

THE GREAT SEAL



of the



UNITED STATES

Celebrating the 225th Anniversary of the Great Seal:



★ Past, Present and Future ★

*Dedicated to the Memory of M. Paul Claussen,
Diplomatic Historian, Office of the Historian,
U.S. Department of State from 1972 to 2007*

Produced in 2007 by the United States Diplomacy Center,
Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC

Designed by The Design Minds, Inc.
Fabricated by Kearney & Associates, Inc.

The Great Seal: Symbol and Identity

The Great Seal of the United States is a unique symbol of our country and national identity. Sometimes called the Eagle and the Shield, our Seal links to a tradition of official use that dates back thousands of years to guarantee and authenticate laws, treaties, ownership, rights and secrets.

This exhibit looks back to the ancestors of the modern Seal, traces the origins of the Great Seal and celebrates its significance in the United States today.



Photo: Alex Jamison

Great Seal in Needlepoint
Gift of Alamance County,
North Carolina Chapter
American Needlepoint Guild, 1984

WHAT IS A SEAL?

The first seals were carvings or etchings in stone, bone or other hard material that formed a tool called a die. The die pressed into soft material like clay or wax, creating an impression, or a seal. Paper seals only came later. Today we call both the die and the imprint a seal.

U.S. citizens needing to authenticate or notarize documents while in a foreign country can turn to a diplomat called a consul. He or she presses down on the lever of this device to imprint the required seal.



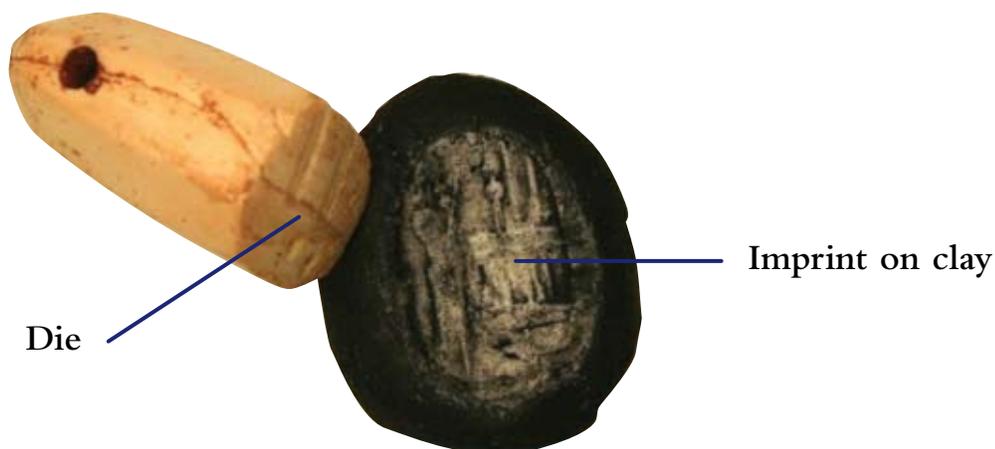
Sumerian Cylinder Seal of Queen Puabi of Ur (replica)
c. 2550 – 2400 BCE



Neo Babylonian Stamp Seal (replica)
c. 700 – 550 BCE



Consular Seal used at U.S. Consulate, Manchester, England
c. 1900 – 1960



ORIGINS OF SEALS

Seals could protect property and secrets, identify and certify ownership, confirm legal matters and validate important documents. Rulers used seals to proclaim and authorize their sovereignty. Some people wore seals as amulets for defense against evil.

Use of seals has not changed greatly since first appearing in Mesopotamia about 3500 BCE, when people began to amass and trade their wealth, build cities and develop writing.

Early seals appeared over a wide geographical area. Monarchs, emperors, nobles and clergy devised them to rule or conduct their business.



Old Babylonian Stamp Seal (replica)
c. 2000 – 1600 BCE



The Seal of King John I was attached to all copies of Magna Carta hand written in 1215 (replica).

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.

Department of Special Collections of the University Libraries of Notre Dame



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>)



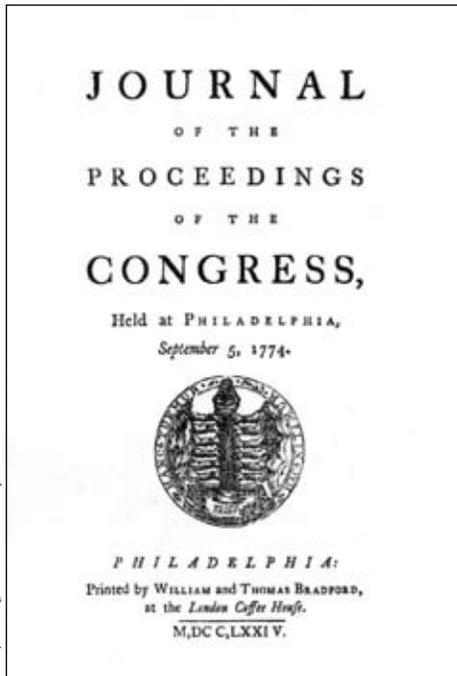
Continental Congress Currency
\$50 Bill, 1778 (replica)

Department of Special Collections of the University Libraries of Notre Dame



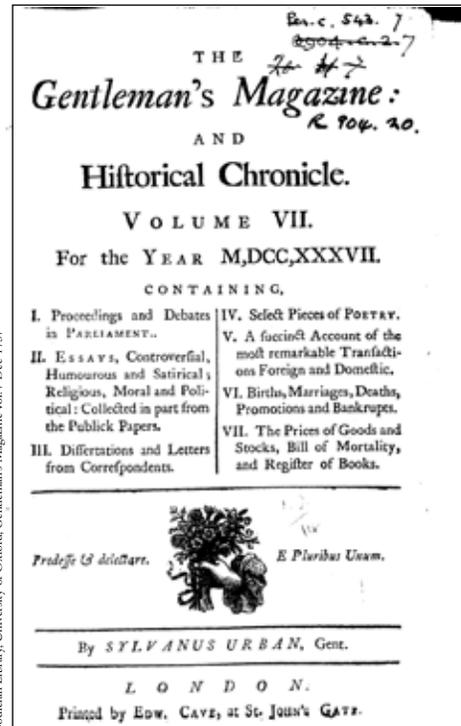
Continental Currency, 1776 first
silver dollar U.S. coin (replica)

Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division



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

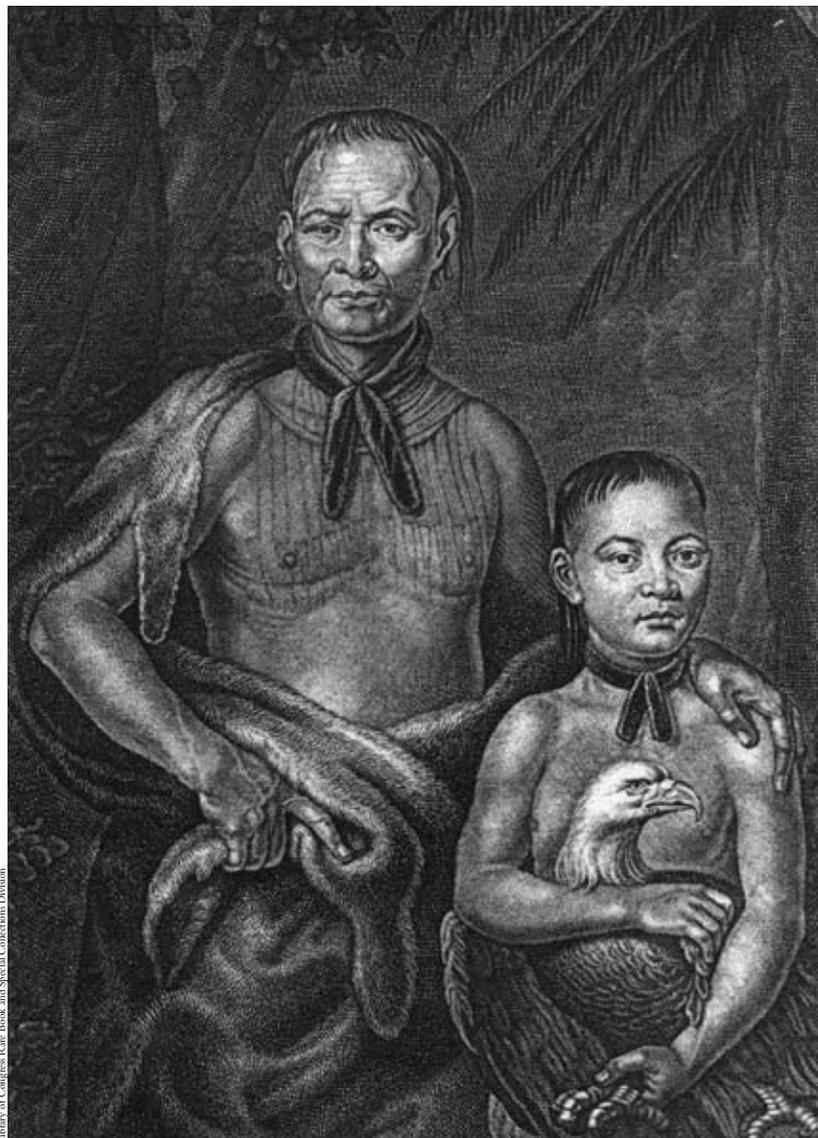
Many in the colonies and early United States were aware of eagle symbolism on the flags, coats-of-arms, seals and other imagery of ancient civilizations and Europe. In the United States, many also recognized the importance of eagles to Native Americans.



New York State Coat of Arms, 1778
The seal displayed an eagle posing over the symbols of liberty (left) and justice (right).



Pennsylvania Coat of Arms, 1778
The Commonwealth displayed an eagle for the first time amidst symbols of productivity.



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.

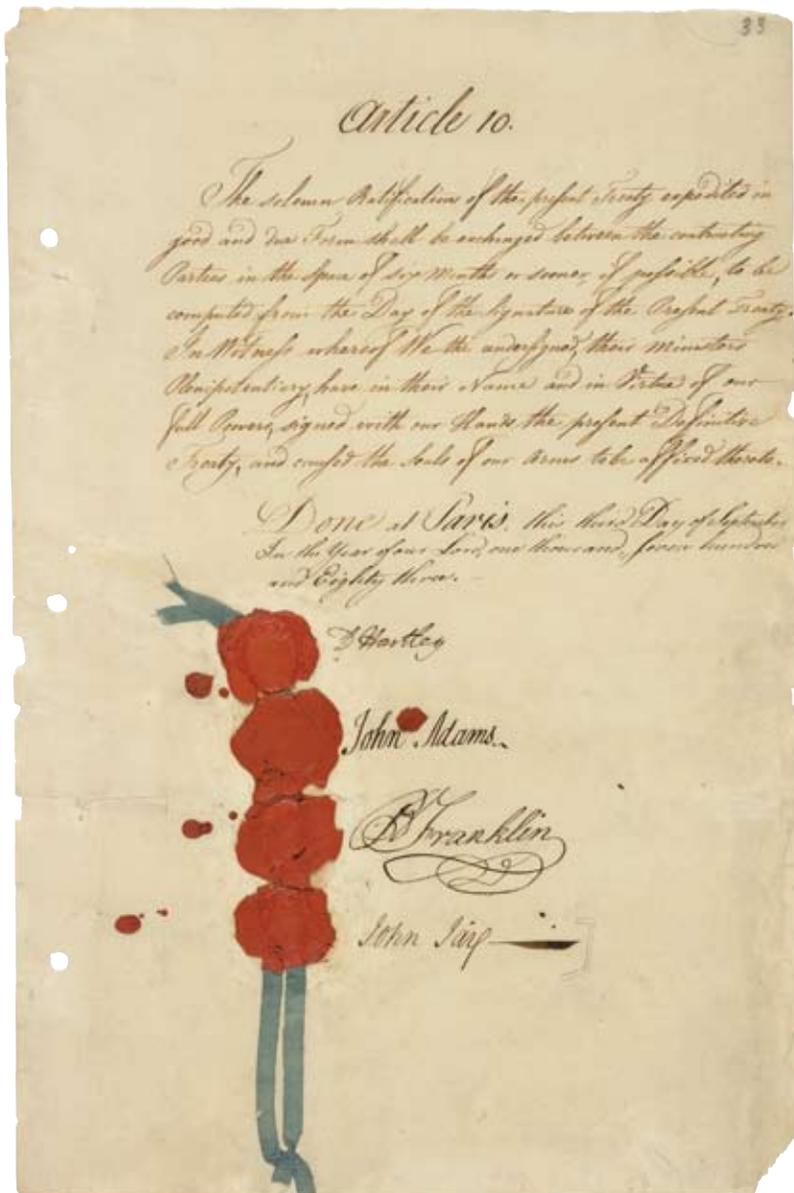
TREATY OF PARIS, 1783

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)

A decorative sunburst graphic consisting of numerous thin, grey lines radiating from a central point at the top of the page, framing the title below.

Creating the Great Seal

To devise a seal an artist was expected to know how to design and describe coats of arms, a study and profession called heraldry. The Founding Fathers wanted the Seal to reflect their beliefs that Providence blessed the new republic and that the United States would find a unique place among the nations of the world. It was not an easy task. Even the great men of the First Committee, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams found it difficult.

In appearance, the new Seal was to possess a design on both the front (obverse) and back (reverse).

FIRST COMMITTEE

The First Seal device—or design—by Pierre du Simitière of Philadelphia, consulting artist to the committee in 1776, presents six symbols of European nations in the center of the shield to reflect the multi-national American population. The final seal incorporated the eye, shield and motto from this sketch.

