

Designs for the Great Seal of the United States (1776-1782)

While the United States was still fighting for its independence, the Continental Congress considered a series of proposals for a national seal. Edited excerpts from three of those proposals are reproduced here, with illustrations. The proposals use imagery with roots in European heraldry, Greco-Roman mythology, and the Bible, along with images distinctive to North America: an armed frontiersman, an indigenous warrior of the eastern woodlands, a bald eagle.

1. Design proposed by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson (1776)

The Great Seal should on one side have the arms of the United States of America, which arms should be as follows:

The shield has six quarters [...] The first, gold, with a rose enameled red and white, for England; the second, white, with a thistle in natural colors, for Scotland; the third, green, with a gold harp, for Ireland; the fourth, blue, with a gold fleur-de-lis, for France; the fifth, gold, with the Imperial Eagle in black, for Germany; and the sixth, gold, with the Belgic Lion in red, for Holland—pointing out the countries from which these states have been peopled.

The shield within a red border [...] of thirteen white escutcheons, linked together by a gold chain, each emblazoned with initial letters, in black, [...] for each of the thirteen independent states of America.

Supporters: On the right, the goddess Liberty in a corselet of armor, alluding to the present times, holding in her right hand the spear and cap, and with her left supporting the shield of the states; on the left, the goddess Justice bearing a sword in her right hand, and in her left a balance.

Crest: The eye of Providence in a radiant triangle, whose glory extends over the shield and beyond the figures. [...]

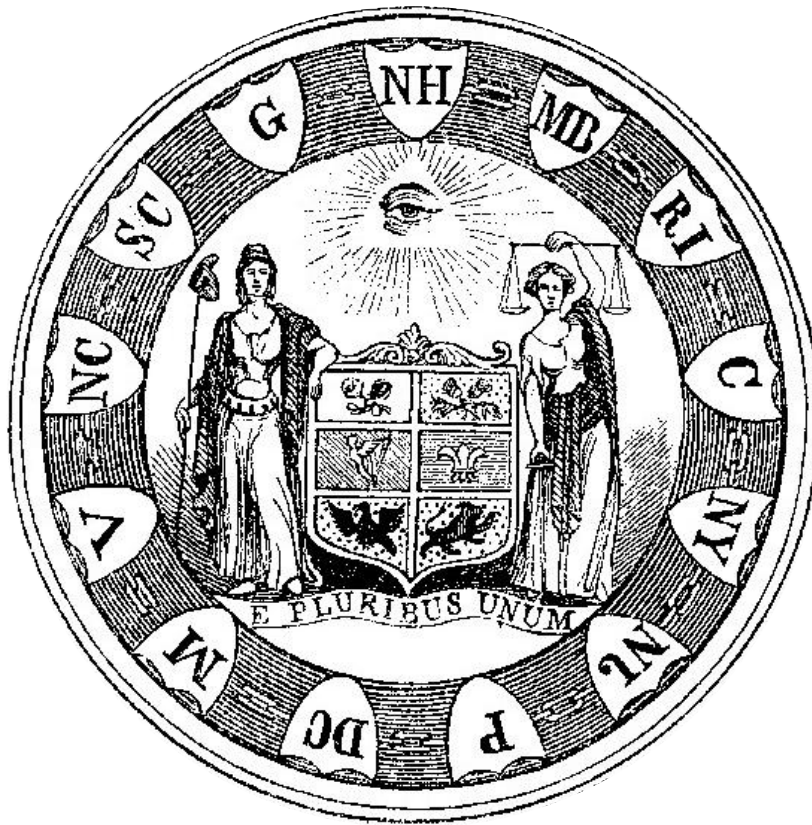
On the other side of the said Great Seal should be the following device: Pharaoh sitting in an open chariot, a crown on his head and a sword in his hand, passing through the divided waters of the Red Sea in pursuit of the Israelites; rays from a pillar of fire in the cloud, expressive of the divine presence and command, beaming on Moses, who stands on the shore and, extending his hand over the sea, causes it to overwhelm Pharaoh.

* * *

[A different description of this design, also submitted to Congress, replaces the figure of the goddess Justice with the following.]

On the left, an American soldier, completely accoutered in his hunting shirt and trousers, with his tomahawk, powder horn, pouch, etc., holding with his left hand his rifle gun rested, and the shield of the states with his right.

