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## FROM HEROIC TO HERALDIC: DEVISING THE GREAT SEAL OF THE UNITED STATES

by Chris McDonald Jones

When the Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress needed an artifact to visualize the beliefs and values enshrined in the Declaration, depict its own sense of sovereignty, and authenticate international treaties and transactions with other nations. On that day, the Congress 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.”(1)

By the time Congress approved a “Device for an Armorial Atchievement & Reverse of the great seal for the United States”(2) on June 20, 1782, the design process went through two phases, three committees, and four artists. On the 234th anniversary of the adoption of the Great Seal of the United States, this paper will be examine how Congress pivoted from depicting the heroic achievement to the full heraldic achievement.

### THE HEROIC ACHIEVEMENT

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.(3)

### First Committee

*Thomas Jefferson's Device*



Fig. 1: Thomas Jefferson's Device (Obverse)

Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that

Thomas Jefferson devised the obverse of his device to portray the Israelites' exodus out of slavery and bondage from Egypt- a caravan of the children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Fig. 1). Jefferson derived his scene from Exodus 13:21-22: “the

they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.”

Jefferson's reverse side portrayed Hengist and Horsa, the two brothers who were the legendary leaders of the first Anglo-Saxon settlers in Britain (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Thomas Jefferson's Device (Reverse)

*John Adam's Device* (Fig. 3)

Another member of the First Committee, John Adams, proposed a “device for a seal” that depicted the Choice of Hercules:

- The Hero resting on his Clubb;
- Virtue pointing to her rugged Mountain, on one Hand, and perswading him to ascend; and
- 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.(4)

Adam's device portrayed Hercules' “choice” taking place at a pivotal moment in the adventure- on “the road of trials” between the “meeting with the goddess” and “woman as temptress before the hero achieves “atonement with the father” and ultimately, “apotheosis.”(5)



Fig. 3: John Adams' Device

Benjamin Franklin's Device (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4: Benjamin Franklin's Device (Reverse)

Then the waters returned and covered the chariots, the horsemen, and all the army of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them. Not so much as one of them remained."

Franklin's device portrayed "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"(6)

Encircling the device, the motto reads, "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God".

**THE HERALDIC ACHIEVEMENT**

While Franklin's reverse design of the device reflected the heroic achievement, the obverse side pivots to reflect the heraldic achievement. The obverse side was devised by Pierre Eugene Du Simitiere to reflect the full heraldic accomplishment(7) (Fig. 5):

- 1 Shield - Divided into six quarters, "pointing out the countries from which these States have been peopled"
  - a. British - Rose for England, Thistle for Scotland, Harp for Ireland
  - b. European - Fleur-de-lis for France, Belgic Lion for Holland, Imperial Eagle for Germany



Fig. 5: Du Simitiere Device (Obverse)

- The shield was bordered with the initials for "each of the thirteen independent States of America."
- 2 Crest - The Eye of Providence in a radiant Triangle whose Glory extends over the Shield and beyond the Figures
  - 3 Supporters
    - a. Sinister - Goddess of Liberty
    - b. Dexter - Goddess of Justice.
  - 4 Motto - *E Pluribus Unum*

Like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin devised a device that reflected the exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt in Exodus 14:27-28: "The sea returned to its full depth, while the Egyptians were fleeing into it. So the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea.

On August 20, 1776, Congress received the First Committee's report and "Ordered, To lie on the table."(8) Two of its design elements, however, were reflected in the final Great Seal - Du Simitiere's Eye of Providence and *E Pluribus Unum*.

