

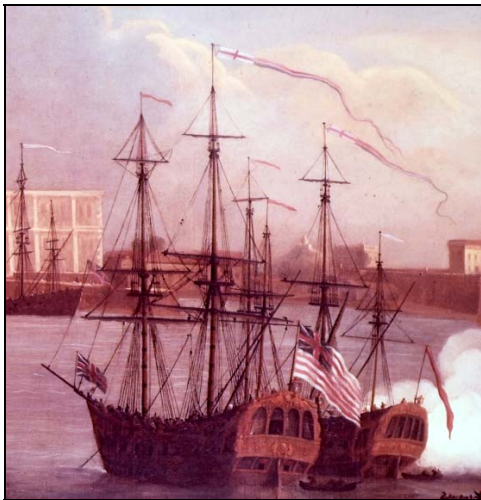


**Sir Charles Fawcett Redux:
The Historical Connection between the East India Company Flag
and the American Continental Colors**

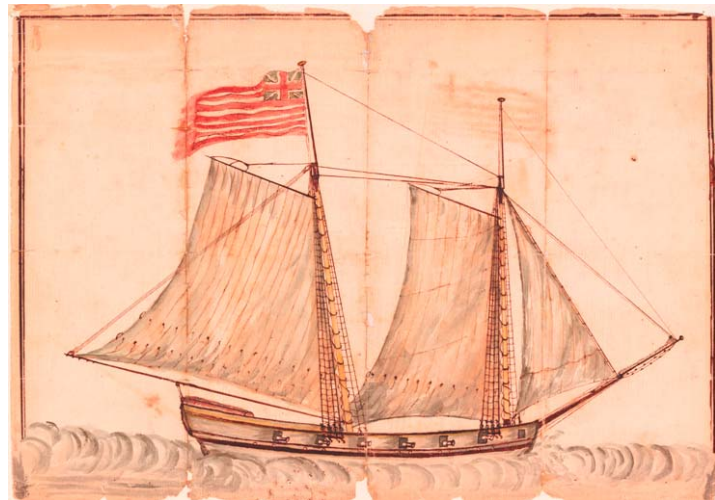
Peter Ansoff

Abstract

An article entitled “The Striped Flag of the East India Company, and its Connexion [sic] with the American ‘Stars and Stripes’ ”, by Sir Charles Fawcett, was published in the British journal *The Mariner’s Mirror* in 1937. This article stated that “. . . the assertion that the Grand Union Flag [i.e., the Continental Colors] was copied from the East India Company’s flag has *prima facie* probability.” However, a careful reading reveals that it does not present any credible evidence of a relationship between the two flags, and, arguably, supports the opposite conclusion. Also, many of its references to the history and historiography of early American flags have become outdated since the article was written. This paper summarizes current scholarship concerning the origins of the Continental Colors, and re-evaluates Fawcett’s evidence and conclusions. Two appendices address issues related to the history and historiography of the Continental Colors.



East India Company ship in Bombay, 1732



American schooner *Royal Savage* on Lake Champlain, 1776

Sir Charles Fawcett Redux: The Historical Connection between the East India Company Flag and the American Continental Colors

INTRODUCTION

Sometime in the early 17th century, the English East India Company (EIC)¹ created an ensign to be flown by its ships when operating east of the Cape of Good Hope. The flag had a field of red and white horizontal stripes, and a white canton containing the red cross of St. George. After the union of England and Scotland in 1707, the canton was modified to display the combined crosses of St. George and St. Andrew, in the same manner as other British ensigns. The resulting flag was used by the EIC in eastern waters throughout the 18th century. (Figure 1)

In the fall of 1775, on the other side of the world, the American colonists were fitting out a squadron of converted merchant ships to defend themselves against the perceived depredations of the mother country. In December, they raised on their new flagship an ensign that was, for all practical purposes, identical to the EIC ensign. Their “Continental Colors” was the *de facto* flag of the fledgling United States until the adoption of the Stars and Stripes in June 1777. (Figure 2) While no documentary evidence links the creation of the two flags, their similarity has intrigued historians for over a century. In 1937, an article on the subject by Sir Charles Fawcett, an Indian civil servant and historian of British India, was published in the British journal *The Mariners’ Mirror*.² (Figure 3) According to Fawcett, “. . . the assertion that the [Continental Colors] was copied from the East India Company’s flag has *prima facie* probability.”³ His article is generally regarded as the definitive treatment of the topic, and is quoted in many books and on many web sites. The present paper reassesses Sir Charles’ analysis in light of current vexillological scholarship.

The title of Sir Charles’ article proposed a relationship between the EIC flag and the Stars and Stripes. He stated, correctly, that “The thirteen stripes of the National flag are . . . undeniably derived from [the Continental Colors]. The present paper will therefore focus on the possible relationship between the EIC flag and the Continental Colors.



Figure 1
East India Company ship in Bombay
Lambert and Scott, *Bombay*, 1732 (Detail).

British Library record number 18915.
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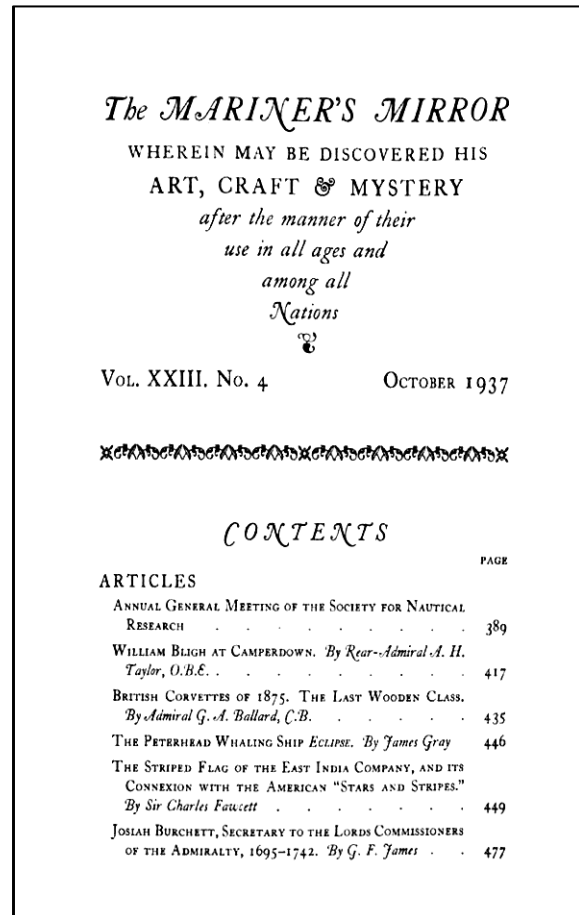
Figure 2
American schooner *Royal Savage* on Lake
Champlain, 1776.

