

# The Revolutionary War Through its Flags

## British Red Ensign



The British Red Ensign was the flag generally recognized as the official flag of the various colonies in North America. It was created in 1707 with the union of Scotland and England into Great Britain. Its canton contains the red St. George's Cross of England and blue St. Andrew's Cross of Scotland. The was flag flown on all colonial and British military and merchant ships.

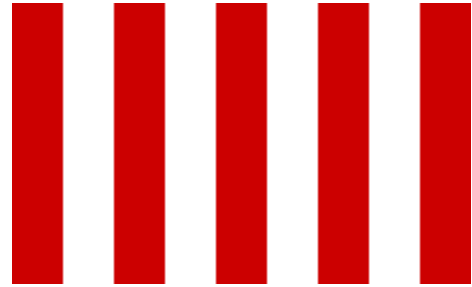
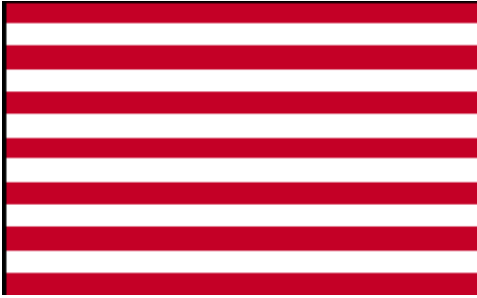
It was the flag surrendered by British General Cornwallis at his defeat at Yorktown on October 19<sup>th</sup> 1781.

The current Union Jack also contains the red St. Patrick's Cross representing Ireland which wasn't used until 1800 and not a part of this flag.



Although not a flag, the political cartoon “Join or Die” was published by Benjamin Franklin in his *Pennsylvania Gazette* on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1754. The cartoon showed the image of a segmented rattlesnake representing the eleven of the colonies. Delaware and Georgia were omitted and the four New England colonies were represented by the segment with the snake’s head. The original intent of the cartoon was to warn the colonies of the danger of disunity in the midst of the French & Indian War. The meaning was later a call for unity against the British policies. The rattlesnake symbolism was used on many flags during the Revolution. The rattlesnake warns us to leave it alone or it will strike back and its eyes are always open to see danger. In 1751, Benjamin Franklin also wrote an article in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* protesting the British policy of sending convicts to the American colonies and suggested that we return the favor by shipping a cargo of rattlesnakes to England to be distributed in the noblemen’s gardens and other places of pleasure.

## Sons of Liberty Flag



To help pay for the French and Indian War, the British Parliament imposed special taxes on the colonies. Since the colonies had no representation in parliament to oppose these taxes, the colonist became discontent. The first of these taxes imposed in 1765 was the “Stamp Act”. Goods brought into the colonies had a stamp placed on them which was the tax and often was nearly the cost of the goods being taxed. By word of mouth, resistance groups known as the Sons of Liberty formed in the colonies to oppose this and other taxes. They were a secret organization.

In October of that year, representatives of 9 colonies met in New York City to discuss actions in what is known as the “Stamp Act Congress”. They adopted a flag, also called the Rebellious Stripes. In 1766 they petitioned the King and Parliament to repeal the “Stamp Act” and through public demonstrations were successful in getting Parliament to repeal the Act, however, other taxes followed. The Sons of Liberty continued to oppose other attempts to tax the colonists. Their next major act was to protest the "Tea Act" in an action that we know in history as “The Boston Tea Party” on December 16, 1773. Three years after the Tea Party, the thirteen colonies had come together in their decision to fight for independence. This flag is thought to be the source of the field in our current flag.

## Taunton Flag



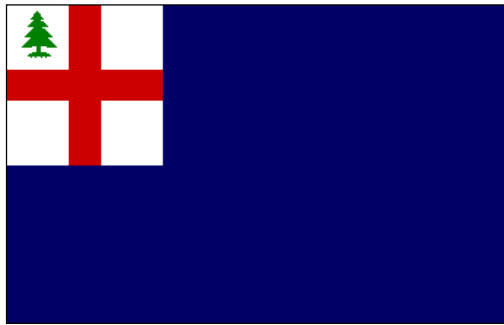
This is the Taunton flag. It is an example of the colonists modifying the British flag, in this case the British Red Ensign. The colonists would usually meet under a large tree in the village greens and the tree would be called the "Liberty Tree". If the town lacked a tree big enough, they erected tall poles as a symbolic tree. This flag was raised on the Liberty Pole in Taunton Massachusetts on October 21, 1774. The Taunton flag wasn't a military color. It was a flag of protest and petition, proclaiming loyalty to the Crown but laying claim on behalf of the colonist to the rights of Englishmen.

