

A few summers ago, a friend invited me aboard his small sloop to bring it down the coast. Just outside the breakwater, his teenager hauled a black flag up the leech of the mainsail. It was the classic skull over crossed cutlasses. The harbor ferry gave us a horn salute, and a kid on a paddleboard yelled, "Arrr!" Within an hour a Coast Guard RIB idled past, gave us a friendly look, then moved on. That day captured the strange double life of pirate flags. They can be lighthearted signals and heavy historical symbols, tactical tools and pop icons, all at once.

What counts as a pirate flag

Pirate flag is a convenient umbrella term for a cluster of practices that shifted over time. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, pirates, privateers, and renegade mariners in the Atlantic and Indian oceans used flags for signals, identity, and intimidation. The most famous is the black flag popularly called the Jolly Roger. The phrase appears in British records by the 1720s, probably derived from the French *jolie rouge*, the "pretty red," which referred to a different signal. That red flag meant no quarter would be given. Black and red together offered choices to a target: surrender under black or face a fight under red.

Not every criminal sailor flew a skull and crossbones. Some ran up simple black fields. Others painted designs on old sailcloth. Captains stitched symbols that were legible from a distance but quick to make. They did not need to last a season. The aim was a sharp psychological edge, not a gallery piece.

The materials and the making

Surviving pirate flags are vanishingly rare, and most attributions are secondhand. Period flags in general were wool bunting or linen, hand sewn, with hoist edges reinforced by canvas or rope. On smaller sloops and schooners, a flag two by three feet was visible enough. On larger square riggers, gaffs and mastheads could carry four by six or bigger. Paint on canvas stiffened in salt air, so stitching with white cloth appliqué was better for a skull or bones. Crews worked fast. A flag made overnight with tar and chalk might fly for a single chase.

The red flag, when used, could be bunting or fabric dyed with whatever held. It faded to brick in the sun. That was fine. Symbolism outweighed aesthetics.

Symbols on black cloth

The skull was hardly the only emblem. Pirates borrowed from memento mori art, shipboard superstition, and straightforward menace. An hourglass warned that time was running out. A full skeleton, sometimes with a spear or dart, suggested death at work. Hearts bled drops to show fate on the move. Cutlasses and cannon added immediacy. Some flags had initials that stood for the captain's name or a motto. Jack Rackham favored cutlasses. Bartholomew Roberts favored a more theatrical set.



Here are five of the most recognizable pirate flags and what their symbols tried to say.

- Edward Teach, called Blackbeard: a horned skeleton raising a toast in one hand and spearing a bleeding heart with the other, set on black. That strange mix, party and peril, telegraphed the captain's cultivated image, equal parts bravado and threat.

- Calico Jack Rackham: a skull above crossed cutlasses on black. The swords replaced bones and turned a death sign into a fight sign. It was simple, fast to paint, and mean at a glance.
- Bartholomew Roberts, variant one: a figure of Roberts standing on two skulls labeled ABH and AMH, for A Barbadian's Head and A Martinican's Head, on black. It bragged about past exploits and promised more.
- Bartholomew Roberts, variant two: a skeleton with an hourglass facing Roberts, between them a heart with three drops of blood. The hourglass underlined urgency. The blood hinted at cost.
- Henry Every, often attributed: a skull over crossed bones on black, the design people now think of as the Jolly Roger. Even if this link is debated, the symbol grew into the default.

You can find more, including flags associated with Edward Low and Stede Bonnet, but the pattern holds. The visuals were not heraldry. They were billboards, optimized for fear and fast decisions.

Myths, archives, and what we actually know

A lot of pirate lore arrived secondhand. Newspaper engravings, court reports, and popular histories in the 18th and 19th centuries filled gaps with tidy stories. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* in 1883 poured gasoline on public imagination. It introduced generations to the black flag, long after the so-called Golden Age of Piracy had ended roughly between 1716 and 1726. When you see a neat skull on slick fabric, you are looking at a modern standardization, not a photograph of history.

