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Museum exhibit honors designer of Tennessee flag



The state flag, designed by Captain LeRoy Reeves, is part of an exhibit at ETSU's Carroll Reece Museum. (Lee Talbert / Johnson City Press)

By James Brooks
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An exhibit of Tennessee's first state flag, designed by Johnson Citian Capt. LeRoy Reeves, is on display this month at the Carroll Reece Museum at East Tennessee State University.

The flag was adopted by the state Legislature on April 17, 1905, and was first flown over the old National Guard Armory on West Market Street. Reeves was a member of the Third Regiment, Tennessee Infantry.

He described the flag as showing three white stars on a blue field, bound together by a white circle as symbolizing the three grand divisions of the state: the Eastern mountains, the central highlands and the western Mississippi River plain. The red field picks up the colors of the U.S. flag and a blue stripe set off by a white bar keeps the flag from

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showing too much red when hanging limp, according to Reeves' description.

The exhibit is on loan from the Tennessee State Museum. It also includes two designs that didn't make the cut, including one with the number 16 for the 16th state admitted to the Union, and another with the state seal instead of the three stars.

Reeves published his personal description of the flag's symbolism after National Geographic mistakenly reported in 1917 that the three stars stood for Tennessee being the third state after the original 13 to be admitted to the Union.

The exhibit also includes sheet music for a potential state song, including a jukebox that plays the music. It is not known for sure if Reeves composed the song as well.

Born in Johnson City in 1876, Reeves attended Johnson City High School and studied French, German, Latin, logic and mathematics at Johnson City College and Normal Institute. He taught in public schools from 1896-98, was admitted to the bar in 1899 and practiced with his father until 1905.

In 1903 he organized Company F, Third Infantry, Tennessee National Guard and was commissioned as its first captain. He was later appointed major judge advocate of the Tennessee National Guard and served in the Mexican border campaign in 1916. In 1918 he entered Officers Training School at Camp McClellan, Ala., and was commissioned a major in the Army in 1919.

He served in the judge advocate general's department in Washington, retiring in 1940 as a colonel.

He died in 1960 and is buried in Oak Hill Cemetery in Johnson City.

The Reece Museum is open Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and on Thursday from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.

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