## Bedford Flag



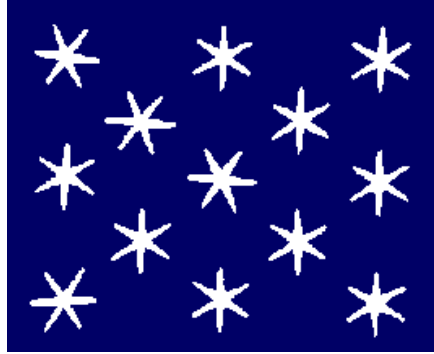
By 1775, the British Government was beginning to seriously worry about the colonists' opposition to their policies and the impact that the Sons of Liberty and a little booklet, "Common Sense", written by Thomas Paine, was having, particularly in the area around Boston, Massachusetts. They decided that by arresting known leaders of the Sons of Liberty, Samuel Adams and John Hancock, and by disarming the colonists of their store of weapons and gunpowder stored in Concord Massachusetts, they could stop a revolt. On April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1775, a large number of British soldiers left Boston and marched to Lexington and on to Concord, Massachusetts. Getting word of the plan, Paul Revere and William Dawes, rode on different routes to warn the patriots, especially Adams and Hancock, that "the Redcoats are coming". As they rode through the country side, they told the patriots along their routes of the British plans and those patriots also sounded the alarm in their local communities and headed for Concord. The first battle of the Revolution was fought on the Lexington Green on April 19<sup>th</sup>, and what has become known as the "shot heard 'round the world" was fired. Following that short battle where the small group of colonists were forced to run, the British went on to Concord Bridge where they were met by a superior force of militias and forced back. The Bedford Flag was carried at the battle by Nathaniel Page, a minuteman from Bedford, Massachusetts. The Latin legend meant "Conquer or die". The arm emerging from the clouds represented the arm of God since the colonist now believed that only with the help of God could they defeat the greatest army on earth.

## Bunker Hill Flag



Following the battles at Lexington and Concord, the colonists from the New England colonies chased the British back to Boston and then laid a siege on Boston. In mid-June of 1775, the British made preparations to break the siege. 1,200 colonial troops under the command of William Prescott, upon learning of the British plans, began fortifying Breed's and the adjoining Bunker Hill to ward off the British. On June 17<sup>th</sup>, the British made three assaults on Breed's Hill sustaining major losses before they finally forced the colonists to retreat when they had run out of ammunition. This battle is known as the Battle of Bunker Hill although the majority of the action took place on Breed's Hill. Contemporary paintings of the battle show the flag now known as the Bunker Hill Flag. This was one of the variations of the New England flags which were either just a pine tree in a blue or red field or as in this case, the pine tree in a quadrant of the Cross of St. George.

## Commander-in-Chiefs Flag

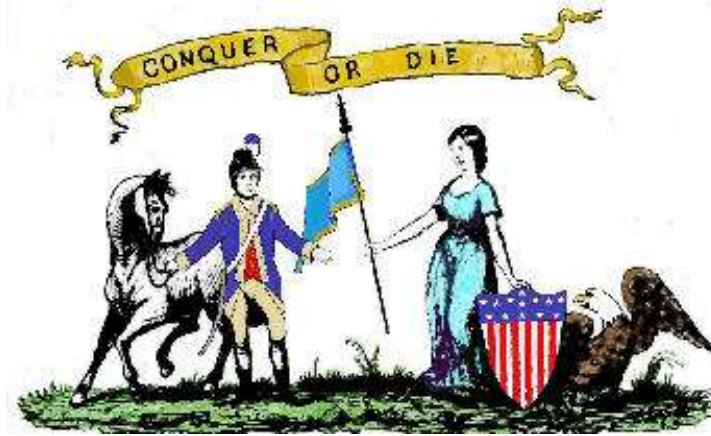


This is the Commander-in-Chiefs flag personal flag. When General Washington was chosen by Congress as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army on June 19, 1775, he assumed command of the Continental Army on July 3, 1775 at Cambridge, Massachusetts. As Commander-in-Chief, he followed typical European tradition by having a flag designed for himself as leader of the army. The flag was flown at Washington's winter encampment at Valley Forge in December 1777.

