

CONFEDERATE BATTLE FLAG: Origin, Design and Use

Contrary to some public opinion in the 21st century, the Confederate battle flag never represented – nor was ever intended to represent slavery. One of the first acts of the Confederate Congress was to create the *Committee on the Flag and Seal* – chaired by a congressman from South Carolina, William Porcher Miles – who designed what we know today as the Confederate battle flag. That flag, however, was never adopted by the CSA as a national flag. Instead, it became the flag of the army of northern Virginia after Confederate soldiers and officers had trouble distinguishing the CSA national flag from the U.S. (yankee) flag used by the Union armies. Below is a letter from William Porcher Miles to General G. T. Beauregard which gives some insight into what was motivating Miles when he designed the flag.

Richmond, August 27, 1861.
Gen. G. T. Beauregard,
Fairfax Court house, Virginia:

Dear General, I received your letter concerning the flag yesterday, and cordially concur in all that you say. Although I was chairman of the 'Flag Committee,' who reported the present flag, it was not my individual choice. I urged upon the committee a flag of this sort. [Design sketched.] This is very rough, the proportions are bad. [Design of Confederate battle-flag as it is.]

The above is better. The ground red, the cross blue (edged with white), stars white.

This was my favorite. The three colors of red, white, and blue were preserved in it. It avoided the religious objection about the cross (from the Jews and many Protestant sects), because it did not stand out so conspicuously as if the cross had been placed upright thus. [Design sketched.]

Besides, in the form I proposed, the cross was more heraldic than ecclesiastical, it being the 'saltire' of heraldry, and significant of strength and progress (from the Latin salto, to leap). The stars ought always to be white, or argent, because they are then blazoned 'proper' (or natural color). Stars, too, show better on an azure field than any other. Blue stars on a white field would not be handsome or appropriate. The 'white edge' (as I term it) to the blue is partly a necessity to prevent what is called 'false blazoning,' or a solecism in heraldry, viz., blazoning color on color, or metal on metal. It would not do to put a blue cross, therefore, on a red field. Hence the white, being metal argent, is put on the red, and the blue put on the white. The introduction of white between the blue and red, adds also much to the brilliancy of the colors, and brings them out in strong relief.

But I am boring you with my pet hobby in the matter of the flag. I wish sincerely that Congress would change the present one. Your reasons are conclusive in my mind. But I fear it is just as hard now as it was at Montgomery to tear people away entirely from the desire to appropriate some reminiscence of the 'old flag.' We are now so close to the end of the session that even if we could command votes (upon a fair hearing), I greatly fear we cannot get such hearing. Some think the provisional Congress ought to leave the matter to the permanent. This might, then, be but a provisional flag. Yet, as you truly say, after a few more victories, 'association' will come to the aid of the present flag, and then it will be more difficult than ever to effect a change. I fear nothing can be done; but I will try. I will, as soon as I can, urge the matter of the badges. The President is too sick to be seen at present by any one.

Very respectfully yours,

Wm. Porcher Miles.

The letter clearly shows that Miles never considered the institution of slavery, one way or another, when designing the flag. According to historian and Director of the Museum of the Confederacy John M. Coski, Miles' first design was a blue St. George's cross (an upright or Latin cross) on a red field, with 15 white stars on the blue cross, and palmetto and crescent symbols on the red field. Miles received some criticism from a self-described "Southerner of Jewish persuasion" named Charles Moise, who asked Miles that "...the symbol of a particular religion not be made the symbol of the nation." In response, Miles changed the St. George (Latin) cross to a heraldic saltire ("X"), otherwise known as St. Andrew's cross. Miles mentioned this in his letter to General Beauregard.

William Porcher Miles never considered slavery when designing the flag. He was thinking of a design which would not offend Jews (and some Protestant sects) who didn't like the symbol of the upright cross. However, apparently Charles Moise did not know the history of the heraldic saltire ("X") – which has deep roots as an emblem used by Christians to represent resistance against those who would murder Christians. The saltire ("X") is referred to as St. Andrews Cross because it is believed that St. Andrew was crucified on a cross in the shape of an X.



(Crucifixion of St. Andrew by Juan Correa de Vivar (1540-1545))

The apostle Andrew, brother of the apostle Peter, was a disciple of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, and both apostles ate meals with Jesus after he arose from the dead after His crucifixion. Both apostles went on to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ for many years, and both were crucified for their testimony.

In his *Church History* 3.1, Eusebius quoted Origen saying that Andrew preached in Scythia, and The Chronicle of Nestor claims Andrew preached along the Black Sea and the Dnieper river as far as Kiev, and from there he traveled to Novgorod. Because of this, Andrew became known as patron saint of Ukraine, Romania and Russia. It is believed that Andrew was crucified in the city of Patras (Patrae) in Achaia. The *Acts of Andrew* mentioned in the Manichaean Psalter says Andrew was not nailed but bound to a Latin cross. But a tradition developed that Andrew was crucified on a crux decussata (X-shaped cross, or "saltire"), now

known as "Saint Andrew's Cross."



