first appearance on a Canadian stamp on June 30 of that year, just in time for Canada Day, July 1 (Scott 439, Figure 11).

The stamp was perforated gauge 11 and 37,360,000 copies were produced in post office panes of 50. It also came in fluorescent and non-fluorescent versions, and again the stamp on fluorescent paper is worth about six times the value.

The same vignette, without the word "POSTAGE," was used on a prepaid postal card sold by Canada in a tin can that also contained a desktop flag. This product was prepared for sale on Canada Day 2003.

In 2005, the Postcard Factory produced the same amended design as the printed stamp on more than 25 different postal cards (Figure 12).



Figure 11. Canada's new flag, adopted by Parliament on December 11, 1964, first appeared on a stamp the following June.



Figure 12. The front and back of the 2003 prepaid Canada Day postal card using the 1965 Flag stamp design.