The flag is a blue field with thirteen 6-pointed stars. The stars are not in the typical fashion, but instead consist of three narrow lines crossing one another with the lines tapering off at the ends.

It has been suggested that these colors are the origin of the field of stars in the canton of our national flag.

## The Commander-in-Chiefs Guard Flag



This is the flag of the Commander-in-Chief's Guard. As the siege of Boston was nearing an end, Gen. Washington perceived that the war would change from a siege into moving campaigns as the British moved out of Boston and were expected to attack elsewhere. Washington believed it would be necessary for him to have a guard to protect his headquarters from a surprise move by the British. In April 1777, he wrote an order asking each Continental regiment to send four of their best to his Headquarters. Thus was born the Commander-in-Chief's Guard under the command of Major Caleb Gibbs. Caleb designed the guard's uniforms as well as the flag. It was at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777 that this flag was first used. There, General Baron von Steuben personally trained the guard and then they subsequently trained the officers of the various regiments while encamped that winter. The Guard served with Gen. Washington at all of his engagements with the British from White Plains in Oct 1776 to Yorktown in Oct 1781.



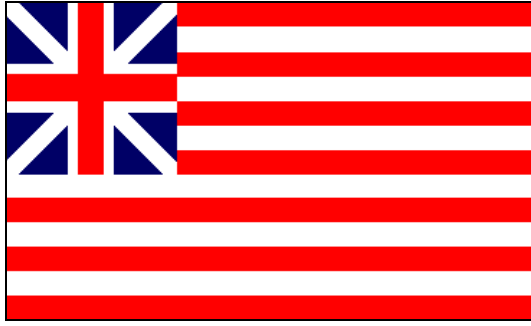
## Gadsden Flag



In October 1775, a merchant ship called The Black Prince returned to Philadelphia from a voyage to England. On board were private letters to the Second Continental Congress that informed them that the British government was sending two ships to America loaded with arms and gunpowder for the British troops. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Continental Congress knowing that General Washington needed those arms more than the British, hatched a plan to capture the cargo ships. They authorized the creation of a Continental Navy, starting with four ships. To accompany the Navy on their mission, Congress also authorized the mustering of five companies of Marines. The frigate that carried the information from England, the Black Prince, was purchased, converted to a man-of-war, and renamed the “Alfred”. Commodore Esek Hopkins was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Navy and the “Alfred” was assigned as his flagship.

Col. Christopher Gadsden, was a leader of the Sons of Liberty in South Carolina, a representative of South Carolina at the Continental Congress, and one of three members of the Marine Committee who decided to outfit and man the “Alfred” and its sister ships. He presented the Gadsden Flag to Commodore Hopkins to be his personal standard on the “Alfred”. It is known that some of the marines mustering into service at the time carried yellow drums with the rattlesnake symbol. It’s unclear whether Gadsden took his inspiration from the Marine drums or whether he came up with the design himself. As the newly appointed 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. on the “Alfred”, John Paul Jones, was the first to raise this flag on its first mission.

# Grand Union



This is the Grand Union flag. It was the first unofficial flag of the united colonies. The thirteen stripes signified the thirteen united colonies. The British Union in the canton symbolized a continued loyalty by the colonists to the British government.

The flag was raised on Prospect Hill, Somerville Mass in January 1776 when the Continental Army was reorganized following the end of the initial enlistment period of 1775. Gen. George Washington called it the Grand Union Flag in one of his letters. It remained our unofficial national flag until June 14, 1777 when the Continental Congress authorized the Stars and Stripes.

