On 9 May 1754 an article was published in Benjamin Franklin’s newspaper, The Pennsylvania Gazette, calling for the British colonies on North America’s eastern seaboard to unite against the threat of French aggression from the western interior. This rousing exhortation was echoed by an accompanying illustration depicting the British colonies as a snake cut into segments and was captioned, ‘JOIN, or DIE’ (fig. 1). Although often cited as the first political cartoon published in an American newspaper, this illustration has rarely received more than passing mention. The frequent inaccuracies in such citations inspired (or rather irritated) Albert Matthews to write the only detailed historical study of the original snake cartoon and its subsequent variants. Even Matthews, however, failed to make the important observation that the snake cartoon is a map.

Admittedly, it is so unconventional that even historians of cartography have failed to see it as a map, although it has a number of cartographic features. The eight segments of the snake are labelled with the initials of the colonies in geographical order, from ‘N.E.’ for New England at its head to ‘S.C.’ for South Carolina at its tail. Thus, the snake map retains the topological quality of neighbourship; places next to one another on the ground are next to one another on the map. Further, the undulations of the snake suggest the curving shape of the eastern seacoast of North America, even if one could not superimpose the cartoon on a map and match the shapes precisely. The diagonal position of the snake suggests the southwest to northeast direction of that coastline. The image is also maplike in being a vertical plan rather than an oblique view. Even though it lacks the planimetric accuracy expected of conventional maps, it is a map. Or rather, it is a cartographic caricature, a distorted representation exaggerating the subject’s most striking features. Before assessing its significance as a map, though, it is necessary to know more about the cartoon and its history.

The purpose of this article is to trace the antecedents and influence of Franklin’s cartoon. Its progeny were numerous, because the cartoon was immediately copied in other colonial newspapers. The snake cartoon was also repeatedly revived and its message adapted to new political circumstances: the Stamp Act crisis in the 1760s, the American Revolution in the 1770s and, finally, the American Civil War in the 1860s.
AUTHORSHIP AND ANTECEDENTS

Although the news article and the cartoon are unsigned, Benjamin Franklin almost certainly was their creator. His position as co-owner of The Pennsylvania Gazette provided the editorial opportunity and his known concern for colonial union the incentive to contribute the article. By 1754 Franklin, aged forty-eight, had reduced his active participation in business and had more time to pursue his interests in science and politics.² On 8 April 1754 the Governor of Pennsylvania had appointed Franklin a commissioner to the congress of colonial delegates meeting on 19 June at Albany to settle a defence treaty with the Indian tribes of the Six Nations. During the journey to Albany Franklin drafted a proposal for the union of the colonies which the Albany Congress later approved, although the plan was never implemented.³ The 9 May article in The Pennsylvania Gazette with its motto, ‘JOIN, or DIE’, and its warning about the French threat, indicates that Franklin already had the benefits of union in mind:

... many more French are expected from Canada; the Design being to establish themselves, settle their Indians, and build Forts just on the Back of our Settlements in all our Colonies; from which Forts, as they did from Crown-Point, they may send out their Parties to kill and scalp the Inhabitants, and ruin the Frontier Colonies. ... The confidence of the French in this Undertaking seems well-grounded on the present disunited State of the British Colonies, and the extreme Difficulty of bringing so many different Governments and Assemblies to agree in any speedy and effectual Measures for our common Defence and Security; while our Enemies have the very great Advantage of being under one Direction, with one Council, and one Purse. Hence, and from the great Distance of Britain, they presume that they may with Impunity violate the most solemn Treaties subsisting between the two Crowns, kill, seize and imprison our Traders, and confiscate their Effects at Pleasure (as they have done for several Years past), murder and scalp our Farmers,
with their Wives and Children, and take an easy Possession of such Parts of the British Territory as they find most convenient for them; which if they are permitted to do, must end in the Destruction of the British Interest, Trade and Plantations in America.*

Franklin had made innovative use of a cartoon once before to accent his political writings. In 1747 he had printed and distributed a pamphlet urging Pennsylvanians to prepare for their own defence, as he later recalled:

With respect to Defence, Spain having been several Years at War against Britain, and being at length join’d by France, which brought us into greater Danger; and the laboured & long-continued Endeavours of our Governor Thomas to prevail with our Quaker Assembly to pass a Militia Law, & make other Provisions for the Security of the Province having proved abortive, I determined to try what might be done by a voluntary Association of the People. To promote this I first wrote & published a Pamphlet, intitled, PLAIN TRUTH, in which I stated our defenceless situation in strong Lights, with the Necessity of Union & Discipline for our Defence, and promis’d to propose in a few Days an Association to be generally signed for that purpose. The Pamphlet had a sudden & surprizing Effect. ... the Subscribers amounted at length to upwards of Ten Thousand.⁵

The frontispiece of Plain Truth (fig. 2) shows a kneeling wagon-driver praying to the god Hercules, while his team of three horses struggles to pull a heavily laden wagon out of the mud. An explanation is provided by the accompanying Latin text, 'Non votis, neque

Fig. 2. The frontispiece to Benjamin Franklin's pamphlet, Plain Truth, 1747. BL, 103.k.62

Non Votis, &c.
suppliciis muliebribus, auxilia deorum parantur', translated in the second edition of Plain Truth as, 'Divine assistance and protection are not to be obtained by timorous prayers, and womanish supplications'. The illustration comes from a set of twelve cuts purchased by Franklin to enliven the fables in his printing of Thomas Dilworth’s school book, A New Guide to the English Tongue, in Philadelphia in 1747. Inventively used again in Plain Truth, the cut of the foolish wagon driver became the first political cartoon of any kind to be published in America.

The success of the Plain Truth cartoon may have inspired Franklin to use a second cartoon, the snake map, in 1754 to arouse support for colonial union. Franklin sent the snake cartoon to Richard Partridge, the Pennsylvania agent in London, on 8 May 1754 (the day before its publication in The Pennsylvania Gazette) saying, ‘With this I send you a Paragraph of News from our Gazette, with an Emblem printed therewith, which it may be well to get inserted in some of your most publick Papers.’ Although no instance is known of the use of the cartoon in an English paper, it was copied in four Boston and New York papers within weeks of its appearance in Pennsylvania.

