

History of the Gadsden flag



The Gadsden flag is a historical American flag with a yellow field depicting a rattlesnake coiled and ready to strike. Positioned below the snake is the legend "Dont Tread on Me"[*sic*]. The flag was designed by and is named after American general and statesman Christopher Gadsden. It was also used by the United States Marine Corps as an early motto flag.

In the fall of 1775, the British were occupying Boston and the young Continental Army was holed up in Cambridge, woefully short on arms and ammunition. At the Battle of Bunker Hill, Washington's troops had been so low on gunpowder that they were ordered "don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes."

In October, a merchant ship called *The Black Prince* returned to Philadelphia from a voyage to England. On board were private letters informing the Second Continental Congress that the British government was sending two ships to America loaded with arms and gunpowder for the British troops.

A plan was hatched to capture these British ships. They authorized the creation of a Continental Navy, starting with four ships. The frigate that carried the information from England, the *Black Prince*, was one of the four. It was purchased, converted to a man-of-war, and renamed the *Alfred*.

To aid in this, the Second Continental Congress also authorized the mustering of five companies of Marines to accompany the Navy on their first mission. The first Marines that enlisted were from Philadelphia and they carried drums painted yellow, depicting a coiled rattlesnake with thirteen rattles, and the motto "Don't Tread On Me." This is the first recorded mention of the future Gadsden flag's symbolism.

At the Congress, Continental Colonel Christopher Gadsden represented his home state of South Carolina. He was an American patriot who had led the Sons of Liberty in South Carolina starting in 1765, and was later made a colonel in the Continental Army. He was also one of three members of the Marine Committee that was outfitting the first mission of what would one day be the United States Navy.

Before the departure of that first mission, the newly appointed commander-in-chief of the Navy, Commodore Esek Hopkins, received the yellow rattlesnake flag described above from Gadsden to serve as his distinctive personal standard. It's likely that John Paul Jones, as the first lieutenant on the *Alfred*, ran it up the gaff. Gadsden also presented a copy of this flag to his state legislature in Charleston. This is recorded in the South Carolina congressional journals:

"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!"

Considered one of the first flags of the United States, the flag was later replaced by the Stars and Stripes (or Old Glory) flag. Since the Revolution, the flag has seen times of reintroduction as both a symbol of American patriotism and as a symbol of disagreement with the government.

For instance, unofficial usage of the Gadsden flag by the U.S. government has been seen, particularly in the wake of September 11, 2001, most notably by the Customs Service and harbor patrol boats in U.S. ports and individuals serving abroad in the U.S. military. Beginning in 2009 the flag became a popular display of The Tea Party movement.



The First Navy Jack (shown on the right), which was directly related to the Gadsden flag, has also been in use by the U.S. Navy, and since the terrorist attacks it is flown on all active naval ships.

Sources: <http://www.gadsden.info/history.html>; www.foundingfathers.info; wikipedia.org/wiki/Gadsden_flag, and multiple links from those sites