Philip Schuyler Papers, New York Public Library.

The History of the EIC Flag⁴

The creation date of the EIC flag and the origins of its design are unknown. However, pictorial evidence shows that it was definitely flown by Company ships in 1670, and there are indications that it may have existed as early as 1616.⁵ Fawcett presents a reasonable speculation about the design:

“Sir William Foster has suggested to me that the flag may possibly have been derived from that used by Portuguese merchant-vessels . . . this was one bearing alternate green and white stripes, with the Portuguese royal arms superimposed. The Portuguese in India established a system of granting passes to native vessels sailing under their protection, which was copied by the English. The former may have permitted country junks to use their commercial flag minus the royal arms, and the English may have adopted the practice, merely substituting red for green. It would be natural for the Company in that case to go one step further, and distinguish their own ships by the use of the national emblem (St. George’s cross) in the canton.”⁶



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Figure 3
The Mariner's Mirror, October 1937

A royal proclamation of 1674 specified that all English merchant ships were to fly the plain red ensign with the St. George’s cross in the canton. However, the EIC Court of Committees arranged an informal compromise with the Admiralty, whereby EIC ships could continue to fly the EIC ensign in eastern waters, and in the Atlantic south of the island of St. Helena.⁷ This arrangement continued throughout the 18th century. When the royal proclamation of 1707 created the red ensign with the combined union crosses in the canton, the EIC ensign followed suit and altered the canton of the EIC flag to contain the union crosses.

The number of stripes on the EIC flag varied, and appears not to have had any particular significance. Thirteen, however, appears to have been a common number, based on depictions in paintings and flag charts.⁸

The Origins of the Continental Colors

The designer of the Continental Colors is unknown;⁹ however, the date of its creation can be bracketed with some degree of certainty. The Continental Congress made the decision to acquire a naval force on 13 October 1775,¹⁰ which resulted in the establishment of the Naval Committee and the procurement of a number of merchantmen suitable for conversion into warships. The first example of the Continental Colors was delivered to the *Alfred*, the flagship of the new squadron, on 2 December 1775, and raised aboard her on the following day.¹¹

The earliest description of the Continental Colors was probably the one written by Richard Henry Lee, a member of the Naval Committee, in mid-December 1775. Lee described it as “a Jack [sic] with the Union flag, and striped red and white in the field.”¹² James Brattle, a British informer in Philadelphia, described the flag on 4 January 1776 as “English colors, but more striped.”¹³ Neither of these descriptions mentioned the number of the stripes; however a letter from Gilbert Barkly to Sir Gray Cooper on 10 January 1776 stated that “they [the fleet] have hoisted what they call the Ammerican Flag viz the British Union, with thirteen stripes red and white, for its field, Representing the thirteen United Collonies.” The symbolism of the 13 stripes was clearly established at an early date, and most contemporary depictions of the Continental colors show this number of stripes.

It appears, however, that the red and white stripe colors were not originally considered to be significant; an Ensign delivered to the Naval Committee on 20 December 1775 is described as “1 Union Flagg Green & Red, 13 Stripes.”¹⁴ The *Alfred* and the other ships of the Continental squadron were converted merchantmen, and would already have been equipped with British red ensigns. The most reasonable speculation for the origin of the Continental Colors design is that it was “differenced” from a red ensign by adding stripes.¹⁵ White would logically be the predominant bunting color to be used for this, because it would have been less expensive and readily available.

ARGUMENTS FOR THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE EIC FLAG AND THE CONTINENTAL COLORS

Other than the self-evident similarity between the two designs,¹⁶ Fawcett offers two main arguments in favor of an historical connection between them. First, he postulates that Americans would have been familiar with the design of the EIC flag. Second, he proposes that they would have perceived a common interest with the EIC, which might have led them to use a similar design for their new ensign. Each of these arguments will now be considered in turn.

American Familiarity with the EIC flag

Fawcett introduces this argument by quoting Willis F. Johnson’s book *The National Flag – A History*. Johnson opined that “The British East India Company’s flag was scarcely known in America, save for a few visits to two or three ports.”¹⁷ Fawcett comments:

“[this] objection has . . . substance, although I admit that my preconceived ideas were against it. I thought that the Company would surely have sent tea and other Eastern commodities to American colonies in ships owned by it or specially chartered for it for this purpose. But clear evidence to the contrary has convinced me that I was wrong.”¹⁸

To Fawcett’s great credit as a scholar, he carefully analyzes the status of the ships that brought the tea to the American colonies in 1773, and concludes that:

“In these circumstances the ships that carried the Company’s teas to Boston, etc., in 1773 would presumably fly the ordinary British mercantile flag, viz. the red ensign. . . . *It follows that the theory favoured by some English and American writers that the Company’s ships were frequent visitors to American ports and its flag a familiar sight to the colonists is a pure myth . . .* It is in any case extremely doubtful whether, supposing vessels owned or chartered by the Company, had traded with American ports on the Atlantic seaboard, they would have flown the striped flag, which, under the arrangement of 1767, could be used only below St Helena in that ocean. Moreover the adoption of a similar striped flag by the [Continental] Congress suggests that it was never seen in those ports, as otherwise it would obviously have been unwise to adopt a flag whose exact similarity would be apt to cause confusion in American waters.”¹⁹ [*emphasis added*]

