

BACK STORY

THE ORIGIN OF THE GERRYMANDER

BY SCOTT G. WASSERMAN, ESQ.

During the upcoming legislative session here, and in every one of the 50 states, accusations of gerrymandering will be levied by one political party against another. Even states that have so-called nonpartisan redistricting commissions will be accused of gerrymandering to satisfy an appointing authority or some other hidden interest or agenda. So as frequently as the term is used, where did “gerrymander” originate?

In 1812, members of the governor’s “Democratic-Republican” party in the Massachusetts Legislature drew contorted senate districts in order to protect the representation in the Massachusetts Senate of the party of its sitting governor, Elbridge Gerry, at the expense of the Federalist candidates. The Boston Gazette printed this editorial cartoon, reportedly drawn by Elkanah Tisdale, and noted the salamander shape of the Senate district drawn to protect the interest of the Democratic-Republican party and Governor Elbridge Gerry – the newspaper

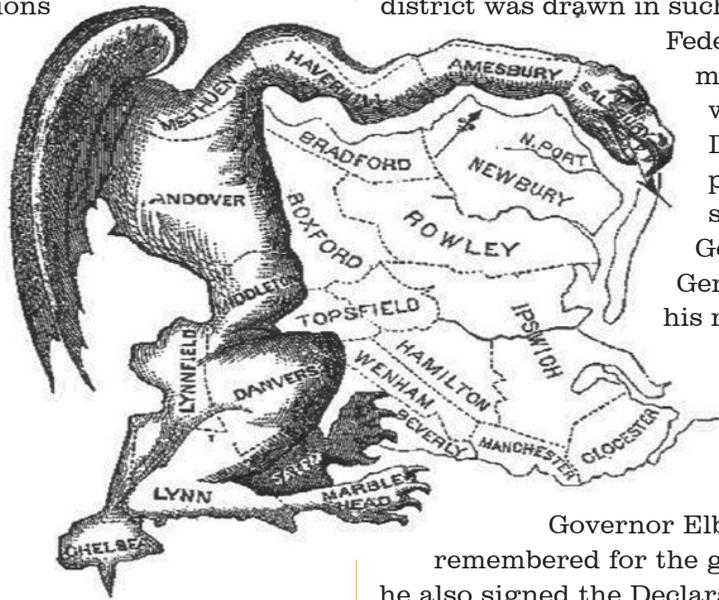
blended salamander and Gerry and coined the term “Gerry-mander.”

As you can see, the drawing itself depicts the senatorial district located in Essex County, with hooves, wings and a dragon-like head. The district was drawn in such a way as to give the

Federalist Party a supermajority in that district, which then allowed the Democratic-Republican party to control several other districts. Governor Elbridge Gerry reportedly lost his reelection bid as a result of the voters’ displeasure with this redistricting practice.

While today

Governor Elbridge Gerry is first remembered for the gerrymander district, he also signed the Declaration of Independence and was a member of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 (though he refused to sign because he had concerns about the amount of power given to the vice president by making the vice president the president of the senate). He was then elected vice president and served with President James Madison, though Gerry died in office before completing his full term as vice president. ■



Author’s biography on page 31.