**Second Committee**

*Francis Hopkinson's Device*

Four years after the First Committee made its report, the Continental Congress formed a Second Committee on March 25, 1780-James Lovell from Massachusetts as chair, John Morin Scott from New York, and William Churchill Houston from New Jersey. After consulting with Francis Hopkinson to design a "device for a seal," the committee delivered its report to Congress on May 10, 1780.(9)

Obverse (Fig. 6)

- 1 Shield - A shield of thirteen diagonal white and red stripes
- 2 Crest - Radiant constellation of thirteen stars
- 3 Supporters
  - a. Dexter - A warrior holding a sword; Hopkinson's preliminary design portrayed an Indian warrior holding a bow & arrow and carrying a quiver of arrows
  - b. Sinister - A figure representing Peace bearing an olive branch
- 4 Motto - *Bello vel Paci*, which means, "For war or for peace"

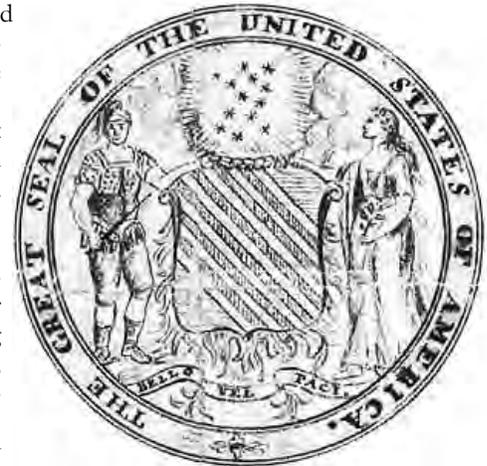


Fig. 6: Hopkinson's Device (Obverse)

Reverse (Fig. 7)

Liberty is seated in a chair holding an olive branch and her staff is topped by a Liberty cap.

- 1 Motto - *Virtute perennis*, which means, "Everlasting because of virtue"
- 2 "1776" in Roman numerals



Fig. 7: Hopkinson's Device (Reverse)

Although Congress did not approve the design either, Hopkinson's constellation of 13 stars, shield of 13 stripes, olive branch, and arrows were integrated into the final Great Seal.

### Third Committee

#### William Barton's Device

As peace talks were underway in Paris between the United States and Britain, Congress formed a Third Committee on May 4, 1782. The committee consisted of Arthur Middleton as chair, John Rutledge of South Carolina, and Elias Boudinot of New Jersey; William Barton served as consultant.(10)

The committee submitted Barton's design to Congress on May 9, 1782:

Obverse (Fig. 8)

1 Shield:  
Barry of thirteen pieces, Argent & Gules; on a pale, Or, a Pillar of the Doric Order, Vert, reaching from the Base of the Escutcheon to



Fig. 8: Barton's Device (Obverse)

the Honor point; and, from the Summit thereof, a Phoenix in Flames with Wings expanded, proper: the whole within a Border, Azure, charged with As many Stars as pieces barways, of the first.

2 Crest: On an Helmet of Burnished Gold, damasked, grated with six Bars, a Cap of Liberty, Vert; with an Eagle displayed, Argent, resting thereon; holding in his dexter Talon a Sword, Or, having a Wreath of Laurel suspended from the point; and, in the sinister, the Ensign of the United States, proper.

3 Supporters:

a. Dexter - Genius of the American Confederated Republic: represented by a Maiden, with flowing Auburn Tresses; clad in a long, loose, white Garment, bordered with Green; having a Sky blue Scarf, charged with Stars as in the Arms, reaching across her Waist from her right Shoulder to her left Side; and, on her Head, a radiated Crown of Gold, encircled with an Azure Fillet spangled with Silver Stars: round her Waist a Purple Girdle, embroidered with the Word "Virtus," in Silver a Dove, proper, perched on her dexter Hand

b. Sinister - an American Warrior; clad in a uniform



Fig. 9: Barton's Device (Reverse)

Coat, of blue faced with Buff, and in his Hat a Cockade of black and white Ribbons: in his left Hand, a Baton Azure, semé of Stars Argent.