On the other side of the coin, it is equally unlikely that American merchant captains and crews would visit Asian waters. To do so would have been illegal, because it would have violated the trading monopoly that was the *raison d’être* for the EIC. A recent study by H. V. Bowen of colonial American perceptions of the British Indian Empire reached a similar conclusion:

“In a British maritime world still regulated by the navigation system and monopoly rights, there were no direct sea passages linking North America with India and the East Indies . . . as a result, very few colonial Americans ever acquired any direct firsthand knowledge of Britain’s Asian empire through travel or temporary residence in the East.”²⁰

However, Bowen goes on to note:

“Some Americans did, however, find their way into the Indian Ocean as illegal traders or privateers, and at the end of the seventeenth century, when buccaneers extended their activities way beyond the Caribbean, New York acted as a supply base for a sophisticated and well-funded pirate operation established on the island of Madagascar . . . A few Americans may [also] have found their way to India as crew members of East Indiamen or Royal Navy vessels . . . Royal Navy crews usually contained a large number of “foreigners”, including Americans, but those who were recruited or pressed in the colonies almost always served their time in Atlantic waters.”²¹

Fawcett makes a similar point:

“[The Company’s] striped flag had been flying for nearly two centuries, and it would at any rate be familiar to Englishmen. It seems probable that it was also well known to American seamen, who made voyages to Dutch and other European ports for various purposes, including the large traffic in smuggling tea and other . . . goods.”²²

He goes on to speculate that Esek Hopkins, the Commander-in-Chief of the Continental fleet, would have known about the EIC flag because of his privateering ventures during the Seven Years War, and that Benjamin Franklin would have because of his extended stays in London. While it is unlikely that either Hopkins or Franklin ever actually saw an EIC flag, or that either of them had anything to do with creating the Continental Colors²³, it is indeed reasonable that men like them might have heard of it. The EIC flag was depicted in 18th century flag charts and books, and its description might also have been passed by word of mouth from men who had served in the Royal Navy or the EIC fleet.

In summary, Fawcett proposed that the designers of the Continental Colors might have been familiar with the EIC design, but chose to copy it because it was *not* familiar in American waters. The strength of this argument rests on the assumption that the Americans would have had a reason to copy the EIC design. This issue is examined in the following section.

American Perception of Common Interests with the EIC

Fawcett attempts to make a case that the American colonists might have selected the EIC’s ensign as their symbol because they believed that the EIC shared their opposition to the actions of the British ministry. He states:

“ . . . in a letter of 5 January 1773 [Benjamin] Franklin mentions a report that the Company had tea and other goods to the value of four millions in its warehouses, for which it wanted a market, and says that he had remarked on the imprudence of keeping up the duty on tea, which had thrown that trade into the hands of the Dutch and others who smuggled it into America. On this point the Company was in agreement with Franklin, for in 1667 it had advocated an alteration of the duties to prevent smuggling and in the beginning of 1773 it urged the abolition of the duty of 3d a pound on tea in America . . . Franklin, therefore, far from having reason to dislike the Company, could properly regard it almost as an ally.”²⁴

As already noted, Franklin is not known to have had anything to do with the creation of the Continental Colors. However, Fawcett’s reference to this letter also is misleading in two other respects. First, it misstates the context of what Franklin was saying; second, it does not account for the significant change in American popular perception of the EIC between January 1773 and December 1775.

Franklin wrote the letter in question from London, where he was acting as agent for several of the colonies, to his associate Thomas Cushing in Boston. The relevant paragraph read:

“ . . . I take the Opportunity of remarking in all Companies, the great Imprudence of losing the American Market, by keeping up the Duty on Tea, which has thrown that Trade into the Hands of the Dutch, Danes, Swedes and French, who . . . now supply by Smuggling the whole Continent . . . This gives some Alarm, and begins to convince People more and more, of the Improprity of Quarrelling with the Americans, who at that Rate might have taken off two Millions and a Half of those Goods within these 5 Years . . . if the Duty had not been laid, or had been speedily repealed.”²⁵

While Franklin did indeed feel that the tea duty should be repealed, he was clearly not expressing any sort of solidarity with the EIC. His point was that the duty was causing a rift between Britain and the American colonies, which he wished to prevent.

Instead of repealing the duty, the Crown approved the Tea Act on 10 May 1773. The Act not only retained the duty, but gave the EIC itself a tax rebate on tea shipped to the colonies, thus further undercutting American merchants. This led to immediate resistance in the colonies. As a recent historian of the Boston Tea Party explained it:

“The Massachusetts colonists might have felt some sympathy and solidarity with the [EIC], but not if the Company was going to make money at Americans’ expense. Using its unfair competitive advantage, the East India Company could now starve the American people of their livelihood, while imperial courtiers and their cronies were scheming to take the rest of it.”²⁶

Additionally, the Americans were aware of the EIC’s indifference to the famine that had struck Bengal, India in 1769. While more than a million native people starved to death, the Company continued to enforce its taxes, and stockpiled grain for its own garrisons at the expense of the locals. The colonists feared that they might be next.²⁷ In October 1773, a pamphleteer in New York wrote “ . . . the Purchase of the Company’s Iniquities, Tea, must be sent to the Colonies, the Profit of which is to support the Tyranny of the East, enslave the West, and prepare us fit Victims for the Exercise of the horrid Inhumanity they have . . . practiced . . . on the helpless Asiaticks.”²⁸ A correspondent to the Boston Post Boy referred to the British ministry and “their auxiliaries, the East-India slavemakers.”²⁹

On 10 December 1773, just after the EIC tea shipments arrived in Boston, Thomas Cushing wrote to Franklin:

“ . . . I cannot well Conceive of any one measure that would tend more Effectually to unite the Colonies than the present Act empowering the East india Company to Export their Tea to America . . . they have been blowing the Coals, we have got into a flame and where it will End God only knows.”³⁰

Six days later, a group of Bostonians disguised themselves as Mohawk Indians, forced their way aboard the tea ships and dumped the tea in the harbor, in what has come to be known as the “Boston Tea Party”. During this affair, one participant named Conner was caught stuffing his own pockets with tea that he obviously intended to steal.

