
**STANDARDS
AND COLORS
OF THE
AMERICAN
REVOLUTION**

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Continental and Union Colors

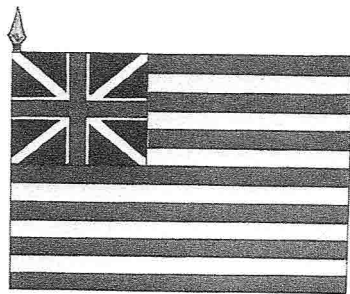
CONTINENTAL UNION

There are numerous references to "Continental" and "Union" colors throughout Revolutionary records. During the early period from late 1775 to mid-1777, such references generally meant a flag with a field of thirteen red and white stripes, with a blue canton bearing the crosses of St. George and St. Andrew. While no original survives, there are a number of contemporary paintings and sketches. Also, the "Continental Union" flag appears on the seal of the North Carolina \$7.50 Bill of April 2, 1776. And we know that the Continental Navy sometimes flew a Continental Union with red, white and blue stripes.


Nineteenth century flag historians identify the above colors by calling it the "Continental Grand Union." However, Revolutionary records do not support the use of that name; instead, it would seem that "Continental" or "Union" would be closer to Revolutionary usage. For ease of identification, we will use the term "Continental Union" or "Continental Colors."

THE STRIPES WITH BRITISH GRAND UNION (Plate 2)

The Continental Union was simply the British red ensign with a striped field. The British ensign or, more accurately, the British Union flag, displayed the symbol of the Grand Union of England and Scotland; this was the superimposed crosses of the two patron saints. For some British colors, the Union was placed in the center, so as to cover the full field, while for others it was borne as a canton (see chapter on British and Loyalist Colors). When the Grand (or Great) Union occupied the canton, the field of the British national ensign was usually red. Some ensigns, however, had fields of blue or white or of distinctive colors. The British Grand Union ensign with a red field was the sovereign flag of colonial America. The Americans, simply by adding six white stripes, divided the field into thirteen stripes to symbolize their union.



"Union Flag" —red, white stripes
Ship Alfred—December 3,
1775
Cambridge—January 1,
1776



The ensign of the "nation of East India" had red and white stripes. Also, the British national ensign was flown with a red and white striped field by ships of the British East Indies Company for many years before the Revolution. Some historians suggest that such stripes provided greater visibility at sea. There is a remarkable panoramic print of Philadelphia, as viewed from across the Delaware, by Scull, 1754. It shows, among the many vessels on the river, an armed ship flying a nine-striped field, Grand Union-cantoned ensign. The ship is heavily armed for its size and must have belonged to the Royal Navy or, possibly, some provincial navy. In either case, the ensign is what we now call a Continental Grand Union and the date was some twenty years before the Revolution. A copy of the print is at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

When the fighting began in 1775, and militia units from the various colonies joined together in besieging the British garrison at

Boston, the Continental Congress voted to take all such troops into the services of the United Provinces of North America and appointed Washington as their Commander-in-chief. There was no United Colonies flag at the time.

Washington states in a letter that on January 1, 1776, he raised "the Union flag" for the first time in observance of the newly reorganized Continental army. He did not use the term "Grand Union" or "Continental Grand Union." Even so it seems almost certain that the flag had thirteen red and white stripes with a Grand Union canton.

Some historians suggest that the Continental Grand Union design was probably decided upon by the three-man Continental Congress committee that conferred with Washington at Cambridge in October 1775, but no original record appears to support this.

The Continental Union was apparently raised at Philadelphia by John Paul Jones