Surrounding the European coats of arms are the arms of the 13 American colonies.

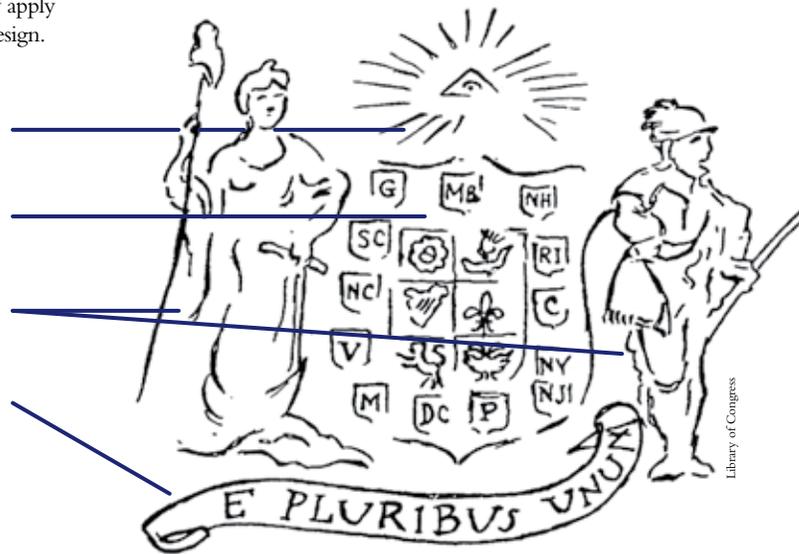
Rules of heraldry apply to this first seal design.

Crest

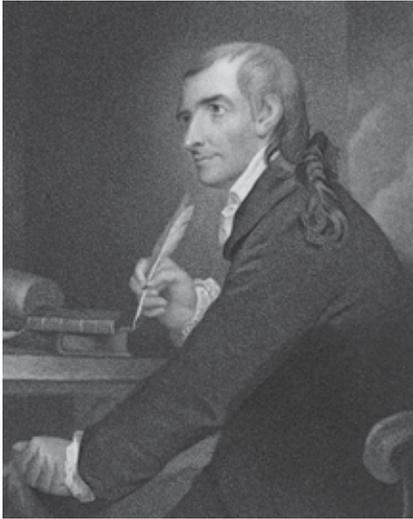
Shield or arms

Supporters

Motto and scroll



SECOND COMMITTEE



Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#595252)



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#595255)

Francis Hopkinson created the second attempt at a design in 1780. From this came the stars, the olive branch and the striped shield.

THIRD COMMITTEE



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#595258)



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#595258)

Artist William Barton provided Congress with these designs in May 1782. The front (obverse) was too complicated, but the symbol of an eagle was drawn from it to become the centerpiece of the final seal. In contrast, the pyramid remained essentially the same for the reverse of the seal.

THE FINAL DESIGN

By 1782, the wait for a seal had lasted six years and involved three committees. Three artists had produced drawings that Congress had not accepted. The end of the war with England was in sight, and the need for a seal to represent the new nation was becoming urgent.

Finally, Charles Thomson, Secretary of the Continental Congress, created a seal that Congress accepted on the first vote in June 1782. He borrowed elements from previous designs to create a Seal that reflected the independence of the new nation.



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#595257)

Thomson's original design shows the eagle's wings pointing down. Artist William Barton changed them to an upwards, or "displayed" position.



Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Artist William Barton modified other aspects of Thomson's work before Congress approved the Seal. Beside the wings, he changed the stripes from chevron shaped to vertical and specified there be 13 arrows and 13 stars in the constellation, as seen in the image of the Seal's imprint.



U.S. Department of State

Thompson's creation reflects his indifference to heraldry but awareness of the new nation's ideals and identity. Above is an imprint of the first Great Seal.



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#59742)

Die of the first Great Seal of the United States, now in the National Archives, reflects Barton's modifications.

From the Continental Congress

Resolved: That these United Colonies are, and, of right, ought to be, Free and Independent States; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown...

Resolved: That Dr. Franklin, Mr. J. Adams and Mr. Jefferson, be a committee, to bring in a device [design] for a seal for the United States of America.

— July 4, 1776
From the Journals of the Continental Congress, Volume V



The two dollar bill features an image of the Declaration of Independence signing with the members of the first Seal committee standing by the document. John Adams is to the far left, Thomas Jefferson, holding his work in the center and Benjamin Franklin, near Jefferson to the far right.



Symbols of the Great Seal

When the first Seal was cast in 1782, it was a modest 2 5/16" in diameter. Its base was sturdy iron or steel and its engraved surface a softer brass. Some small imperfections occurred, yet every aspect of this new Seal represented the ideals that our Founding Fathers upheld—unity, independence, strength, fortitude and virtue.

The Seal shares symbolism with the American flag. The white stripes in both signify purity and innocence; the red, hardiness and valor. The blue field for the flag's stars and the blue bar across the shield both represent vigilance, perseverance and justice.

CHARLES THOMSON'S BLAZON OR DESCRIPTION OF THE GREAT SEAL

That the Device for an Armorial Achievement & Reverse of the great seal for the United States in Congress assembled is as follows.—

Arms

Paleways of thirteen pieces Argent and Gules: a Chief, Azure. The Escutcheon on the breast of the American bald Eagle displayed, proper, holding in his dexter talon an Olive branch, and in his sinister a bundle of thirteen arrows, all proper, & in his beak a scroll, inscribed with this 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, & 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 & underneath the following motto. 'novus ordo seclorum'



Papers of the Continental Congress, item 23, R.G. 360, folio 113

Copy of the Continental Congress' 1782 report on the Great Seal. Courtesy of the National Archives.

THE EAGLE OR THE TURKEY: BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S THOUGHTS ON THE NATIONAL BIRD

Popular culture portrays Benjamin Franklin ardently opposing the eagle as the national emblem. How much truth is there to this story?

Was Franklin in Philadelphia protesting the eagle during the 1782 vote on the Seal? No, he was Minister to France at the time, negotiating the treaty to end the war with England.

Did he complain to the Congress afterwards about the eagle? If so, we have no record of it.

Did he ever object publicly to the eagle? Again, no evidence today. This is what we do know:

Artist Anatole Kovarsky created a cover for the *New Yorker's* November 24, 1962 Thanksgiving issue that humorously illustrated Benjamin Franklin's preference for the turkey as our national bird. Kovarsky's drawing can be found at: <http://www.cartoonbank.com>.



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Dave Menke

For Franklin, the bald eagle did not “get his living honestly,” being “too lazy to fish for himself” and was easily chased away by smaller birds. He also observed, “Eagles have been found in all Countries.”