“Conner tried to slip away, but the men raised the cry “East Indian!” . . . A group of the destroyers tore off some . . . of Conner’s clothes, coated him with mud, and gave him a ‘severe bruising.’”³¹

Clearly, the colonists’ attitudes toward the East India Company were anything but friendly.³²

The colonists’ antagonism toward the East India Company did not soften between the Tea Party in December 1773 and the outbreak of the Revolution. On 9 July 1774, “The Freeholders and other Inhabitants” of the County of Essex, Virginia

“Resolved, that it is the Opinion of this Meeting that the East India Company, having a Design to monopolise a great Part of the American Trade, to the Injury of the other Merchants of Britain trading to America, and knowing well the fatal Consequences that must have resulted from their fixing a Precedent for future Taxes by importing Tea into the Colonies, became the willing Instruments of the Ministry to destroy American Liberty, and deserve the Loss they have sustained.”³³

In the fall of 1776, Governor Livingston of New Jersey stated in a speech before the state Assembly and Council that the Americans were clearly justified

“ . . . in renouncing those tyrants, who, having ravaged the great part of Asia, and dissipated in venality and riot the treasures extorted from its innocent inhabitants by the hand of rapine and blood, finally meant to prolong their luxury and corruption by appropriating the hard earned competence of the American world.”³⁴

American antipathy for the EIC lasted throughout the Revolutionary War. In 1782, an American privateer was named the *Hyder Ally*, after the ruler of Mysore, India, who defeated the Company’s troops at the battle of Polilur in September 1780.³⁵

In summary, the passage quoted by Fawcett from Franklin’s letter of 10 January 1773 does not support an argument for American sympathy with the EIC. His quote was presented out of context, and did not account for historical developments between then and the beginning of hostilities in 1775.

CONCLUSIONS

It is indisputable that the designs of the EIC flag and the Continental Colors were virtually identical. However, this similarity is clearly not sufficient to support Fawcett's "*prima facie* probability" that the Continental Colors was copied from the EIC flag, and the additional arguments that he presents do not appear to be convincing.

The similarity of the Continental Colors to the EIC flag is unlikely to have resulted from any American sympathy for the EIC. In the Americans' view, the Company was a part of the monopolistic colonial mercantile system that they were rebelling against. American perception of the EIC was overwhelmingly negative, and it is beyond belief that they would "properly regard it as an ally" as Fawcett proposed. Fawcett's argument for this idea was based a single letter written by Benjamin Franklin in January 1773. Fawcett's analysis did not present the letter in its actual context, and did not consider the significant shifts in American public opinion that resulted from subsequent events.

If the design of the Continental Colors was influenced by the EIC flag, it was almost certainly because the latter suggested the idea of differencing a British red ensign. It is unlikely that the designers of the Continental Colors had actually seen an EIC flag; however, it is quite possible that they were aware of it from illustrations in flag books and flag charts, or word-of-mouth descriptions. There would seem to be two possibilities: first, that the designers were aware of the EIC design, and copied the idea of differencing the existing merchant ensigns of their vessels; second, that the designers were not aware of the EIC flag and came up with the differencing idea from other sources.³⁶ (Figure 4) The fact that the EIC flag was *not* commonly seen in Atlantic waters actually makes it *more* likely that the Americans might have consciously chosen a similar design, since confusion between the two flags would be unlikely.

At the conclusion of his 1937 article, Fawcett commented, "I trust the publication of this article may result in further light being thrown on the subject by others more competent than I am to discuss points about flags."³⁷ It is hoped that the present article has fulfilled Sir Charles' trust by clarifying the historical background for the creation of the Continental Colors.



Figure 4
English ship flying a striped flag
Wou, *English Ships in a Rough Sea*, early- to
mid-17th century. (Detail)

National Maritime Museum, Greenwich,
Image BHC0810.

APPENDIX A: THE ORIGINS OF THE CONTINENTAL COLORS

It is reasonably well established that the Continental Colors was created in the fall of 1775 as part of the outfitting of the first Continental naval squadron. There is no historical record of who chose the design, or why. This appendix summarizes the historical background for the creation of the Continental Colors, and offers some speculations about its creation.

Given the circumstances that existed in the fall of 1775, the design of the Continental Colors was probably a utilitarian decision, rather than a conscious exercise in symbolism. The converted merchant ships that formed the first Continental squadron would already have been equipped with British red ensigns, and such ensigns would also have been common chandlery items. Adding stripes would have been a simple and economical way to create a distinctive ensign for the squadron. The choice of white as the color of the added stripes would also have been logical, given the cost and availability of undyed bunting.

There was, however, one symbolic aspect to the creation of the design: the fixing of the number of stripes to thirteen, representing the number of the rebelling colonies. This was done, not by simply adding that number of stripes to the red ensign, but by adding six or seven stripes of a different color, so that remaining visible portion of the red field would form the remaining stripes. It should be noted that there were two distinct decisions involved: to difference the red ensign with stripes, and to fix the number of stripes at thirteen. These two decisions could have been made simultaneously, or the second could have been inspired by the first.

WHO DESIGNED THE CONTINENTAL COLORS?

