

Seals and Symbols in the American Colonies

From about 1565 to 1776, American colonists drew ideas for symbols from many different European sources. The expression of these symbols changed with an awakening sense of political autonomy. An example of an early political symbol on the New England seal below shows two men kneeling in submission to King James II. By 1776, symbols favored expressions of unity, democracy, strength and independence. This panel includes some of the symbols that colonists might have seen on money and in print.



Currency in the colonies foreshadowed symbols on the Great Seal. A nearly identical pyramid to the one on the \$50 Continental bill, eventually appeared as the central icon of the reverse of the Great Seal.

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James II's seal for New England in 1682 depicts a colonist and Native American kneeling to their monarch. One hundred years after James II's seal appeared, the Continental Congress approved the Great Seal of the United States. The later Seal depicted an eagle—a symbol of America's newly proclaimed independence.

History of the United States Vol. 3 by Bryant and Gay, 1879, page 9, Library of Congress



This British guinea coin from the reign of George III (1760 – 1820) shows a spade shaped shield, similar to the shape of the shield the eagle bears on the Great Seal.

CNG coins (<http://www.cngcoins.com>)



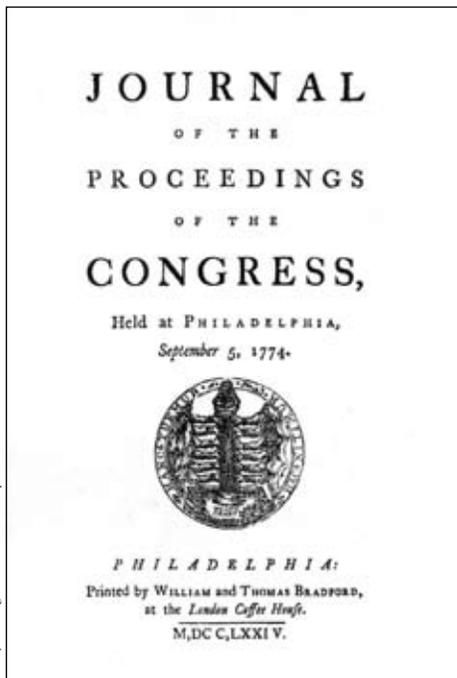
Continental Congress Currency
\$50 Bill, 1778 (replica)

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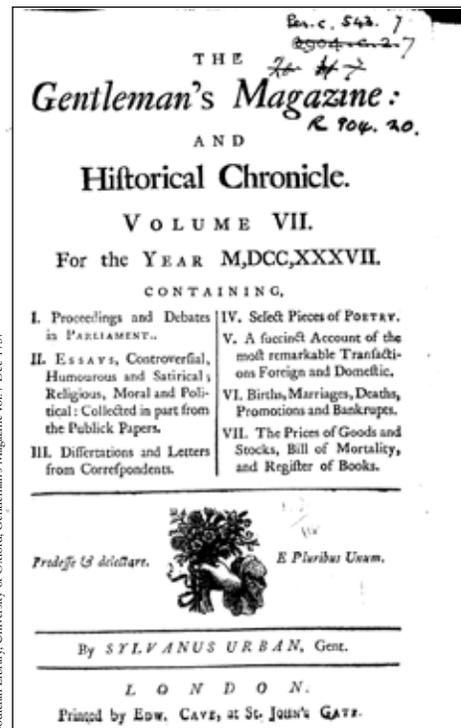
Continental Currency, 1776 first
silver dollar U.S. coin (replica)

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Benjamin Franklin searched for symbols to embody the colonies joined together as a nation. Above, the emblem of the Continental Congress shows a Liberty Column supported by hands and arms that represent the states. Magna Carta supports the base of the column. The Latin inscription *HANC TUEMUR, HAC NITMUR* means “This we defend, This we lean upon.”

Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Gentleman's Magazine Vol. 7 Dec. 1737



The motto on our Seal, *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of many, one) appeared in *Gentleman's Magazine*. Literate Americans knew it as a popular and influential London publication. *Gentlemen's Magazine* would collect the best of the year into one issue, and use a bouquet and the Latin term “*E Pluribus Unum*” to signify this was “one issue from many previous issues.”

