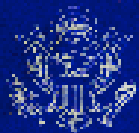


# The Great Seal of the United States



United States Department of State  
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# The Great Seal of the United States

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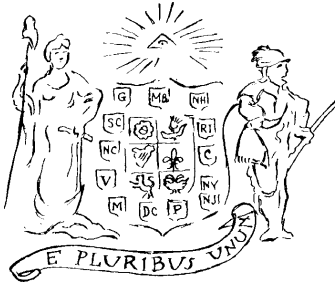
Before it adjourned on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress of the newly independent United States passed a resolution:

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

Thus, three of the five men who had drafted the Declaration of Independence were brought together in further service to their country. The revolutionaries needed an emblem and national coat of arms to give visible evidence of a sovereign nation and a free people with high aspirations and grand hopes for the future. The task proved far more difficult than anticipated; it took six years, two more committees, and the combined efforts of 14 men before the Great Seal of the United States became a reality on June 20, 1782.

# Designing a Seal

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**Portrait artist Du Simitiere's design for Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson suggested shield, Eye of Providence in radiant triangle, and motto, *E Pluribus Unum* used in final design. Drawn from original in Thomas Jefferson papers.**

## The First Committee

The challenge facing the committee was to translate intangible principles and ideals into graphic symbols. Three of the best minds of the Age of Enlightenment—Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson—struggled unsuccessfully with Biblical and classical themes, including the Children of Israel in the Wilderness and the Judgement of Hercules. Finally they sought the help of a talented “drawer” and portrait artist, Pierre Eugene du Simitiere. To the post of consultant, Du Simitiere brought some knowledge of heraldry—the art of describing coats of arms—and also experience in designing seals.

Four features recommended by the first committee and its consultant were later adopted in the final seal: the Eye of Providence and the date of independence (MDCCLXXVI), both of which appeared on the final reverse side of the seal, and the shield and Latin motto, *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of many, one), on the obverse side.

The first committee submitted its design on August 20, 1776, but the Congress ordered the report “to lie on the table,” indicating lack of approval.

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## The Second Committee

In March 1780, the Congress turned the design and final report of the first committee over to a new committee, composed of James Lovell, John Morin Scott, and William Churchill Houston. They asked Francis Hopkinson, the gifted Philadelphian who had designed the American flag and the great seal of the State of New Jersey, to serve as their consultant. They too failed to create an acceptable seal, but, influenced by the flag adopted in 1777, they contributed to the final design 13 red and white stripes, the constellation of 13 six-pointed stars, and the olive branch, a symbol of peace.



**Second committee's consultant, Francis Hopkinson, contributed red, white, and blue colors to shield, an arrow and olive branch, and radiant constellation of 13 stars.**

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## Great Seal Origins

Great seals have their origins in the royal seals of the 7th, 8th, and 9th centuries, but the first seal to be called "great" was that of England's King John (1199-1216). The King's Chamber acquired a smaller seal of its own, called the "privy seal," for use in the sovereign's private business, and thereafter the King's seal became known as the "Great Seal." The U.S. seal is called "Great Seal" although no "lesser" seal exists. □

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## The Third Committee

In May 1782 the Congress appointed a third committee. The three members—John Rutledge, Arthur Middleton, and Elias Boudinot—did little or no serious work

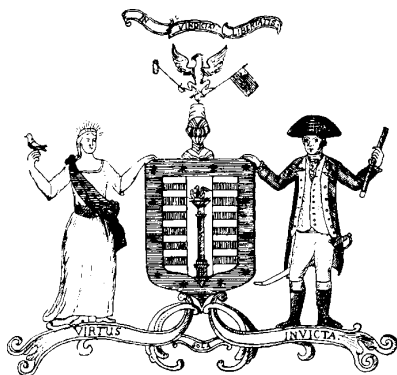
themselves, relying on the services of William Barton of Philadelphia. A young lawyer with artistic skill and well versed in heraldry, he became a central figure in the seal's refinement.

Barton's chief contribution at this stage was the eagle, not the American bald eagle, but a small crested white eagle "displayed" (with its wings spread). He combined it with a small flag and a design for the reverse which contained a 13-step unfinished pyramid and the

first committee's Eye of Providence. He quickly drew up two designs and their technical explanations, and the committee turned in its report five days after it was appointed.

