

Celebrating Banner Years: A Retrospective

BANNERS, FLAGS and GONFALONS DESIGNED and FABRICATED in GETTYSBURG by BOB (MAC) MCILHENNY from 1988 to 2018

Born and raised in Gettysburg, Bob (Mac) McIlhenny was drawn to art and music at an early age. He can attribute his interest in art to his art teacher in elementary school, Richard Krick, who taught kids to, "Use the whole paper!" In his youth, Mac worked part time for local sign painter, Joe Reaver, who opened Mac's eyes to graphic design and the prospect of doing it for a living.

Late in the 1980's Mac received a commission from the Holiday Inn in Gettysburg to create two large banners for a hot air balloon race in Gettysburg.



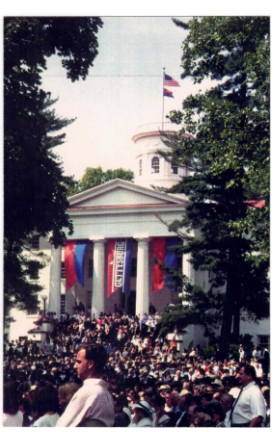
1988: Mac purchases a sewing machine at a yard sale, taught himself how to sew and started making banners for local businesses including Gettysburg College.

1989: Enrolled at York Technical Institute, he receives an associate degree in Technical Drawing. Upon graduation, Mac was hired as an instructor at YTI. That's where he met Ruthmary Zupan.

1990: Mac developes a process for making appliqued banners using 200 Denier Oxford Nylon. All the letters and graphics were cut and sewn together. No ink, dye or paint was used. Banner graphics were first drawn onto paper then cut out to form "patterns." A hand-held tool called a "hot knife" was then used to cut the fabric, thus melting the edges, so they would not fray. Another hand-held tool called a "basting needle" held the pieces in place so they could be sewn into a final product. Banners were then lined and the edges were finished to fit various forms of hardware.



1991: Mac is commissioned by Gettysburg College president, Gordon Haaland to create a suite of banners to dress the stage at Commencement. Commissions for commencement banners for George Washington University, Virginia Tech and the University of Maryland soon followed. Mac purchased an abandoned gas station near Gettysburg and established his business, "McIlhenny Banners."



1992: Ruthmary and Mac are married. She became Mac's artistic muse and inspiration. She is the 'eminence grise' in his life.



Photo by Lynn Forney

2003: Gettysburg Borough Council approves Mac's design for an official Town Flag. A 10 foot x 14 foot version of the flag was first raised on the town square, then shipped to the guided missile cruiser, the USS Gettysburg where it serves as the ship's house flag to this day.



2004 to Present: McIlhenny Banners continues to provide banners and gonfalons for Commencement ceremonies and other special events at: American University, Arizona State University, Auburn University, Duke University, University of Chicago, University of Texas, College of William & Mary, Dickinson College, Vanderbilt University, Kenyon College, West Virginia University, Lebanon Valley College, Embry-Riddle, Marist College, John Jay College, Penn State, Skidmore College, Valparaso University, Gonzaga University, Johns Hopkins University and many others.

In **2016** McIlhenny Banners became a division of GraphCom in Gettysburg. Mac retired in 2018. McIlhenny Banners was then acquired by Mac's long-time employee, Beverly Parsons, who continues to operate the business today.



Nov-Dec 2026 Majestic Theater Gallery: Over the years, Mac took time out from the banner 'business' to have some fun making flags & banners for friends and local non-profits. Many of the banners in this exhibit were donated for sale to the Land Conservancy of Adams County's annual art auction. They were borrowed back from the buyers for this retrospective exhibit. All of the banners in the gallery, including the mobile above, are made of appliqued nylon oxford cloth.

Please note: Mac's fascination with flags & banners lies in the fact that pieces of ordinary cloth, once sewn together, can suddenly acquire a formidable aspect as a symbol that can stir powerful emotions.