

BOAT FLAG TRADITIONS

For hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years, flags have been used on vessels to communicate who you were and what you were about. Over time traditions have evolved that describe when and where flags are to be flown.

Flags are hoisted at 0800 (8am) and lowered at sunset. Yacht clubs that maintain a full-time staff will fire a 'color gun' at these times to signal the fleet in-harbor to make or lower colors at the appropriate times. If one is entering or leaving a harbor outside of these times, flags should be flown if there is enough light to see them.

Who flies what flag where?

The Ensign

First and most important is the ensign, the flag of our nation. The ensign (from the Latin *in signum*, meaning 'in sign' or 'marked') is always hoisted first, (briskly), and lowered last, (ceremoniously). It was traditionally flown from the peak of the mizzen on sailing ships. This is because the mizzen, being at the aft end of the ship, was over the captain's cabin and the helm, which is to say, over the place of command. It is not the highest place that it could be flown but it is the place of honor. For this reason, the ensign is flown from the peak of the gaff on a yacht club mast, and the peak of the after-most sail of any gaff rigged vessel.

But in the early 1900's, gaff rigs were being replaced with jib-headed rigs. (As a term of derision, the old-timers of the day called them "Marconi" rigs because all the wires used to hold up the tall thin masts made them look like one of those new-fangled radio masts.) At any rate, the proper place for an ensign on a jib headed vessel under sail is 2/3 of the way up the leech of the after-most sail. In other words, where it **would** have been had it been on a gaff rigged vessel. Ensigns can be stitched into the leech of the sail or attached to 'flag clips' on the leech. The latter is a good practice for racers who prefer not to have the extra windage or distraction of an ensign while racing.

On power boats, and auxiliaries under power, the ensign is flown from a stern staff. For convenience some sailboats fly their ensign from a stern staff while under sail and this practice is gradually gaining acceptance. The ensign, and the nation that it stands for, should never be dishonored by being flown from a masthead, a spreader or anywhere else.

The "Yacht Ensign" (field with 13 stars surrounding a fouled anchor).

Through the early to mid 1800's, some United States ports charged duty on U.S. Commercial vessels hailing from other U.S. ports. In an effort to identify their vessels as non-commercial, and thus save the duty, yacht owners devised the yacht ensign and had it recognized by Congress as a legal US Flag, which it remains to this day. Technically it should only be flown by yachts that the Coast Guard documented and all others should fly the standard 'stars and stripes'. In practice everyone, from runabout owners on up, fly yacht ensigns. So whether or not it's proper, it's done. Yacht ensigns are not recognized as legal U.S. flags by other nations so if sailing abroad, one must fly the 'stars and stripes'.

Size

Ensigns should be about 1 inch 'on the fly' for every foot of boat length. Erring to larger is better than toward smaller.

The Burgee

The burgee (from old French *burgeois* meaning 'owner') is the flag for the masthead. It originally derived from heraldic crests of merchant's 'house flags' and later was used to identify squadrons, fleets and clubs. Your burgee appears in the Register of American Yacht Clubs and helps others recognize your membership in a long-standing and respected organization. Unfortunately, keeping the burgee at its proper place **at the masthead**, and out of the VHF antenna and wind indicator is no easy task. The solution is a 'pig stick' which carries the burgee **above** the problem. And, making one is a nice wintertime project (see photo). By the way, the Bellport Bay Yacht Club burgee should be flown with the **single** point of the star pointing up.

If one belongs to more than one yacht club or boating organization (Corinthians, a cruising club, *etc.*) one must choose which organization to show affiliation with for a given day or occasion. More than one burgee should not be flown at the same time.

Size

Burgees should be about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch 'on the fly' for every foot of boat length. Again, erring to larger is better than toward smaller.



Left: An example of a BBYC burgee being flown from a 'pig stick' at its proper location at the masthead. This particular burgee belonged to our late friend and club member Brian Abernethy who was very proud of having worked out this arrangement to keep his burgee where it should be and yet out of the antenna and wind indicator. It is hoped that we might honor him by following his example.

