

# The Gadsden Flag Flies Again

By Peter Darnall

If you've been watching television or reading the newspapers lately, you're probably aware of the Tea Party movement. Perhaps you've noticed the jaunty yellow flag which seems to attract the photographers' cameras. This flag, which flaunts a coiled rattlesnake above the motto "Don't Tread on Me," has mistakenly been described as the Tea Party Flag.

The flag is properly known as the Gadsden Flag. This yellow banner is one of the most recognized and copied relics of the Revolutionary War era. The image of a coiled rattlesnake brandishing thirteen rattles above the motto "Don't Tread on Me" sent a very clear message that didn't require a tweedy professor to prattle on about the subtleties of the design. When the flag appeared, it was usually accompanied by buckskin clad fellows carrying muskets or by a shiplot of hard-nosed marines.

The flag honors the name of Colonel Christopher Gadsden, but we don't know if he created or even authorized the design himself. We do know, however, that Col. Gadsden did present this flag to Commodore Esek Hopkins commemorating the birth of the United States Navy. For years this flag represented the very heart and soul of the American colonies' struggle for independence until it was replaced by the Stars and Stripes.

It's quite a story . . . I think you'll enjoy it.

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Since the days of Adam and Eve, snakes have suffered from bad PR. In 1751 Benjamin Franklin put the rattlesnake in the public eye, metaphorically speaking. He had published a satirical essay in his *Pennsylvania Gazette* in which he proposed that the colonies send rattlesnakes to England as an expression of "gratitude" for the British government's practice of dumping convicted felons on American soil. After publication of his article, snake images began appearing in newspapers, on banners, uniform buttons and coins. The seeds of rebellion had been sown . . .

Three years later, Franklin published America's first political cartoon in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. His woodcut image depicted a snake, cut into sections, representing the original American colonies over the caption "Join, or Die." The subject of the cartoon was not humorous this time; it represented the plight of the American colonies during the French and Indian War.

Legend has it that Benjamin Franklin criticized the selection of the American Bald Eagle as the symbol of the newly formed United States. He supposedly preferred the Wild Turkey. . . but that's another story!



Christopher Gadsden, the man for whom the Gadsden Flag is named, was one of the founders of The Charleston Sons of Liberty. He earned a fine reputation as a courageous patriot and became known in South Carolina as the “Sam Adams of the South.” In 1775 he left for Philadelphia to represent his home state in the Second Continental Congress.

On October 4, 1775, the merchant vessel *Black Prince* arrived in Philadelphia bringing ominous news. Private letters intended for delivery to Congress warned that the British Government would be sending two ships to the colonies laden with gunpowder and arms intended to supply the British troops.

As a member of the Congressional Marine committee, Gadsden and his fellow members were alarmed at the threatening intelligence and voted to establish a Continental Navy which would initially consist of four ships. In addition to the vessels, Congress authorized the mustering of five companies of marines to accompany the navy in the upcoming clash with the British. Four days later, The *Black Prince* was purchased and work began to outfit her for combat. Esek Hopkins, a Rhode Island man, was chosen to be commander-in-chief of the Navy.

On December 3, 1775, the *Black Prince* was placed in commission under her new name, *Alfred*, and designated Commodore Hopkins’ flagship. The first mission of the newly formed navy would be to intercept the two British ships and divert the munitions to Washington’s desperately ill-equipped army.

As the marines began to assemble in Philadelphia, some of the men carried yellow drums adorned with the image of a rattlesnake and the motto “Don’t Tread on Me” In early December an article under the pseudonym “An American Guesser” appeared in the *Pennsylvania Journal* documenting the sighting. Many believe that the ‘American Guesser’ was Benjamin Franklin himself.

Before sailing in early December, Commodore Hopkins received a very special flag from Christopher Gadsden. Gadsden also presented the flag to his state legislature. The South Carolina congressional journals recorded:

Col. Gadsden presented to the Congress an elegant standard, such as is to be used by the commander in chief of the American navy; being a yellow field, with a lively representation of a rattle-snake in the middle, in the attitude of going to strike, and these words underneath, “Don’t Tread on Me!”

We don’t know the origin of the distinctive flag. Perhaps Col. Gadsden had carried it into battle in defense of the city of Charleston against the British. Certainly both Gadsden and Franklin were in Philadelphia when the marines were assembling with the yellow rattlesnake drums. Did either Benjamin Franklin or Christopher Gadsden design a flag using the marines’ yellow drums as inspiration?

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The Gadsden Flag is one of the historic flags honored by the Sons of the Ameri-

can Revolution. You can see it exhibited at group meetings and carried by the Color Guard at ceremonial events, such as parades. Recently the Tea Party movement has adopted the Gadsden Flag and the yellow banner with the coiled rattlesnake is once again flaunting the spirit of revolution that is an integral part of our American heritage.

No, it's not the Tea Party's flag . . . but I think Ben Franklin would approve!