The fitting out of the Continental fleet was initiated by a Congressional resolution on 13 October 1775. The resolution called for outfitting of two vessels “for a cruise of three months . . . for intercepting such transports as may be laden with warlike stores and other supplies for our enemies, and for such other purposes as the Congress may direct.” A committee consisting of “Mr. Deane, Mr. Langdon, and Mr. Gadsden” was appointed “to prepare an estimate of the expence, and lay the same before the Congress, and to contract with proper persons to fit out the vessel[s].”³⁸ On 30 October, the Congress resolved to fit out two more vessels, and added four new members to the committee: “Mr. Hopkins, Mr. Hewes, Mr. Lee and Mr. J. Adams”.³⁹ The members of this committee, usually known as the “Naval Committee” are listed in Table 1. The Naval Committee existed in this form until January 1776, after the fitting out of the squadron had been completed. It was then replaced by a 13-member “Marine Committee” charged with building and fitting out additional vessels.⁴⁰

Table 1
The Naval Committee 1775-1776

Name	State	Date Appointed
John Adams	Massachusetts	30 Oct. 1775
Silas Deane	Connecticut	13 Oct. 1775
Christopher Gadsden	South Carolina	13 Oct. 1775
Joseph Hewes	North Carolina	30 Oct. 1775
Stephen Hopkins	Rhode Island	30 Oct. 1775
John Langdon	New Hampshire	13 Oct. 1775
Richard Henry Lee	Virginia	30 Oct. 1775

The Naval Committee's tasks included purchasing the vessels, recruiting officers, and establishing rules and regulations for the fleet. No minutes survive of their work, but the major decisions are documented by Congressional Resolutions and other documents.⁴¹ On 4 November, the Committee acquired its first vessel, the merchant ship *Black Prince*, which was renamed the *Alfred*.

The conversion of the *Alfred* into a warship took place at James Wharton's shipyard in Philadelphia. The Naval Committee engaged three men to supervise the effort. John Barry (Figure 5), the former captain of the *Black Prince*, was put in charge of re-rigging and outfitting the vessel. Nathaniel Falconer, also a well-known Philadelphia ship captain, was responsible for stores, provisions and accounts. Shipbuilder Joshua Humphries supervised the structural work of the conversion. Both Barry and Falconer had recently returned for merchant voyages to London, Barry in the *Black Prince* and Falconer in command of the *Mary and Elizabeth*.⁴²

At some point in November of 1775, the outfitters contracted with Margaret Manny to make an ensign for the *Alfred*. Wharton's Day Book entry for "Ship *Alfred*" on 2 December 1775 includes the debit of £8.13.2 for "49 yds Broad Bntg", 521/2 yds Narrow Do", and "To makg an Ensign Canvas & Shd", followed by credit of £1.2.8 to "Margt Manny for makg an Ensign".⁴³

Presumably, this entry and payment were made when the ensign was delivered to the vessel. According to the report of a British informer, it was raised aboard the *Alfred* on the following day:

"An Admiral is appointed, a court established, and the 3rd instant the Continental flag on board the *Black Prince*, opposite Philadelphia, was hoisted."⁴⁴

Several of the members of the Naval Committee were involved in the merchant shipping business, and would have been familiar with the requirement for a distinctive ensign for the fleet. One of them, Gadsden, is believed to have designed the famous rattlesnake flag that was used as the standard of the fleet's Commander-in-Chief.⁴⁵ However, the Committee's work appears to



Figure 5

Captain John Barry (1745–1803).
Portrait by Matthew Pratt, April 1776.
Most portraits of Barry are based on the one painted by Gilbert Stuart around 1800, at the end of Barry's career. Pratt's portrait shows Barry as a young captain at the beginning of the Revolution, as he would have appeared when he fitted out the *Alfred*.

Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, Gift of the Estate of Peter Barry. Reproduced by permission.

have involved the major issues of purchasing, funding and manning the ships, while the Barry, Falconer and Humphries dealt with the outfitting details. It seems likely that if the Committee had formally agreed upon a design for the ensign, they would have submitted it to Congress along with the proposed regulations for the fleet. The records of the Congress make no mention of a national flag until the adoption of the stars and stripes in June 1777. However, the Continental Colors were correctly described in a letter published in the *Virginia Gazette* on 9 February 1776, which is believed to have been written by Gadsden.⁴⁶ Also, Hewes purchased a Continental Color from James Wharton 8 February 1776 and sent it to North Carolina along with other equipment for the state forces.⁴⁷

Given the apparent informality of the decision to use a striped version of the red ensign as the Continental Colors, a reasonable possibility is that it was made by one or both of the two men who were actually responsible for outfitting the vessels: John Barry and Nathaniel Falconer. Both were experienced merchant captains, and both had recently been in the port of London.⁴⁸ Differencing the ensigns of the *Alfred* and the other ships of the squadron, or modifying ensigns that were already in Wharton's stock, would have been a utilitarian way for them to satisfy the requirement for a distinctive ensign. Why they might have chosen stripes, and whether or not either of them had the East India Company flag in mind, we will probably never know.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the possibility that John Barry, in particular, may have been involved in designing the Continental Colors is appealing. Barry was destined for a glorious career in the Continental Navy, and was also one of the founders of the United States Navy that was formed under the Constitution. Unlike many of his peers, he was a modest man, and it would have been very much in character for him to downplay such an accomplishment.

JOHN PAUL JONES AND THE CONTINENTAL COLORS

'Twas Jones, Paul Jones who first o'er Delaware's tide
From "*Alfred's*" main displayed Columbia's pride;
The *Stripes* of Freedom proudly waved on high
While shouts of freemen rang for liberty.
— Miss G. H. Sherburne⁵⁰

John Paul Jones received his formal appointment as first lieutenant of the *Alfred* on 7 December 1775.⁵¹ However, it is likely that he was on board before this date. The ship's captain, Dudley Saltonstall, did not arrive in Philadelphia until 23 December,⁵² so Jones was acting commander of the *Alfred* during most of the fitting out period. In a 1779 letter, Jones stated,

"I had the honor to hoist with my own hands the flag of freedom, the first time it was displayed on the river Delaware; and I have attended it with veneration ever since."⁵³

Jones did not mention the date on which the flag-raising occurred, or the design of the flag that he raised. However, as already discussed, it is fairly well established from other sources that the flag was the Continental Colors, and that it was first raised on 3 December 1775. In his 1786 memoir for the king of France, Jones mentioned that he had raised the flag "as the commander in chief embarked on board the *Alfred*."⁵⁴ Commodore Hopkins accepted his appointment on 2

December,⁵⁵ and it is reasonable that the Commodore might have “embarked” on his new flagship on the following day.

