

## **E Pluribus Unum – ‘Out of Many, One’**

Great Seals have their origins in the royal seals of the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> 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 US seal is called “Great Seal” although no “lesser” seal exists.

The Great Seal serves as official emblems and are used in authenticating important documents and representing a nation's values and ideas.

European custom in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century called for the use of pendant seals on certain state documents, such as treaties. These seals consisted of impressions of the die on red or white wax discs which were then placed in silver or silver gilt boxes called skippets.

The seal and skippet were suspended from the document being sealed by heavy ornamental cords that bound the pages together, passed through the seal and its box, and ended in tassels.

The United States did not begin to use pendant seals until 1815 (on the instrument of ratification of the Treaty of Ghent), and then it used the die of the 1782 seal to make the wax impressions. (State Department)

### **US Great Seal**

A few hours after the Declaration of Independence was adopted by the Continental Congress the first committee to design a seal for the United States was appointed, and its design began. (Archives) The Great Seal of the United States is a unique symbol of our country and national identity. (State Department)

The history of the Great Seal begins with the day of our founding as a nation. The Continental Congress appointed a committee to design a seal for the United States on July 4, 1776, just a few hours after they adopted the Declaration of Independence. (Archives)

Members of the Continental Congress also recognized that the new nation needed a formal seal to affix on official documents and passed a resolution on July 4, 1776, before adjourning.

“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.”

In an August 14, 1776 letter to Abigail, John Adams recounted some of the debate. Benjamin Franklin, Adams wrote, suggested “Moses lifting up his wand, and dividing the Red Sea, and Pharoah, in his chariot overwhelmed with the waters,” and the following motto, “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.”

Thomas Jefferson imagined Americans as “the children of Israel in the wilderness ... led by a pillar of fire by night,” alongside representations of early Britons “whose political principles and form of government” the United States assumed. Adams concentrated on Hercules, the mythical figure of strength, “resting on his club,” gazing towards a figure of virtue, and impervious to sloth and vice. (Archives)

The committee consulted with Philadelphia artist Pierre Eugène du Simitière. Choosing a design of his, with slight changes, for the obverse, and one by Franklin for the reverse, it reported to the Continental Congress on August 20, 1776.

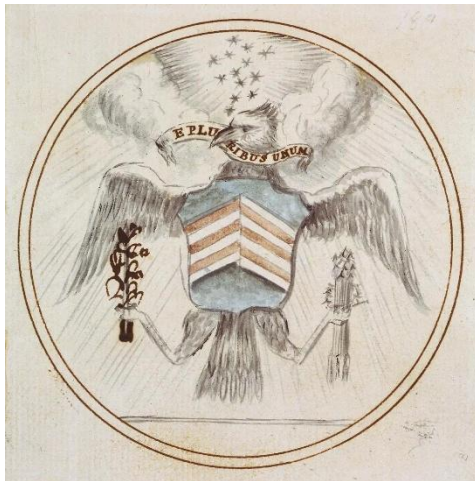
The Continental Congress tabled the report and deferred further action. However, certain elements carried over into the seal that was adopted: the shield, the motto E Pluribus Unum (“Out of Many, One”) (seemingly suggested by Franklin or Pierre Eugène du Simitière), the “Eye of Providence in a radiant Triangle,” and the date “MDCCLXXVI.” (Britannica)

## E Pluribus Unum

‘Out of Many, One’ - out of 13 colonies came one nation. As our nation’s motto, E Pluribus Unum speaks of the union between the states and the federal government in order to form a single entity. (Smithsonian)

In 1780, a second committee - James Lovell of Massachusetts and John Morin Scott and William Churchill Houston of Virginia - developed a second design, but it was also tabled by Congress. Like the first design, the second had elements that were later incorporated into the final seal, including the olive branch, the constellation of 13 stars, and the shield with red and white stripes on a blue field.

A third committee was appointed in May of 1782. This committee's design employed the eagle for the first time, in the crest. (Archives)



Charles Thomson, Secretary of the Continental Congress, designed the 1782 seal to symbolize our country’s strength, unity, and independence. The olive branch and the arrows held in the eagle’s talons denote the power of peace and war.

The eagle always casts its gaze toward the olive branch signifying that our nation desires to pursue peace but stands ready to defend itself.

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,” Thomson explained in his original report. (State

Department)

The seal shares symbolism with the colors of the American flag. In addition, 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 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.

Thirteen is an important number used in the Great Seal. It represents the original colonies and first 13 states: Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Georgia, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, South Carolina, New Hampshire, Virginia, New York, North Carolina, and Rhode Island.

There are also 13 stars in the crest above the eagle; 13 stripes in the shield; 13 arrows in the eagle's left claw; 13 olives and leaves in the eagle's right claw; and 13 letters in the motto E Pluribus Unum. (GPO)

The seal's reverse side, sometimes referred to as the spiritual side of the seal, contains a thirteen-step pyramid with the year 1776 in Roman numerals at 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 ("to nod assent, to favor, to smile upon").



Along the lower circumference of the design appear the words Novus Ordo Seclorum ("A New Order of the Ages", heralding the beginning of the new American era in 1776. (State Department)

After undergoing numerous changes, on June 20, 1782, the seal was officially adopted by the Continental Congress.

The Great Seal's design, used as our national coat of arms, is also used officially as decoration on military uniform buttons, on plaques above the entrances to US embassies and consulates, and in other places. Both the seal and the reverse (the reverse is never used as a seal), appear on the one-dollar bill. (Archives)

Today the Secretary of State is the custodian of our national symbol, the Great Seal of the United States. The seal is impressed upon documents such as treaties and commissions, and it is also found on documents such as US passports and the reverse of the \$1 bill. (State Department)





*Great Seal of the United States (Graham Lithograph – 1899)*

Information here is primarily from US Archives, US State Department, Government Printing Office and Britannica.

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young