Franklin invented a third political cartoon, ‘MAGNA Britannia: her Colonies REDUC’D’, in London during the winter of 1765–6 and circulated it to gain support for the repeal of the Stamp Act. His appreciation of the cartoon as an effective medium of communication must have been in his mind in 1773 when he observed that ‘Odd ways of presenting Matters to the publick View sometimes occasion them to be more read, talk’d of, and more attended to.’

He also created symbolic designs for various other purposes. His account of the response to Plain Truth in 1747 continues with the information that, ‘The Women, by Subscriptions among themselves, provided Silk Colours, which they presented to the [militia] Companies, painted with different Devices and Mottoes which I supplied.’ The tradition that Franklin contributed to the design of American paper currency in 1775–6 is supported by the discovery, among his papers, of drawings in his hand of the emblem used on the back of the bills: a circle of thirteen links, each representing a colony and labelled in geographical sequence.

Whether Franklin actually engraved the snake cartoon is more problematical, although it is certain that he did some relief and intaglio engraving during his early career. He may have acquired this skill while apprenticed to his elder brother, James, a London-trained Boston printer also identified as the probable engraver of some woodcuts. Recollecting the various tasks he had performed while foreman for the Philadelphia printer, Samuel Keimer, after returning from England in 1726, Franklin wrote, ‘I also engrav’d several Things on occasion.’ Employed again by Keimer in 1728 to print paper currency in New Jersey, Franklin remembered that ‘I contrived a Copper-Plate Press for it, the first that had been seen in the Country. I cut several Ornaments and Checks for the Bills.’ A receipt in Franklin’s accounts indicates that he may have cut the wood block for a map in 1733. However, as Franklin’s own printing business grew in the 1740s, he began to purchase small cuts and ornaments rather than make them himself. It is possible that he commissioned James Turner, a Boston engraver of maps and other illustrations
known to have worked for him, to cut the snake cartoon.\textsuperscript{18} Lacking conclusive evidence, we have to leave this question open.

As the author of the snake cartoon, if not its engraver, Franklin drew upon various sources for its form and content. The snake cartoon follows the formula of the standard emblem book, a type of literature that had originated during the sixteenth century in Italy and soon thereafter spread across Europe. Conventionally in the emblem book each example consisted of three parts: motto, symbolic picture and explanatory text. Readers enjoyed deciphering the symbolic meaning and relationship of the elements. For example, in the 1564 Lyons edition of Andreas Alciatus’s \textit{Emblemata}, one of many editions of this popular work, the motto, ‘Ex literarum Studiis immortalitate acquiri (From literary studies comes immortality)’, is illustrated by a Triton encircled by a snake (representing eternity) and is explained by lines of poetry and prose below.\textsuperscript{19} By the eighteenth century, however, the emblem book had degenerated from a serious literary genre into a cheap formula used chiefly for education in children’s books and entertainment in humorous reading matter for adults.\textsuperscript{20}

In this latter guise the emblem was also employed by the political satirists who flourished in eighteenth-century England, but whose origins can be traced several centuries earlier. Where the emblem in its pure form had been an end in itself, political satire delivered its message with a purpose. Pictorial propaganda mocking authority, such as by showing the Pope as the Devil, had been used effectively by Martin Luther during the Reformation. Later Holland became a source of satirical prints whose anti-Spanish, anti-Jesuit viewpoint was well-received in England. While Dutch prints continued to circulate, English-produced prints began to appear in the seventeenth century, chiefly as an expression of opposition to the government.\textsuperscript{21}

Benjamin Franklin had had ample opportunity to become familiar with the various types of emblem literature. The first book he bought as a child in Boston, according to his autobiography, was John Bunyan’s \textit{The Pilgrim’s Progress}, a late example, even at its first publication in 1678, of serious literature employing emblematic symbolism.\textsuperscript{22} Throughout his childhood, apprenticeship and early working years in Boston (1706–23), Philadelphia (1723–4) and London (1724–6), Franklin had supplemented his early formal schooling with voracious and wide-ranging reading, drawing on the libraries of acquaintances and paying to borrow books from booksellers.\textsuperscript{23} A developing interest in linguistic symbolism was indicated by the sixteen-year-old Franklin’s fascination with John Wilkins’s \textit{An Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language} (London, 1668), a book proposing a philosophical subject classification represented by a shorthand symbolic language.\textsuperscript{24} Thus it seems hardly surprising that in 1751 Franklin was the first to publish an American edition of Johann Arndt’s \textit{Sechs gestreiche Bücher von Wahren Christenthum}, a German book of symbolic devices popular among German settlers in Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{25} Typical of colonial printing establishments, the business built up by Franklin in Philadelphia during the 1730s and 1740s included the importing and selling of books, maps and related items, as well as jobbing printing and newspaper and book publishing. He was the leading founder of the Library Company of Philadelphia
in 1731 and was instrumental during the following decades in the selection and acquisition of books for what was, in effect, the city's first public library. As his circumstances improved, Franklin was able to become a collector of books himself. He amassed a substantial personal library in Philadelphia even before the extensive acquisitions made during his later lengthy stays in England (1757–75) and France (1776–85). The catalogue of his personal library has disappeared since his death, and only about a quarter of the library’s contents have since been traced. However, it is reasonable to assume that by 1754 (the year of the snake cartoon) he already had a wide knowledge of both American and foreign publications.

Not only does Franklin’s snake cartoon employ the emblematic formula of motto, symbolic picture and emblematic text, but he also referred to it as an ‘Emblem’ when he sent it to the Pennsylvania agent in London. Franklin’s consciousness of its emblematic character is also supported by his grandson’s reference to his later political cartoon, ‘MAGNA Britannia: her Colonies REDUC’D’, as an ‘emblematic design’. William Temple Franklin added that the emblem was printed both by itself on cards and ‘on half sheets of paper, with the explanation and moral’. The text of the explanation, which survives in a later copy, calls the picture a ‘Prophetic Emblem’. Joseph Galloway, who received Franklin’s political card in 1766, wrote, ‘The lance from the thigh of New England, pointed at the breast of Britannia, is striking, as is indeed every other emblem’. In addition to using the word ‘emblem’, Galloway’s comment demonstrates the impact of the pictorial symbolism.