Several writers have questioned Jones’ claim to have been the first to raise an American flag. In an 1813 letter, John Adams wrote to John Langdon,

“My recollection has been excited lately by the information from Philadelphia that Paul Jones has written in his Journal, ‘My hand first hoisted the American flag,’ and that Captain Barry used to say that the first British flag was struck to him. Both these vain boasts I know to be false . . . It is not decent nor just that these emigrants, foreigners from the South, should falsely arrogate to themselves merit that belongs to New England sailors, officers and men.”⁵⁶

Langdon replied:

“As to Paul Jones . . . and Captain Barry . . . they are both unfounded, as it is impressed on my mind that many prizes were brought into the New England States before their names were mentioned.”⁵⁷

One could split hairs over whether or not the “Pine Tree” flag flown by the “New England sailors” qualified as a flag that was generally recognized as the “Flag of America”. However, there is little question that the Continental Colors was the first flag to be so recognized, and that Jones did not deserve the chauvinistic criticism of Adams and Langdon.

In an 1846 book, James Fenimore Cooper said the following about Jones’ claim:

“Jones always affirmed that he first hoisted the flag of the United Colonies, with his own hands, when Commodore Hopkins first visited the Alfred. This occurred on the Delaware, off Philadelphia . . . This may be true or not. There was a weakness about the character of the man that rendered him a little liable to self-delusions of this nature . . .”⁵⁸

More recently, an article about the Continental Colors in the British vexillological publication *Flagmaster* commented:

“We know that this flag [the Continental Colors] was raised aboard the Continental *Alfred*, moored at Philadelphia, 3 December 1775. Later John Paul Jones remembered having been the first person to hoist this flag aboard the ship. Jones never lied, but he tended to ‘remember very big’.”⁵⁹

Like most of his naval contemporaries, John Paul Jones was prone to self-promotion, and he was not reticent about his achievements. However, no evidence suggests that he was willfully dishonest about this subject. The circumstances and chronology support his claim. He repeatedly cited the flag-raising as an important event in his career, and there seems to be no reason to doubt that he was genuinely proud of having done it. It is conceivable, of course, that the incident he described actually occurred later than 3 December, and that he was unaware of the

fact that the flag previously been raised (by someone else) the day after being delivered to the ship. This seems unlikely, however, given that he was in acting command of the *Alfred*. The raising of an ensign on an armed vessel would have an important occurrence at that time and place, and it is unlikely that it would have been done without his knowledge.

APPENDIX B: THE MYTH OF THE “FLAG COMMITTEE”

Sir Charles’ article briefly mentions a popular legend about the origins of the Continental Colors:

“It is also asserted that in 1775 a committee was appointed to consider the question of a single flag for the thirteen States and that it recommended the adoption of the Grand Union Flag. Here again documentary proof of the statements appears to be wanting, in spite of a thorough search. No doubt there are reasons for supposing the flag to have been designed or recommended by such a committee; but, in the absence of authentic evidence as to the ideas and motives of its draughtsmen, we are necessarily thrown back on a consideration of the probabilities.”⁶⁰

Like many myths, this tale hangs from a slender thread of truth. There was a conference held at Washington’s headquarters at Cambridge between 18 and 24 October 1775. It was attended by three members of Congress, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Lynch, and Benjamin Harrison, as well as Washington and his staff and representatives of the New England colonial governments. The purpose of the meeting was to work out the organization and regulations for the new Continental Army that was to be formed from the contingents provided by the individual colonies. Detailed minutes were kept of the sessions.⁶¹ The Congressional delegates returned to Philadelphia after the conference and presented their report, which was discussed by Congress on 4 November 1775.⁶²

Unsurprisingly, there is no mention of flags anywhere in the minutes of the conference. National flags were primarily a naval matter in the 18th century, and there would seem to be no reason why a conference on Army organization would deal with them. However, the tale that the Continental Colors was created at this conference (or even that it was the sole purpose of the conference) has been part of the historiography of the American flag since the mid-19th century. This story has great popular appeal, especially because of the involvement of the two most famous heroes of the Revolution (Washington and Franklin). George Preble presented this version in his seminal history of the flag:

“Notwithstanding the equipment of [the] fleet, the necessity of a common national flag seems not to have been thought of until Doctor Franklin, Mr. Lynch, and Mr. Harrison were appointed to consider the subject, and assembled at the camp in Cambridge [Washington’s headquarters during the siege of Boston]. The result of

their conference was the retention of the king's colors or union jack, representing the still-recognized sovereignty of England, but coupled to thirteen stripes, alternate red and white, emblematic of the union of the thirteen colonies against its tyranny and oppression, in place of the loyal red ensign."⁶³

The popularity of the "flag committee" tale was reinforced by the story that Washington raised the Continental Colors on Prospect Hill on 1 January 1776, the day that the Continental Army was formally established. More recent scholarship indicates that this story is also unlikely.⁶⁴ All actual evidence indicates that, as one would expect, the Continental Colors had a naval origin.

Perhaps the ultimate version of the myth was published by Robert Allan Campbell in 1890. In his telling, the flag committee included not only Washington and the Congressional delegates, but also a mysterious Professor who dominated the proceedings. Campbell quotes an extensive speech by this unnamed worthy, which includes the following paragraph:

"While the field of our flag must be new in the details of its design, it need not be entirely new in its elements. It is fortunate for us that there is already in use a flag with which the English Government is familiar, and which it has not only recognized, but also protected for more than a half a century, the design of which can be readily modified, or rather extended, so as to most admirably suit our purpose. I refer to the flag of the English East India Company, which is one with a field of alternate longitudinal red and white stripes, and having the Cross of St. George for a union. I, therefore, suggest for your consideration a flag with a field composed of thirteen equally wide, longitudinal, alternate, red and white stripes, and with the Union Flag of England for a union."⁶⁵

Franklin and Washington "enthusiastically endorsed" this outpouring of wisdom, and

"It was formally and unanimously adopted; and shortly before midnight the Committee adjourned. The 13th of December, 1775, therefore, witnessed the presentation, consideration and approval of the only official flag of the Coöperating American Colonies . . ."⁶⁶

All of this is self-apparent nonsense. The EIC flag had the union crosses in the canton in 1775, not just the St. George's cross. The fact that the British had "protected" the flag would make it less, not more, suitable as a distinctive ensign for the Americans. Franklin and the other delegates were not even in Cambridge on 13 December; they had been back in Philadelphia for over a month. The Continental Colors was raised aboard the *Alfred* in Philadelphia on 3 December, well before it was supposedly created in Cambridge.⁶⁷ Allan claimed that his information came from notes made by the hostess of the house in which the meeting took place, who was invited (anachronistically) to act as secretary.⁶⁸ Needless to say, no such notes have ever been found.