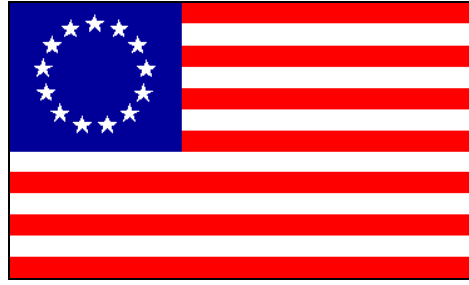
## Morgan's Rifle Corps Flag



In February 1776, Gen. Washington ordered that every Regiment in the Continental Army have a regimental flag. This is the flag of the 11<sup>th</sup> Virginia Regiment also known as Morgan's Rifle Corps. In June, 1775 during the siege of Boston Virginia sent two rifle companies to participate in the siege. Daniel Morgan, a cousin of Daniel Boone, was commander of one of these. He had been an officer in the Virginia militia since the French and Indian War. Later that year, Morgan and his company joined Col. Benedict Arnold in the invasion of Quebec where he was taken prisoner. He was exchanged in a prisoner exchange in January 1777 and subsequently promoted to Col. and given command of the 11<sup>th</sup> Virginia Regiment. Morgan's company had a significant advantage carrying lighter and more accurate rifles Instead of the smooth-bore weapons used by the British and most American companies. Morgan's company used guerrilla tactics first shooting the Indian guides who led the British forces through the rugged terrain as well as their officers and artillerymen. The rifle corps played a significant role in the Battle of Saratoga and the surrender of Gen. Burgoyne's forces in October 1777.

Morgan was promoted to Brig. Gen. in 1780 and served under Nathaniel Greene with the assignment to harass the British in the back country of South Carolina. British Gen., Cornwallis sent Col. Banastre Tarleton's British Legion to pursue him until, on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1781, Morgan and his Rifle Corps engaged and defeated Tarleton's British Legion at the Battle of Cowpens, the turning point of the Revolution in the South.

## The Betsy Ross Flag



This is the Betsy Ross flag. It was adopted on June 14, 1777 by the Continental Congress who resolved “That the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes alternating red and white; that the Union by thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation.”

This flag used 5-pointed stars rather than the 6 or 8 pointed stars used previously in accord with rules of heraldry (the more points, the more important, and 6 points had been considered to be the minimum number).

The story of why 5-pointed stars were used is that Washington and George Ross went to the house of recently widowed Betsey Ross, the widow of John Ross, the nephew of George Ross who had recently been killed guarding munitions. John had an upholstery business that Betsy was trying to continue although not a good seamstress. To give her some business she was asked to make the flag but didn't know how to cut the 6-pointed stars requested and instead recommended a 5-pointed star that could be perfectly cut using a simple fold-and-cut method.

Congress didn't specify how the stars should be arranged thus there are many variations in the flags that followed. The circular design in this flag is believed to be the design made by George Washington, Francis Hopkins, and Betsy Ross and was intended to show that all of the new states had equal status.  
the Revolution.

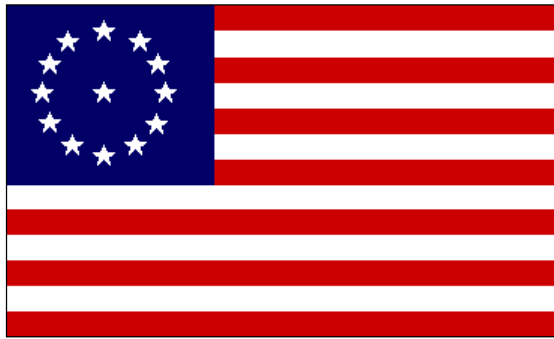
# Serapis



One variation of the flag design made by Congress was the Serapis flag. It is named for the British ship His Majesty's Ship "Serapis" that John Paul Jones captured in one of the most famous sea battles of the Revolution on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1779.

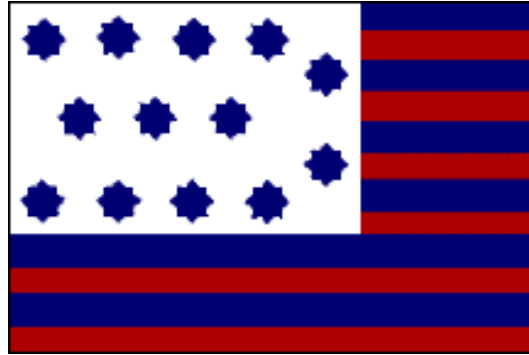
In winning the battle, Jones' own ship, the "Bon-Homme Richard" was so badly damaged that he was forced to abandon his sinking ship and transfer to the "Serapis". It was this flag that flew above the "Serapis" when it sailed into the Dutch port of Texel after the battle.