The archives remind us pirates did not want to fight unless they had to. A chase might end bloodlessly if the target struck sail at the sight of a black flag. Pirates often approached under false colors, even under flags of European powers, then raised their own colors for the final mile. In depositions, merchant captains describe the chilling moment a boat cut loose from the pursuer, its crew masked or blackened, while the black flag climbed the halyard. Under a black field, the message was surrender quickly and you will live. Under a red field, there would be no promises.

That binary was messy in practice. Some pirates abused mercy. Others kept to their own word for self interest. A known captain who spared crews on [American Revolution flags](#) surrender had a reputation that saved time and reduced risk. That was the point. A pirate business model relied on fast capitulation across many encounters, not one glorious battle.

Beyond the Caribbean

Skull flags were not a global pirate language. Barbary corsairs from the North African coast, for example, sailed under flags tied to their rulers or fleets, then used converging boats and speed to capture European prizes. In the South China Sea, the fleets under Zheng Yi Sao in the early 1800s operated with colored squadron flags, signals, and strict codes. In the Indian Ocean, pirates and privateers worked along trade routes between Madagascar, the Red Sea, and India, sometimes using plain black or improvised flags. The Atlantic habit of a skull signified a specific cultural theater and time. That narrowness makes it easier to study and easier to mythologize.

Why the Jolly Roger endures

A black flag with a skull is one of the simplest graphics a person can draw. Children doodle it in a margin. Designers recognize its power at a distance. You see it in sports, on motorcycle jackets, at hacker

conferences, and on the transom of weekend boats. Whole subcultures use the skull and crossbones to say, We opt out of your rules, or, We still play by a code, but it is ours. That is clean, efficient messaging.

Movies and cartoons turned pirates into stock characters. Plastic Jolly Rogers hang from birthday party kits. Meanwhile, [battlefield flags](#) maritime professionals see a different lineage. The flag is the original threat display, a way to compel action without firing a shot. That duality, playful and dangerous, keeps the symbol alive.

From piracy to heritage: flags as memory

Walk a marina and you will spot an American flag flying from a stern, often with a smaller personal flag below it. This layering shows how we use symbols. The national ensign speaks to citizenship. The smaller flag, maybe a pirate emblem or a yacht club burgee, speaks to personality.

Historic Flags tell a broader story about identity, ideals, and conflict. In the American tradition, early revolutionary symbols like the Pine Tree flag and the Gadsden flag were as bold in their day as any skull. Ships under the command of George Washington flew versions of the Continental Colors before the adoption of the flag that would become familiar with stars and stripes. Flags of 1776 were not yet standardized. Makers stitched stars in circles or rows, added mottos, or arranged elements with local flair.

When you ask Why Fly Historic Flags, the answers vary. Some want to study and share the past. Others want to make a statement about Patriotism, Pride, and Freedom to Express Yourself. Museums and re-enactors use flags to put visitors in the right frame of mind before a cannon even fires. Community parades carry Heritage Flags to include all the strains that made a place. There is a difference between reenactment and advocacy, and context matters. A person can honor a regiment's sacrifice with sobriety, while also being clear about the painful causes tied to a particular banner.

That nuance shows up with the 6 Flags of Texas idea, a historical shorthand for the sovereignties that claimed the region at different times: Spain, France, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the Confederate States, and the United States. A theme park turned that into branding. Historians use it as a teaching tool. Citizens argue about which flags belong on public buildings. All of this sits under the same umbrella, using flags to talk about identity and change.

Flags of WW2 carry similar weight. A unit color that survived a beach landing or a bomber group emblem painted on aluminum has gravity. People fly reproductions at airshows and memorials to say Honoring Their Memory and Why They Fought. The same is true of Civil War Flags, where standards still have bullets lodged in poles. Here it helps to be specific. A historical society documenting a company that mustered in 1861 is telling a story with dates and names. Anyone flying a controversial flag in everyday life should be ready to explain intention, listen, and consider the setting. Never Forgetting History means wrestling with hard parts, not airbrushing them away.

