

history of the great seal of the united states

The History of the Great Seal of the United States

history of the great seal of the united states is a fascinating journey through symbolism, politics, and national identity. The Great Seal, a powerful emblem that represents America's sovereignty and ideals, is more than just an official stamp—it's a story woven into the very fabric of the nation's founding. Understanding how this iconic symbol came to be reveals much about the early ambitions and values of the United States.

Origins and Early Designs of the Great Seal

The story of the Great Seal begins shortly after the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The Continental Congress recognized the need for an official seal to authenticate documents and signify the legitimacy of the new government. However, the process of designing the seal was anything but straightforward.

The First Committee and Initial Concepts

In July 1776, Congress appointed a committee composed of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams to create a design for the seal. Each of these founding fathers brought different ideas influenced by classical symbols, Enlightenment philosophy, and their vision for the new nation.

- **Benjamin Franklin** suggested imagery from nature, including the biblical story of Moses striking the rock, symbolizing divine providence.
- **Thomas Jefferson** leaned towards classical emblems like the Roman fasces, representing strength through unity.
- **John Adams** favored symbols linked to liberty and justice.

Despite their efforts, the committee's design never fully materialized into a seal. This initial attempt was only the beginning of a long process that spanned over six years.

Evolution of the Seal's Symbolism

The history of the great seal of the united states is deeply tied to the evolving symbolism chosen to represent the young country. Early designs reflected a mix of European heraldry and uniquely American elements that

expressed liberty, strength, and unity.

The Second Committee and the Role of Charles Thomson

In 1780, a new committee was formed, and Charles Thomson, the Secretary of Congress, played an essential role. He combined various elements from previous designs and introduced several significant symbols that still appear on the seal today:

- **The Bald Eagle:** Adopted as the national bird, the eagle symbolizes freedom and courage.
- **The Olive Branch and Arrows:** Held in the eagle's talons, these represent peace and war, conveying that the nation seeks peace but is prepared for defense.
- **The Shield:** Featuring stripes representing the original 13 states, it signifies unity and strength.
- **The Motto "E Pluribus Unum":** Meaning "Out of many, one," this phrase emphasizes the union of diverse states into a single nation.

Thomson's design was adopted by Congress on June 20, 1782, marking the official creation of the Great Seal of the United States.

Design Details and Their Meanings

Every element of the Great Seal carries symbolism carefully chosen to reflect the ideals and aspirations of the United States. The history of the great seal of the united states is enriched by the layers of meaning within its imagery.

The Obverse Side: National Identity and Values

The most commonly recognized side of the seal, known as the obverse, features the bald eagle prominently. Here's a closer look at its components:

- **The Bald Eagle:** This majestic bird represents freedom, vigilance, and strength. It was chosen because it is native to North America and embodies the spirit of the nation.
- **The Shield (Escutcheon):** The shield on the eagle's chest has 13 vertical stripes (pales) alternating white and red, symbolizing the original states. The blue horizontal bar (chief) above the stripes represents Congress.
- **Olive Branch and Arrows:** The eagle holds an olive branch in its right

talon and thirteen arrows in the left, symbolizing the preference for peace but readiness to defend the country.

- **The Banner:** Flying over the eagle's head is a banner with the motto "E Pluribus Unum," highlighting unity among diversity.

The Reverse Side: The Pyramid and the Eye of Providence

Less commonly seen but equally symbolic, the reverse side of the seal features an unfinished pyramid topped with the Eye of Providence, or the all-seeing eye.

- **The Pyramid:** Represents strength and durability, with its unfinished state symbolizing the nation's growth and development.
- **The Eye of Providence:** Symbolizes divine guidance and protection over the country's endeavors.
- **The Latin Mottoes:** "Annuit Coeptis" means "He approves our undertakings," while "Novus Ordo Seclorum" translates to "New order of the ages," emphasizing the beginning of a new American era.

The Great Seal's Role in American Government and Culture

Beyond its rich history and symbolism, the Great Seal plays a vital role in the functioning of the United States government and its identity. It is used to authenticate various official documents, treaties, and commissions, reinforcing their legitimacy.

Use of the Seal in Official Documents and Diplomacy

The Great Seal's primary function is to certify documents issued by the federal government. When affixed to a treaty or a presidential proclamation, it signifies the authority and authenticity of the document. The Secretary of State is the official custodian of the seal, ensuring its proper use.