The pictorial imagery in the snake cartoon incorporates several symbolic themes whose combined interpretation amplifies and reinforces the text: map, snake and dismemberment themes. In an investigation of Franklin’s sources, each theme warrants separate consideration.

The Map Theme

All available evidence indicates that Franklin was very aware of the value of maps as a means of recording and communicating geographical information. He bought and sold maps as part of his printing business, exchanged maps with friends, participated in smuggling maps out of England during the American Revolution, used maps himself, supported the production of new maps and even participated in mapmaking. For instance, it was Franklin who was asked by the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1747 to order large maps, some with bordering views, for display in ‘the long Gallery and the Assembly Room in the Statehouse’. Franklin was also a friend and financial backer of the cartographer, Lewis Evans. And when in 1753 Franklin, who since 1737 had been Deputy Postmaster of Philadelphia, was appointed Deputy Postmaster General of the American colonies, he improved the efficiency of the post routes forming the main intercolonial communication network, a task which required the knowledge and use of maps. Still holding that post in 1768 while based in London, where he had been the Pennsylvania agent since 1757, Franklin was consulted about the reasons for British mail.
packets from London taking two weeks longer to sail to New York than to Rhode Island, a delay not explicable simply by relative distance. Ships sailing to New York were being slowed by the Gulf Stream, a phenomenon of the ocean current already familiar to American seamen. Franklin then asked his cousin, Timothy Folger, a Nantucket sea captain, to mark the ‘Dimentions Course and Swiftness of the Stream’ on a chart and had it printed for use by packet captains. This chart was an important early example of thematic cartography.\(^{38}\)

Franklin’s article in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* on 9 May 1754 vividly conjures up his mental map of the British colonies as a narrow strip ‘confined to the country between the sea and the mountains’, threatened at their rear by French expansion into ‘the great country back of the Appalachian mountains’.\(^{39}\) His familiarity with military maps and tactics comes across as he visualizes the coastal colonies as a defensive line vulnerable to attack from the rear.

Franklin’s knowledge of maps of the British colonies may well have been matched by exposure to symbolic maps used in political satire. One early example printed in 1566 in Geneva and dedicated to England’s Queen Elizabeth was the anti-Catholic *Mappemonde nouvelle papistique*, a sixteen-sheet print showing a world map symbolically poised in the jaws of Hell. At least two other satirical maps relating to political events in England were produced in Amsterdam during the seventeenth century.\(^{40}\) Further there were cartographic personifications of European countries. In some cases the map, signifying the territory ruled, adorned a person. The female personification of ‘Great Britaine’ shown in the titlepiece of Drayton’s *Poly-Olbion* in 1613 is wearing a map.\(^{41}\) Similarly, one of the few surviving English prints about the seventeenth-century conflict with France shows Louis XIV attired in ‘the Usurper’s Habit’, a costume covered with depictions of battles, towns and fortresses and holding his hat, which represents Limerick.\(^{42}\) In other instances, the person or animal was embodied in the map. For example, the numerous cartographic portrayals of Europe as a queen and of *Leo Belgicus* are well known.

### The Snake Theme

The use of a person, animal or object to represent a concept was a typical emblematic device,\(^{43}\) although the historical roots of the practice certainly lay deeper, for animal personifications are universally typical of folk tales.\(^{44}\) Snakes have always been central figures in myth and fable, sometimes associated with good and sometimes with evil.\(^{45}\) Such symbolism, the cumulated heritage of preceding ages and cultures, was consciously revived by the Renaissance and later creators of emblem designs.

The heraldic association of different animals with particular countries was already widespread when the political cartoons of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gave this form of personification a satirical twist. By the 1660s England was being depicted as a lion or a dog in Dutch political prints, while the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell appeared as a dragon. Political cartoons during the French and Indian War
often pitted the British lion against the Gallic cock. The possibilities for animal representation had been expanded by the opening up of the New World. The rattlesnake, indigenous to America, had become a symbolic attribute of the New World, along with other animals, like the alligator and the armadillo, in pictorial representations of the Continents.

Typical of early scientific writing, the first accounts of American animals tended to blend folklore and fact. The myth, carried from Europe, that snakes cut into pieces could rejoin or regenerate missing parts was based on a confusion between snakes and certain lizards which, as a defence mechanism, can lose their tails and regrow them. This myth was probably the source for the image of a snake divided into two parts which appears in Nicolas Verrien’s *Livre curieux et utile* (fig. 3), an emblem book first published about 1685 in Paris. The accompanying motto, ‘se rejoindre ou mourir’, must have been the source for Franklin’s ‘Join, or die’. However, the snake emblem of Verrien is much smaller and more generalized than Franklin’s snake cartoon, and Franklin must have had other, more detailed snake images in mind, as well. Mark Catesby, whose *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands* published in London 1731–43 stands out as a landmark in the natural-history literature of North America, describes the habits of rattlesnakes:

They are the most inactive and slow moving Snake of all others, and are never Aggressors, except in what they prey upon, for unless they are disturbed they will not bite, and when provoked, they give Warning by shaking their Rattle. These are commonly believed to be the most deadly venomous Serpent of any in these parts of America…

Benjamin Franklin may have had Catesby’s description in mind when he contributed a satirical piece to *The Pennsylvania Gazette* on 9 May 1751. In it he suggested that in return for the ‘Thieves and Villains introduc’d among us’ by the British ‘Exporting of Felons to the Colonies’, the colonies might send to England ‘Numbers of these venomous Reptiles we call RATTLE-SNAKES; Felons-convict from the Beginning of the World’, concluding:

That this Exporting of Felons to the colonies may be consider’d as a Trade, as well in the Light of a Favour. Now all Commerce implies Returns: Justice requires them: There can be no Trade without them. And Rattle-Snakes seem the most suitable returns for the Human Serpents sent us by our Mother Country. In this, however, as in every other Branch of Trade, she will have the Advantage of us. She will reap equal Benefits without equal Risque of the Inconveniencies and Dangers. For the Rattle-Snake gives Warning before he attempts his Mischief; which the Convict does not.