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Gary M. Stolz

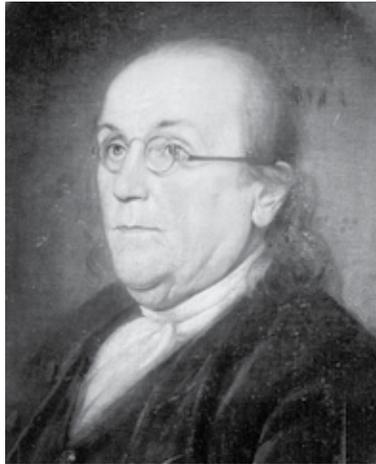
Franklin called the turkey a bird of courage and a “true original Native of America.” Even so, he admitted it was a little “vain and silly.”

THE EAGLE OR THE TURKEY: BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S THOUGHTS ON THE NATIONAL BIRD



Library of Congress

In 1784, Franklin wrote a humorous letter from France to his daughter, Sarah Bache, above, stating he wished “the bald eagle had not been chosen as the Representative of our Country.”



Library of Congress

In the letter, Franklin was humorously rebuking critics that the eagle resembled the turkey on the national emblem. He felt the detractors should not complain, since for him the turkey was a far more “respectable Bird.”



Scan from The Eagle and the Shield by Paterson and Dougall, page 21

No birds appeared in the image of Moses crossing the Red Sea that Franklin proposed for the reverse of the Great Seal while on the First Committee to design the Seal.

All parts of the Seal design, from eagle and shield to pyramid and mottoes, held distinct meanings for the founders of our nation.

Glory or Constellation of Stars 

symbolizes a new nation taking its place among other sovereign states.

Bald Eagle 

stands for courage, strength, alertness, and nobility. Its open wings, with tips up (a position called "displayed") signify protection.

Shield or Escutcheon 

as a whole represents the nation. The stripes symbolize the states united under a blue bar representing Congress. The unsupported shield reflects the value of the U.S. standing alone on its own virtue.

Olive Branch 

has for millennia stood for peace and harmony. With the arrows, the olive branch denotes the powers of peace and war.

E Pluribus Unum 

means "out of many, one," and reflects the many individuals and colonies that form the United States.

The Number 13

denotes the 13 original states. The arrows, stripes in the shield and stars in the constellation are also 13 in number.

Arrows 

are an ancient symbol of readiness for battle. With the olive branch, the arrows denote the powers of peace and war.

Red, White, and Blue

are the colors of the American flag. White stands for purity and innocence; red for hardiness and valor; and blue for vigilance, perseverance and justice.



All parts of the Seal design, from eagle and shield to pyramid and mottoes, held distinct meanings for the founders of our nation.



Eye of Providence 

appears on the highest point of the pyramid, with rays of glory surrounding it. The designers did not specify a right or left eye. The pyramid signifies strength and duration.

13 Step Pyramid 

signifies strength and duration. Traditionally drawn with thirteen levels, but no particular number was specified in the original design.

The motto ANNUIT CŒPTIS

means "Providence favors (or has favored) our undertakings." The eye alludes to the many interventions of providence that Founding Fathers perceived to have favored the American cause.

The motto NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM

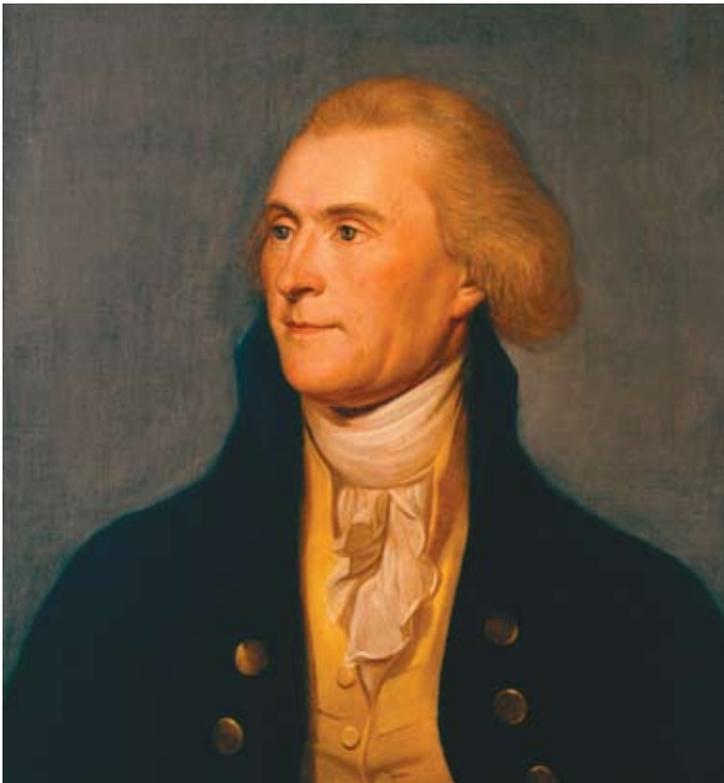
and Date, literally mean "A new order of the ages," but referred to the beginning of a New American era. The date, 1776 in Roman numerals, refers to the year of the Declaration, when the new American era began.

A decorative sunburst background consisting of numerous thin, light gray lines radiating from the top center, creating a fan-like effect behind the title.

Keeping the Seal in Good Hands

A major change affecting the Seal took place in 1789, shortly after the Constitution was ratified. Congress passed an act to rename the Department of Foreign Affairs, calling it the Department of State, and assigned both foreign and domestic duties to it. As one of these duties, Congress transferred custody of the Seal from the Secretary of Congress to the new agency, which is why the State Department holds the Seal today.

In 1789, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson was designated official custodian of the Great Seal as Secretary of State.



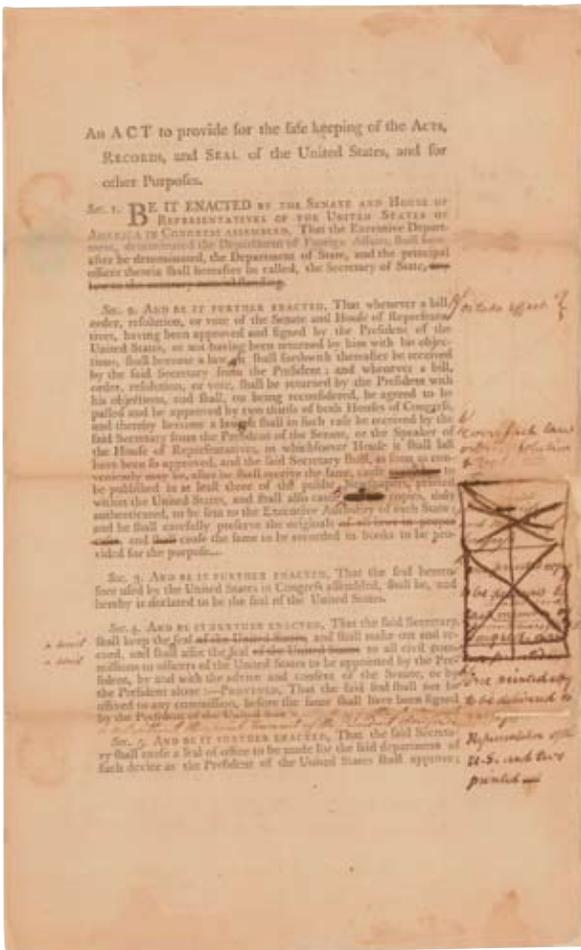
Courtesy of the Diplomatic Reception Rooms, U.S. Department of State



