

# HERALDRY OF THE AMERICAN EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*by the Rev. Canon J. Robert Wright*

*Summary of a Presentation*

*Made on Thursday 26 May 2005*

*at the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society*

Heraldry in the Episcopal tradition was the subject of a talk by the Rev. Canon J. Robert Wright, St. Mark's in the Bowery Professor of Church History at the General Theological Seminary, at a joint meeting the College of Arms Foundation and the Committee on Heraldry of the New York Genealogical & Biographical Society on 26 May at the Society's headquarters.



*The arms of Saint Thomas Church, New York, were granted to it by the College of Arms in London*

Almost none of the arms used by Episcopal dioceses, churches and parishes in the United States are “granted” by an armorial authority, such as the College of Arms; rather, they are “assumed.” Among the very few with granted arms is Saint Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue in New York (above), where Canon Wright is an honorary priest and of which he has written a definitive history. Another is the Cathedral of the Advent in Birmingham, Alabama.

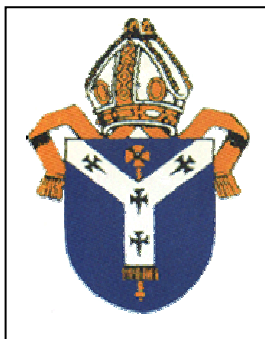
## English Church Heraldry

When it was introduced in Western Europe in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, armory was used first by monarchs and the greater nobles. Over time it was adopted by the lesser nobility, knightage and gentry; and then institutions, including religious establishments. Sees, cathedrals, abbeys, religious orders and prelates adopted arms for use on seals.

The practice evolved for archbishops and bishops to use on seals the arms of their see ensigned with a “precious mitre” (*mitra preciosa*), a mitre adorned with jewels; and for abbots to use the arms of their abbey surmounted by a “simple mitre,” with no jewels. Brass rubbings of medieval bishops’ effigies appear to indicate that the mitres were indeed studded with precious stones, now long disappeared.

Because they are “married” to their sees, prelates may also impale their arms with those of their dioceses. (This only applies to archbishops or diocesan bishops, not to suffragans or auxiliaries.) When arms are impaled, the official ones are on the left side of the shield, and the personal ones on the right side as seen by the viewer. In the language of blazon, left is termed “sinister” and right is termed “dexter.” (The seeming contradiction between the terms in blazon and English is explained by the convention that left and right are described as if one is standing behind the shield, not in front.)

Another practice for archbishops and bishops is to display their arms with a crossed crozier and key behind the shield. Archbishops use a primatial double cross and a key.



As an example, Canon Wright showed the arms of the Archdiocese of Canterbury (*seen at left*): **Azure an Archiepiscopal Cross in pale Or surmounted by a Pall proper charged with four Crosses pattée fitchée Sable.** The professor pointed out that the crosses on the pall (or *pallium*, an ancient symbol of metropolitan rank) may derive from pins that held it in position. The arms are ensigned with a *mitra preciosa*.

Although they would theoretically never engage in warfare, non-episcopal clergy may use their own arms with martial helms and crests. As an alternative, a 1976 warrant by the Earl Marshal of England, the official in charge of the College of Arms, provides for non-obligatory ecclesiastic hats over the shield. The hats are black and wide brimmed, with different numbers of tassels to denote rank.

## The Arms of the Episcopal Church and the Presiding Bishop

The tradition of Episcopal heraldry is derived from that of the Church of England.

This Episcopal Church of the United States of America (ECUSA) adopted its shield in 1940. The blazon is: **Argent a Cross Gules on a canton Azure nine Cross Crosslets Argent in saltire.** The design makes clear the origins of the church through the convention of heraldry.

The Episcopal Church was founded in 1789 as a separate group from its parent Church of England, from which the churches in the colonies found themselves divided by the American Revolution. Many of the founders of the nation, including George Washington, were Episcopalians.

The red cross on a white field is the cross of St. George, Patron Saint of England. This remembers the Episcopal Church's roots in the Church of England.