Like many legends associated with the American flag, the flag committee story is an appealing myth involving the heroes of the Revolution. It has no basis in fact, however.

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END NOTES

¹ The Company that received the original royal charter from Queen Elizabeth in 1600 was formally styled as “The Company of Merchants of London Trading into the East Indies.” It was superseded by a successor company under a new charter in 1698, known as the “New” or “English” East India Company. After the Act of Union in 1707, the Company was referred to in correspondence as the “United” East India Company. Keay, pp. 8 and 182, Fawcett, p. 457. Although it is commonly referred to as the “British East India Company”, this was apparently never its formal name.

² Fawcett, pp. 449–476.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 463. Fawcett refers to the Continental Colors as the “Grand Union Flag” in his paper. Subsequent research indicates that this name is an after-the-fact creation of 19th century historians. Contemporary sources referred to it as the “Continental Colors” or “Continental Flag.” See Ansoff, Prospect Hill, p. 91.

⁴ The history of the EIC flag is well summarized in Fawcett, pp. 450–462. Other useful sources are Cotton, Chapter 3, Hastings Chapter 3, and Perrin, *British Flags*, pp. 129–131. Charles Fawcett edited Cotton’s book after the author’s premature death, and the chapter on the EIC flag contains much the same material as Fawcett’s 1937 article.

⁵ Fawcett, p. 450–451.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 449–450, fn. See also Cotton, pp. 101–102.

⁷ Fawcett points out that “Though the Company’s flag could not properly be flown during voyages between St. Helena and England, it could be worn as a jack at the bow in port.” However, the evidence he gives for this is a set of pictures dated to 1670, before the royal proclamation of 1674. Fawcett, pp. 472 ff.

⁸ See Perrin, Gridiron, and note in MM Vol. 3, No 1, p. 63.

⁹ For a speculation on the creator of the Continental Colors, see Appendix A.

¹⁰ See Paullin, pp. 37–60.

¹¹ See the extract from the Day Book of James Wharton, NDAR 3:1380 and extract of letter from “B.P.” to Lord Dartmouth, *ibid.*, p. 186.

¹² NDAR 3:640. NDAR gives the date of the letter as 5 January 1776; however, circumstances indicate that it was actually drafted the previous month. See LDC3, pp. 542–544.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 615.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1384.

¹⁵ There is at least one documented reference to this being done. An invoice for the Massachusetts State Navy brig *Freedom* on 21 February 1777 specified “an Ensign alter’d into a Continental one.” Ansoff, *State Navies*, p. 27

¹⁶ As Fawcett points out, several American writers have mistakenly stated that the EIC flag in 1775 still had the St. Georges’s cross in the canton instead of the Union crosses. While there is no record of a formal decision to change the canton, it is clear from pictorial evidence that the combined crosses were in use by the mid-18th century. Fawcett, pp. 456–460 and 465.

¹⁷ Quoted in Fawcett, p. 465.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Fawcett, p. 471.

²⁰ Bowen, p. 287.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Fawcett, p. 472.

²³ Franklin was not a member of the Naval Committee, and there is no known evidence that he had anything to do with creating the Continental Colors. The myth that he participated in a “flag committee” at Washington’s headquarters in the fall of 1775 is discussed in Appendix B. Hopkins had accepted the position of Commander-in-Chief the day before the flag was raised on the *Alfred*, and it is unlikely that he was involved in the creation of the Continental Colors either. See Appendix A.

²⁴ Fawcett, p. 473.

²⁵ Franklin to Cushing, 5 January 1773, Franklin Papers.

²⁶ Carp, p. 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

²⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁹ Quoted in Bowen, p. 293.

³⁰ Cushing to Franklin, 10 December 1773, Franklin Papers.

³¹ Carp, p. 128.

³² In a letter to the Massachusetts House Committee of Correspondence, Franklin suggested that Massachusetts consider repaying the EIC for the destroyed tea, “As the India Company . . . are not our Adversaries, and the offensive Measure of sending their Teas did not take its Rise with them, but was an Expedient of the Ministry to serve them . . .” Once again, however, his motivation was not sympathy for the Company, but a desire maintain a favorable image of the Colonies’ cause: “. . . If War is finally to be made upon us, which some threaten, an Act of violent Injustice on our part, unrectified, may not give a colourable Pretence for it. A speedy Reparation will immediately set us right in the Opinion of all Europe.” In any case, Franklin’s view that the EIC “are not our adversaries” was not shared by popular opinions in the Colonies by this time. Franklin Papers, Franklin to the Massachusetts House Committee of Correspondence, 2 February 1774.

³³ *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), 21 July 1774, Postscript, p. 2.

³⁴ Quoted in Bowen, p. 295.

³⁵ Paullin, pp. 394–95 and Keay, p. 412.

³⁶ Stripes were historically used by both the British land and sea forces to difference flags. For the Army, see Ede-Borrett pp. 36–41, for the Navy, see Wilson, p. 15.

³⁷ Fawcett, p. 476.

³⁸ JCC 3:293–294.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:311–312.

⁴⁰ Paullin, p. 40 and 60.

⁴¹ See *ibid.*, pp. 37–56.

⁴² Clark, *Barry*, p. 65 and NDAR 3:1377.

⁴³ NDAR Vol. 3, p. 1380.