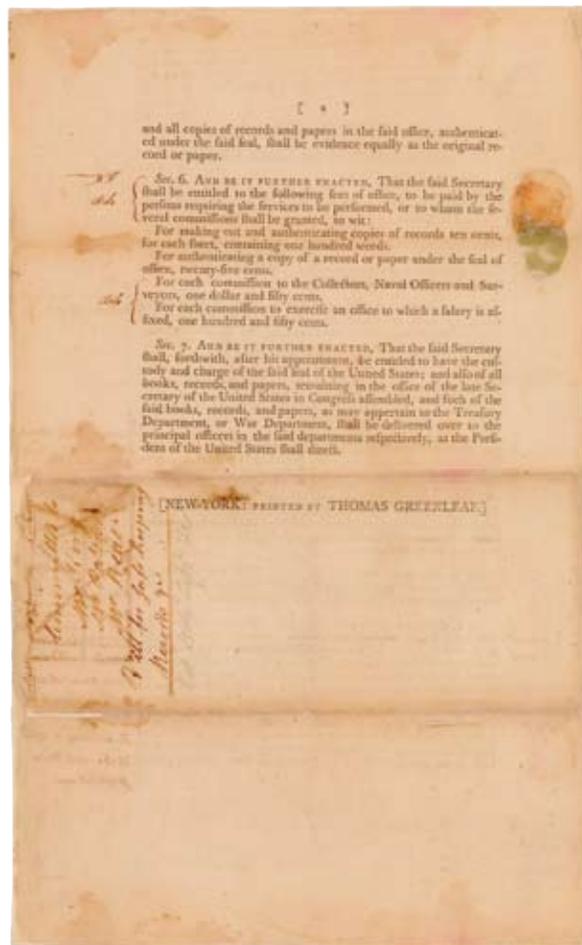
The Patent Office Pony: History of the United States Patent Office by Dobyns

From 1790 – 1792, Henry Remsen, Jr. became keeper of the Seal and in 1790 helped move the Department and the Seal from the seat of the federal government in New York to Pennsylvania.

Portrait of Thomas Jefferson, Diplomatic Reception Rooms, U.S. Department of State



Bill version of the 1789 Act establishing the Department of State as keeper of the Seal, from the records of the U.S. Senate. Courtesy of the National Archives.



CAREFUL HANDS

PRESS THE SEAL

Although the Secretary is the official custodian of the Seal, designated clerks or officers have overseen its daily use, which includes pressing seals and affixing them to signed documents. None of the press mechanisms for creating Seals from 1782 – 1904 has survived.



Scan from *The Eagle and the Shield* by Patterson and Dougall, page 213

George Bartle, above, cared for the seal from 1852 - 99, the longest serving custodian in Department history. This sketch by William Allen Rogers appeared in the March, 1878 *Harper's Magazine* along with an article about the Seal.



U.S. Diplomacy Center

Seal caretaker, Percy F. Allen imprints a Seal using a press, die and cabinet that R. Hoe & Co. produced for the Department in 1903 and remains in use today. He was in charge of the Seal from 1924 to 1942.

THE SEAL MEETS GRAVE DANGER— AND SURVIVES



Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol

In 1814, during the War of 1812, the British burned Washington's government buildings with flames visible for miles. The Seal could have been destroyed, but like the nation, survived.



Stephen Pleasonton, keeper of the Seal, (left) helped rescue America's charter documents from destruction. The Seal also escaped harm, but no one knows who saved it.

www.nightbeacon.com



Seal of the Confederacy, 1862 (replica)

During the Civil War, with the integrity of the United States being challenged, the South devised the Great Seal of the Confederacy. On this seal, George Washington rides a horse; the date 1862 commemorates the year Jefferson Davis became President and other symbols reflect the major agricultural products of the South. Today this Seal resides in the Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond VA.

THE SEAL TAKES PRIDE OF PLACE

From 1945-1955 the Seal became “a stepchild of the Department,” in the words of Great Seal historian Richard S. Patterson. During this period the Department relocated into new quarters and the Seal was moved almost once a year.

In 1950, Clydia Mae Richardson became Chief of the Presidential Appointments. She directed efforts to secure a dignified and stable home for the Seal.

In 1955, she realized her aspirations. The Department put the Seal on display in a central location in its main building. In 1961 the Seal became a central focus of the new Department Exhibit Hall, where it resides today.



U.S. Diplomacy Center

Clydia Mae Richardson operates the press with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles looking on, 1955

CREATING A SEAL TODAY

Today, Presidential Appointments Staff Section Chief Sharon Hardy of the Department's Office of Career Development and Assignments, is the keeper of the Great Seal. The following photos depict the materials required and steps taken to imprint a Great Seal for a document.

Seal Wafer



Photo: Alex Jamieson

Seal Counter-die



Photo: Alex Jamieson

Seal Press



Photo: Alex Jamieson

Imprinting



Photo: Alex Jamieson

The Seal



Photo: Alex Jamieson

Using the Seal as the Nation Expands

The United States government applied the Great Seal to treaties, presidential proclamations and many other documents as its involvement in international affairs grew.

After the U.S. confirmed the Great Seal in June 1782, the Secretary of Congress applied the first seal to a document of the Continental Congress that empowered George Washington as “trustworthy and well-beloved” Commander in Chief to negotiate “better treatment for all Prisoners of War.”

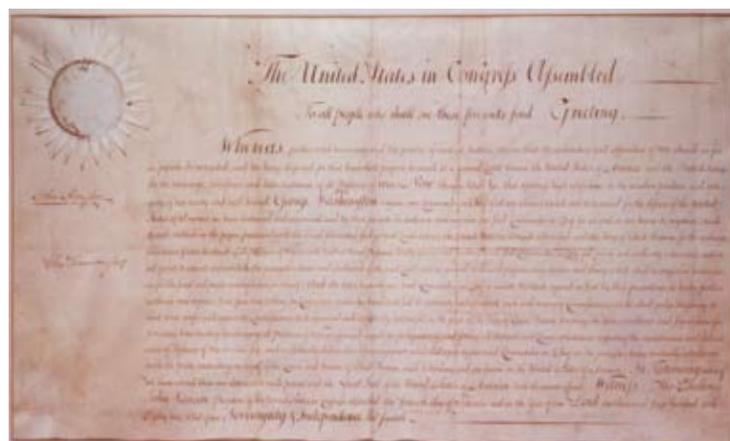
AMERICAN TREATIES: 1782 – 1825

Between 1782 and 1789, the Continental Congress affixed Seals on nine treaties and other diplomatic papers. As the U.S. defined itself, foreign governments at times protested the placement or absence of the U.S Seal on official documents.