Club Officers' Flags

Club officers fly their flags at the mast head in lieu of the club burgee and fly them day and night during the entire season that their boat is in commission. Past commodores fly their flag from the port spreader.

On vessels with more than one mast, the options for flying flags are greater (see table below) but the ensign and the burgee are still the most important.

Half-Masting Flags

A flag is flown at half-mast in respect for a deceased person, but only the President of the United States or the governor of a state has authority to direct that the U.S. flag be flown at half-mast, and the duration will vary from a day or so up to 30 days, determined by the deceased person's position. For a yacht club to honor a deceased member, only the burgee is half-masted, never the ensign. When the U.S. ensign is displayed at half-mast on a vessel or at a club, other flags remain at their normal position. When an ensign is half-masted at a club, such as on Memorial Day until it is fully raised at 1220 (the time of the last gun of a 21 gun salute started at noon), the club burgee is the only other flag displayed. On a simple flagstaff-as at the stern of a vessel or a flagpole ashore-the "half-mast" position is approximately three-fourths the way up to the top. If the flagpole has a yardarm and gaff, the half-mast position is level with the yardarm.

When a U.S. ensign or burgee is to be flown at half-mast, it should first be hoisted fully and smartly, and then lowered ceremoniously to the half-mast position. Before lowering, it is again raised to full height and lowered from there.

Flags on Boats

FLAG	WHEN FLOWN	POWER with bow & stern staff only	POWER with bow & stern staff & signal mast	SAIL single mast under sail	SAIL 2 masts under sail
US Ensign or Yacht Ensign	0800 to sunset	stern staff	stern staff	main peak (2/3 up main leach) (stern staff under sail or at anchor)	aftermost peak
Club Burgee	0800 to sunset	bow staff	bow staff	mast head	fore mast head
Private Signal	0800 to sunset	not flown	mast head	under way in lieu of Burgee	after mast head
Officer's Flag	continuously	not flown	mast head in lieu of private signal	mast head in lieu of Burgee	in lieu of private signal
Signal Flags Gag Flag Fish Flag	daylight hours	not flown	starboard yardarm	starboard spreader	starboard spreader
Past Commodores	daylight hours	not flown	port yardarm	port spreader	port spreader

Signal Flags

The starboard spreader is the place for signal flags. But in this day of the ubiquitous VHF and cell phones, there is not much that a yacht needs to communicate by flag. Some standard international flag signals are listed below. At regattas, on holidays and special occasions, yachts will sometimes use code flags to “dress ship”. Flags are strung in such a manner as to silhouette the vessel and are arranged in a sequence of complimentary colors that has no particular meaning in terms of the flags themselves. The general sequence, from the bow, is; AB2 UJ1 KE3 GH6 IV5 FL4 DM7 PO3RDRep RN1STRep ST0 CX9 WA8 ZY2NDRep

	Alfa Diver Down Keep Clear		November No		Answering Pendant
	Bravo Dangerous Cargo		Oscar Man Overboard		0
	Charlie Yes		Papa About to Sail		1
	Delta Keep Clear		Quebec Request Pratique		2
	Echo Altering Course to Starboard		Romeo		3
	Foxtrot Disabled		Sierra Engines Going Astern		4
	Golf Want a Pilot		Tango Keep Clear		5
	Hotel Pilot on Board		Uniform Standing Into Danger		6
	India Altering course To Port		Victor Require Assistance		7
	Juliet On Fire Keep Clear		Whiskey Require Medical Assistance		8
	Kilo Desire to Communicate		Xray Stop Your Intension		1st
	Lima Stop Instantly		Yankee Am Dragging Anchor		2nd
	Mike I am Stopped		Zulu Require A Tug		3rd

It is hoped that information above will be helpful to you in properly carrying on one of the more colorful aspects of yachting tradition. You will also find that the making of appropriate colors at appropriate times is an activity that young crew members find fun and engaging. In addition it helps them to get in touch with some of the etiquette and tradition of our nautical past.

For more information, see the chapter on flag etiquette in *Piloting, Seamanship and Small Boat Handling* by C. F. Chapman and *Nautical Etiquette and Customs* by L. Lord