It seems likely that snake illustrations in Catesby’s books were the direct pictorial source, as well, for Franklin’s snake cartoon in 1754. This connection is not immediately apparent from the first and best-known plate, ‘The Rattle-Snake’, shown coiled in the classic ‘don’t-tread-on-me’ pose of symbolic (but non-cartographic) rattlesnake representations. However, the next plate of ‘The Small Rattle-Snake’ (Plate VIII),
Fig. 3. Emblems from Nicolas Verrien’s *Livre curieux et utile*, including no. 7, the divided snake, with the motto ‘Se rejoindre ou mourir’
open-mouthed with projecting forked tongue in an undulating pose, is very similar to the Franklin cartoon. On the other hand, the snake in the Franklin cartoon may not be a rattlesnake; the indeterminate markings near the tip of its tail could simply be scales. Other distinctive features of the cartoon snake, however, appear elsewhere in Catesby’s book. The single loop of the cartoon snake’s body matches that of ‘The Green Spotted Snake’. The plate of ‘The Chain Snake’ shows a dark blue snake apparently divided into segments by thin yellow bands, an effect strikingly similar to the cut segments in the snake cartoon. Finally, the description of ‘The Glass Snake’ says, ‘A small Blow with a Stick will cause the Body to separate, not only at the Place struck, but at two or three other Places; the Muscles being articulated in a singular Manner quite through to the Vertebra.’ One can imagine Franklin drawing an analogy with the idea that a blow to one of the colonies would hurt them all. Rather than copying a single snake illustration, it seems that Franklin used a composite of features from a number of snake images and descriptions.

The Dismemberment Theme

The idea of a personification cut into segments may have had other sources, as well. The depiction of an animal or human personification of a country being dismembered or trampled was also common imagery in the political print. Henry Stubbe wrote angrily in 1672 that Dutch satirical prints and medals showing a prostrate Britannia trampled by the elephant of Holland or depicting ruffians cutting the tails off English dogs were ample provocation for war. During the mid-eighteenth century British political cartoons regularly showed Britannia being murdered or butchered. It is likely, for example, that Franklin knew ‘The Conduct, of the two Butche[r]s’, a pictorial attack on the Pelham brothers (First Lord of the Treasury and Secretary of State respectively) published in 1749. That print shows Britannia being dismembered and disembowelled, and her severed arms bear the geographical names of Cape Breton and Gibraltar. Along with a 1756 cartoon showing ‘The English Lion Dismember’d’, it is thought to have been the design source for Franklin’s third political cartoon, ‘MAGNA Britannia: her Colonies REDUC’D’, issued in 1766.

As with map imagery, Franklin used similar dissection imagery in his writings. When General Edward Braddock brought British troops to America in 1755 and was preparing to advance inland to subdue the French and Indians, Franklin sent him the following advice:

The only Danger I apprehend of Obstruction to your March, is from the Ambuscades of Indians, who by constant Practice are dextrous in laying and executing them. And the slender Line near four Miles long, which your Army must make, may expose it to be attack’d by Surprize in its Flanks, and to be cut like a Thread into several Pieces, which from their Distance cannot come up in time to support each other.

In July 1755 Braddock’s troops were ambushed after crossing the Monongahela River, much as Franklin had predicted.
Unlike the frontispiece in *Plain Truth*, the snake cartoon seems to have been an original design, drawing upon the various sources just described. Its publication in a newspaper in 1754 was equally remarkable. Several factors discouraged the use of pictures in eighteenth-century American newspapers: the scarcity and high cost both of engravers capable of cutting pictorial printing blocks and of paper on which to print them. Illustrations were usually limited to the masthead design or to small stock images, such as horses, houses or ships, identifying types of advertisements. Only exceptional circumstances, combined with Franklin's awareness of the power of the graphic image to enhance the printed word, could have given birth to the snake cartoon.

It is likely that Franklin published the snake cartoon just five weeks before the Albany Congress as part of a deliberate strategy to gain support for his proposal for colonial union. After all, he had successfully employed similar tactics with his political pamphlet *Plain Truth* in 1747. As a newspaper publisher, Franklin was ideally placed to reach a wide audience. Newspaper publishing had been introduced to the American colonies earlier in the eighteenth century and was catering to an increasingly literate general public. Typically located in a coastal town, the colonial newspaper publisher used commercial contacts to import news from Europe along with trade goods. As well as printing local items and advertisements, the colonial newspaper redistributed news from overseas and from other colonies. The colonial newspaper became a forum for public discourse and contributed to the formation of an American political consciousness. Prior to the American Revolution, newspaper articles written by a relatively small number of political activists made publicly voiced discontent seem general. Set in that context, it is not surprising that Franklin regarded his political writings as a means to an end. He expressed his pragmatic attitude in a letter to his sister, Jane Mecom, in 1767:

> You desire me to send you all the political Pieces I have been the Author of. I have never kept them. They were most of them written occasionally for transient Purposes, and having done their Business, they die and are forgotten. I could as easily make a Collection for you of all the past Parings of my Nails.

Ephemeral or not, Franklin's snake cartoon had considerable public exposure. Re-engraved versions appeared with variants of the text in *The New-York Gazette* and *The New-York Mercury* on 13 May 1754, in *The Boston Gazette* on 21 May and in *The Boston News-Letter* on 23 May. The design of the cartoon as copied varies only slightly from the original; the added slogan, 'Unite and Conquer', issues from the mouth of the snake in the Boston versions. Only a couple of papers published the text without the snake cartoon, *The Pennsylvania Journal* on 9 May and *The Boston Evening-Post* on 20 May. On 19 July *The Virginia Gazette* mentioned the snake cartoon but did not reproduce it. *The South Carolina Gazette* of 22 August printed an article with a much-simplified diagram of the snake cartoon, formed by short lengths of printer's rule labelled with the initials of the colonies in the same geographical sequence.
Despite whatever support this rapid and wide newspaper circulation raised, Franklin’s political aim of colonial union was not fulfilled in 1754. Although the representatives of seven colonies who met at Albany that June and July accepted Franklin’s plan in principle, the colonial assemblies and the British government were never able to agree on its implementation. Franklin recollected, ‘The Assemblies did not adopt it as they all thought there was too much Prerogative in it; and in England it was judg’d to have too much of the Democratic.’ However, the snake map had captured the popular imagination, as its revival in coming decades was to show. As the political situation evolved, both the form of the snake cartoon and the content of its patriotic message changed correspondingly.