As the United States expanded, ratified treaties marked its growth. When the U.S. acquired the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, the new nation had not yet produced a pendant, or hanging seal in a round box, seen in the treaty photo.

The 1782 die was too small and plain for the lofty formality of treaty ratification. A comparison of the 1782 Seal to the large hanging Seals in silver boxes illustrates how the U.S. changed its self-perception among the nations of the world over its first four decades.

September 16, 1782,
the United States
government affixes its seal
to a document for the
first time.



Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. The George Washington Papers



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#299807)

Pictured here is the French copy of the 1803 Louisiana Treaty displaying a pendant seal.



Scan from *The Eagle and the Shield* by Patterson and Dougall, page 172

The U.S. used a pendant, or hanging seal for the first time on the Treaty of Ghent in 1815, which ended the War of 1812 with Great Britain.

The Masi Seal brought a robust presence to U.S. treaty ratification.



Courtesy of the Diplomatic Reception Rooms, U.S. Department of State

The Pendant Seal

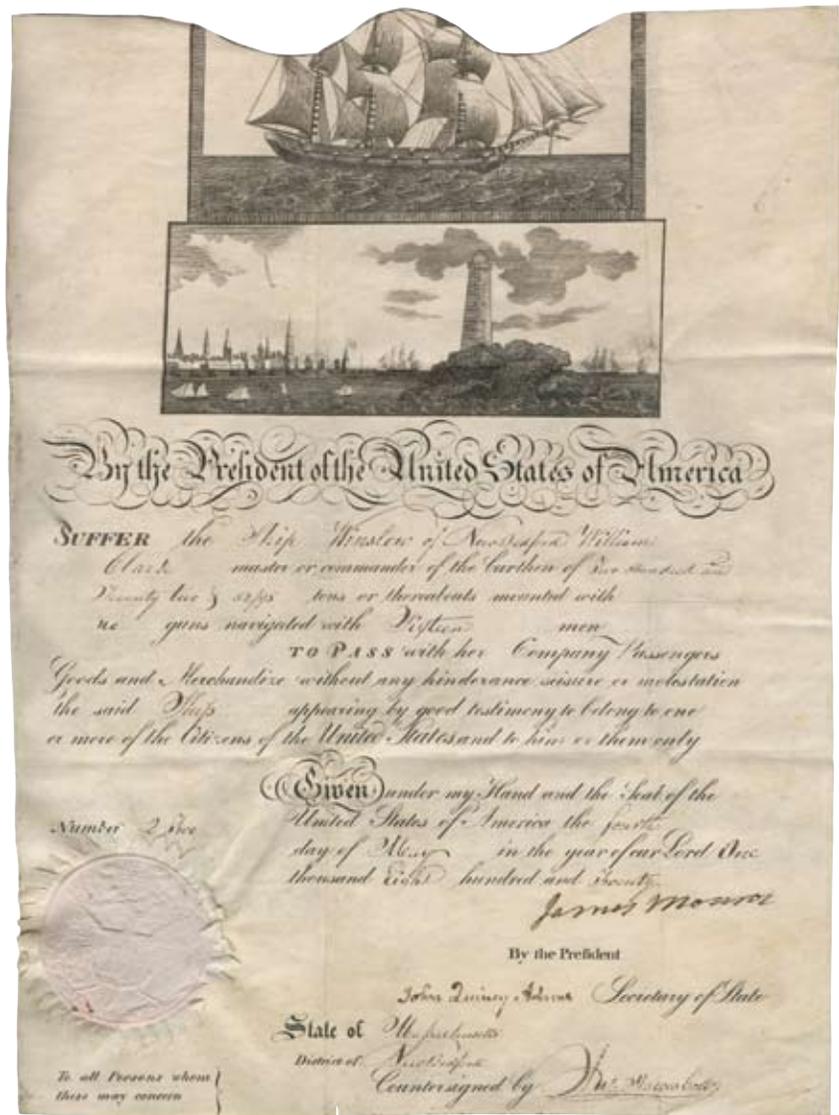
Fragile wax often decomposes when sealed on a flat surface. By the 1100s attaching a hanging or pendant seal to cords affixed to the manuscript became standard practice. Silver, gold and wooden boxes called skippets protected the seals and made it possible to display designs on the front and back.



THE SEAS MAKE WAY FOR SHIPS WITH U.S. PASSPORTS

The thousands of ships' passports sealed from 1795 to the mid 1800s attest to the vigor of the new republic's expanding economy. Also called the Mediterranean passport, this document offered protection from pirates as it proved that the U.S. had signed treaties with the North African Barbary Coast countries.

The signatures of President James Monroe and Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams appear on this 1820 replica passport for the ship *Winslow* from New Bedford, MA. The Seal, visible on the bottom left, identified the United States as a separate nation, validating the intent of the Founding Fathers in creating a national symbol.



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#595194)

EARLY U.S. PEACE MEDALS FOR NATIVE AMERICANS

Only from 1789 to 1795 did the United States government present Native Americans with peace medals that bore the Great Seal design. Later peace medals differed in appearance.



Washington Presenting Medal to Red Jacket
In the painting by Hal Sherman, President George Washington extends a medal to Red Jacket, who had led a delegation of 50 Indians to the Federal government in Philadelphia in 1782.



Seneca Chief, Red Jacket (1757-1830) wears a Peace Medal that indicates the respect George Washington had for him.



The Great Seal is engraved on the front of the Indian Peace Medal.



The back of the medal depicts President Washington and a native exchanging a peace pipe. They stand in front of a farm scene that symbolizes taking up a settled

