

Don't Tread on Me

By Frederick Boyce

In December 1775, Benjamin Franklin, writing anonymously in the *Pennsylvania Journal* as "An American Guesser," described an unusual symbol he had noticed being used by the very first companies of U.S. Marines that were then being raised in Philadelphia:

"I observed on one of the drums belonging to the marines now raising, there was painted a Rattle-Snake, with this modest motto under it, 'Don't tread on me.' As I know it is the custom to have some device on the arms of every country, I supposed this may have been intended for the arms of America."

This anonymous writer, "in order to divert an idle hour," went on to expound further on the appropriateness of the rattlesnake as a symbol for the fledgling nation:

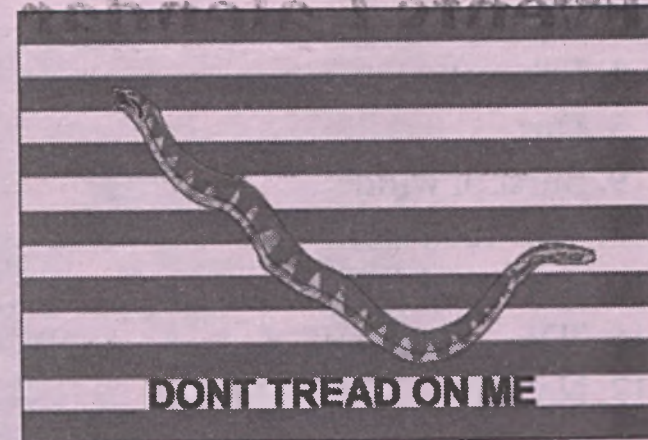
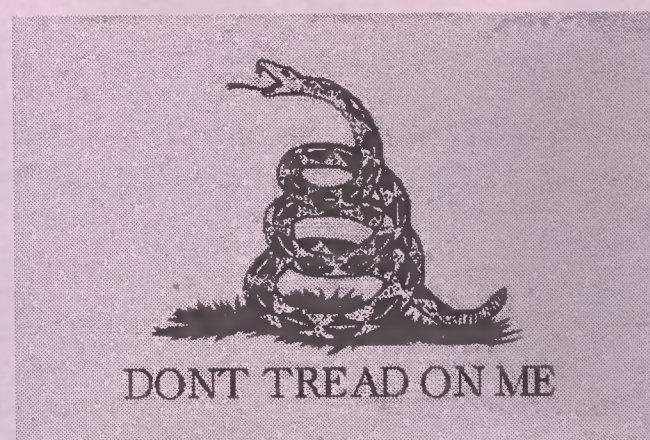
"She never begins an attack, nor, when once engaged, never surrenders: She is therefore an emblem of magnanimity and true courage. She never wounds 'till she has generously given notice, even to her enemy, and cautioned him against the danger of treading on her." He further observed astutely that "the Rattle-Snake is found in no other quarter of the world besides America" and that the ever-watchful rattlesnake "may therefore be esteemed an emblem of vigilance. I confess I was wholly at a loss what to make of the rattles, 'till I went back and counted them and found them just thirteen, exactly the number of the Colonies united in America; and I recollected too that this was the only part of the Snake which increased in numbers. '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 never to be separated but by breaking them to pieces. One of those rattles singly, is incapable of producing sound, but the ringing of thirteen together, is sufficient to alarm the boldest man living."

Franklin is, of course, well known for having opposed the bald eagle, which he considered "a bird of bad moral character" as a national emblem, but the rattlesnake proved to be a very good choice in terms of intimidating an enemy—especially the snake-poor British. On July 27, 1776, the *London Chronicle*, with dread dismay, reported that "The colours of the American fleet have a snake with thirteen rattles, described in the attitude of going to strike, with this motto: 'Don't Tread on Me.'" There were several versions of the "Don't Tread on Me" flag—the first real flag of the United States. The best known are the First Navy Jack, with an uncoiled rattlesnake stretched diagonally across thirteen red and white stripes, and the familiar yellow flag with a loosely-coiled snake that was designed by Christopher Gadsden, a colonel from South Carolina who served in the Continental Congress and who helped select Esek Hopkins as commander-in-chief of our first Navy. Hopkins used the Gadsden flag as his personal standard on his flagship, the *Alfred*.

The snake that inspired the first versions of the symbol in Pennsylvania, including the striped Navy Jack, was no doubt the highly variable and then-common timber rattlesnake, *Crotalus horridus*, which still follows the spine of the Appalachians from New York and Vermont down to Georgia and northern Florida, and extends west past the Mississippi to eastern Texas and up to Minnesota. In its coastal form, traditionally called the "canebrake" rattlesnake, it goes no farther north than the Chesapeake area of Virginia. It is still found in eastern NC, and here on Bogue Banks, but only in the Roosevelt Natural Area, where it is now very rare and strictly protected.

The Gadsden flag, born in South Carolina, appears to have been based on the eastern diamondback, *Crotalus adamanteus*, a majestic snake of the low country coastal plain that only just reaches into southeastern NC. While neither emblem bears much resemblance to an actual rattlesnake, the Gadsden flag does have discernible diamond shapes running down its back.

Of course, some four-score and seven years after the events of 1775, the nation faced an entirely different type of rebellion, and many who fought on the Confederate side, including General Robert E. Lee, were the sons or grandsons of soldiers who had served bravely during the Revolution in the previous century. Throughout the South, and right here on Bogue Banks, the rattlesnaakes also sided with the Confederates. It is reported that the Union troops who landed at Hoop Hole Creek in 1862 found the numerous rattlesnakes on the island to be far more worrisome than the Confederate fire from Fort Macon. I plan to revisit the natural history of these remarkable and



The Gadsden flag (left) and the First Navy Jack—Images compliments of Wikimedia Commons

fascinating animals—my favorites, actually—in a future column, but this month I felt it would be appropriate to focus on the unique and important role they played in our country's early history.

In 1980 I had the great fortune to spend much of the year living in Kenya, formerly known as British East Africa, where I made numerous good friends of the British ex-colonial persuasion. As I was preparing to return to the U.S., I extended an invitation to a British lady to "come and visit us sometime in the States." She had been born and raised on a continent that is home to many of the most formidable and famous venomous snakes in the world—cobras, mambas, gaboon vipers and puff adders—and her reply fills me with a certain amount of pride to this day: "Oh no," she demurred, in her fine accent, "you have rattlesnakes."

Most of the historical information on the flags and "Don't Tread on Me" emblem is from a website created by Chris Whitten—foundingfathers.info, a fascinating site I have returned to often for information on this topic. The quote about the *London Chronicle* is from an equally interesting book, *The Snakebite Survivors' Club* by British travel author Jeremy Seal (Harvest, 1999).

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