The Stamp Act Crisis

In the 1750s Franklin had sought to unite Britain’s American colonies against the French and Indian threat. But when in 1763 the British government began to consider imposing a stamp tax on the American colonies to raise revenue for their defence, the colonial press reacted strongly against it. The newspaper publishers’ own interests were threatened, since the proposed tax was to be levied on paper, as well as on other imported goods. With their close ties to England, colonial printers had heard about or experienced personally the harsh taxes imposed on paper in England by the Stamp Acts of 1712 and 1725. The British government now became the oppressor against whom colonial public opinion was to be rallied, and newspaper accounts emphasized the threat posed by taxation to the liberty and livelihood of the colonists in general.

During the unsettled period preceding the imposition of the Stamp Act on 1 November 1765, there appeared on 21 September in New York an opposition publication in the guise of a newspaper, The Constitutional Courant. The masthead of The Constitutional Courant includes the snake cartoon with the single motto ‘JOIN or DIE’ as its central feature. The imprint of the paper reads: ‘Printed by ANDREW MARVEL, at the Sign of the Bribe refused, on Constitution Hill, North-America.’ Andrew Marvel was the pseudonym of William Goddard, a printer who had recently left Providence, Rhode Island, for New York City, associating briefly with several printers there before moving to Philadelphia in December 1766. He is thought to have printed The Constitutional Courant at the press of James Parker, located in Woodbridge, New Jersey, in September 1765. Copies were transported secretly to New York City for sale by hawkers and created such a commotion that an official enquiry was held. The Constitutional Courant was quickly reprinted in Boston and possibly in New York or Philadelphia in at least two variant editions illustrated with different cuts of the snake cartoon. The Boston version was probably printed by Thomas and John Flett, the publishers of The Boston Evening-Post; on 7 October 1765 their paper carried an advertisement for The Constitutional Courant using the same cut of the snake cartoon.

The publication on 21 September 1765 of The Constitutional Courant may have been timed to influence popular opinion just before the meeting in October of twenty-seven
colonial representatives at the Stamp Act Congress held at New York City. If so, it followed the pattern set by Benjamin Franklin with *Plain Truth* in 1747 and the snake cartoon in 1754. As for its content, *The Constitutional Courant* generally voiced, albeit in less temperate language, the conclusions that the Stamp Act Congress would reach. The Congress issued a statement of the rights and liberties of the British American Colonists, pledging allegiance to King George III but calling for the reversal of recent Acts of Parliament, including the Stamp Act, which threatened their rights, liberty and prosperity. *The Constitutional Courant* had similarly implied that the colonies ought to unite in opposition to the British government but stopped short of advocating their political union.

Benjamin Franklin was engaged in anti-Stamp Act lobbying in London and only a distant spectator when *The Constitutional Courant* appeared in 1765. An old and more conservative-minded friend, Cadwallader Colden, sent him a copy of *The Constitutional Courant* from New York on 1 October 1765. Writing in his capacity as Lieutenant Governor of the colony of New York, Colden told Franklin, a Deputy Postmaster General since 1753, of the illicit use of the postal service to deliver the paper:

My regard to you makes me give you the trouble of the inclosed Printed Paper, one or more bundles of which I am well informed were delivered to the Post Rider at Woodbridge by James Parker were distributed by the Post Riders in several parts of this Colony & I believe likewise in the neighbouring Colonies: the doing of which was kept secret from the Post Master in this Place. It is believed that this Paper was printed by Parker after the Printers in this Place had refused to do it, perhaps you may be able to judge from the Types. As he is Secretary to the General Post office in America, I am under a necessity of taking notice of it to the Secretary of State by the return of the Packet which is daily expected, & I am unwilling to do this without giving you previous notice by a Merchant Ship which Sails Tomorrow.  

Colden’s sympathies with the British government became even clearer later in October 1765 when he tried to force acceptance of a shipment of stamped paper from England and was consequently burned in effigy by a New York mob.

Once the Stamp Act had been passed, political agitation focussed on repealing it, and Franklin now played a key role in England. Although he did not use the snake map again as a propaganda image, Franklin and others made use of related symbolism in other political cartoons. ‘MAGNA Britannia, her Colonies REDUC’D’, Franklin’s third political cartoon, produced in the winter of 1765–6, is also an emblematic picture. Britannia’s severed limbs are labelled in geographical order (New Eng[land], New York, Pennsyl[vania] and Virg[inia]), echoing the dissected map. A lance is aimed from New England at the breast of Britannia. Her representation as a classical figure and the banner referring to Bellisarius, a once-famous Roman general impoverished and imprisoned by the jealousy Emperor, also contribute to the symbolism.

Rather than publish this political cartoon, Franklin circulated it privately. A fashion in late eighteenth-century London was the printing of political cartoons on small pasteboard cards for distribution or binding into booklets. Amateurs like Franklin, as
well as leading artists of the day, made sketches and had them engraved and printed. Mary Darly, the wife of the main publisher of political cards, wrote a guide to the drawing of caricatures. Franklin sent his ‘MAGNA Britannia’ cards to friends, used them as note paper ‘to write all his Messages to Men in power in Great Britain’, ‘employed a Waiter to place one of them in each Parliament Mans hand as he entred the house the day preceding the great debate of the Stamp Act’, and even left them as his final visiting cards before his departure from England at the start of the American Revolution in 1775.

Among other British political cartoons inspired by the Stamp Act is the snake cartoon’s most exotic relative, ‘THE CURIOUS ZEBRA. alive from America!’ (fig. 4). The zebra’s stripes are labelled in geographical order with the names of the thirteen American colonies. Various political figures look on, while George Grenville attempts to place on its back a saddle labelled ‘Stamp Act’.

