

**THEME:** The Revolutionary War

**TOPIC:** The Battle of Yorktown, The Join or Die Flag, The Gadsden Flag

**PREPARATION / PROPS:** Decorate with a Gadsden flag, small American flags, poster including: a copy of a painting of George Washington firing the first shot at the Battle of Yorktown, a map of the Battle of Yorktown, a picture of US Postage Stamp (1931 issue) depicting Rochambeau, George Washington and De Grasse to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the victory at Yorktown, a copy of Ben Franklin's cartoon - "Join, or Die", First Navy Jack Flag

**LESSON: Battle of Yorktown.** The Battle of Yorktown was the last major land battle of the Revolutionary War, and a decisive victory for American/French forces. The American forces were under the command of General George Washington. The French forces were under the command of General Rochambeau. The British forces were under the command of Lieutenant General Lord Cornwallis. The battle took place from October 9 through October 17, 1781. Cornwallis' surrender prompted the British government to end the war, thus creating the independent nation of The United States of America.



The battle took place in Yorktown, Virginia – a peninsula (body of land surrounded by water on 3 sides). This made it easier for the French Fleet (or navy) to come to the aid of Washington and Rochambeau, thus surrounding the British forces.

French forces landed in Rhode Island in 1780 to help the Americans in the war against the British. The French and American forces met north of New York City in 1781. General Rochambeau convinced Washington to attack the British in Yorktown, VA, instead of attacking New York City, because the French Fleet (or navy) was due to be in the area of Yorktown in October and could help in the assault. He also felt an attack on New York City was unlikely to succeed. General Washington agreed, and the two armies began "The Celebrated March" from north of New York City to Virginia in August 1781.

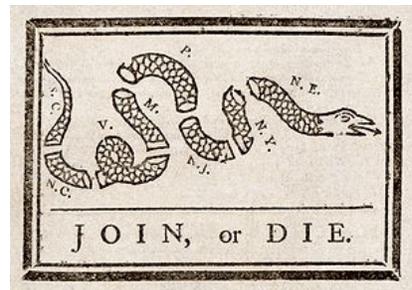
On October 9, all French and American guns were in place at approximately 5:00pm. General Washington himself fired the first shot. The attacks by the Americans and French continued for 8 days, crippling the British forces. Cornwallis agreed the situation was hopeless, and on October 17, a drummer appeared, followed by an officer waving a white handkerchief, which signals surrender. Cornwallis refused to meet formally with Washington. He instead had Brigadier General Charles O' Hara present the sword of surrender to Washington and Rochambeau. The British soldiers marched out and laid down their arms in between the French and American armies. The American colonies were one giant step closer to freedom!

**Ben Franklin "Join, or Die" Cartoon.** "Join, or Die" is a well-known political cartoon, created by Benjamin Franklin and first published in his Pennsylvania Gazette on May 9, 1754.

The original publication by the Gazette is the earliest known pictorial representation of colonial union produced by a British colonist in America. It is a woodcut showing a snake severed into eighths, with each segment labeled with the initials of a British American colony or region. New England was represented as one segment, rather than the four colonies it was at that time. In addition, Delaware and Georgia were omitted completely. Thus, it has 8 segments of snake rather than the traditional 13 colonies. The cartoon appeared along with Franklin's editorial about the "disunited state" of the colonies, and helped make his point about the importance of colonial unity. During that era, there was a superstition that a snake which had been cut into pieces would come back to life if the pieces were put together before sunset.

The difference between the use of "Join or Die" in 1754 and 1765 is that Franklin had designed it to unite the colonies for 'management of Indian relations' and defense against France, but in 1765 American colonists used it to urge colonial unity against the British. Also during this time the phrase "join, or die" changed to "unite, or die," in some states such as New York and Pennsylvania.

Soon after the publication of the cartoon during the Stamp Act Congress, variations were printed in New York, Massachusetts, and a couple months later it had spread to Virginia and South Carolina. In some states, such as New York and Pennsylvania, the cartoon continued to be published week after week for over a year.



The Gadsden Flag. Although Benjamin Franklin helped create the American rattlesnake symbol, his name isn't generally attached to the rattlesnake flag. The yellow "Don't Tread on Me" standard is usually called a Gadsden flag, and less commonly, a Hopkins flag.