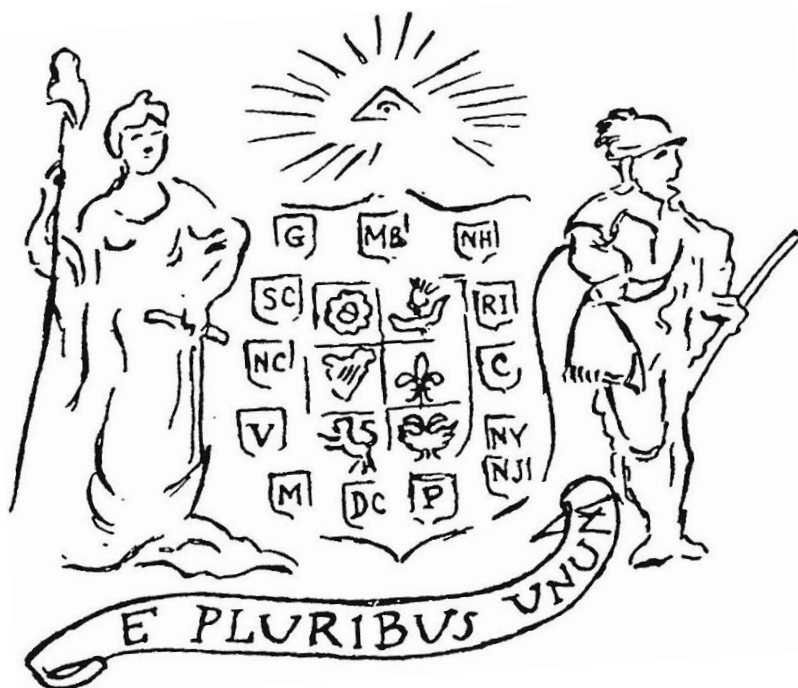
Obverse (front):



Version with the goddess Justice

*E pluribus unum =
Out of many, one*

(An artist's reconstruction, created in 1856, based on the written description.)



Version with a frontier soldier

*E pluribus unum =
Out of many, one*

(From a sketch created in 1776 by the artist who assisted Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams with their proposal. As redrawn in 1909.)

Reverse (back):



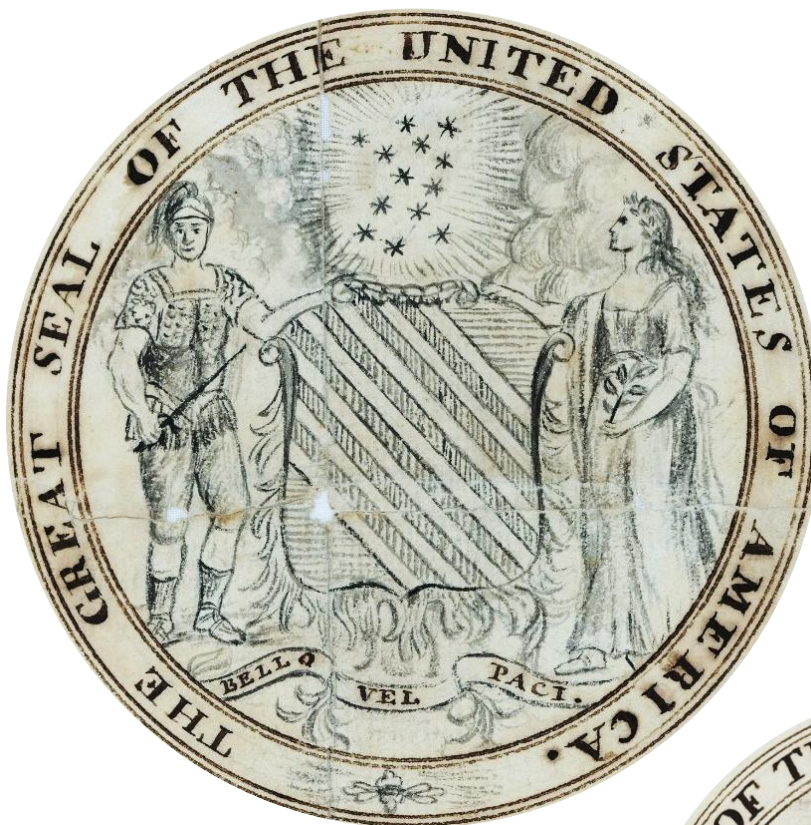
(An artist's reconstruction, created in 1856, based on the written description.)

2. Design proposed by Francis Hopkinson (1780)

On one side, the arms of the United States, as follows: The shield emblazoned, on its blue background, with thirteen diagonal stripes, alternating red and white. Supporters: On the right, a warrior holding a sword; on the left, a figure representing peace, bearing an olive branch. The crest: A radiant constellation of thirteen stars. [...]

On the reverse: The figure of Liberty seated in a chair, holding the staff and cap.

Obverse (front):



*Bello vel paci =
For war or for peace*

(Sketch by Hopkinson, 1780.)

*An earlier draft of the obverse,
with an indigenous warrior*

*Bello vel pace paratus =
Prepared in war or in peace*

(Sketch by Hopkinson, 1780.)



Reverse (back):



Virtute perennis =
Everlasting, by reason of
virtue

Libertas = Freedom
Semper = Always

MDCCLXXVI =
1776

(Sketch by Hopkinson, 1780.)

3. Adopted design, proposed by Charles Thomson (1782)

ARMS: Pales of thirteen pieces, white and red; a chief, blue; the escutcheon^a on the breast of the American eagle displayed in natural colors, holding in his right talon an olive branch, and in his left a bundle of thirteen arrows, all in natural colors, and 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, in natural colors, surrounding thirteen stars forming a constellation, in white, on a blue field.