National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution



Redefining the Seal's Use

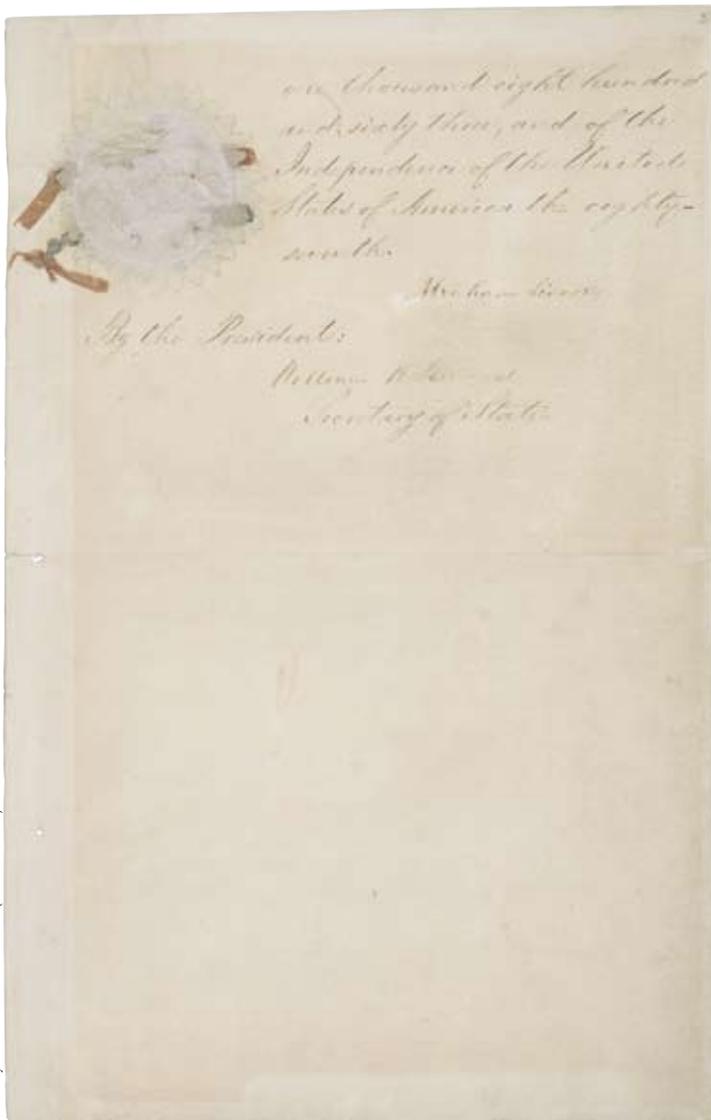
As the government grew and expanded along with the territory and population of the United States, the use of the Seal also changed. New government bureaus created their own seals. An expanding diplomatic corps required faster processing of papers. Streamlining removed Seals on warrants for fugitives from U.S. justice or Presidential pardons. Presidents Grover Cleveland, Richard Nixon and Lyndon B. Johnson issued Executive Orders to cease use of the Seal on certain documents.

No matter what changes have taken place, the President and Secretary of State must first sign all documents before the Seal is affixed.

EXAMPLES OF DOCUMENTS NO LONGER REQUIRING THE GREAT SEAL

Presidential Proclamations

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, which addressed complex issues of slavery during the Civil War, is one of the best known proclamations of our nation's history.



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#299998)

Exequaturs

The exequatur here is an example of a document that U.S. presidents issued in the past to foreign consular officials to conduct business in our country. As of 1971 this document is no longer required. A consul to the U.S. only needs a diplomatic note from his or her country requesting recognition from the U.S.



Photo: Alex Jamieson

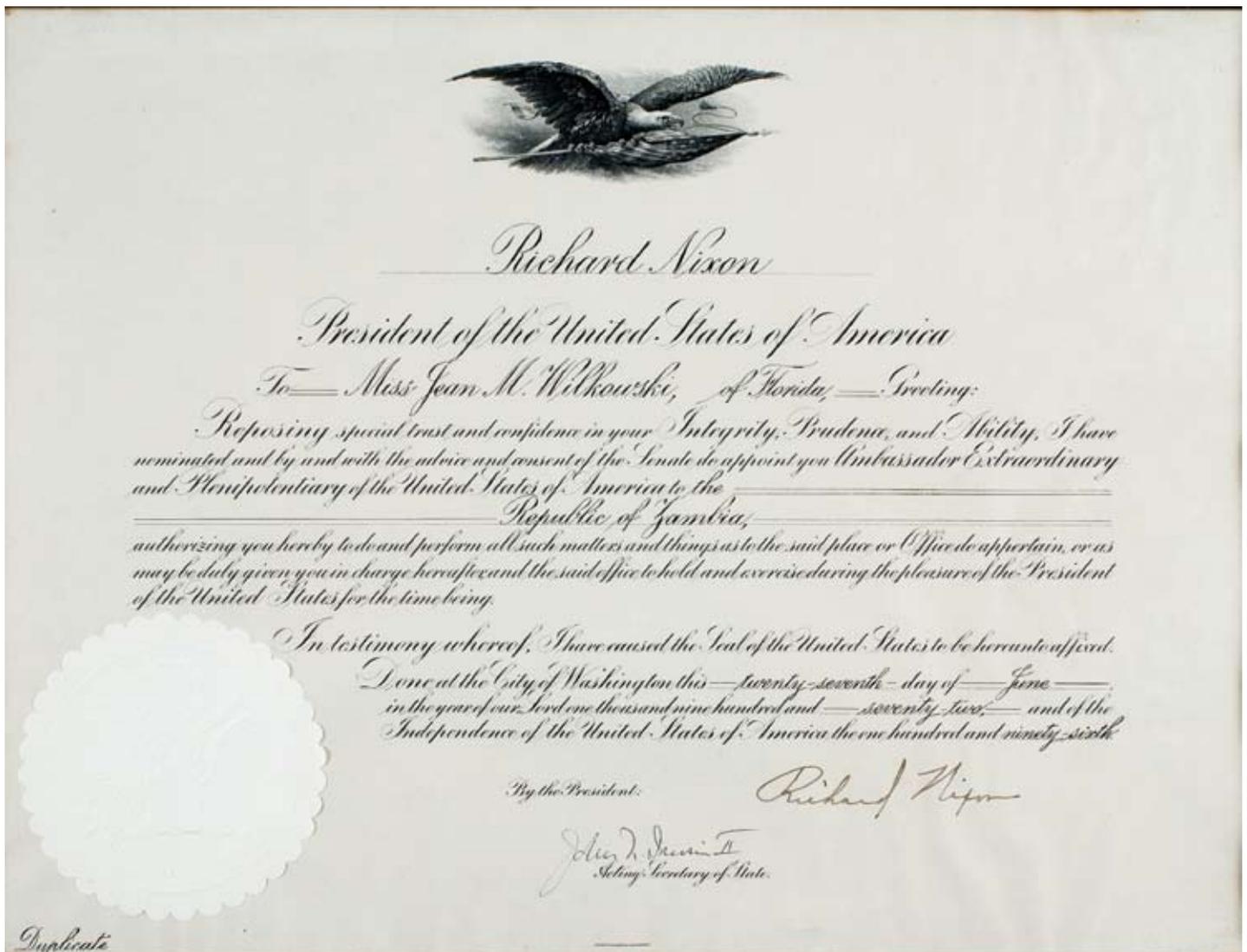
This exequatur, signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1938, authorized the French consul general in New York City, Charles de Ferry de Fontnouvelle, to conduct diplomatic business for France in the U.S.

The Emancipation Proclamation (left) bears the signatures of President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State William H. Seward on its fifth and last page along with an imprint of the Great Seal.

