

The U.S. Coat of Arms, Seal, Flag and Motto

Why did the U.S. think it necessary even to have a national coat of arms? When did America adopt her present Great Seal?

At the time when the U.S. declared independence in 1776, it was the prevailing practice in much of the civilized world — in Europe especially — to have a national coat of arms.

Devising a Seal

On the very day the U.S. declared its independence, the Second Continental Congress appointed a committee of three (Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson), “to bring in a device for a seal for the United States of America.”

But the task of providing a suitable “Great Seal” proved to be a difficult one. For six weeks Franklin, Jefferson and Adams searched, discussed and debated what would make a suitable “seal” for their new-born country. They considered many different symbols, coats of arms and various devices. They even considered the national shields of England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany and France.

They also looked at mythological symbolism, such as Hercules choosing between virtue and sloth. And they seriously considered biblical representations such as Moses crossing the Red Sea.

What, according to *John Adams*, America’s second President, were some of the important details of this committee’s attempt to arrive at a suitable coat of arms? Some of their suggestions are revealed in the *Familiar Letters of John Adams to His Wife*:

“For the seal he (Du Simitière) proposes the arms of several nations from whence America has been peopled, as English, Scotch, Irish, Dutch, German, etc., each in a shield.

“On one side of them, Liberty with her pileus, on the other a rifler in his uniform, with his rifle-gun in one hand and his tomahawk in the other; this dress and these troops with the kind of armor being peculiar to America, unless the dress was known to the Romans Dr. F. proposes a device for a seal: *Moses lifting up his hand dividing the Red Sea*, and Pharaoh in his chariot overwhelmed with the waters. This motto, ‘Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.’

“Mr. Jefferson proposed the children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a *cloud* by day and a *pillar of fire* by night; on the other side, Hengist and Horsa, the Saxon chiefs from whom we claim the honor of being descended, and whose political principles and form of government we have assumed.

“I proposed the choice of Hercules, as engraved by Gribelin, in some editions of Lord Shaftesbury’s works. The hero resting on his club. Virtue pointing to her rugged mountains on one hand, and persuading him to ascend. Sloth, glancing at her flowery paths of pleasure, wantonly reclining on the ground displaying the charms both of her eloquence and person, to seduce him into vice. But,” admitted John Adams, “this is too complicated a group for a seal or medal, and it is not original.”

We find *Thomas Jefferson* telling us in his papers (now in the Library of Congress) what was proposed for the American Seal:

“*Pharaoh* sitting in an open chariot, a crown on his head and a sword in his hand passing thro’ the divided waters of the Red Sea in pursuit of the *Israelites*: rays from a *pillar of fire* in the *cloud*, expressive of the *divine presence* and command, reaching to *Moses* who stands on the shore and, extending his hand over the sea, causes it to overwhelm *Pharaoh*. Motto, Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.”

Benjamin Franklin’s note concerning the proposed seal reads as follows: “*Moses* standing on the shore, and extending his hand over the sea, thereby causing the same to overwhelm *Pharaoh* who is sitting in an open chariot, a crown on his head and a sword in his hand. *Rays from a Pillar of Fire in the clouds* reaching to *Moses* to express that he acts by Command of the *Deity*. Motto, Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.”

Thus, we see that John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were all thinking seriously about using the main characters in the Red Sea episode, mentioned in the Scriptures, as the emblems on a picturesque seal for their infant nation.

They spent over *six weeks* debating various proposals, but could not agree on what form the seal should take. Their committee report to the Congress was finally tabled.

Congress appointed two further committees before a satisfactory Great Seal was devised and adopted — *six full years* later!

The final design which was presented to, and adopted by, the Continental Congress on June 20, 1782 incorporated the suggestions of several people. It was, however, primarily the creation of William Barton and Charles Thomson (both of Philadelphia).

Official Description

The official description (or blazon) of this coat of arms is still part of the law of this land, and reads as follows:

“ARMS. Paleways (vertical lines) of thirteen pieces, argent and gules; a chief, azure; the escutcheon (shield) on the breast of the American eagle displayed proper, holding in his dexter (right) talon an olive branch, and in his sinister (left) a bundle of thirteen arrows, all proper, and in his beak a scroll, inscribed with the motto, ‘*E Pluribus Unum.*’

“For the CREST. Over the head of the eagle, which appears above the escutcheon, a *glory*, or, breaking through a *cloud*, proper, and surrounding *thirteen stars*, forming a constellation, argent, on an azure field.

“REVERSE. *A pyramid unfinished.* In the zenith, an *eye* in a triangle, surrounded with a *glory* proper. Over the *eye* these words ‘*Annuit Coeptis.*’ On the base of the pyramid the numerical letters MDCCLXXVI. And underneath the following motto, ‘*Novus Ordo Seclorum.*’ ”

What does all this heraldic jargon mean? What does it symbolize?