‘The TEA-TAX-TEMPEST, or OLD TIME with his MAGICK = LANTHERN’,
another British political cartoon published in 1783 at the close of the Revolutionary War, takes a retrospective look at the beginnings of rebellion during the Stamp Act crisis. In this cartoon, Father Time projects a magic-lantern medley of images before an audience which includes personifications of Britannia and America (the latter as an Indian maiden). Issuing from an exploding teapot is the undulating snake of the cartoon; a similar snake is stretched across the striped ground of a flag. The explanatory text reads, 'There you see the little Hot Spit Fire Tea pot that has done all the Mischief... There you see the thirteen Stripes and Rattle = Snake exalted ... &c. &c. &c.' The magic-lantern theme recalls the practice of displaying oil-paper transparencies of patriotic scenes and symbols in windows or at evening meetings. The Boston silversmith and revolutionary, Paul Revere, had fashioned such affecting transparencies that it was reported that 'spectators were struck with solemn silence and their countenances were covered with a melancholy gloom'. One such patriotic symbol was the snake from Franklin’s cartoon, which also inspired a number of flag designs during the Revolutionary War period.

The snake cartoon made one more appearance between the Stamp Act crisis in 1765 and the American Revolution. When the hated Governor of Massachusetts, Sir Francis Bernard, returned to England in 1769, he was saluted with a volley of derogatory newspaper articles and poems. The snake map appeared on the verso of a poem printed in Boston, titled ‘An Elegy to the infamous Memory of Sr. F—— B——’. The print is identical with the Boston version of the snake map which appeared in The Constitutional Courant of 1765. Beneath the snake image are four lines of verse adapting the symbolism to the occasion:

Not the harsh Threats of Tyrants bearing Rule,
Nor Guile-cloak'd-Meekness of each cringing Tool;
Shall shake our Firmness, or divide That Love
Which the strong Ties of social Friendship prove.

AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY WAR

During the American Revolution, however, the snake map would reappear in a more general context. By 1775 there were almost forty newspapers in the American colonies, and a paper war raged on their pages at the same time that battles were being fought on the ground. The snake map appeared as a masthead design in three of those papers, continuing the precedent set by The Constitutional Courant. On 23 June 1774 John Holt, the publisher of The New-York Journal, changed the masthead design from the traditional British Royal Arms to a new version of the snake map, thus advertising the paper’s revolutionary sympathies. In Holt’s version the snake is divided into nine parts with ‘G’ for Georgia added at the tail; it has lost its loop; and the motto is now ‘UNITE OR DIE’. By 27 July 1774 it had been copied in the masthead of The Pennsylvania Journal published by William and Thomas Bradford. The only notable difference is that the Georgia tail portion of the Pennsylvania version is divided into two segments. The
New-York Journal used the snake map as a masthead until 8 December 1774, while The Pennsylvania Journal used it until 18 October 1775.\textsuperscript{76}

At the same time a more innovative variation of the snake map showed up in the masthead of a Boston paper, The Massachusetts Spy (fig. 5). The publisher, Isaiah Thomas, later wrote that:

On the 7th of July, 1774, ... a new political device appeared in the title of this paper — a snake and a dragon. The dragon represented Great Britain, and the snake the colonies. The snake was divided into nine parts, the head was one part, and under it N.E. as representing New England; the second part N.Y. for New York; the third N.J. for New Jersey; the fourth P. for Pennsylvania; the fifth M. for Maryland; the sixth V. for Virginia; the seventh N.C. for North Carolina; the eighth S.C. for South Carolina; and the ninth part, or tail, for Georgia. The head and tail of the snake were supplied with stings, for defence against the dragon, which appeared furious, and as bent on attacking the snake. Over several parts of the snake, was this motto, in large capitals, 'JOIN OR DIE!' This device, which was extended under the whole width of the title of the Spy, appeared in every succeeding paper whilst it was printed in Boston.\textsuperscript{77}

The American snake confronting the British dragon gives dramatic visual emphasis to the line of text just below the newspaper title: 'DO THOU Great LIBERTY inspire our Souls — And make our Lives in THY Possession happy — Or, our Deaths glorious in THY just Defence.' The last appearance of The Massachusetts Spy in Boston, and hence of the snake-and-dragon design, was 6 April 1775.\textsuperscript{78}

The design of the snake appearing in the three newspaper mastheads during 1774–5 has been generalized, and its curves no longer suggest the coastline. This is particularly true of The Massachusetts Spy where the snake has been elongated across the page. However, the maplike geographical sequence of the colonies remains. The Massachusetts Spy masthead is of particular interest, because it was executed by Paul Revere, the
Boston silversmith famous for his midnight ride in 1775 to warn of approaching British troops. Revere's revolutionary sentiments were also expressed in his printed engravings and metalcuts. His surviving day books record not only his work in silver but also, with a versatility typical of the period, many commissions to engrave maps, music, advertising cards, currency, portraits, caricatures, and the like for intaglio or relief printing. For example, after the Boston Massacre in 1770 Revere produced a copper engraving of the event and also, for The Boston Gazette, a metalcut showing the coffins of the patriots slain by the British soldiers. He had provided the scrollwork title for The Massachusetts Spy in 1771, and on 6 July 1774 he charged the publisher twelve shillings for cutting the accompanying snake-and-dragon design. He often adapted designs from existing pictorial models. The likely inspiration for the snake-and-dragon design was Revere's own intaglio satirical print, 'A View of the Year 1765', itself an adaptation of a British print of 1763. The original print had depicted opposition in Britain to the Excise Bill of 1763, the latter personified as a dragon. Revere's version in 1765 modified the dragon to represent the Stamp Act and showed his opponents as a row of figures, eight of whom (labelled by initials) represent the American colonies. For The Massachusetts Spy masthead Revere updated and simplified the imagery to suit the metalcut medium, replacing the figures by the American snake facing the British dragon.

The snake cartoon appeared frequently on newspaper mastheads in New York, Boston and Philadelphia during 1774–5. Instead of responding in kind, the Royalist press replied poetically. The New-York Gazetteer opened the lively exchange of verse on 25 August 1774 with the following lines:

For the NEW-YORK GAZETTEER.
On the SNAKE, depicted at the Head of some American NEWS PAPERS.

Ye Sons of Sedition, how comes it to pass,
That America's typed by a SNAKE — in the grass?
Don't you think 'tis a scandalous, saucy reflection,
That merits the soundest, severest Correction,
NEW-ENGLAND's the Head too; — NEW ENGLAND's abused;
For the Head of the Serpent we know should be Bruised.