In the Greek alphabet, the "X" is the 22nd letter, spelled Chi. It is pronounced kai or ki in English. It is the first letter in the word Christ. The next letter in the word Christ is P (Rho) – pronounced roe. When the two symbols are combined, they are called Chi Rho – which has become used as a Christogram (a symbol to represent Christ). This originated in 312 AD when emperor Constantine fought Maxentius at Milvian Bridge. On the evening of October 27, 312 AD, with his army preparing for the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, the emperor Constantine claimed he had seen a vision which led him to believe he was fighting under the protection of the Christian God.

Lactantius wrote that on the night before the battle, Constantine was commanded in a dream to "delineate the heavenly sign on the shields of his soldiers". Constantine obeyed and "he marked on their shields the letter X, with a perpendicular line drawn through it and turned round thus at the top, being the cipher of Christ".

From Eusebius, two accounts of the battle still survive. The first – the *Ecclesiastical History* leaves no doubt that God helped Constantine but does not mention a vision. Later, Eusebius wrote in his *Life of Constantine* a detailed account of a vision and stresses that he had heard the story from the emperor himself. According to this version, Constantine with his army was marching somewhere (Eusebius does not specify the location of the event) when he looked up to the sun and saw a cross of light above it, and with it the Greek words *Εν Τούτῳ Νικά*. The Latin translation of the Greek is *in hoc signo vinces*—literally "In this sign, you will conquer."

At first, he was unsure of the meaning of the apparition, but the following night he had a dream in which Christ explained to him that he should use the sign against his enemies. Eusebius then continues to describe the labarum, the military standard used by Constantine in his later wars against Licinius showing the Chi-Rho sign. Those two accounts have been merged together to arrive at the modern-day idea that Constantine saw the Chi-Rho sign on the evening before the battle. The first appearance of the Chi-Rho is on a Constantinian silver coin from c. 317, which proves that Constantine did use the sign at that time. He made extensive use of the Chi-Rho and the labarum later in the conflict with Licinius.



A coin of Constantine (c. AD 337) showing a depiction of his labarum spearing a serpent.

The saltire (St. Andrews Cross) was used on coins of several Christian emperors of Rome, beginning in the fourth century, such as Constantius II, Valentinian, Jovian, Gratianus, Valens, Arcadius, Constantine III, Jovinus, Theodosius I, Eugenius and Theodosius II. Examples of these coins can be seen today at the British Museum located in the Bloomsbury area of London. The saltire is also found on coins of Britain and Scotland struck in the middle ages.



(Flag of Scotland)

In 832 AD in Scotland, Oengus II was about to lead an army of Picts and Scots into battle against the Angles, led by Aethelstan – near modern-day Athelstaneford, East Lothian. According to legend, Oengus II was heavily outnumbered and while engaged in prayer on the eve of battle vowed to appoint Saint Andrew as the Patron Saint of Scotland – if granted victory over Aethelstan. In the morning, before the battle, white clouds appeared forming an X shape in the sky. Oengus II and his combined army, emboldened by this sign, were victorious over the Angles. Oengus II interpreted the cloud phenomenon as representing the *crux decussata* upon which Saint Andrew was crucified, honored his pledge and appointed Saint Andrew as the Patron Saint of Scotland. Based on this legend, the Scots adopted the white saltire (X) set against a celestial blue background as the design of the flag of Scotland. Later in 1314 AD, following Robert Bruce's victory at the Battle of Bannockburn, the Declaration of Arbroath (Scotland's Declaration of Independence) officially named Saint Andrew as the patron saint of Scotland. It was used by the Guardians of Scotland in 1286 AD and appears to have become the official national flag in 1385 AD when the Parliament of Scotland agreed that Scottish soldiers should wear the white cross as a distinguishing mark. The flag of Scotland is one of the oldest national flags still in use today and has been the fore-runner of many other flags of other nation-states which employed the St. Andrews cross.



(Flag of Britain)

In 1603 AD, James VI of Scotland inherited the English and Irish thrones (as James I), uniting the crowns of England, Scotland and Ireland. On April 12, 1606, a new flag was specified in a royal decree to merge together England's flag of St. George and Scotland's flag of St. Andrew. The saltire in the flag of Scotland became a part of the flag of Britain, resulting in a new flag to represent one united Britain.



From 1696 until 1917, the naval ensign of the Imperial Russian navy was this blue saltire on a white field. In 1991, after the fall of communism in the USSR, the Russia navy resumed use of this flag.

The saltire (St. Andrew's cross) is still in use on the national flags of Burundi, Grenada, Jamaica, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador. It is also used on the state flags of Alabama, Florida, Jersey in Normandy France, as well as the cities of Amsterdam, Apopka Florida, Arkhangelsk Russia, Castro Urdiales Spain, Coral Springs Florida, Fortaleza Brazil, Hollywood Florida, Kanjiza Serbia, Katwijk Holland, Logrono Spain, Luqa and Marsaxlokk on the island of Malta, Panama City Florida and several other cities and counties throughout America and Europe.

The saltire (St. Andrew's cross) was seen on flags flown at the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989 and used by some demonstrators who marched into Prague, Czechoslovakia in what has become known as the "velvet revolution" on November 25, 1989.