The design on the “obverse” side (the face) of the Great Seal is, in the main, the work of the American heraldist, William Barton, and of the secretary of Congress, Charles Thomson, who made certain modifications in Barton’s plans.

This modified seal was presented to the third committee appointed to select a design for a U.S. Seal. They worked with Thomson to arrive at the final result. This final design of the Great Seal of the United States was then presented to, and approved by, the Continental Congress on June 20, 1782. Since that time the Great Seal has never been officially modified. It has, however, had certain unauthorized artistic variations made in it, which were later corrected.

A total of seven dies have been cut — for the purpose of making official imprints of this Great Seal. These dies were cut in 1782, 1825, 1841, 1854, 1877, 1885, and the last one in 1904. The first two dies were cut in brass, and the last five in steel.

The present die (cut in 1904) is an almost exact reproduction of the 1885 die, and was corrected to conform to the legal design specifications of the 1782 act of Congress.

Symbolism Explained

What is the true meaning of the symbolism which was designed into the Great Seal of the United States? Since William Barton was the main designer of the *face* of the Great Seal (Charles Thomson designed the *reverse* side of the seal), let us see his description of its symbolism.

The following description of the Great Seal is found in Charles Thomson’s own handwriting, in his “Remarks and Explanation,” and is endorsed by him — showing its authenticity:

The Escutcheon (shield) is composed of the chief and pale, the two most honorable ordinaries. The pieces, paly, represent the Several States all joined in one solid compact entire, supporting a *Chief*, which united the whole and *represents Congress*. The Motto alludes to this union. The pales in the arms are kept closely united by the chief and the chief depends on that Union and the strength resulting from it for its support, to denote the Confederacy of the United States of America and the preservation of the Union through Congress.

The *colours* of the pales are those used in the flag of the United States of America; *White* signifies purity and innocence, *Red*, hardiness and valour, and *Blue*, the colour of the Chief signifies vigilance, perseverance and justice. The *Olive branch* and *arrows* denote the power of *peace* and *war* which is exclusively vested in Congress. The *Constellation* denotes a new State taking its place and rank among other sovereign powers. The Escutcheon is borne on the breast of an American Eagle without any other supporters, to denote that the United States of America ought to rely on their own virtue.

On the bottom of the pyramids are the Roman numerals MDCCLXXVI — referring to 1776, the year in which America declared her independence, and began as a new nation.

The Bald Eagle

It should also be noticed that the “eagle” which appears on the Great Seal is specified to be the American bald eagle, also called the white-headed eagle. Eagles are known for their strength, endurance, vision, grace, and their martial qualities. They are also known for their independence, and for the exemplary care which they bestow on their young.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the eagle clutches an *olive branch* (containing 13 leaves and 13 olives) in its *right* talon. And the face of the eagle is turned toward the olive branch — symbolizing that this “king of birds” desires *peace* rather than war.

In the left talon, this bald eagle on our Seal clutches thirteen arrows — symbolizing her power to make war. It is also significant that during a period of declared war, the official seal of the U.S. is altered in such a way that the eagle turns its head toward the arrows — showing that the nation is engaged in mortal combat.

The Eye of God

The following quote clearly explains the overall symbolism of the Great Seal:

“The symbolism of the obverse (face) of the Great Seal is conventional and well known: the American bald eagle; the motto ‘*E Pluribus*

Unum' ('One from many'); the *olive branch* of peace and the *arrows* of war; and symbols of the 13 colonies. That of the reverse (back side) is less familiar. The design incorporates the date of the founding of the nation, 1776; an *unfinished pyramid*, suggesting the firm and durable building of the new nation, not complete, however, and having room for other states; a *single eye* surrounded by the sun's rays, suggesting the *eye of providence* surrounded by the light of the universe; and two mottoes, '*Annuit Coeptis*' (He [i.e., God] *has favoured our undertakings*') and '*Novus Ordo Seclorum*' ('A new order of the ages'), both adapted from Virgil" (*Ency. Brit.* vol. 20, 1973 ed.)

It is of interest to understand the symbols which are on *both* sides of the Great Seal. When the original committee was appointed to devise a seal, its members, Franklin, Jefferson and Adams, all thought seriously about using the Red Sea episode, the biblical symbols of the cloud-and-pillar-of-fire which led the infant nation of Israel.

The Unfinished Pyramid

What do the symbols on the reverse side of the Great Seal Signify? Again, let Charles Thomson, one of the two main designers of the Seal, tell us in his own words:

"Reverse. The *Pyramid* signifies Strength and Duration: The *Eye* over it and the Motto allude to *the many signal interpositions of providence* in favour of the American cause. The date underneath is that of the Declaration of Independence and the words under it signify the beginning of the new American Era, which commences from that date."

Seven dies have been cut of the face or obverse side of the Great Seal, but a die of the *reverse side* of the Seal has *never been cut*.