In the first quarter of the shield are nine miniature crosses crosslet on a blue field symbolizing the nine dioceses that met in Philadelphia in 1789 to ratify the initial constitution of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. The crosslets are arranged in saltire, forming another allusion, this time to the Cross of St. Andrew, patron saint of Scotland. This recalls that it was Scottish Episcopal bishops who ordained Samuel Seabury as the first American Bishop in 1784.

Not by coincidence, the red, white and blue colors are the colors of the American flag. Since 1946 the Presiding Bishop has used the arms of the Episcopal Church with a mitre.



*Left: The arms of the Presiding Bishop as displayed at the 2006 General Convention of the Episcopal Church*

*Right: The crossed swords in the arms of the Diocese of London are repeated in those of the Diocese of New York*



### The Arms and Seal of the Diocese of New York

The arms of the Diocese of New York are blazoned **Quarterly Gules and Argent a Cross of St. George countercharged per pale and per fess of the field in the first quarter an American Eagle displayed Or; in the second and third quarters the Sails of a Windmill Sable; in the fourth quarter two Swords in saltire Or.**

The arms were adopted during the episcopate of Bishop David Hummell Greer (1908-1919) and replaced a design in use as early as 1896.

The color red and the crossed swords clearly allude to the Diocese of London (see illustration above), of which the bishop was also the bishop for the American colonies. The windmill sails are a well-known symbol for New York, formerly New Amsterdam. (They are also a charge in the arms of the City of New York.) The American eagle is in the first quarter, the most significant one, and is a reminder that New York City was briefly the capital of the United States and where George Washington was sworn in as the nation's first President.



*Left: The arms of the Bishop of New York.*



*Right: The seal of the Diocese of New York.*

For the arms of the bishop (above left), the shield is placed over a crossed crozier and key and ensigned with a precious mitre. For the seal of the diocese and the bishop (above right), the ensigned shield on a field *purpure* (purple) is surrounded by a *vesica azure* (or blue) with the legend SEAL OF THE DIOCESE OF NEW YORK MDCCLXXXV, that date (1785) being the founding year of the diocese of New York.

The first five bishops of New York used their personal arms ensigned by a mitre. Bishop Horatio Potter (bishop 1861-1887) put his own arms in pale with an adaptation of the arms of New York State, and his successor (and nephew), Bishop Henry Codman Potter (1887-1908) continued the same practice. Bishop Greer at first used a shield charged with his monogram until the present arms were adopted for the see of New York at the diocesan convention of 1914.

### The Arms and Seal of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine



*The shield of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine with a bishop's mitre and crossed crozier and key*

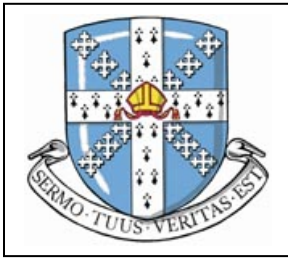
The arms of the cathedral are blazoned as follows: **Azure seven six-pointed Stars Argent between as many Candlesticks Or.** For the seal, the shield is placed within a circle around the edges of which are the words: SIGILL: ECCLES: CATH: S. JOHANN: THEOL: N. EBOR (Sigillum Ecclesiae Cathedralis Sancti Johannis Theologi Novi Eboraci or, in English, Seal of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine New York).

The seven stars and candlesticks represent the seven churches described in the Book of Revelation of St. John. The first of these was at Ephesus, of which the Saint was the patron and where his basilica was located. St. John in the seal is described as *Theologus*, alluding to his status as theologian of the New Testament.



An earlier version (seen in the seal at left), which combined the arms of New York City, New York State and the cathedral, was in use in 1901. Subsequently there was a great discussion, involving well-known artists and designers such as Louis Comfort Tiffany, Ralph Adams Cram and Pierre de Chaignon La Rose, on what the cathedral's arms should be. The present – simpler – shield was adopted by the Cathedral in 1965.

