



The Making of the First American Logo By Lady Reid

The Benjamin Franklin Seminar at the RSA on November 7th this year is devoted to discussion of the Media in Global affairs. Franklin was one of the best printers and publishers in Colonial America with many Global accolades to his name. The most famous has to be the Issues of Poor Richard's Almanack which he published between 1733 and 1758, which enlarged the normal annual information required of an Almanack, with aphorisms, poems and articles. Many of these aphorisms have become an international form of popular moral philosophy, entrenched in the literature of many languages. "Early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise", is as commonly quoted in Chinese as English.

Not so well known is Franklin's hand in the creation of the first visual logo that represented the essence of the colonies for the decades prior to and during the War of Independence. This logo was that of the snake or serpent. Its origins are attributed to Franklin, who may have developed it from a French, late 17th century publication depicting "suitable devices", this one was of a snake, cut in half, with the caption "join together, or die". Franklin's library was full of useful books from which he pulled his aphorisms, adapting them to Colonial appropriateness. Certainly, the concept of the colonies, as a snake broken into individual parts, with the caption "Join or Die", was published in the Pennsylvanian Gazette on May 9th 1754, to emphasise the necessity for cooperation at the Albany Conference to counter the threat of the French-Indian Alliance. Other newspapers, quickly copied this theme adding "Unite and Conquer".

However clever this image was, it was soon a symbol of controversy. First, because of its religious significance, the symbol of the snake was still considered the originator of deceit, treachery and wickedness, and of lowliness equal to baseness. This was countered in both articles and cartoons, depicting the snake as cunning, vigilant and permanent. Liberal supporters emphasised the need for cooperation and the non-religious significance of the snake's ability to deliver deadly blows even when trampled on "Don't tread on me" was a common tag. In contrast the Tories or Loyalists continued to claim that the logo represented treachery and concealment.

The most significant criticism was purely internal. The divided snake always had New England as its spitting head, and South and North Carolina as its rear portion. This led to considerable squabbling over the inequality of place in the Colonial hierarchy, and that the symbol was inappropriate. Ben Franklin came to the rescue once again. He

simply changed the specie of snake to that of the Rattlesnake, which was exclusively found on the American Continent, had no religious connotation and kept its warning messages in the rattles in its tail, whilst retaining its venomous bite. The logo soon has thirteen rattles in its tail, and during the war was used on both side of the Atlantic to symbolise the American Colonies. This turned out to be a very satisfactory piece of Franklin marketing and compromise, and ensured an acceptable Logo until the end of hostilities.

With the arrival of peace, and the creation of the Bald Eagle symbol, and the Flag of the United State, the Snake soon vanished into the cartoons of History, but also can still be spotted in representations such as this beautiful gold leafed frame on a French portrait of Franklin. All thirteen rattles are still alive and well as a reminder yet again of Franklin's ingenuity.