⁴⁴ “B.P” to Lord Dartmouth, 20 December 1775. NDAR 3:186. The “Admiral” refers to Commodore Esek Hopkins, who was accepted command of the Continental fleet on 2 December. See NDAR 2:1233–1234 and Hopkins pp. 11–14.

⁴⁵ Gadsden is believed to have shown his design to other members of Congress, and it is possible that he intended it to be a proposal for the fleet’s ensign. See Ansoff, *First Navy Jack*, pp. 28–29.

⁴⁶ NDAR 3:1188–1189. However, the design was apparently not widely known by the members of Congress in general. In a letter to the New York Committee of Safety on 23 March 1776, John Jay stated that “As to Continental colors, the Congress have made no order as yet concerning them,” and did not know what they looked like. Ansoff, *First Navy Jack*, p. 29.

⁴⁷ NDAR 3:1204–1205. Joshua Barney, master’s mate of the sloop *Hornet*, reported in his memoirs that he received “the first flag of the U States” in Baltimore, where the ship was fitting out for Continental service. The chronology of his memoir is slightly muddled, but the *Hornet* arrived in Philadelphia to join the fleet on February 13 1776, and Barney reported using the flag in his recruiting drive before that. It therefore seems likely that the flag was sent from Philadelphia to Baltimore in early January 1776. *Ibid.*, pp. 1263–1264.

⁴⁸ The log of Barry’s voyage in the *Black Prince* is available online as part of the Barry-Hayes Papers collection available online as a joint project of the Independence Seaport Museum and Villanova University, <http://digital.library.villanova.edu/Independence%20Seaport%20Museum/Barry-Hayes/>.

⁴⁹ As noted in a previous footnote, The EIC flag is not the only possible inspiration; stripes had previously been used to difference British flags both on land and at sea. Also, Dr. Henry Moeller has suggested that the stripes could have originated as signal flags used by the telegraph systems on the Hudson and Delaware rivers. Interestingly, Nathaniel Falconer was employed by the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety in the Spring of 1776 as one of a committee “to fix signals for giving alarm at Cape Henlopen, and such other places on either side of the Bay and River Delaware . . .” NDAR 4:266, 354 and 422. However, chronology suggests that if striped flags were used for this purpose, the development was probably the other way around: the stripes on the signal flags would have been copied from the ensign created by the Continental squadron in fall 1775. Moeller, p. 82, cites an April 1776 recommendation to General Washington that red and white striped flags be used as signals for the defenses of New York; however, this document also postdates the creation of the Continental Colors by several months. (See NDAR 4:1285).

⁵⁰ Sherburne, p. 379. Miss Sherburne was the daughter of the author of this work, and also the granddaughter of Elijah Hall, who was one of Jones’ officers in the *Ranger*. Ironically, Sherburne states in a footnote that the flag Jones raised in the Alfred was “13 Stripes (without the field of stars), with the rattlesnake and motto, ‘Don’t tread upon me!’” See Ansoff, *First Navy Jack*, for a detailed discussion of the historiography of this legendary flag.

⁵¹ The primary source for this date is Jones himself, in a letter to the president of the Continental Congress. He mentioned it also his memoir to the king of France. NDAR 2:1307, and Sands, p. 34.

⁵² Hopkins, p. 13.

⁵³ Jones to Baron Vander Cappellen, 19 October 1779. Jones mentioned the incident on at least three other occasions: a letter to Samuel Huntington President of the Congress on 7 December 1779, a letter to Robert Morris on 10 October 1783, and in his memoir for the King of France. In all four cases, the context is a recapitulation of the highlights of Jones' career. Clearly, he considered this to have been an important accomplishment, and he was proud of having done it. See Sands, pp. 34, 211 and 306. The Vander Cappellen letter also appears in De Koven's *The Life and Letters of John Paul Jones*, vol. II, p. 33–34, although part of the statement about the flag raising is deleted in an ellipsis. The Huntington letter is quoted in NDAR, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Sands, p. 34

⁵⁵ Hopkins, p. 12. A letter of 2 December, quoted in *The Correspondence of Esek Hopkins*, stated that the Commodore had accepted his appointment.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Preble, p. 239–240.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁵⁸ Cooper, *Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers*, 1846. Online at www.history.navy.mil/bios/jones_jp_cooper.htm, accessed 6 June 2011.

⁵⁹ *Flagmaster*, No. 135, p. 4. Published by the Flag Institute. U.K.

⁶⁰ Fawcett, pp. 463–464.

⁶¹ Images of the handwritten minutes are available online in the Library of Congress George Washington Papers collection at www.loc.gov, Series 4, September 7, 1775 to December 17, 1775, image 481 et seq. A transcription is in the Franklin Papers, Minutes of a Conference held by the Delegates of the Hon. Continental Congress with General Washington, 18 October 1775.

⁶² JCC Vol. 3, pp. 321–22.

⁶³ Preble, p. 217.

⁶⁴ See Ansoff, Prospect Hill.

⁶⁵ Campbell, pp. 46–47.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶⁷ For a detailed debunking of Campbell's story, and some interesting background on the mysterious Professor, see the excellent "Boston 1775" blog written by local historian J.L. Bell (<http://boston1775.blogspot.com>), entries for 4 through 6 July 2009.

⁶⁸ Campbell, p. 40.

About the Author

Peter Ansoff lives in Annandale, Virginia, and does logistics analysis and documentation for U.S. Navy acquisition programs. His interest in flags began at age six, when his down-the-hill neighbors in Los Angeles installed a flagpole in front of their home. (Peter pestered his father into finding him a bamboo pole, a pulley and some rope, and impressed his mother into buying a U.S. flag and sewing a few others. Everything else “just sort of followed”.) He has been a member of NAVA since 1992 and served as its president 2004–08. He has a special interest in Revolutionary War-era American flags, and has published four papers on the subject to date. His paper on the U.S. “First Navy Jack” won the Driver Award in 2002. In addition to vexillology, his interests include maritime history and lighter-than-air aviation history.

