

# REVOLUTIONARY RATTLES—

## How Pennsylvania's Timber Rattlesnake Fueled American Independence

by Brady J. Crytzer

Timber Rattlesnake, black phase

photo-Chris Calhoun

As we find ourselves in the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, we reflect on the people and ideas that shaped it. Since the 1750s, Pennsylvania's own Benjamin Franklin lobbied passionately for American liberty and adopted the Timber Rattlesnake, *Crotalus horridus*, as one of its most potent symbols.

Although Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston, MA, his move to Philadelphia at the age of 17 set him on the path to becoming one of America's most celebrated founding fathers. Following his move to Penn's colony, Franklin established himself as one of the leading voices of the people when he established the famed newspaper called *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. Using *The Pennsylvania Gazette* as his personal sounding board, Franklin tackled all the major issues of the day.

In May 1751, Americans were greatly unsettled by Great Britain's new policy of sending convicts to the New World to increase the population of the colonies. As boatloads of criminals arrived in Philadelphia, Franklin jokingly wrote to his readers that perhaps Timber Rattlesnakes should be sent to England in return. "I would propose to have them carefully distributed in St. James's Park... and other places of pleasure about London," he quipped.

After all, "Rattlesnakes seem the most suitable returns for the human serpents sent us by our Mother Country."

This was the first time that Franklin used Pennsylvania's Timber Rattlesnake to make his point, but it was not the last. Three years later, when hostilities with the French boiled over and ignited a global war, Franklin again turned to America's most famous serpent dweller. In 1754, Franklin proposed that America's colonies should join to combat their French enemy as a wartime measure.

Despite the looming threat of the Seven Years' War, most colonial governments refused to combine their efforts.

Frustrated by the stubborn politicians, Franklin called upon the rattlesnake yet again. This time in what would be his most famous editorial. Based on the fable that a chopped up rattlesnake could repair itself by nightfall (warning: it can't), on May 9, 1754, Franklin published his famed sketch declaring "JOIN, or DIE."

The image of the Timber Rattlesnake as a symbol of resistance caught on like wildfire in the colonies. Within a month of the publication of Franklin's cartoon, newspapers in New York and Massachusetts also adopted the image. Just as the American colonies were reaching their fullest potential, it seemed they had found their national mascot.

By the dawn of the American Revolution, the rattler had become synonymous with liberty and independence. On December 27, 1775, Franklin called upon the viper again, this time in *The Pennsylvania Journal*. He wrote its "eye excelled in brightness, that of any other animal, and that she has no eyelids. She may therefore be esteemed an emblem of vigilance. She never begins an attack, nor, when once engaged, ever surrenders: She is therefore an emblem of magnanimity and true courage."

Much as the colonies had warned the British that their new laws were a violation of American rights, Franklin suggested that the rattlesnake "never wounds till she has generously given notice, even to her enemy, and cautioned him against the danger of treading on her." He finally declared that the time for national unity had come. "One of those rattles singly, is incapable of producing sound, but the ringing of 13 together, is sufficient to alarm the boldest man living."





Benjamin Franklin, 1767

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Celebrated as one of the most beautiful and deadly residents of Penn's Woods, the Timber Rattlesnake remains a powerful connection to our own founding era. May its rattle continue to echo through the forest, nature's way of letting freedom ring. 🗣️

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*This political cartoon (attributed to Benjamin Franklin) originally appeared during the French and Indian War but was recycled to encourage the American colonies to unite against British rule.*



## Timber Rattlesnake *Crotalus horridus*

**Size:** 36 to 54 inches long

**Field Notes:** Timber Rattlesnakes are venomous. They inhabit timber-covered terrain with abundant rodent prey populations and typically use hillsides with stone ledges for basking. Rattlesnakes are found in two different color phases, black and the less common yellow phase. Coloration does not change from one phase to the other.

**Did you Know?** Snakes would rather be left alone. The Timber Rattlesnake is not an aggressive creature. It is prone to lie quietly or crawl away when given the chance. However, if it feels threatened and unable to escape, it stands its ground. Contrary to popular belief, a rattlesnake does not always “rattle” before striking. In fact, when striking because of fear or in defense, it often strikes without an audible warning.

