

The Great Seal

History

On July 4, 1776 a committee was formed by order of the Continental Congress, to research and create a national motto and seal for the newly formed nation. The committee was made up of three important founding fathers: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. The Nation's first motto was accepted on September 2, 1776 during a meeting in which Congress declared that this new nation would be called the "United States." The new motto was "E Pluribus Unum," which is Latin for "Out of many, one." It stands as a reminder, that out of many states, one new nation was born.

It was another six years before Charles Thompson presented his idea for the Great Seal of The United States. Thompson was the Secretary for the Continental Congress and during his presentation to the Congress, he explained that "the colors of the pales are those used in the flag of the United States of America; White signifies purity and innocence, Red, hardiness and valour, and Blue, the color of the Chief signifies vigilance, perseverance and justice."

Congress approved the design on June 20, 1782 and the images of the eagle within the seal became our National Coat of Arms.

The Great Seal

Called a "blazon," it is the starting point for creating an accurate die or illustration of the Great Seal. Charles Thompson did not submit a drawing to Congress; instead, he submitted this written description of the two-sided design along with a brief explanation of the design.

**Continental Congress - June 20, 1782*

Blazon of the Great Seal of the United States

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 of 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 MDCCCLXXVI & underneath the following motto. "novus ordo seclorum"

***Glossary of Heraldic Terms used in the Blazon**

- argent = silver
- azure = blue
- chief = top part of the shield
- dexter = right
- escutcheon = shield
- gules = red
- or = gold or yellow
- paleways or pales = vertical stripes on the shield
- proper = the element's natural color
- sinister = left

* <http://www.greatseal.com/symbols/blazon.html>

In its purest form, the Great Seal exists as words describing an image. The illustration that is created from this description is called a "realization." An artist's realization of the Great Seal is based on the image described and envisioned by America's founders and then drawn. The problem is that many illustrations are not based on the original Great Seal blazon. Instead, they are derived from other realizations that may be inaccurate.

What do the symbols and mottos represents?

Obverse Side (Front)

Shield: The 13 alternating red and white stripes, like the American flag, represent the thirteen original states

Chief: The blue field, or chief, across the top of the shield unites the stripes and represents the United States Congress.

Olive Branch: peace; **Arrows** (13): war. The olive branch and arrows represent our desire for peace, but our willingness to defend our nation with might.

“New Constellation”: The 13 stars in the circular design above the eagle is the same constellation referred to in the blue union of the U.S. Flag.

“E Pluribus Unum”: These words are written on the ribbon in the eagle’s beak. This saying represents the Nation’s first motto “Out of many, one.”



Reverse Side (Back)

Pyramid: This represents the strength and duration.

“Annuit Coeptis”: Means “He has favored our undertakings.” The “HE” refers to God and is representative of the Founding Father’s belief that God favored our nation and our struggle for freedom.

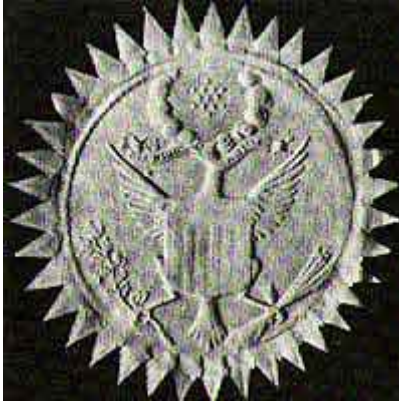
MDCCLXXVI: The Roman numerals for 1776, the birth year of our nation. Located at the base of the pyramid.

“Novus Ordo Seclorum”: Means “A new order of ages,” and refers to the new American era.



Variations of The Great Seal

In September 1872 the first die was produced for the obverse side of the Great Seal. A die is an engraved stamp for impressing a design upon some softer materials. Instead of a bald eagle, however, the die featured a crested eagle.



In 1825, a special die for treaties was produced and used with the first two dies. The Masi treaty-seal was used for pendant seals because it was larger and more elegant.



The fourth die was produced in 1877. This Baumgarten die still had an incorrect number of arrows.



The fifth design, the Tiffany die was created in 1885 and was the basis for the Zeitler die in 1904.



The final Zeitler design of 1904



Quiz

- 1) Who designed the first Great Seal of the United States?
 - a. Benjamin Franklin
 - b. Thomas Jefferson
 - c. Charles Thompson

2. A drawing of the Great Seal was submitted to and approved by the Congress in 1782.
 - a. True
 - b. False

3. What symbols represent war and peace?
 - a. pyramid and olive branch
 - b. olive branch and arrows
 - c. eagle and arrows

4. Why were so many dies cast of the Great Seal?
 - a. incorrect designs
 - b. they were lost
 - c. Congress did not like the designs

5. What is the language origin of the three mottos found on the Great Seal?
 - a. Greek
 - b. English
 - c. Latin