Both the obverse and reverse sides of the seal may be seen on the back of the one-dollar bill.

The pyramid (as an emblem of strength and durability) on the Great Seal has 13 courses of stone, symbolizing the original thirteen states of the Union.

Suspended over this *unfinished pyramid* is the ever-watchful "Eye of Providence" enclosed in its traditional triangle. The upper motto is comprised of the Latin words *Annuit coeptis*, meaning *He (God) has favored our undertakings*.

The lower motto has the words *Novus ordo seclorum*, meaning *a new order of the ages* (has begun) — referring to the year 1776.

Is it just a coincidence that the "glory," "golden radiance," or "breaking through a cloud," is on the face of the Great Seal? Did its designers associate these symbols with the "cloud" and the "pillar of fire" which led the infant nation of Israel out of tyrannical bondage of Egypt?

Why was the *pyramid*, the foremost monument in Egypt, used on the reverse side of the Great Seal?

Furthermore, what significance has the use of the "eagle" on our Seal? Was the eagle used because the Founding Fathers realized that Providence had watched over the forming of the United States? An eagle is known to gather its young on its wings, drop them from a high altitude, then (if need be) swoop down under the eaglets to catch them and carry them back up for another try. In this way the eagle exercises a watchful, providential-like care over its young while they are learning to fly.

When the nation of Israel was released from its Egyptian bondage, was led into the wilderness of Sinai, and was on the eve of receiving the Ten Commandments at the foot of Mt. Sinai, the Eternal One told them: "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on *eagles' wings*, and brought you unto myself" (Exodus 19:4).

Did the Founding Fathers — Franklin, Adams and Jefferson — influence the Continental Congress to adopt these symbols of the eagle, the cloud and the *glory* (or golden radiance) and the pyramid because of their having drawn a parallel between Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage, and their own deliverance from colonial bondage to Britain?

It is certainly a matter of the record, that men like Washington, Franklin and Jefferson repeatedly acknowledged the Supreme Being, and appealed to Him for guidance and for His Providential care.

In Washington's farewell address to the Congress in 1783, he said:

"I consider it an indispensable duty to close this last act of my official life by *commending the interests of our dearest country to the protection of Almighty God*, and those who have the superintendence of them to his holy keeping!"

There is certainly much more behind the artistic symbolism of the Great Seal of the United States of America than most Americans ever remotely dreamed of.

The Great Seal can only be used by the President of the United States, but numerous other seals and coats of arms are based on this Seal and have been used both by civil and military authorities, and have long appeared on flags, uniforms, in architectural motifs and on stationery. U.S. diplomats abroad use the coat of arms above the entrances to their offices.

The Great Seal is a work of art, of beauty — having great symbolical significance for our great nation!

Symbolism in "Old Glory"

Surely every patriotic American has been cheered by the majestic fluttering of "Old Glory"!

What is the symbolism behind this beautiful flag?

The original flag of the U.S. was adopted during the Revolutionary War. On June 14, 1777, John Adams introduced the following resolution to the Second Continental Congress:

“Resolved, that the *flag* of the thirteen United States shall be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white on a blue field, representing a new constellation.”

His resolution was unanimously passed on that date by Congress.

From that day till now, there have been many alterations in the U.S. flag — as more states were added to the union. But the basic ideas and symbolism incorporated in that very first flag still remain in today’s flag.

In 1776 there were only thirteen states in the union, so that flag had only thirteen stars, and stripes. Congress decided to keep the original number of stripes — symbolizing the beginning of our nation with only thirteen states — when any future additions were made to “Old Glory.” Additional stars would then be added to the flag as more states joined the Union. Today, there are fifty states in the Union, and fifty stars in our national flag.

“In God We Trust”

What is the origin of our national motto: “In God We Trust”?

This motto originated during the Civil War, as an inscription for U.S. coins, but it was used by Francis Scott Key (in a slightly different form) when he composed “The Star Spangled Banner” in 1814.

During the dark days of the bloody Civil War, when brother fought against brother, Union morale had sunk pretty low because of numerous defeats on the battlefields.

Realizing the peril to the Union caused by these military reverses, a minister named M.R. Watkinson, of Didleyville, Pennsylvania, sent a written appeal to the Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase: “From my heart,” wrote the clergyman, “I have felt our national shame in disowning God as not the least of our present national disaster.”

“Recognition of The Almighty”

He then suggested “recognition of the Almighty God in some form on our coins.”

Shortly afterwards, Secretary Chase ordered designs prepared with the now-familiar words “In God We Trust.” He then backed coinage legislation which authorized the use of this slogan.

“In God We Trust” first appeared on certain U.S. coins in 1864. This slogan later disappeared from U.S. coins, then reappeared and continued

until 1955, at which time Congress ordered it placed henceforth on all coins and paper money.

That is how America came to adopt her “national motto.”