EAGLE SYMBOLISM

Coats of Arms of New York and Pennsylvania

Many in the colonies and early United States were aware of eagle symbolism on the flags, coats-of-arms, seals and other imagery of ancient civilizations and Europe. In the United States, many also recognized the importance of eagles to Native Americans.



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New York State Coat of Arms, 1778

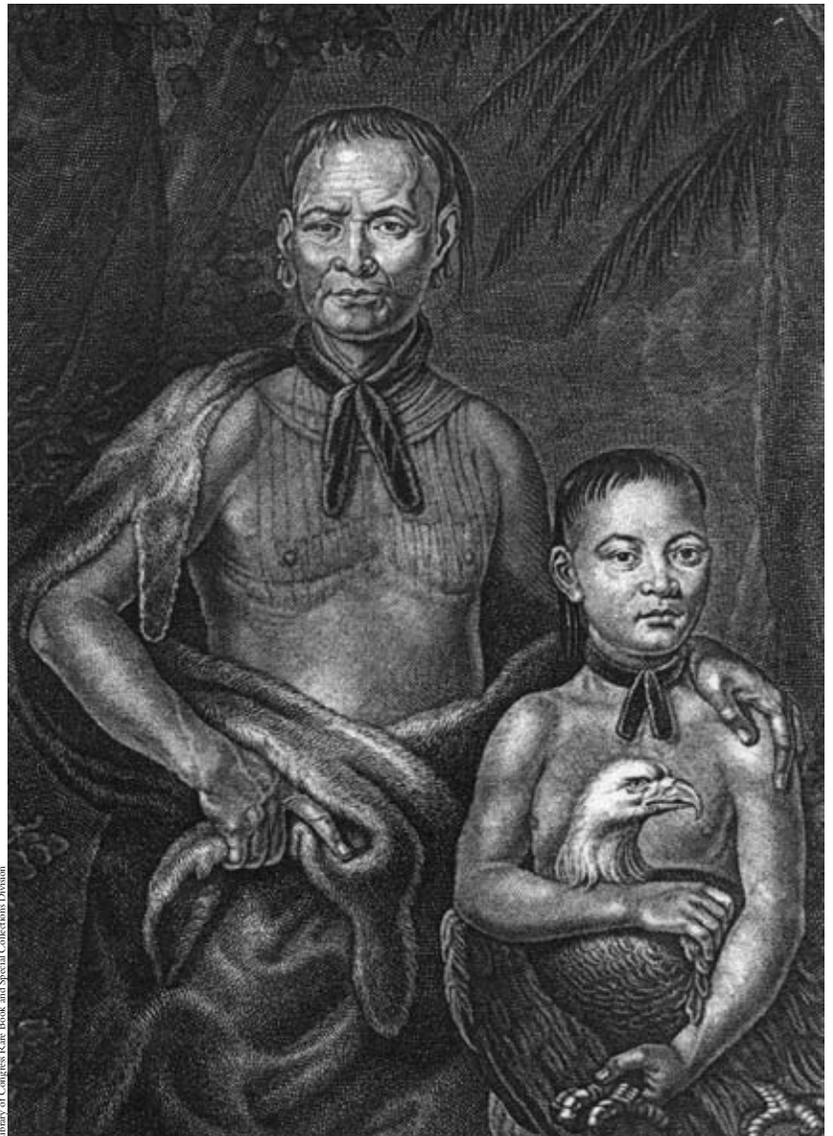
The seal displayed an eagle posing over the symbols of liberty (left) and justice (right).



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Pennsylvania Coat of Arms, 1778

The Commonwealth displayed an eagle for the first time amidst symbols of productivity.



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Chief and nephew of the Creek Nation pose with an eagle, demonstrating its sacred worth as a symbol of great leadership, strength and bravery to Native Americans. *Chief Tomochichi with Eagle*, 1733, print by Jacob Kleinsmidt, after a painting by Willem Verelst.

