

The "White Palmetto"

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The "white palmetto" is found chiefly in the state of South Carolina, and is rarely seen outside its boundaries. In all parts of South Carolina this proud palm may be seen stirring in the breeze, its white head lifted high with never a rustle among its glistening white fronds. Long "neglected" by botanists, it has, nevertheless, evoked considerable interest from historians, as it is the palmetto that adorns the flag of South Carolina—the Palmetto State.

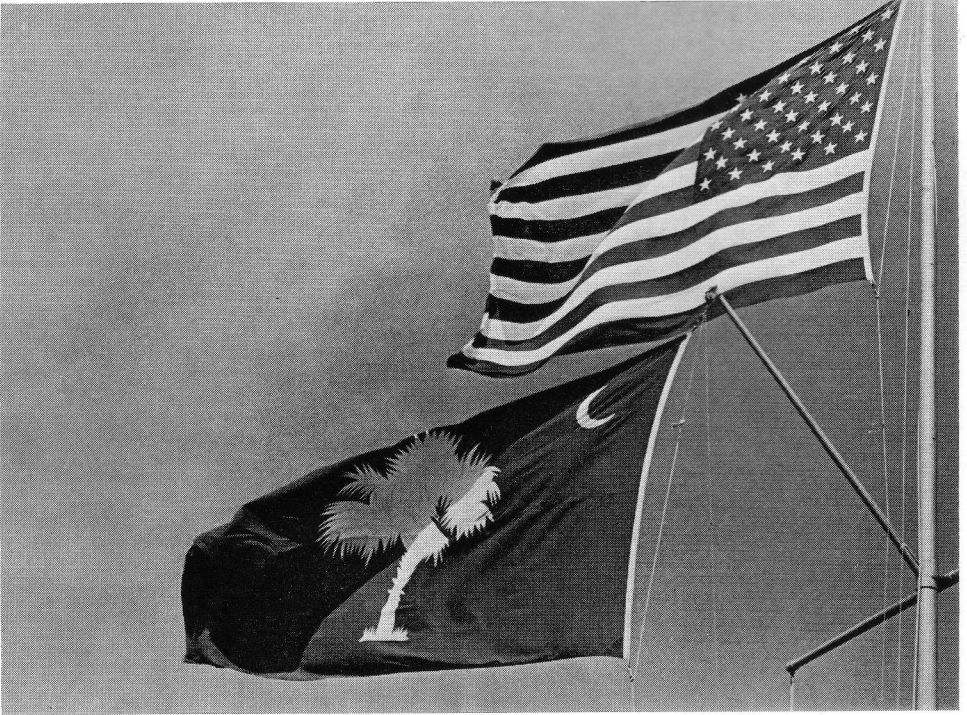
Sabal Palmetto, model for the "white palmetto," is found in its native habitat along the entire coastline and numerous sea islands of South Carolina, and thrives as an ornamental as far north as the sand hills; its diminutive cousin, the blue palmetto (*Sabal minor*), grows wild profusely in the "low country" and is even occasionally found in swampy areas along the fall line that separates the coastal plain from the piedmont. Not to be overlooked also is the sabal's thorny relative, the saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*). This armed bush hog thrives on the sea islands that dot the lower coastline of the Palmetto State and makes itself at home on the mainland near the Georgia line. For none of these reasons, however, did *Sabal* earn its place on the proud flag of South Carolina.

This sturdy native American palm earned the right to fly on the flag by playing a heroic role in the defense of its native state. On June 28, 1776, a small band of South Carolinians defended a crude, incomplete fort constructed of sand and palmetto logs overlooking Charleston harbor against an attack by eleven armed British vessels.

From a distance of 400 yards, the fleet's cannon began pounding the little fort at ten that morning. To the chagrin of the attacking forces, the cannon balls harmlessly imbedded themselves in the spongy palmetto logs; this kept the enemy from taking the small unfinished fortification, and the British were subsequently defeated.

A few days after the departure of the British, word was received in Charleston that the Declaration of Independence had been signed. The little fort was named "Moultrie" for its commander, Colonel William Moultrie, and the palmetto joined the crescent on the state flag. A year earlier, the revolutionary council of safety had asked Colonel Moultrie to design a flag for the use of South Carolina troops. The good Colonel chose a deep blue which matched the color of their uniforms and a crescent which reproduced the silver emblem worn on the front of their caps.

On the grounds of the State Capitol in Columbia stands what is probably the only monument in the world to a member of the palm family. It is a cast iron replica of the palmetto tree. Oddly enough, this beautiful cast iron palmetto does not honor the palmetto's role in the famous battle of Fort Moultrie, but another time when South Carolina sons proudly carried their native white palmetto in the field of battle. The monument memorializes the state's famous Palmetto Regiment that distinguished itself in the Mexican War from 1841 to 1847. During this conflict, the palmetto flag was the first to enter the Mexican Capitol. The monument was designed by Christopher Werner of Charleston



1. The flags of the United States and of the State of South Carolina. Since 1776 the latter flag has been emblazoned with a figure of *Sabal Palmetto* in white. Photo courtesy South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

and was purchased by the State for only five thousand dollars. It was damaged first by Union General Tecumseh Sherman's troops when they shelled the statehouse in 1865 during his blazing march across the state, and was broken into bits by a freak tornado in 1939. It has since been restored. Therefore, a description of South Carolina's native white palmetto by a historical botanist might read something like this:

"First described in 1776, it is by statute displayed 'upon the inside of every public school building in the state and daily except in rainy weather

from a staff upon the Statehouse and from a staff upon each County Courthouse.' "Beyond the borders of its native state, the white palmetto is frequently seen but always as a devoted representative of its native state in times of peace and war."

Even though the white palmetto has ably represented South Carolina since 1776 with its place on the State Flag as well as the State Seal, legislators did not get around to naming its first cousin, *Sabal Palmetto*, the State Tree until 1939.

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