4 Motto:

- a. Over the Crest: *In Vindiciam Libertatis*, which means, "In Defense of Liberty"
- b. Under the Arms: *Virtus sola invicta*, which means, "Only Virtue Unconquered"

Reverse (Fig. 9)

A Pyramid of thirteen Strata, (or Steps) Or, and, on the Summit of it a Palm Tree, proper. In the Zenith, an Eye, surrounded with a Glory, proper. In a Scroll, above, or in the Margin - *Deo Favente*, which means, "With God's Favor"; The Exergue - *Perennis*, which means, "Everlasting"

While Congress did not pass the Committee's design, Barton's eagle and unfinished pyramid was incorporated into the final device of the Great Seal.

### Final Design

#### Charles Thomson's Device

Congress asked Charles Thomson, Secretary of Congress, to come up with a "device for a seal" on June 13, 1782. Thomson incorporated elements from all three committees with ideas of his own to create his design.

On June 20, 1782, "the Secretary of the United States in Congress assembled to whom were referred the several reports of committees on the device for a great seal, to take order, reports That the Device for an Armorial Achievement & Reverse of the great seal for the United States in Congress assembled is as follows:"(11)



Fig. 10: Arms and Crest

Arms (Fig. 10)

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,



Fig. 11: Reverse

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 (Fig. 10)

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 (Fig. 11)

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.”

On September 16, 1782, the obverse side of the Great Seal was impressed on a document for the first time.

**GREAT SEAL OF THE UNITED STATES (OBVERSE)**

In addition to its diplomatic and civic roles, the Great Seal of the United States shows up in the visual identity of the three branches of government.

*Seal of the President of the United States (Fig. 12)*

The description of the Seal of the President of the United States may be found in President Harry Truman’s Executive Order 9646:

The Coat of Arms of the President of the United States shall be of the following design:

1 Shield- Paleways of thirteen pieces Argent and Gules, a chief Azure; upon the breast of an American eagle displayed holding in his dexter talon an olive branch and in his sinister a bundle of thirteen arrows all Proper, and in his beak a white scroll inscribed “E Pluribus Unum” Sable.



*Fig 12: President of the United States*

2 Crest- Behind and above the eagle a radiating glory Or, on which appears an arc of thirteen cloud puffs proper, and a constellation of thirteen mullets Argent.

The whole surrounded by white stars arranged in the form of an annulet with one point of each star outward on the imaginary radiating center lines, the number of stars conforming to the number of stars in the union of the Flag of the United States as established by the act of Congress approved April 4, 1818, 3 Stat. 415.

The Seal of the President of the United States shall consist of the Coat of Arms encircled by the words “Seal of the President of the United States.”



*Fig. 13: United States Congress*



*Fig. 14: Supreme Court of the United States*

**Notes**

- 1 US Department of State. The Great Seal of the United States. Washington, DC: Bureau of Public Affairs, 2003. Print
- 2 US Department of State. The Great Seal of the United States: Celebrating the 225th Anniversary of the Great Seal- Past, Present, and Future. Washington, DC: United States Diplomacy Center, 2007. Print
- 3 The Hero With A Thousand Faces. Campbell, Joseph. Princeton University Press, Princeton. 1949
- 4 Mental\_Floss. “Rejected Designs for the Great Seal of the United States.” <http://mentalfloss.com/article/30912/rejected-designs-great-seal-united-states>. Web 1 June 2016
- 5 The Hero With A Thousand Faces. Campbell, Joseph. Princeton University Press, Princeton. 1949
- 6 Great Seal. “First Seal Committee - July/August 1776.” <http://greatseal.com/committees/firstcomm/index.html>. Web 1 June 2016
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- 9 Great Seal. “Second Great Seal Committee – March 1780.” <http://greatseal.com/committees/firstcomm/index.html>. Web 1 June 2016
- 10 Great Seal. “Third Great Seal Committee – May 1782.” <http://greatseal.com/committees/firstcomm/index.html>. Web 1 June 2016
- 11 Great Seal. “Official Description of America’s Great Seal – June 20, 1782.” <http://greatseal.com/committees/firstcomm/index.html>. Web 1 June 2016

*Chris McDonald Jones generates calls-to-action that mobilize people to discover god in the details.*