Pirate flags at sea today

Small boaters love symbols. I have seen the black flag on tuna towers, paddle boards, and kayaks. At sea, courtesy counts. If you are a United States citizen, the American flag takes pride of place on your vessel. The pirate flag, if you fly one, goes lower and aft, or on a spreader, never in a way that disrespects the national ensign. Smart captains lower novelty flags when they enter a naval anchorage or when law enforcement is nearby, not out of fear, but out of respect for clear signals. In dense harbors, you want as little ambiguity as possible.

Sailors also confuse pirate flags with maritime signal flags, the colored pennants that spell letters or specific messages like “diver down” or “I require assistance.” Do not hoist a red flag with a diagonal white stripe unless you are diving. That symbol has real legal meaning in some waters. A black novelty flag on your starboard spreader is just that, novelty. Keep it separate from safety signaling.

Materials, sizing, and workmanship

The cheapest flags look good for a weekend and then shred. I have tested poly-cotton blends, all-nylon, and heavy polyester on modest sailboats and small houses in coastal wind. Nylon is light, dries fast, and flies in a breeze of 5 knots. It also fades quickly in high UV. Two-ply polyester, sometimes called spun poly, resists UV and lasts longer in winds above 15 knots, but it is heavier and needs more wind to lift. Stitching matters as much as fabric. Look for lock-stitched seams, bar tacks at stress points, and a canvas or webbed header with brass grommets. If you fly year round, plan on two or three replacements per year in very windy areas, and one per year in milder climates.

Sizes are a balance. On a house pole, three by five feet is a standard that looks right at 15 to 20 feet from the curb. On a 25 to 30 foot sailboat, a one and a half by two foot courtesy flag reads fine from dockside. A three by five novelty flag on the leeward spreader will foul the shrouds all day and annoy your crew. Bigger is not better if it ruins the sailing.

How to read a skull in the suburbs

If your neighbor flies a skull and crossbones, it might be seasonal. Around October, pirate flags come up with pumpkins and skeleton lawn ornaments. Other times, it is a general signal for rebellious humor. If that same house flies American Flags prominently, the pairing often says, This is my country, and this is my personality. Patriotic Flags and novelty flags can live together without friction, but tone matters. A tattered national flag above a crisp novelty flag sends the wrong message.

Online, you find passionate communities that trade designs. Some borrow from naval history. Others invent personal heraldry. A fisherman who spends half his life on the Gulf might stitch a hook and a skull and call it his own. That is the personalized branch of Heritage Flags, a modern twist on older practices. The heart of it is personal expression tied to place and craft.

Pirate flags alongside historic American symbols

A fun weekend project is to fly a rotating series of Historic Flags leading up to a national holiday, then cap it with a Jolly Roger on the day you host friends for barbecue. Mix education with amusement. For June, run a Betsy Ross variant, a Bennington flag with 76 in the canton, and a modern 50 star flag on the main holiday. For July, include a Pine Tree flag and a Gadsden flag on alternating days. If you have a family connection to a state, a state flag can go on the porch too. In Texas, people sometimes frame a wall of small desk flags for the 6 Flags of Texas, an easy visual lesson for kids.

There is another bridge between pirate flags and early American banners: privateering. During the Revolution, letters of marque turned private ships into legal raiders. They used flags to communicate the same ideas pirates did, but within a legal framework. A captured British merchantman struck her colors at the sight of a determined privateer, not eager to test guns and hulls. The line between commerce raiding and piracy ran through paperwork. Flags helped draw it on the water.

What a flag asks of you

Certain objects ask for care. A well made knife asks you to keep it sharp. A good sail asks you to flake it dry. A flag asks you to be mindful. If you are going to fly Civil War Flags or Flags of WW2 for a ceremony, prepare to explain why, and center veterans, civilians, and families who bear the weight of those years. If you fly a skull for fun, be ready to take it down if a neighbor is holding a memorial. When we say Honoring Their Memory and Why They Fought, we are not reciting a slogan. We are accepting a duty to be decent with symbols that still sting.

