

## **The Rattlesnake and the Swift in Chesapeake Bay**

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In November of 1778, the American privateer Rattlesnake was returning from Charleston to Philadelphia, deeply laden with salt and rice, under pursuit by the British vessel HMS Swift. The Rattlesnake sought safety in the Chesapeake Bay, and an ensuing battle lasted for several hours. The Rattlesnake ran aground near the same spot on the Middle Ground as the USS Virginia had run aground earlier that same year. The pursuing HMS Swift was perhaps too eager and also ran aground in the same vicinity.

After attempts to lighten ship by tossing over supplies, fresh water, and cannon, the 20-gun British ship remained stuck. Rather than risk capture by the Americans, Captain Thomas Frederick of the Swift abandoned ship and burned his vessel. Cape Henry was the nearest land. It was occupied by the Princess Anne County Militia under Colonel Thomas Reynolds Walker. Capt. Frederick and his crew of 90 surrendered to Walker.

Patriot Captain David McCullough had been slightly wounded in his leg. He and the crew of the Rattlesnake made it safely to their Virginia comrades, but the Rattlesnake, like the Swift, was lost. Somewhere on or around the Middle Ground might still lie a couple of dozen ship's cannon from this engagement.

As for the Rattlesnake's namesake, the distinguished Founding Father Benjamin Franklin observed that the rattlesnake is only found in the Americas - and might therefore be a fitting symbol to represent the aspiring nation. He noted that the rattlesnake has no eyelids, an emblem of vigilance. The rattlesnake never begins an attack, nor, when once engaged, ever surrenders - leading Franklin to consider it a symbol of magnanimity and true courage. But he was perhaps most impressed by the snake's rattles themselves - typically thirteen on an adult snake, exactly the number of the Colonies united in America. He found it "curious and amazing" to observe how distinct and independent of each other the rattles were, 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 oldest man living."