## Charles Thomson's Proposal

The Congress still was not satisfied. On June 13, 1782, it presented the collected work and recommendations of the three committees to Charles Thomson, Secretary of Congress. Thomson was not an artist, but he was a practical man with the ability to get things done. He selected the best features of all the previous designs, assigning prominence to the eagle. Feeling that the new nation's symbol should be strictly American, however, Thomson replaced Barton's crested Imperial eagle with the native American bald eagle, wings extending downward as though in flight. He placed in the left talon a bundle of arrows and in the right, the olive branch.



**Lawyer William Barton's design for third committee combined white eagle, flag, and reverse side with 13-step pyramid and first committee's Eye of Providence.**



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Thomson's modified crest (a device placed above the shield) was a constellation of 13 stars surrounded by clouds. The shield, borne on the eagle's breast, was a chevron design with alternating red and white stripes. Adopting the motto *E Pluribus Unum* from the first committee's report, Thomson included it on a scroll clenched in the eagle's beak. His was the first proposal in which the final design of the obverse can be seen.

In his design of the seal's reverse, Thomson retained the pyramid with the Eye of Providence in a triangle at the zenith and, as products of his Latin scholarship, introduced the motto *Annuet Coeptis* (He [God] has favored our undertakings) over the eye and *Novus Ordo Seclorum* (A



**Secretary of Congress Charles Thomson united earlier suggestions, gave them fresh and novel arrangement, pleasing in its simplicity and lack of clutter. His design was first to foreshadow one Congress adopted.**

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### **Charles Thomson's "Remarks and Explanation," Adopted by the Continental Congress, June 20, 1782**

"The Escutcheon is composed of the chief [upper part of shield] & pale [perpendicular band], the two most honorable ordinaries [figures of heraldry]. The Pieces, paly [alternating pales], represent the several states all joined in one solid compact entire, supporting a Chief, which unites the whole & 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 & the strength resulting from it for its support, to denote the Confederacy of the United States of America & the preservation of their 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 & valour, and Blue, the colour of the Chief signifies vigilance, perseverance & justice. The Olive branch and arrows denote the power of peace & 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 born on the breast of an American Eagle without any other supporters [figures represented as holding up the shield] to denote that the United States of America ought to rely on their own Virtue.

"Reverse. The pyramid signifies Strength and Duration: The Eye over it & 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 Æra, which commences from that date." □

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new order of the ages) beneath the pyramid. He gave his rough sketches and reports to Barton, depending on him to polish the designs.

### **The Final “Device”**

Barton portrayed the eagle with its wings displayed, but with wing tips upward, and simplified Thomson’s chevron arrangement of stripes on the shield. He arranged 13 vertical stripes, alternately white and red, below a rectangular blue “chief” (upper part of the shield). And he specified that the arrows in the eagle’s left talon should number 13.

The designs were returned to Thomson on June 19, 1782. He made a few alterations and overnight produced the “blazon” (written description) with accompanying “Remarks and Explanation” and presented them to the Continental Congress on June 20. The Congress acted the same day to adopt the report, which did not contain a drawing of either design.

Thus, nearly six years after establishment of the first committee, Charles Thomson and William Barton “brought in a device.” The Great Seal of the United States was unique—simple and uncluttered, yet bold—the composite product of many minds.

## Meaning of the Seal

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Symbolically, the seal reflects the beliefs and values that the Founding Fathers attached to the new nation and wished to pass on to their descendants. The report which Thomson submitted to the Congress explained the obverse this way: The red and white stripes of the shield “represent the several states... supporting a [blue] Chief which unites the whole and represents Congress.” The colors are adopted from the American flag: “White signifies purity and innocence, Red, hardiness & valour, and Blue, the colour of the Chief, signifies vigilance, perseverance & justice.” The shield, or escutcheon, is “born 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.”

The number 13, denoting the 13 original States, is represented in the bundle of arrows, the stripes of the shield, and the stars of the constellation. The olive branch and the arrows “denote the power of peace & war.” The constellation of stars symbolizes a new nation taking its place among other sovereign states. The motto *E Pluribus Unum*, emblazoned across the scroll and clenched in the eagle’s beak, expresses the union of the 13 States. Recent scholarship has pointed out the probable source of this motto: *Gentlemen’s Magazine*, published in London from 1732 to 1922, was widely read by the educated in the American Colonies. Its title page carried that same motto and it is quite possible that it influenced the creators of the seal.