A short, practical checklist for respectful flying

- If you fly multiple flags on one pole, place the national flag at the top, equal size or larger than any below.
- Keep the national flag clean and in better condition than novelty flags. Retire it when it frays.
- Use separate halyards for novelty or Pirate Flags where possible, and lower them in formal settings.
- Know local rules. Some HOAs and towns regulate flag size, lighting, and placement.
- At sea, never use novelty flags where they could be mistaken for safety or signal flags.

Trade offs and edge cases

On a boat with limited halyards, the choice is between flying fewer flags well or more flags poorly. A single, crisp ensign at the stern and a small personal flag on the starboard spreader is clean seamanship. If you race, many clubs bar novelty flags on the course to reduce confusion.

At home, a tall pole can handle stacked flags, but you soon face a readability problem. Three different banners at 25 feet become colored rectangles to anyone passing by. Better to rotate flags day by day than to layer five at once. Sunlight eats inks and fibers. If you love a rare reproduction, fly it briefly, then store it out of UV in acid-free tissue.

If the goal is education, add a small plaque by your porch or a QR code to a laminated card on a display inside. I have watched neighbors stop, scan, and then ring the bell to talk about a flag they had never seen, like the Bedford flag with its Latin motto. That is how Never Forgetting History turns from a phrase into a friendly conversation.

Buying wisely and avoiding fakes

The market is full of cheerful but misattributed flags. A seller might label a design as Blackbeard's when it is a 20th century redraw. That is not a crime against the spirit of boating, but if you care about accuracy, look for vendors who cite primary sources or museum collections. Reputable makers name their fabrics and stitches and tell you where the flag is sewn. If they also offer Historic Flags with proper dates, the odds go up that they did their homework on Pirate Flags too.

Price signals quality only loosely. I have paid modest sums for sturdy two-ply polyester that stood up to a semester of coastal weather. I have also wasted money on glossy nylon that shredded at the header. The best bargain is a flag you are willing to replace when it gets tired, so the presentation never looks sloppy.

The feel of a good hoist

Every flag has a little ceremony to it, even if you are just tying off a halyard on a fiberglass mast. You take a breath, check the clips, and send it up. A porch flag sings in a breeze. A skull on a boat snaps and claps. More than once, I have had a stranger wave from shore when the bones unfurled. That small, silly exchange reminds me why people love these symbols. They create tiny communities in the moment, through recognition and shared play.

That same energy exists with Patriotic Flags at a ball game, with Historic Flags in a classroom, and with Heritage Flags in a town square. They are shortcuts to big ideas: loyalty, rebellion, memory, aspiration. A pirate flag can be mischief made visible. An American flag can be a promise repeated every morning when the light catches the threads. Together, they show how a piece of fabric can still carry meaning across water and time, if we treat it with a mix of knowledge and care.

Why people keep coming back to black

There is a reason a teenager reaches for a skull on black. It is immediate. You can see it from a hundred yards on the water. It asks no permission. At the same time, the skull carries enough history to reward anyone who goes looking. Trace it back and you meet real captains with hard lives, court records, newspaper gossip, and folk art made under pressure. It connects to naval history, to Revolutionary privateers, to George Washington's early squadron picking a pine tree for a masthead and a motto for the cause. It nudges you toward the Flags of 1776, state stories like the 6 Flags of Texas, and the severe lessons bound up in Flags of WW2 and Civil War Flags.

That is a lot of freight for a black rectangle with a grin. Which is why a little care goes a long way. Learn enough to talk about what you fly. Be generous with neighbors. Keep it in good repair. Do that, and your pirate flag will not just look sharp in a breeze. It will fit into a long habit of using cloth and color to say who we are, what we remember, and how we hope to be seen.