

FROM THE COLLECTIONS

The Banner of the Calais Frontier Guard

THE BANNER of the Calais Frontier Guard is one of seventeen banners in the collection of the Maine Historical Society. Ranging from an 1805 Stroudwater militia standard to a 1960s Black Power banner, each is a graphic statement about time, place, and values. The Calais militia banner, dating from Maine's Northeast Boundary dispute era (1839-1842), provides an excellent example of how such an object can be used to document various themes in state and national history.

In the years between the War of Independence and the Civil War, militia companies were formed in nearly every town from the Piscataqua to the St. Croix. Their appearance marks one of the first times communities bound together in a district or statewide military network. Although under the command of the state Adjutant General, each company tried to rival all others, especially when it came to its banner or stand of colors. Up until the 1820s, nearly all such colors were produced in Boston by such artists as Benjamin B. Curtis and J.R. Penniman. Indeed, the Maine State Museum *Broadside* (Spring 1994) notes that the State of Maine ordered "66 Military-Standards" from Penniman in 1822.

Market and artistic control by Bostonians did not deter young Charles Codman (c.1800-1842) from opening an ornamental painting business at Portland in 1822. Trained by Penniman, Codman virtually cloned his mentor's newspaper advertisements. In 1823, the *Eastern Argus* praised the new painter's banners noting: "we hazard nothing in saying that they may be procured in this place, equal in point of elegance to those painted in Boston or elsewhere." Codman soon produced military standards for the likes of the Harraseeket Cadets, the Thomaston Cavalry, the Augusta Rifle Greys, the Andover Militia, the Buckfield Light Infantry, and the Frankfort Artillery Company, to name a few.

By the late 1820s, Codman was established as Maine's first settled professional artist and a taste-setter for a generation of young Down-



Charles Codman, American (c.1800-1842),
Banner of the Calais Frontier Guard, 1839; oil & gold-leaf on silk; 60" x 48";
collection of the Maine Historical Society.

East painters. Though subsequently best known for his oil paintings of Maine landscapes, Codman's military banners were objects of great artistic merit, and often the first examples of public art seen in rural communities.

This is certainly the case with Codman's elegant banner for the Calais Frontier Guard, painted during the height of the Aroostook War. On one side of the standard is the Maine State Seal, and on the other, a copy of Thomas Sully's famous oil, *The Passage of the Delaware*. Codman almost certainly had first-hand knowledge of Sully's masterpiece, which was exhibited at Portland's Union Hall in July and August of 1823. Indeed, it is likely that he made sketches during the showing. By placing the image on a military banner, Codman evoked a patriotic symbol of national identity, linking Maine to the Union. The banner itself became a carrier of artistic ideas and taste under which a Washington County militia company no doubt proudly marched to the New Brunswick border.

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