

Saint John's Lodge No. 115, F.&A.M.

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THE GREAT SEAL OF THE UNITED STATES¹

Have you ever looked at the symbols on the back of a one dollar bill and wondered what they meant?

According to Paul Zamarian, president of the Great Seal Foundation, the symbols you see are the "single most important representation of the philosophical, political, and spiritual visions upon which the United States was founded."

The symbols represent the two sides of the Great Seal of the United States, created, says Zamarian, "by the Founding Fathers to express their intense feelings about this nation's providential creation, noble purpose, and great destiny. No other sign, symbol or device so clearly stands for the roots, nature, purpose and goals of this country.

Yet, says Zamarian, the history and meanings of the Great Seal are shrouded in misunderstanding and inattention. The reverse side has never been struck as a die and put into official use as was intended by Congress.

The Great Seal's recorded history began on July 4, 1776. After adopting the Declaration of Independence the Founders appointed a committee consisting of Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to design an appropriate seal. Six weeks later they presented the Continental Congress with suggested designs. Although none were adopted, elements of the final design were present: the Eye of Providence in a radiant triangle; the motto 'E Pluribus Unum' (out of many, one), the shield and the year 1776 in Roman numerals; and a two-sided seal with an allegorical character.

The war being more pressing, Congress tabled the seal design process until 1780 when a second committee was appointed. Francis Hopkinson, a signator of the Declaration and designer of the flag, served as a consultant. His ideas, although not adopted contributed to the final design: 13 stars bursting through clouds; the shield with stripes; arrows and an olive branch; and the title, "The Great Seal of the United States of America."

In October 1781, Britain's General Charles Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, and the war was over. In May 1782, a third seal committee was appointed. William Barton, the consultant, submitted a design that, for the first time, included the eagle and the pyramid with the Eye of Providence at its zenith.

¹ Adapted from an article of the same title appearing in "The Retired Officer", June 1932, by LCol M. L. Lien, USAF-Ret., Executive Editor.

On June 13, 1782, Congress turned the designs of all three committees over to its secretary, Charles Thompson. Having been Secretary of Congress since 1775, he was knowledgeable in the beliefs and intentions of the Founders. In only seven days Thompson synthesized all the designs, changed the mottos, and presented Congress with designs it adopted on June 20, 1782.

The American eagle became the focus for the front, or obverse, side. For the reverse, Thompson chose the unfinished pyramid with the Eye of Providence in a radiant triangle as its capstone and, the mottos 'Annuit Coeptis' (He prospers the undertaking), and 'Novus Ordo Seclorum' (the cycle of great ages has begun anew).

Of the reverse side, Thompson remarked: "... the unfinished pyramid signifies strength and duration. The eye over it and the motto 'Annuit Coeptis' alludes to the many signal interpositions (obvious involvement) of providence in favor of the American cause." The words 'Novus Ordo Seclorum' signify the beginning of a new order of the ages, which commenced with the date of the Declaration of Independence, said Thompson.

By looking at the beliefs of the Founders we can begin to understand the importance of the symbolism of the Great Seal, says Zamarian. The all-seeing eye is common to many spiritual and religious systems as symbolizing the inner and outer divinity. They emphasize that inner development of man's spiritual quality goes together with building moral and virtuous societal structures. In Masonry, the eye is that of The Great Architect of the Universe, and symbolizes the builder.

Many of the Founders belonged to organizations that emphasized moral and spiritual growth, including the American Philosophical Society, founded by Benjamin Franklin. George Washington and Franklin were considered two of the leading Freemasons in the colonies. The Masonic influence in the War of Independence was substantial. Most of the Europeans who aided America were Freemasons, including Marquis de Lafayette, Baron von Steuben, and Count Casimir Polaski. Paintings show Washington and others draped in Masonic aprons and pendants as part of a Masonic ritual when laying the cornerstone of the United States Capitol.

Although Congress adopted a two-sided seal, a die was struck only for the obverse side and first used by George Washington in 1782 on a treaty with the British for the exchange of prisoners. The pyramid and eye went into oblivion until 1882, the Centennial of the Great Seal, when a commemorative medal was struck which displayed for the first time both sides of the seal.

Now, says Paul Zamarian, a plot unfolds. The Congress, in July 1884, passed a law appropriating \$1,000 to have dies made for both sides of the seal. The project was turned over to the Department of State under Theodore Dwight, who commissioned Tiffany & Co. to present designs in accordance with the description in the Journals of Congress for June 20, 1732. Dwight also sought the services of a group led by Charles Eliot Norton and Justin Winsor of

Harvard, who were severely critical of the Founders' designs. Said Norton: "It is greatly to be regretted that the device adopted in 1782 is so elaborate and allegorical a character. As to the reverse, it can hardly look otherwise than a dull emblem of a Masonic fraternity."

Added Winsor: "the reverse is both unintelligible and commonplace. If it can be kept in the dark as it seems to have been kept, why not keep it so."

And kept dark it was, until 50 years later. In 1934, Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture for Franklin D. Roosevelt, saw a picture of the reverse of the Great Seal for the first time and took it to the president. Wallace later described what happened: "Roosevelt, as he looked at the colored reproduction of the Seal, was first struck with the representation of the all-seeing eye — a Masonic representation of the Great Architect of the Universe. Next he was impressed with the idea that the foundation for the new order of the ages had been laid in 1776 but that it would be completed only under the eye of The Great Architect. Roosevelt like myself was a 32nd degree Mason. He suggested that the Seal be put on the dollar bill."

In 1934, the one dollar bill had George Washington on the front, and merely the numeral 1, and the word ONE on the back. When the first drawing of Roosevelt's proposed dollar bill came from the Secretary of the Treasury, the eagle — or obverse — side was on the left as would be the heraldic practice. Roosevelt insisted that the order be reversed so that the phrase "The Great Seal" would be under the pyramid side. Thus, for the second time since its adoption the pyramid side came out from obscurity. However, in its official form for use on certain state documents requiring the president's signature, the Great Seal remains, to this day, half finished. The die of the pyramid side has never been struck.

SEPTEMBER MASONIC BIRTHDAYS

BANET, George J.	1955	NEWMAN, Neal E.	A1980
BRENDLE, Clair E.	1978	PANNAPACKER, William A.,Sr	1951
CARL, Henry A.	1953	ROVERAN, Charles G.	1948
DAVIDOVITZ, Ignatz	1962	SCHMITT, Louis E.	1949
FOEHL, Richard E.	1953	SEIGEL, Henry A., P.M.	1969
FRATRICK, John P.	1956	SILVERMAN, Harold	1985
HAYES, Ronald	A1934	SINGER, William E., P.M.	1935
HOLDEN, John W.,Jr.	1948	SLATKO, Bernard	1945
KAUFMAN, Raymond E.	1944	SOSANGELIS, Constantine S.	1947
KREMER, Howard U.	1979	TOMPKINS, Arthur O.	1964
MANGIGIAN, Simon H.	1943	WEYHMULLER, Eugene A.,P.M	1972
MOUAT, Donald E.	1935	A = ADMITTED	