## The Arms and Seal of the General Theological Seminary



The arms of the Seminary (right) are blazoned as follows: **Azure twelve Cross Crosslets in Saltire Argent over all a Cross Ermine charged at the fess point with a Mitre Or fimbriated Gules.** Again we see the little crosses arranged in saltire, the by now obvious allusion to the Scottish bishops' role in establishing the American Episcopal Church. The gold mitre signifies the oversight role of the House of Bishops over the Seminary. The unusual touch is the ermine cross. This alludes to Bishop John Henry Hobart, third Bishop of New York (1816-1830) and the Seminary's principal founder. The arms were designed by the late Rev. Canon Edward Nason West, a well-known – if not the pre-eminent – heraldist of the American Episcopal Church.



The Seminary's seal (right), which dates from 1902, is a complex design. The seal is contained within a circle, along the outer edge of which, running from 6:00 to 6:00, are these words: SIGILLUM SEMINARII THEOLOGICI GENERALIS ECCLESIAE PROTESTANTIS EPISCOPALIS IN CIVITABUS

FOEDERATIS AMERICAE 1817. Within the circle is a compartmentalized structure. The central compartment contains an image of Jesus blessing with his right hand and holding in his left an open book containing “the word” (as in “SERMO TUUS VERITAS EST” or “THY WORD IS TRUTH”, the Seminary's motto). Arranged in squares around Him are Saints Ambrose and Augustine on the left and Saints Athanasius and Gregory Nazianzus on the right. The Greek fathers are on the left and the Latin ones on the right. Also visible are the Greek letters “Α” (alpha) and “Ω” (omega), literally symbolizing “catholic” and “orthodox.”

It can be seen that, in the case of just these few Episcopal institutions, heraldry has been adopted to express in the provenance of the church, its location and its mission. Heraldry is widely used in the Episcopal Church yet is notably unregulated. In this regard, Canon Wright noted that the General Convention in 1982 passed a resolution establishing a Committee on Heraldry for bishops and the Presiding Bishop. The original members

were: John P.B. Brooke-Little, of the College of Arms in London; the Rev. Canon Edward N. West (mentioned above); Col. Harry Temple of the US Army's Institute of Heraldry; and Professor James Waring McCrady of the University of the South. Minutes of the only meeting held were never distributed; and no public report was ever made. But Canon Wright was able to obtain from Mr. Brooke-Little the following information.

At its first and only meeting, the members of the Committee formulated the recommendations below:

1. Guidelines for the use of heraldry in the Episcopal Church should be written and published.
2. Bishops should be required to use arms even if other symbols are also utilized.
3. The bishops' arms should appear on their diocesan seals with a legend beginning "Seal of the Diocese of ..." at 7 o'clock.
4. The committee should help with the design of the bishops' arms, which, in turn, should be registered with the committee after diocesan adoption.
5. The blazon, or technical description, of the arms, rather than any picture or drawing, is to be the criterion that is followed.
6. The permissive designs for ecclesiastical hats as laid down by the Earl Marshal of England in 1976 for Anglican clergy should be adopted for clergy below the rank of bishop.
7. The use of mottoes should be discouraged.
8. The use by bishops of a key and crozier behind their arms should be permitted, the key being in bend and the crozier in bend sinister, and both of gold.
9. Bishops may or should ensign their arms with the *mitra preciosa*, either gold and jeweled or chased as jeweled with gold *infulae* (insignia of office).
10. The only mandatory ornament exterior to an episcopal coat of arms should be the mitre, of which the *infulae* are essential.
11. The color of the lining of the mitre is of no consequence.
12. Cathedrals should not have arms, but only the bishop as diocesan.

13. Seals should not be depicted in color and can be of any shape but preferably vesical or round.
14. In legends on seals the colon should be used for separation, and a full point for an abbreviation.
15. There should be a manual prepared on flags, banners, etc.
16. There should be a set form of approved registration.

Canon Wright noted that some of these guidelines have been followed while others have not. He concluded by asking whether the time has come to circulate, review, revise and adopt these regulations.

Without a central authority to govern its use, apply the rules and maintain standards, heraldry can quickly degrade through poor design, inappropriate imagery and ignorance of the rules.