The reverse, sometimes referred to as the spiritual side of the seal, contains the 13-step pyramid with the year 1776 in Roman numerals on the base. At the summit of the pyramid is the Eye of Providence in a triangle surrounded by a Glory (rays of light) and above it appears the motto *Annuit Coeptis*. Along the lower circumference of the design appear the words *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, heralding the beginning of the new American era in 1776.



## The Die Is Cut

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**First Great Seal, possibly engraved by Robert Scot of Philadelphia in 1782. Brass die of seal was in use almost 60 years.**

### 1782

The first die was cut from brass in 1782 by an engraver who has not been positively identified (possibly Robert Scot of Philadelphia). It is thought that Charles Thomson, since he was to have custody of the seal as Secretary of the Continental Congress, took it upon himself to find an engraver and someone to supply a suitable press. If Thomson provided a drawing to the engraver, it has disappeared and no drawing made by the engraver has been found. In any case, the seal and its press came into existence sometime between June and September 1782. They were placed in the State House in Philadelphia and on September 16, Thomson used them for the first time. That first sealed document was a full power authorizing General Washington to negotiate and sign with the British an agreement for the exchange, subsistence, and better treatment of prisoners of war. It was signed by President of the Continental Congress John Hanson and countersigned by Secretary Thomson. Thomson continued as keeper of the seal until the Congress handed over power to the new government in 1789 and custody of the seal passed to the Secretary of State.

The 1782 seal, now on public display in the National Archives, is rather archaic in appearance. It measures  $2\frac{5}{16}$  inches in diameter and carries a relatively crude rendering of a crested eagle,<sup>1</sup> thin-legged and awkward, its head protruding into the constellation of six-pointed stars. The bundle of 13 arrows and the olive branch, bare of fruit, are pressed against the border of modified acanthus leaves.

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<sup>1</sup>The eagle on the Great Seal has always faced to its own right. The eagle that faced to its own left (toward the arrows) was in the Presidential seal and this was the design President Truman altered in 1945 when he ordered the eagle's head turned toward the olive branch.



**Great Seal of 1841, engraved in steel by John Peter Van Ness Throop of Washington, DC. It departed from 1782 design by showing only six arrows in eagle's claw and by giving stars five, rather than six, points. It also added fruit to olive branch.**

## 1841

By 1841, the original die of 1782 had become worn, and a new steel die was cut by John Peter Van Ness Throop of Washington, DC. This die has been called "the illegal seal" because of its faulty design. Whereas the law called for 13 arrows in the left talon, Throop gave his eagle only 6. It is assumed that he didn't work from the text of the resolution of 1782 but rather from an impression made by the worn, original die, which would have shown a bundle of arrows but perhaps not the precise

number. This may also account for the fact that he engraved five-pointed stars,<sup>2</sup> instead of the heraldic six-pointed stars of the original. However, these departures from the official design didn't affect the legality of the documents on which this seal was affixed.

The Throop die is steel,  $2\frac{3}{8}$  inches in diameter, about the same size as the original. In fact, it is thought that the same press was used for both. But the differences in style are marked: The border is without acanthus leaves; the whole design has been crowded upward; the eagle is more vigorous and uncrested; two arcs, instead of a straight line, form the top of the shield; and the olive branch bears fruit, i.e., four olives.

In early 1866, a crude counter-die of the die was cut for the first time and put into use. It was a duplicate cut in relief, apparently in bronze. Its purpose was to improve the impression from the die when a document was pressed between them. However, the impressions grew less distinct and the die was retired after some 36 years of use.

<sup>2</sup>This innovation has been carried from die to die through the one now in use.

# The Great Seal of the United States

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## *Obverse Side of the Great Seal*

The most prominent feature is the American bald eagle supporting the shield, or escutcheon, which is composed of 13 red and white stripes, representing the original States, and a blue top which unites the shield and represents Congress. The motto, *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of many, one), alludes to this union. The olive branch and 13 arrows denote the power of peace and war, which is exclusively vested in Congress. The constellation of stars denotes a new State taking its place and rank among other sovereign powers (see next pages).

## *Reverse Side of the Great Seal*

The pyramid signifies strength and duration: The eye over it and the motto, *Annuit Coeptis* (He [God] has favored our undertakings), allude to the many interventions of Providence in favor of the American cause. The date underneath is that of the Declaration of Independence and the words under it, *Novus Ordo Seclorum* (A new order of the ages), signify the beginning of the new American era in 1776 (see next pages).



**Obverse Side of the Great Seal**



Reverse Side of the Great Seal