These two individuals, Gadsden and Hopkins, were mulling about Philadelphia at the same time, making their own important contributions to American history and the history of the rattlesnake flag. Christopher Gadsden was an American patriot if ever there was one. He led the Sons of Liberty in South Carolina starting in 1765, and was later made a colonel in the Continental Army. In 1775 he was in Philadelphia representing his home state in the Continental Congress. He was also one of three members of the Marine Committee who decided to outfit and man the *Alfred* and its sister ships.

Gadsden and Congress chose a Rhode Island man, Esek Hopkins, as the commander-in-chief of the Navy. The flag that Hopkins used as his personal standard on the *Alfred* is the one we would now recognize. It's likely that John Paul Jones, as the first lieutenant on the *Alfred*, ran it up the gaff.



It's generally accepted that Hopkins' flag was presented to him by Christopher Gadsden, who felt it was especially important for the commodore to have a distinctive personal standard. 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!"

The Revolutionary standard, The Gadsden flag, and other rattlesnake flags were widely used during the American Revolution. There was no standard American flag at the time. People were free to choose their own banners. The Minutemen of Culpeper County, Virginia, chose a flag that looks generally like the Gadsden flag, but also includes the famous words of the man who organized the Virginia militia, Patrick Henry, i.e. "Liberty or Death." The First Navy Jack Flag features an uncoiled rattlesnake winding its way across a field of thirteen red and white stripes.

One of the most interesting variations is the flag of Colonel John Proctor's Independent Battalion from Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania.

Tradition holds that in May 1775, when the citizens of Westmoreland gathered at the Hannastown Tavern and issued their own Declaration of Independence, they tore down the British flag that was flying there and made some modifications. The original flag had an open red field with the British ensign in the upper corner. They painted a coiled rattlesnake and its "Don't Tread on Me" warning onto the center, as if ready to strike at the Union Jack. This flag is one of the few that's still intact. It's at the William Penn Memorial Museum in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

After the Revolution, rattlesnake flags became less common. General Washington and many members of Congress preferred stars, stripes, and more conventional symbols, such as the eagle. Rattlesnake flags, in particular the yellow Gadsden Flag, have made a comeback as a symbol of the Tea Party and other groups who stand in opposition to the current wave of Progressivism and Socialism in modern American politics.

## **DISCUSSION POINTS:**

- George Washington listened to the advice of General Rochambeau and they decided to meet the British in Yorktown instead of New York City. What does that tell you about Washington? What does it tell you about his relationship with Rochambeau – did they trust each other? Respect each other? Can you think of some times when you consulted a parent or a friend and took their advice? How did it work out?
- Why was it important for the colonies join together? Do you think the people in the colonies liked each other? Where they different? What did they have in common? Are people from different states much different today? What joins us together now?
- Do you think a coiled rattlesnake, ready to strike, was a good symbol? Snakes like to be left alone, but will defend themselves if threatened. Can you think of any other symbols that would convey the same message? What would happen if a rattlesnake bit someone in the colonial era? Knowing someone would likely die from a rattlesnake bite, what does the symbol tell you about the early Americans?

**ACTIVITY:** The British Surrender at Yorktown

**Materials:** A “drum” - coffee can or round box with a strap, drumsticks, white handkerchief, 4 tricorne hats, a toy sword, toy guns and swords to accommodate the number in your group

**Method:** Choose volunteers for the several roles – Cornwallis, O'Hara, Washington, Rochambeau, a drummer, an officer, and British and American soldiers. Act out the surrender by having the drummer appear, followed by the officer waving the white handkerchief. Then have Cornwallis watch from a distance, while O'Hara hands his sword to Washington and Rochambeau. Then have the British soldiers walk up one at a time and put their toy gun in a pile. Have them make up words they think may have been said. Use accents to make it more fun! Be dramatic!

**ACTIVITY:** Make Your Own Flag

**Materials:** Construction paper 9”x12”, markers, crayons, pencils, pens, die cuts, scissors, glue sticks, tape

**Method:** This activity can be used in stead of the Yorktown Surrender or in addition to it if there is enough time. Remind the kids that the flags you showed them have meanings – to join together for a common goal, and to warn against attacking. Have each of the kids make a flag that has meaning. It could be one that the colonists could have used, or one that has meaning in their own lives. If there is time, each of the kids can explain their flag to the group.

**REFERENCES:** “We the People” by Lynne Cheney, [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org), [www.gadsdenculpeper.com](http://www.gadsdenculpeper.com) (History section), [www.earlyamerica.com](http://www.earlyamerica.com)