Rejoinders appeared in The Pennsylvania Journal on 31 August, The Massachusetts Spy and The New-York Journal on 15 September. A further reply whose opening lines echo the cartographic imagery of the snake map appeared in The New-York Journal on 29 September and was reprinted in The Massachusetts Spy on 27 October:

On the BRITISH MINISTRY, and New-England, the Head of the AMERICAN SNAKE.
AN EPIGRAM. 1774.

Britain's sons line the coasts of Atlantic all o'er,
Great of length, but in breadth they now wind on a shore
That's divided by inlets, by creeks, and by bays, —
A snake* cut in parts, a pat emblem convey —

104
The fell junto at home — sure their heads are but froth —
Fain this snake would have caught to supply viper broth
For their worn constitution — and to it they go,
Hurry Tom, without his yes or his no,
On the boldest adventure their annals can show:
By their wisdom advised, he their courage displays,
For they seiz'd on the tongue 'mong their first of essays;
Nor once thought of the teeth, when our snake they assail —
Tho' the prudent catch snakes by the back or the tail —
To direct to the head! — our GOOD KING must indite 'em —
They forgot that the head would most certainly bite 'em.

*Some fifty years hence, when the body fills up, an elephant supporting Great Britain on his back, will be a more proper emblem. 82

No longer a novelty, the snake cartoon had become a political icon.

During the course of the Revolutionary War the snake design was further modified, shedding its cartographic aspect to emphasize the theme of unity. When John Holt, the publisher of The New-York Journal, stopped using the snake map in the masthead, he immediately replaced it on 15 December 1774 with a circular snake design which appeared until 29 August 1776. A contemporary description reads:

The snake was united, and coiled with the tail in its mouth, forming a double ring; within the ring was a pillar standing on Magna Charta, and surmounted with the cap of liberty; the pillar on each side was supported by six arms and hands, figurative of the colonies. 83

The inscription on the body of the snake reinforces this imagery:

UNITED NOW ALIVE AND FREE - FIRM ON THIS BASIS LIBERTY SHALL STAND * AND THUS SUPPORTED EVER BLESS OUR LAND * TILL TIME BECOMES ETERNITY. 84

The circular snake as the symbol of eternity was, of course, a familiar emblematic image, but other American snake symbolism was also developing.

A letter published in The Pennsylvania Journal and also in The Pennsylvania Gazette in 1775 extols the rattlesnake as a suitable American symbol, because it is vigilant, only attacks in self-defence, never surrenders and its thirteen rattles symbolize the union of the thirteen American colonies:

'Tis curious and amazing to observe how distinct and independent of each other the rattles of this animal are, and yet how firmly they are united together so as to be never separated except by breaking them to pieces. One of these rattles is incapable of producing a sound; but the ringing of thirteen together is sufficient to alarm the boldest man living. 85

The acceptance of the rattlesnake as an American emblem is also shown by its appearance on paper currency, uniform buttons, and naval and military flags. 86

In its new role as a national symbol the snake image was once again linked with
Benjamin Franklin. Based in France from 1776 to 1785, Franklin fought with words and diplomacy on America’s behalf and became a legendary figure in old age. Among the many portraits painted of him during his stay in France was one by Joseph-Siffred Duplessis, who first exhibited it at the Salon of 1779 and later made numerous copies of the subject. The original version is mounted in an elaborate gilded frame ornamented with carvings symbolic of Franklin’s role in the struggle for American independence: a liberty cap, a liberty torch, a flayed lion skin and a rattlesnake.87 Interpreted generally, the snake could represent wisdom or prudence, but its undulating shape and single coil are unmistakably those of Franklin’s original snake map of 1754. Here is the once-divided snake which has united to defeat the British lion, represented by its flayed skin. When the leading London cartoonist of that day, James Gillray, published a print showing the American rattlesnake encircling the defeated British troops at Yorktown in 1782,88 it must have seemed that the life history of the snake map had drawn to a fitting close.

AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

However, there is an epilogue to the tale of the snake map. In 1861, as the Civil War threatened to split the United States over the issue of slavery, both the northern Unionists and the southern Secessionists employed graphic propaganda. The political cartoon, by now a traditional means of attack and repartee, appeared separately and in newspapers and magazines.

One such cartoon titled ‘Scott’s Great Snake’ was published in Cincinnati by J. B. Elliott in 1866 (fig. 6). It illustrates the proposal, popularly dubbed the ‘Anaconda Plan’, of the aged but cunning General-in-Chief, Winfield Scott, to strangle the insurrection by

... a complete blockade of the Atlantic and Gulf ports soon to commence. In connection with such a blockade, we propose a powerful move down the Mississippi to the ocean, with a cordon of ports at proper points ... the object being to clear out and keep open this great line of communication in connection with the strict blockade of the seaboard, so as to envelop the insurgent States and bring them to terms with less bloodshed than by any other plan.89

The cartoon shows a snake patterned with the stars and stripes of the American flag encircling the Confederate States. Reminiscent of Gillray’s copper engraving of the American rattlesnake encircling the British at Yorktown a century earlier, but less refined in style, this nineteenth-century lithograph compensates for its crudity by the energetic portrayal of the snake and the malicious fun of its humorous details. In any event, hotter heads prevailed, and the Union side adopted instead General George McClellan’s plan ‘to subdue the seceded states by piece meal’, a course of action which resulted in victory, but only after the long, bloody conflict that General Scott had predicted.90

During the mid-nineteenth century a new method of circulating political propaganda came into use. Following the earlier British example, a change in American postal
regulations in 1845 meant that envelopes no longer incurred an additional charge. Thus encouraged, the American envelope industry developed rapidly. An innovation copied from England and taken up by the protagonists in the American Civil War was to print a patriotic image, either straightforward or satirical, on the envelope. Clearly drawing upon the emblem tradition, such designs often included a motto and short explanatory text, as well as a graphic image. Southerners found a design source for such patriotic covers in the imagery of the American Revolution, which they consciously revived to rally public opinion to their cause. The Secessionists felt that they, like the American colonies during the Revolutionary War, were rebelling against an oppressive central government. In addition to envelopes used during the Civil War, other unused ones with fictitious imprints appear to have been produced later as souvenirs.