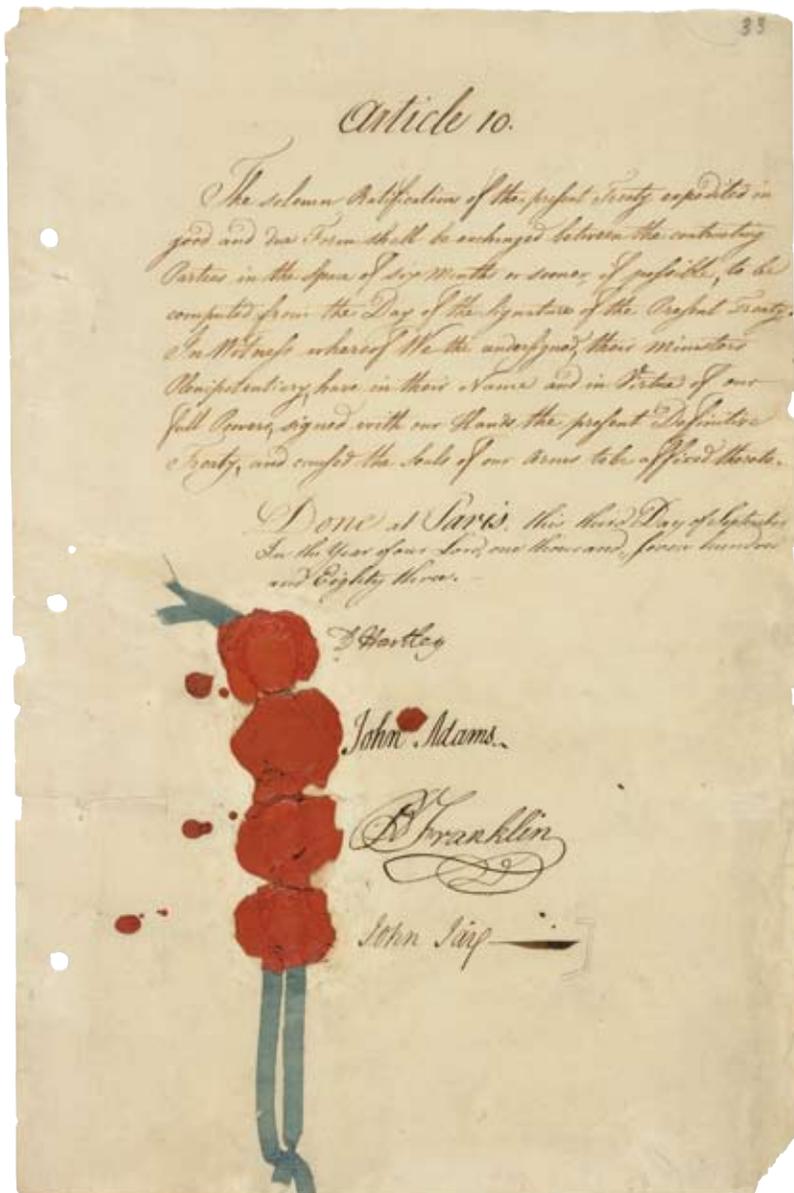
TREATY OF PARIS, 1783

Seals on the Treaty of Paris witnessed steps to ending the American colonies' war with Britain.

The draft of the Treaty of Paris, 1783, depicted here, ending the Revolutionary War, did not bear the Great Seal, which had been ratified in 1782, but the individual family seals of the signers—Benjamin Franklin, John Jay and John Adams. The fourth signer was David Hartley, representative of British king, George III. At this time diplomats could use family seals on signet rings to seal treaty drafts. Today U.S. diplomats initial drafts which, when ratified, bear the Great Seal.



This print at the Library of Congress is titled, *Signing the Preliminary Treaty of Peace at Paris, November 30, 1782*. Jay and Franklin Standing at the left of the picture. It is a reproduction of the print of the late Eighteenth Century painting by German artist Carl Seiler.



The red wax seals of the 1783 signers line up vertically. Top to bottom they are D. Hartley, John Adams, B. Franklin and John Jay.



The ingredients of sealing wax to this day may include shellac, turpentine, dye and other materials to ensure that it impresses and adheres well.

Even our egalitarian Founding Fathers had to rely on the ancient use of personal or family seals to secure mail and validate legal matters. Centuries ago, members of the royalty or gentry created seals by burning drops of special wax, similar to the kind seen here, onto important documents or envelope flaps. Then, by pressing engraved sealing or signet rings into the liquid wax, they created a seal with an imprint of their coat of arms.

Courtesy of the National Archives (RG2299805)