The Gadsden Flag ©

Although Christopher Gadsden was born in Charleston, he found his way to the Georgetown area in his early business life. Popular historian Walter Edgar writes, "His story began in February 1724 when Thomas and Elizabeth Gadsden welcomed their new son into the household. Young Christopher's education included a stint in England and a clerkship with the Philadelphia merchant Thomas Lawrence. It was this latter experience that prepared him for the lucrative business career he was to pursue as an adult. After serving as a supply master on a merchant vessel that was pressed into service during the French and Indian War, Gadsden became a merchant dealing furs, slaves, land, and country produce. His business acumen resulted in a chain of stores in Charleston, Georgetown, and the Cheraws as well as plantations in the Pee Dee region."

After the decimation of the Native American tribes in eastern South Carolina by the 1740s by wars and diseases, the Indian trails were natural beginning for trading centers. Taking advantage of this, James Gillespie, in association with Christopher Gadsden, began a trade and navigation business around 1740. By 1750, Gadsden and his wife purchased land on the Black River, buying back land his father had owned but sold. After building a spacious house, he named his small kingdom Benevento Plantation, Italian for "Welcome". The name was later changed to Beneventum. Its location is just off U.S. Highway 701 North, about five miles from the city limits of Georgetown.

The plantation house is significant as one of the earliest main houses of the Georgetown County rice plantations. Beneventum was one of the earliest successful rice plantations in the area. The home and about 190 acres still exist and are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Christopher Gadsden was an American patriot of the highest order. He was one of the founders and led the Sons of Liberty in South Carolina starting in 1765, and was later made a colonel in the Continental Army.

We know that Christopher Gadsden was present in Georgetown in 1774 and a member of Prince George Winyah Church. A document has been found in the archives bearing his signature where he was one of the Prince George subscribers pledging money for the relief of the "Boston Sufferers" following the Boston Tea Party of December 16, 1773. We also know that he was very active and on the move from Georgetown, to Charleston to Phildelphia where he represented his home state in the Continental Congress. He rose to the rank of general in the Continental Army during the American Revolution, was vice president – later changed to lieutenant governor - of South Carolina and was elected governor of the state. He declined because of health reasons.

One of the most enduring acts of Christopher Gadsden is his creation of a special flag that became a symbol of liberty. He was one of three members of the Marine Committee who decided to outfit and man the Alfred and its sister ship. He and Commodore Esek Hopkins were mulling about Philadelphia at the same time. The flag that Hopkins used as his personal standard on the Alfred is one we would now recognize as the "Don't Tread on Me" flag. It's likely that John Paul Jones, as the first lieutenant on the Alfred, ran it up the gaff. 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, or less commonly, a Hopkins flag, for Commodore Esek Hopkins. 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 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!" This flag appears to be a First Navy Jack.

When the British laid siege to Charleston in 1780, John Rutledge, as president of the council fled to North Carolina to ensure a "government in exile" should the city fall. Gadsden remained, along with Governor Rawlins Lowndes. General Benjamin Lincoln surrendered the Continental Army garrison on May 12 to General Sir Henry Clinton. At the same time, Gadsden represented the civil government and surrendered the city. He was sent on parole to his Charleston house.

After General Sir Henry Clinton returned to New York, the new British commander in the South, General Cornwallis changed the rules. On the morning of August 27, he arrested about 20 of the civil officers then on parole, Gadsden among them. They were marched as prisoners to a ship and taken to St. Augustine, Florida. When they arrived, Governor Tonyn offered the freedom of the town if they would give their parole. Most accepted, but Gadsden refused claiming that the British had already violated one parole, and he could not give his word to a false system. As a result, he spent the next 42 weeks in solitary confinement in a prison room at the old Spanish fortress of Castillo de San Marcos. When they were finally released in 1781, they were sent by merchant ship to Philadelphia. Once there, Gadsden learned of the defeat of Cornwallis at Cowpens and withdrawal to Yorktown. He hurried home, to help the restoration of South Carolina's civil government.

The snake, it turns out, was something of a Colonial-era meme, evidently originated by Benjamin Franklin. In 1751, Franklin made the satirical suggestion that the colonies might repay the Crown for shipping convicts to America by distributing rattlesnakes around England, "particularly in the Gardens of the Prime Ministers, the Lords of Trade and Members of Parliament; for to them we are most particularly obliged." Later, in what may be America's first-ever political cartoon, Franklin published the famous "Join or Die" image, which depicts the American colonies as segments of a snake. Among other borrowers, Paul Revere put the snake in a seventeen-seventies newspaper nameplate. Gadsden's venomous remix, for a flag used by Continental sailors, depicted the reassembled rattler as a righteous threat to trampling imperialism. "The origins of 'Don't Tread On Me,' " Leepson summarizes, "were completely, one hundred percent anti-British, and pro-revolution." Indeed, that E.E.O.C. directive agrees, "It is clear that the Gadsden Flag originated in the Revolutionary War in a non-racial context."