## Cowpens Flag



The Cowpens or the 3<sup>rd</sup> Maryland Regimental Flag was used at the battle of Cowpens. The war in the North continued for several years with neither side winning a significant victory. British General Clinton ordered his troops, commanded by General Cornwallis to the southern colonies to defeat the patriots in the south and then once they were defeated, the British would return north to finish off the remaining resistance to British rule. After several British successes, and in particular, the capture of Charlestown, South Carolina, the emboldened British moved into the countryside. The main British forces were under the command of Col. Banastre Tarleton with his British Legion of 250 light cavalymen and another 900 infantry soldiers. On January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1781, Tarleton, after his success at the battle of Camden, South Carolina pursued Gen. Daniel Morgan and his forces to Cowpens, North Carolina. Gen. Morgan developed a strategy that is still required study at the military academies today, using his militia to fire two shots and then retreat back to their rear as if fleeing the battle field. The pursuing British army and Tarleton's British Legion, expecting another easy victory, followed and fell into Morgan's trap where the Continental Army and Morgan's riflemen awaited them. Tarleton's Legion was decimated losing 85% of his cavalry. 110 British soldiers were killed and 712 taken prisoner.

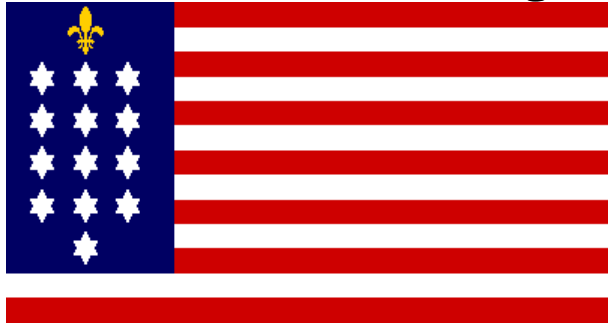
## Guilford Courthouse Flag



Immediately following the defeat at Cowpens, Gen. Cornwallis ordered his army, now joined by two battalions of foot soldiers and German Jagers, to pursue Gen. Morgan. The pursuit continued for the next several weeks with Gen. Morgan's troops joining those of Gen. Nathaniel Greene in late January. Finally on March 15<sup>th</sup> 1781, the opposing armies engaged at Guilford Courthouse, North Carolina. Although the patriots eventually retreated giving the victory to the British, their victory was achieved with the loss of one-fourth of their troops while the patriot losses were small in comparison. Gen. Greene's militiamen had halted the British advance through the Carolinas and turned them back to the seaport towns. This was one of the bloodiest battles of the long war.

This flag was raised over the Guilford Courthouse, North Carolina on March 15, 1781. It has the unique elements of an elongated canton and blue stripes.

## French Alliance Flag



Following the defeat at Cowpens and the losses at the battle of Guilford Courthouse, Cornwallis' army with now less than 1,500 troops and badly needing to resupply, moved into Virginia and eventually to Yorktown where they expected reinforcements to be sent to them from New York by the British Commander-in-Chief, Sir Henry Clinton, and supplies from England. Washington knew of the British plans and decided to dispatch his army to the South. However he circulated a false plan that he was instead going to try to retake New York. Clinton, fearing this attack, delayed any movement of reinforcements to Gen. Cornwallis at Yorktown. Meanwhile James Rivington, a printer thought to be a loyalist but in reality one of the six members of Washington's "Culper Spy Ring" in New York City, somehow obtained a copy of the British naval codebook which he forwarded to Washington, who in turn sent a copy to French Admiral De Grasse. Now the French naval forces had full knowledge of the signal flags used by the British navy, giving them a significant advantage in any sea battle. De Grasse was able to block any British supplies from reaching Yorktown by sea. At the same time, Clinton, fearful of an imminent attack on New York, held back on sending any reinforcements or supplies to Cornwallis while Washington with his French allies, Rochambeau and Lafayette and their troops moved by land to lay siege on Cornwallis at Yorktown. Trapped, Gen. Cornwallis finally surrendered his army on October 19, 1781.

In 1781 and 1782, in honor of help provided by France in the Revolution, a special U.S. Flag appeared. It consisted of 13 red and white stripes with the canton containing 13 white stars in rows of three with a single star below and a gold fleur-de-lis above.

Following the Surrender at Yorktown, the war-weary British Parliament began negotiations for a peace treaty. The Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1783 and finally ratified by all parties on April 9<sup>th</sup> 1784 recognizing the United States as a free, sovereign, and independent nation.