

# 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](#)". 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.

## Snake symbolism

The use of the [timber rattlesnake](#) as a symbol of the American colonies can be traced back to the publications of [Benjamin Franklin](#). In 1751, he made the first reference to the rattlesnake in a satirical commentary published in his [Pennsylvania Gazette](#). It had been the policy of [Britain](#) to send convicted criminals to America, so Franklin suggested that they thank the British by sending rattlesnakes to [England](#).<sup>[1]</sup>



Benjamin Franklin's "[Join, or Die](#)" cartoon

In 1754, during the [French and Indian War](#), Franklin published his famous woodcut of a snake cut into eight sections. It represented the colonies, with [New England](#) joined together as the head and [South Carolina](#) as the tail, following their order along the coast. Under the snake was the message "[Join, or Die](#)". This was the first [political cartoon](#) published in an American [newspaper](#).

As the [American Revolution](#) grew, the snake began to see more use as a symbol of the colonies. In 1774, [Paul Revere](#) added it to the title of his paper, the *Massachusetts Spy*, as a snake joined to fight a British [dragon](#).<sup>[2]</sup> In December 1775, Benjamin Franklin published an essay in the [Pennsylvania Journal](#) under the pseudonym *American Guesser* in which he suggested that the rattlesnake was a good symbol for the American spirit:

"I recollected that her eye excelled in brightness, that of any other animal, and that she has no eye-lids—She may therefore be esteemed an emblem of vigilance.—She never begins an attack, nor, when once engaged, ever surrenders: She is therefore an emblem of magnanimity and true courage.—As if anxious to prevent all pretensions of quarreling with her, the weapons with which nature has furnished her, she conceals in the roof of her mouth, so that, to those who are unacquainted with her, she appears to be a most defenseless animal; and even when those weapons are shewn and extended for her defense, they appear weak and contemptible; but their wounds however small, are decisive and fatal:—Conscious of this, she never wounds till she has generously given notice, even to her enemy, and cautioned him against the danger of treading on her.—Was I wrong, Sir, in thinking this a strong picture of the temper and conduct of America?"<sup>[3]</sup>

# Gadsden's flag



Gadsden's flag in an 1885 school book

In fall 1775, the [United States Navy](#) was established to intercept incoming British ships carrying war supplies to the British troops in the colonies. To aid in this, the [Second Continental Congress](#) 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 one of three members of the Marine Committee who were outfitting the first naval mission. It is unclear whether Gadsden took his inspiration from the Marines' drums, or if he inspired them himself.

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.

Gadsden also presented a copy of this flag to the South Carolina [legislature](#) in [Charleston, South Carolina](#). This was 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!"

## Contemporary significance

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



## First U.S. Navy Jack



Flag of the [Free State Project](#)

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.<sup>[[citation needed](#)]</sup> The [First Navy Jack](#), 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.<sup>[[citation needed](#)]</sup> The rattlesnake from the flag is shown on the [U.S. Army's Drill Sergeant Identification Badge](#).

Athletic apparel company [Nike](#) uses the image of a snake coiled around a [soccer](#) ball for an ongoing, patriotic "Don't Tread On Me" campaign in support of the [United States men's national soccer team](#). The phrase has become a rallying cry for American soccer fans and the Gadsden flag can occasionally be seen at national team games. A representation of the rattlesnake is contained on the inside of their uniforms to be used in in the [2010 World Cup](#).<sup>[4]</sup> Coincidentally, USA opened the World Cup play against England. In 2006, the campaign was accompanied by a hip-hop song performed by team member [Clint Dempsey](#) entitled "Don't Tread". The [Philadelphia Union Major League Soccer](#) expansion team, set to play in 2010, incorporated the coiled snake into its logo that was unveiled in May, 2009. The only differences between the team's logo and the snake on the Gadsden flag is that the snake on the team's logo lacks the rattle on its tail, and that it is displayed on a blue and gold background in the likeness of the municipal flag of the city of Philadelphia.

A Gadsden flag was presented to the town manager of [Killington, Vermont](#), by a representative of the [Free State Project](#) after that town's 2004 vote to pursue secession from [Vermont](#). The Free State Project adopted a unique version of the Gadsden Flag which bears the organization's mascot, a porcupine, rather than a snake.

On June 17, 2010 a dozen Gadsden Flags were presented to each elected board member at a public hearing of the Town of [Grafton, New York](#) by a citizen in opposition to the board's decision to replace the elected Assessors with a Sole Appointed Assessor without an opportunity for a public referendum vote on the issue. The action of the citizen represents the idea that "Taxation Without Elected Representation" is the right of the electors, not the elected.<sup>[5]</sup>

The Boy Scouts of America frequently fly this flag at campouts, ceremonies, and jamborees.<sup>[[citation needed](#)]</sup>

The flag appears in the [Disney](#) animated television series [Recess](#), raised above the home of the character Gustav, whose father is a Marine. It is seen in the first episode's segment titled, "The New Kid," which addresses individuality and tyranny.

For historical reasons, the flag is still popularly flown in Charleston, South Carolina, being the city where Christopher Gadsden first presented the flag, and where it was commonly used during the revolution, along with the [blue and white crescent flag](#) of pre-Civil War [South Carolina](#). It also appears in a historical context in the 2000 film [The Patriot](#) in Charleston and in battle alongside the Old Glory flag. [Metallica](#) later used the flag on their self-dubbed "[Black Album](#)" as a song name ("[Don't Tread on Me](#)"), and on the cover of the album, the snake from the flag is in the lower right hand corner. 311's eighth studio album is titled "don't tread on me" released 2005, and also of significance is the Cro-Mags' track of the same title. The New Jersey based punk

rock group [Titus Andronicus](#) features one on the cover of their self-titled album, and the flag is frequently seen with them on tour. The flag has also been used as a critical prop in several movies and TV shows, such as in the [final episode](#) of *Jericho*, where it was flown to signal the titular town's independence. The flag also hung on the wall of [Sam Seaborn](#)'s office in the television series "The West Wing". Inspecting Sam's flag carefully, you will notice the prop was constructed in error. The bottom stripe is white instead of red.

## Tea Party symbol

Beginning in 2009, the Gadsden Flag has become an adopted symbol of the American [Tea Party movement](#).<sup>[6][7]</sup> Tea Party activists have embraced the "Don't Tread on Me" flag and its message.<sup>[8]</sup> Nationwide it serves as an alternative to the [stars and stripes](#)<sup>[9]</sup> for Tea Party protesters upset at the current government yet still feeling patriotic.<sup>[10]</sup> It was also seen being displayed by members of Congress at Tea Party rallies.<sup>[11]</sup> Some lawmakers have dubbed it a political symbol due to the Tea Party connection,<sup>[9]</sup> and the political nature of Tea Party supporters.<sup>[12]</sup>