One such envelope design incorporates a new version of the snake cartoon with the
The device of our Fathers in their first struggle for liberty, -1776.

UNITE OR DIE

"SLAVE STATES, once more let me repeat, that the only way of preserving our slave property, or what we prize more than life, our LIBERTY, is by UNION WITH EACH OTHER."

Jefferson Davis.

Fig. 7. Confederate Decorative Cover. By courtesy of the Florida Federation of Stamp Clubs

printer’s name given as G. W. Falen of Charleston, South Carolina (fig. 7). No postally used example is known, and a search of historical records in Charleston has failed to trace a printer named G. W. Falen, so this may have been a post-war souvenir envelope. The allusion to the American Revolution is made clear by a line of text at the top: ‘The device of our Fathers in their first struggle for liberty, -1776.’ Below this the motto ‘UNITE OR DIE’ appears in crudely cut letters. The snake, undulating from left to right, is divided into segments labelled with the initials of the fifteen slave-holding states (eleven later joined the Confederacy). The names are not in geographical order, so the map symbolism has been lost. However, the symbolic imagery of the snake has been supplemented by a palmetto tree which serves as a mast for a seven-star Confederate flag of the ‘stars and bars’ type. The device of the South Carolina seal and flag, a palmetto tree with a rattlesnake coiled about the base, has supplied the additional symbolism. Beneath the snake is printed a statement by Jefferson Davis, the President of the Southern Confederacy: ‘SLAVE STATES, once more let me repeat, that the only way of preserving our slave property, or what we prize more than life, our LIBERTY, is by UNION WITH EACH OTHER.’

Whether Benjamin Franklin would have agreed or disagreed with the sentiments expressed is not at issue here. However, remembering his timely circulation of political cartoons by means of pamphlets, newspapers and political cards, one has to conclude that the prompt exploitation of new propagandizing media, such as the envelope, would have suited the Franklin style of operation.

By the time the snake cartoon was revived during the American Civil War, the mixture
of map, snake and dismemberment symbolism had almost lost its potency. My own rough tally of Confederate and Union patriotic covers identified numerous map images (mostly conventional location maps and bird’s-eye views), several dozen snake motifs and a few with dissection imagery (e.g. a segmented arch representing the Union, each stone bearing the name of a state), but no cover which combines all three symbolic strands. The segmented snake on the Confederate envelope (fig. 7) is no longer a map, while General Scott’s snake (fig. 6) has lost its segments and metamorphosed into a boa constrictor. After the Union victory which resulted in the preservation of the United States of America, no political context in which the snake cartoon would be relevant has recurred. Considering that the snake cartoon may now have come to the end of its symbolic life, it deserves a brief epitaph.

In his political writings, Franklin characteristically used the medium of print to inform and persuade, making the serious message more palatable and memorable with a touch of humour. He also used the graphic image as visual propaganda to enhance the emotive power of the printed word. Combining various symbolic themes, including that of the map, his snake cartoon was meant to convey a particular message for an immediate purpose. However, released into the sphere of public knowledge, the snake image took on an independent existence in the popular imagination. Its evolutionary cycle of intermittent rebirth continued as long as the symbolic combination remained viable. Like Peter Pan, though, the snake cartoon could live in men’s minds only as long as they believed in it. Considered by itself, the snake cartoon permits no further generalizations. As an example of a genre, however, its life story enhances our understanding of cartographic imagery in the broader history of graphic symbolism.

Thanks for assistance with research for this paper are due to David Beech of the British Library Philatelic Collections, John R. Brumgardt and Mary Giles of the Charleston Museum, Ralph Ehrenberg and Ronald Grim of the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, and Pamela Scott of Cornell University.


5 Franklin, Memoirs, pp. 278–9.


9 Edwin Wolf, 2nd, ‘Benjamin Franklin’s Stamp


11 Franklin, Memoirs, pp. 280–1.


15 Ibid., pp. 142–3.


17 Hamilton, pp. xxvi, 8; Miller, p. 215.


24 Franklin, Papers, vol. xv, p. 300.

25 Sommer, p. 62.


29 Wolf, 'Benjamin Franklin's Stamp Act Cartoon', p. 388.

30 Ibid., p. 391.

31 Ibid., p. 390.


33 Ibid., vols. v, p. 330; xii, p. 423.


36 Gipson, pp. 3, 6, 9, 78.


40 George, pp. 26–8.


42 George, p. 62.

43 Freeman, p. 22.


46 George, pp. 48, 60, 101–2.

47 Klauber, p. 350.


50 The Pennsylvania Gazette, 9 May 1751, as quoted in Franklin, Papers, vol. iv, pp. 131–3.


52 George, pp. 49, 118, 132.


54 Franklin, Memoirs, pp. 350–1.


Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 30, 65-6, 68.

59 Franklin, Memoirs, p. 326.
62 Franklin, Papers, vol. xii, pp. 287-8; Matthews, pp. 421-46.
64 Ibid., pp. 105-7.
65 Matthews, p. 436.
68 George, pp. 115-18, 128-9, 134.
70 George, p. 156, pl. 50.
72 Schlesinger, p. 43.
75 Warner, pp. 65-6.
76 Matthews, pp. 446-8.
78 Matthews, p. 447, pl. ix.
80 Ibid., pp. 52-78, 199-202, 209; Hess and Kaplan, pp. 54-7.
81 Matthews, p. 448.
82 Ibid., p. 450.
84 Furlong and McCandless, p. 71; Matthews, p. 447.
85 Furlong and McCandless, pp. 71-2; Gillespie and Mechling, p. 53; Preble, pp. 147-50.
88 Hess and Kaplan, pp. 53, 183.
90 Ibid., pp. 722-7.
93 Benjamin Wishnietsky, Confederate Patriotic Covers and their Uses (North Miami, 1991), pp. 9, 140.
95 Preble, pp. 383-5.
96 The covers surveyed were those illustrated in the comprehensive catalogues by William R. Weiss, The Catalog of Union Civil War Patriotic Covers (Bethlehem, Pa., 1995), and Wishnietsky.
Copyright of British Library Journal is the property of British Library Board 96. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.