The Seal as a Cultural Icon

Over the centuries, the Great Seal has become more than a government tool; it's a powerful cultural symbol. It appears on the one-dollar bill,

government buildings, passports, and military insignia. The history of the great seal of the united states is a story told through these everyday appearances, reminding citizens of their shared heritage and values.

Changes and Controversies Throughout Its History

Like many national symbols, the Great Seal has undergone subtle changes and faced periods of debate. Early designs varied before the final adoption, and some symbolism has been interpreted differently over time.

Variations in Artistic Representation

Throughout history, artists and engravers have interpreted the Great Seal with slight variations in color, style, and detail. These differences reflect artistic trends and practical considerations rather than changes in meaning.

Debates Over Symbolism

Some elements, such as the Eye of Providence and the pyramid, have sparked debate about their origins and meanings. While some view them as purely symbolic of divine favor, others associate them with secret societies or conspiracies. However, historical records show that the symbols were common Enlightenment motifs representing guidance and strength.

Tips for Appreciating the Great Seal's Rich History

If you're interested in exploring the history of the great seal of the united states further, here are some helpful suggestions:

1. **Visit Museums and Archives:** Institutions like the National Archives in Washington, D.C., display the original Great Seal and related documents.
2. **Study Founding Documents:** Reading the debates and writings of the founding fathers provides context for the symbolism.
3. **Explore Related Artifacts:** Look at early American coins, currency, and government seals to see how the imagery evolved.

4. **Understand Symbolism:** Learning about classical and biblical symbols common in the 18th century enriches appreciation for the seal's design.

The history of the great seal of the united states is a compelling narrative of creativity, identity, and the nation's aspirations. From its inception amid revolutionary fervor to its enduring presence today, the seal remains a testament to the ideals upon which America was founded and continues to inspire pride and unity.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Great Seal of the United States?

The Great Seal of the United States is the official emblem used to authenticate certain documents issued by the federal government. It features an eagle holding an olive branch and arrows, symbolizing peace and war.

When was the Great Seal of the United States adopted?

The Great Seal was officially adopted on June 20, 1782, by the Continental Congress after several years of design proposals and revisions.

Who designed the Great Seal of the United States?

The final design of the Great Seal was primarily created by Charles Thomson, the Secretary of the Continental Congress, and William Barton, a heraldist, based on earlier committee recommendations.

What are the main symbols on the Great Seal and their meanings?

The Great Seal features a bald eagle clutching an olive branch in its right talon, symbolizing peace, and thirteen arrows in its left talon, representing the original thirteen colonies and readiness for war. The shield on the eagle's chest has thirteen stripes, and above the eagle is a constellation of thirteen stars, signifying unity.

Why does the Great Seal include the Latin motto 'E Pluribus Unum'?

The motto 'E Pluribus Unum' means 'Out of many, one,' reflecting the union of the original thirteen colonies into one nation.

How has the Great Seal been used throughout U.S. history?

The Great Seal has been used to authenticate official documents such as treaties and commissions. Its imagery also appears on the one-dollar bill, passports, and various government insignia.

Were there multiple designs proposed before the final Great Seal?

Yes, there were three different committees formed between 1776 and 1782, each proposing different designs that incorporated various symbols before the final design was approved.

How does the reverse side of the Great Seal differ from the front?

The reverse side of the Great Seal features an unfinished pyramid with thirteen steps topped by the Eye of Providence and the Latin mottos 'Annuit Coeptis' and 'Novus Ordo Seclorum,' symbolizing strength, duration, and a new order of the ages.

Additional Resources

History of the Great Seal of the United States

History of the great seal of the united states is a subject that intertwines symbolism, national identity, and the foundational period of American history. As the official emblem of the federal government, the Great Seal serves not only as a mark of authenticity on important documents but also as a visual representation of the ideals and aspirations of the nation. Tracing its origins reveals a fascinating journey through political deliberations, artistic interpretations, and evolving national values.

Origins and Early Development

The genesis of the Great Seal dates back to the Continental Congress in 1776, shortly after the Declaration of Independence was adopted. Recognizing the need for a formal emblem to authenticate official documents, the Congress appointed a committee to design a seal that would embody the sovereignty and principles of the new nation. This initial committee included prominent figures such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams—each bringing unique perspectives influenced by Enlightenment ideals and classical symbolism.