EXAMPLES OF DOCUMENTS WHICH REQUIRE THE GREAT SEAL

Commissions

Presidentially appointed officers receive commissions, official documents that grant the right to take office. Cabinet Officers, Heads of independent government agencies, Ambassadors, Foreign Service Officers and special envoys receive sealed commissions.



This is a copy of the commission that Ambassador Jean Wilkowski received from President Nixon upon her appointment as Ambassador to Zambia in 1972. She was the first female ambassador from the U.S. to serve in Africa.

Diplomatic Envelopes

The Great Seal also appears on the envelopes that contain letters of credence [credentials] and recall and other ceremonial communications from the President to heads of foreign governments.



Letter of credence

*To Her Majesty,
Elizabeth the Second,
by the Grace of God, Queen of the United Kingdom
of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of
Grenada and Her other Realms and Territories,
Head of the Commonwealth.*

For exhibit purposes only



Commemorating the Seal

Over the past 225 years, the Great Seal has remained a constant symbol of sovereignty and independence for the United States, unlike other nations whose seals change with monarchs or regimes. Even so, slight variations occurred in some of the past dies of the Seal due to artistic interpretation or human error. In 1986 the Bureau of Engraving and Printing produced a master for the present die and counter-die for all future Seals. The master follows the 1904 Seal that engraver Max Zeitler prepared for the firm Bailey, Banks and Biddle of Philadelphia.

1841: FIRST VARIATIONS

The faulty design of John Peter Van Ness Throop's 1841 die caused people to call it the "illegal seal."

Some of the Differences:

Changed stars from six to five points

Six, not 13 arrows

Added fruit to olive branch

Courtesy of the National Archives (#15493)



U.S. Diplomacy Center



1877: CENTENNIAL SPURS CHANGE

The 1876 Centennial prompted criticism of the Seal's "illegal" variations, which continued in the 1877 version of engraver Herman Baumgarten. The Department was unable to create a new die for the Centennial commemorations of the Seal in 1882.



Courtesy of the National Archives (#15516)

In 1885, James Horton Whitehouse created the pattern still used for the Seal today. The clouds form a complete circle, and the robust eagle grasps 13 arrows and 13 olive branches. The eagle's talons now grip from the back, rather than the front, as they did earlier.



James Horton Whitehouse, an exceptionally skilled engraver, researched the first Seal to recapture important details. In 1904 Max Zeitler created a crisper, more detailed copy of Whitehouse's die.

Scan from The Eagle and the Shield by Patterson and Dougall, page 255

BICENTENNIAL

The 200 Anniversary Commemoration

On June 1982 the Department of State held a special reception to mark the 200th Anniversary of the Great Seal. Secretary of State Alexander Haig spoke, received commemorative gifts from the U.S. Postal Service and the U.S. Capitol Historical Society and affixed a Seal to a document.

In his remarks about the Seal, Secretary Haig observed, “This symbol has reflected the hopes and dreams of both the founders of the country and we, their descendants.”



U. S. Diplomacy Center

During the special commemorative event, Jane Mossel, keeper of the Seal, guides Secretary Alexander Haig in affixing a Seal on the commission of a new Foreign Service Officer.

THE REVERSE OF THE GREAT SEAL

Congress approved a written design for the Seal’s reverse in 1782, specifically for hanging, or pendant, seals with fronts and backs. In 1815 the U.S. affixed its first pendant seal but only used the Seal’s front. Once U.S. diplomats ceased applying the pendant device in 1871, the desire to strike a reverse waned. In 1885 Congress appropriated funds to cut a reverse, but the Department declined to order it, heeding the recommendation of scholarly advisors who did not favor its appearance.



Library of Congress

In 1786 engraver James Trenchard created this version of the reverse with a stepped pyramid, a right Eye of Providence and mottoes in small print.



Scan, The Eagle and the Shield, Patterson and Dougall

In 1856 artist Benson J. Lossing changed the eye from right to left, smoothed the pyramid’s sides, deepened the perspective, and added plants. The mottoes became more prominent.

The One Dollar Bill

In 1935, when the U.S. government decided to place the Great Seal on the dollar bill, some distrusted the unfamiliar design of the reverse. They feared a Masonic “plot” and detractors of President Roosevelt read the motto “*Novus Ordo Seclorum*” as a sinister reference to the New Deal.

In fact, nothing on the Seal refers to any special group. The Founding Fathers accessed these symbols readily in print, art and coats of arms.

When President Roosevelt approved the new U.S. Treasury design in 1935, he noted two changes.

First, he moved the obverse to the right and the reverse to the left. Second, he added the words, “The Great Seal of the United States,” placing the phrase “of the United States” so that it was underneath the eagle.

This was the first time the Great Seal appeared on U.S. currency. The dollar is one way people come into widespread contact with the reverse of the Seal.



Courtesy of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing

President Roosevelt's notes on the dollar bill design, 1935.



Courtesy of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing

1928: The design of the back of dollar bill before incorporating the Great Seal.



2007: Since 1935 the Seal has remained on the dollar bill.



This 1882 Centennial medal by the U. S. Mint helped spark public interest in the Seal. Artist Charles E. Barber, closely following Trenchard's interpretation of the Seal.



Sculptor Elisabeth Gordon Chandler, created the bicentennial medal. The U.S. Capitol Historical Society described the Seal as symbolizing the "unity, strength and independence of the new United States."



For the 200th anniversary, the Post Office chose the Department as the first day of issue site for the embossed Seal envelope.



The U.S. Capitol Historical Society commemorated both the 250th anniversary of George Washington's birth and the Seal's bicentennial on the medal. These plaster molds are part of the fabrication process.



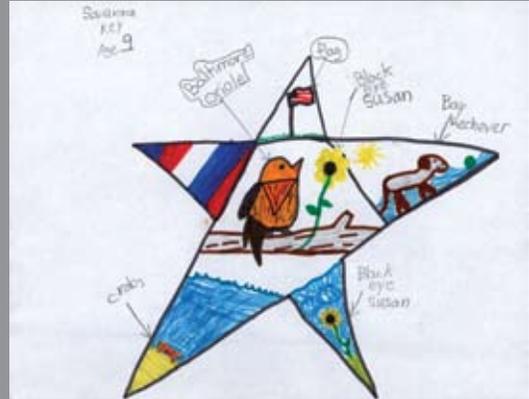
Looking to the Future

The bicentennial of the Great Seal helped us remember why its symbolism still glows with vitality after 200 years. At its 225th anniversary in 2007, we reflect again on how the Seal embodies our beliefs about independence and strength in national unity.

What of the Seal's future? The generations to come will guard the rights and responsibilities that form our system of government. Here we let the creative works of children express visions and hopes for the future of their nation.



Ilana Shapiro
Kenmore Middle School



Savanna Key
Bodkin Elementary School



Annie Lee
Carson Middle School



Shaun Ebaugh
Bodkin Elementary School