



Introducing the Join or Die Flag



The “Join or Die” flag was fashioned after a 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 cut into eighths, with each segment labeled with the initials of one of the thirteen American colonies or regions. New England was represented as one segment, rather than the four colonies it was at that time. In addition, Delaware (then a part of Pennsylvania) and Georgia were omitted completely. Thus, it has eight 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. This cartoon was used in the French and Indian War to symbolize that the colonies needed to join together with Great Britain to defeat the French and Indians. It became a symbol of colonial freedom during the American Revolutionary War.

The cartoon depicts the early American colonies as a snake divided into eight segments. Toward the head of the snake, “NE” represents New England, followed by “NY” (New York), “NJ” (New Jersey), “P” (Pennsylvania), “M” (Maryland), “V” (Virginia), “NC” (North Carolina) and “SC” (South Carolina). Even though there were four “New England” colonies, Franklin lumped them into one category to stress the need for colonial unity. At the time, the colonists fiercely debated expanding west of the Appalachian

Mountains and fighting the French and their Indian allies. A longtime advocate of inter-colonial union in dealings with Indians, Franklin helped make such a union an important agenda item for the Albany Congress, convened shortly after the snake image was published, on earlier orders from the Board of Trade, the British advisory council on colonial policy, with the goal of establishing one treaty between all the colonies and the Six Nations of Iroquois.

Robert C. Newbold has speculated that Georgia was probably excluded from the snake image, “because, as a defenseless frontier area, it could contribute nothing to common security.” Only three laws had been passed in Georgia since its founding as a colony in 1732, prompting a historian of the colony and state to conclude, “The hope that Georgia might become a self-reliant province of soldier-farmers had not succeeded, and even the early debtor-haven dream had not come to pass.” Delaware, Newbold added, “shared the same governor as Pennsylvania; hence the *Gazette* probably considered it as included with Pennsylvania.”

The Albany Plan, drafted during the congress, also did not include Georgia and Delaware in its proposed colonial union for mutual defense and security, specifying only Massachusetts Bay, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. The segmented snake image was revived in a number of newspapers during the 1765 Stamp Act conflict, again without reference to Georgia and Delaware. In 1774, when the segmented snake image, along with the “Join or Die” slogan, was employed as a masthead for newspapers in York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania, a pointed tail labeled “G” for Georgia had been added.