The history of the great seal of the United States, however, was far from straightforward. The first proposed designs reflected a variety of themes, ranging from biblical references to mythological figures, and incorporated complex iconography meant to convey liberty, strength, and unity. Despite the efforts of the initial committee, their designs were ultimately rejected, prompting Congress to form subsequent committees over the next six years, each tasked with refining the seal's imagery.

Key Symbolic Elements and Their Significance

The final design, approved in 1782, is rich with symbolism that continues to resonate today. Central to the seal is the American bald eagle, a new national symbol chosen for its representation of courage, freedom, and immortality. The eagle holds a bundle of thirteen arrows in one talon, symbolizing the original thirteen colonies' readiness to defend their liberty, while in the other talon it clasps an olive branch, a sign of peace.

Above the eagle, a constellation of thirteen stars forms a new "glory," or radiant halo, representing a new nation taking its place among sovereign states. The eagle's shield is composed of thirteen vertical stripes (pales) alternating red and white, symbolizing the colonies united under a blue chief, which stands for Congress. This arrangement underscores the balance between unity and individual states' sovereignty.

The banner in the eagle's beak bears the Latin motto "E Pluribus Unum," meaning "Out of many, one," a phrase that encapsulates the federal union's foundational principle. Each of these elements was carefully chosen to communicate a layered message about the United States' identity and values during its formative years.

The Design Process and Artistic Contributions

The history of the great seal of the United States also highlights the collaborative yet iterative nature of its design. After the initial committees failed to produce a satisfactory emblem, the task was eventually given to Charles Thomson, the Secretary of the Continental Congress, and William Barton, a heraldist and artist. Thomson synthesized elements from previous proposals and refined the symbolism into a coherent design.

Engraving the seal was entrusted to Francis Hopkinson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and an accomplished artist. However, the first physical seal, carved by engraver Robert Scot, was not completed until 1786—four years after the design approval. This delay underscores the meticulous care and political sensitivity involved in producing a symbol meant to unify a diverse and fledgling country.

Evolution of the Seal Over Time

Though the Great Seal's core design has remained consistent, there have been subtle modifications and adaptations throughout American history. For instance, the number of stars in the constellation above the eagle has increased to reflect the admission of new states, and the depiction of the eagle has varied slightly depending on the artistic style of the era.

Moreover, the Great Seal exists in two primary forms: the obverse, featuring the eagle and shield, and the reverse, which displays an unfinished pyramid topped by the Eye of Providence, flanked by Latin mottos. The pyramid symbolizes strength and duration, while the eye represents divine guidance. This reverse side is less commonly used but is famously featured on the one-dollar bill, linking the seal to American currency and popular culture.

Applications and Legal Importance

The history of the great seal of the united states is not merely academic; the seal holds significant legal and governmental importance. It is affixed to treaties, presidential proclamations, and commissions, serving as a guarantee of authenticity and authority. The use of the seal is strictly regulated by the U.S. government, with the Secretary of State designated as the official custodian.

The seal's symbolism also extends into various branches of government and military insignia, reinforcing national identity and continuity. Its widespread recognition lends gravitas to official acts and documents, underscoring the enduring legacy of the nation's founding principles.

Comparative Perspectives: National Seals Worldwide

When examined alongside other nations' seals and emblems, the Great Seal of the United States stands out for its blend of classical motifs and republican ideals. Unlike monarchies that often feature royal insignias or heraldic devices tied to dynasties, the American seal reflects a conscious effort to symbolize a government "of the people, by the people." The balance of martial readiness and peace, represented by the arrows and olive branch, is a nuanced statement uncommon in many national emblems.

This differentiation highlights the United States' unique political philosophy during its inception and provides insight into how states use symbols to project identity on the international stage.

Enduring Legacy and Cultural Impact

The history of the great seal of the united states has cemented its place not only in government operations but also in American culture. Its imagery is reproduced in countless forms—from official documents and government buildings to popular media and memorabilia. The seal's elements have inspired logos, artworks, and even conspiracy theories, reflecting its deep embedding in the national psyche.

Its continued use and reverence demonstrate how symbols can evolve yet maintain their core meaning, embodying a nation's story and values across centuries. As a visual shorthand for American ideals, the Great Seal remains a powerful reminder of the country's origins, struggles, and aspirations.

Through careful design, symbolic depth, and historical significance, the Great Seal of the United States encapsulates the narrative of a nation striving for unity, liberty, and enduring strength. Its history offers a window into the early American mindset and remains a testament to the power of national symbolism.

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