REVERSE: A pyramid, unfinished. In the zenith, an eye in a triangle, surrounded with a glory in natural colors. Over the eye, these words: “*Annuit cœptis.*” On the base of the pyramid, the numerical letters MDCCLXXVI. And underneath, the following motto: “*Novus ordo seclorum.*”

Remarks and explanation:

The escutcheon is composed of the chief and pales [...] The pales represent the several states all joined in one solid compact entire, supporting a chief which unites the whole and 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 and the strength resulting from it for its support, to denote the confederacy of the United States of America and the preservation of their union through Congress.

The colors of the [escutcheon] are those used in the flag of the United States of America: white signifies purity and innocence; red, hardiness and valor; and blue, the color of the chief, signifies vigilance, perseverance, and justice. The olive branch and arrows denote the power of peace and 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 borne 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.

Reverse: The pyramid signifies strength and duration. The eye over it and the motto allude to the many signal interpositions of Providence in favor 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 era, which commences from that date.

^a *escutcheon = shield. The upper portion of the shield is called the “chief.” The vertical stripes on the lower portion of the shield are called “pales.” (The source text alternates among the synonyms “pales,” “paleways,” and “paly,” but “pales” is used consistently in this edited text to avoid confusion.)*

Obverse (front):



E pluribus unum =
Out of many, one

(Drawing, made in 1892, of the first metal cast of the Great Seal, which was created in 1782.)

Reverse (back):



Annuit cœptis =
Has favored our undertakings
or Favors our undertakings

In the Latin text, the verb is conjugated for the third person singular (she/he/it), but the subject of the verb is not stated.

MDCCLXXVI =
1776

Novus ordo seclorum =
New order of the ages

(Artist's conception, drawn in 1786 based on the written description. The Great Seal has never been cast with its reverse side, only with its obverse.)

Sources:**1. Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson**

■ **Description:** Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 5 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1906), 689-691 (August 20, 1776), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044020407409>. Public domain. ■ **Obverse, with goddess Justice:** [Benson J. Lossing?], “The Great Seal of the United States,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, July 1856, 180, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.c065162776>. Scanned image from Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:FirstCommitteeGreatSealObverseLossingDrawing.jpg>. Public domain. Cropped from the original. ■ **Obverse, with frontier soldier:** Gaillard Hunt, *The History of the Seal of the United States* (Washington DC: Department of State, 1909), facing page 12, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015010761040>. Scanned image from Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Great_Seal_du_Simitiere_proposal_sketch.jpg. Public domain. ■ **Reverse:** [Benson J. Lossing?], “The Great Seal of the United States,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, July 1856, 180, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.c065162776>. Scanned image from Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:FirstCommitteeGreatSealReverseLossingDrawing.jpg>. Public domain. Brightness/contrast adjusted.

2. Hopkinson

■ **Description:** Gaillard Hunt, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 17 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1910), 434 (May 17, 1780), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044097905384>. Public domain. ■ **Obverse, with Roman soldier:** “Second Design for the Great Seal Obverse by Francis Hopkinson,” Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789, US National Archives, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/595252>. Scanned image from Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HopkinsonGreatSealDesignObverse.jpg>. Public domain. Cropped from the original; brightness/contrast adjusted; color tone reduced. ■ **Obverse, with indigenous warrior:** “First Design for the Great Seal Obverse by a Mr. Hopkinson,” Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789, US National Archives, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/595254>. Scanned image from Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HopkinsonPrelimGreatSealDesignObverse.jpg>. Public domain. Cropped from the original; brightness/contrast adjusted; color tone reduced. ■ **Reverse:** “Francis Hopkinson’s Second Design for the Great Seal Reverse,” Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789, US National Archives, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/595255>. Scanned image from Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HopkinsonGreatSealDesignReverse.jpg>. Public domain. Cropped from the original; brightness/contrast adjusted; saturation and color tone reduced.

3. Thomson

■ **Description:** Gaillard Hunt, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 22 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1914), 338-340 (June 20, 1782), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044024228835>. Public domain. ■ **Obverse:** Gaillard Hunt, *The Seal of the United States: How It Was Developed and Adopted* (Washington DC: Department of State, 1892) facing page 26, <https://books.google.com/books?id=8uzUg8ml5Q4C>. Scanned image from Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_Great_Seal_1782_drawing.png. Public domain. ■ **Reverse:** “The Reverse of the Great Seal of the United States,” reproduction number LC-USZ62-45509, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004676788>. Scanned image from Wikimedia Commons, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Trenchard_1786_Great_Seal_Reverse.jpg. Public domain. Cropped from original; brightness/contrast adjusted.

Edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Heraldic terms have usually been replaced with paraphrases for the benefit of non-experts; but to avoid textual clutter, square brackets have not been used to indicate these substitutions. Additional paragraph breaks inserted into quoted excerpts. Spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation regularized, modernized, Americanized, or otherwise emended for readability. Ordinal numbers spelled out.

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