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# EARLY AMERICAN STATE HERALDRY, 1775–1783: SOURCES, SYMBOLS, AND MESSAGES

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The American political and military revolution of 1775–1783 was inevitably accompanied by an iconographic revolution as well. The British royal arms, seals, and associated devices that had dominated the symbolic landscape throughout the colonial era clearly could not serve to represent the emerging polities that would go on to form the United States of America. The Revolution thus presented both a need and an opportunity to express independent identities in graphic form, primarily on seals, but also in other applications.

But where did these new symbols come from? Why were they important? How were they developed? What messages were they meant to convey? And do they tell us anything about how the American founders viewed heraldry vis-à-vis other modes of state iconography?

## **The Status Quo Ante: Seals**

Before the Revolution, the British royal arms were the dominant political symbol in British North America. They were most prominent in the seven crown colonies – where the governor and council were directly appointed by the king – and only slightly less so in the proprietary and charter colonies where royal control was less direct. They appeared on and inside public buildings, in Anglican churches, and in many other contexts, but for official purposes the most important usage was on the seals of nine of the colonies. The geographically smaller crown colonies – New Hampshire and New Jersey – as well as the charter colony of Massachusetts, had virtually identical single-sided seals. Each used the royal arms and was about 51 mm in diameter; they differed only in the name inscribed on the legend. Delaware, although not a crown colony,<sup>1</sup> had a seal of similar form.

The larger crown colonies – New York, Virginia, the two Carolinas, and Georgia – had two-sided great seals measuring about 108 mm in diameter. The reverse of each was engraved with the royal arms, practically identical to the emblazonment on the single-sided seals. Each obverse showed an allegorical scene in which the monarch interacted with other figures, generally personifying the province. In three, the figures were native Americans kneeling to offer tribute: for New York a woman and man offering beaver pelts and wampum; for Virginia a man presenting tobacco; for Georgia a woman with a skein of silk. South Carolina's showed a European woman in classical dress wearing a mural crown and imploring the king to "look more closely on our affairs." On North Carolina's seal, Liberty stood at the shoulder of the seated King, introducing Plenty, who knelt to spill the contents of cornucopia at His Majesty's feet.<sup>2</sup>

Maryland and Pennsylvania were proprietary colonies, so called because power to govern them was vested by royal patent in the owners of the territory: the Calvert Lords Baltimore in Maryland<sup>3</sup> and the descendants of William Penn in Pennsylvania. The seals of both were emblazoned with the arms of the proprietorial families, which served as the provincial arms for non-sigillary purposes as well.<sup>4</sup>

Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut were known as ‘charter colonies’ because their institutions were established by charters forming their inhabitants into corporations with extensive rights of self-government. Their founding charters authorized each to adopt a seal of its own choice.<sup>5</sup> That of Massachusetts originally depicted a Native American holding a bow and arrow, with a scroll issuing from his mouth reading “Come over and help us.” The text refers to a vision of the apostle Paul in which a man pleads with him to “Come over into Macedonia and help us” by bringing the gospel.<sup>6</sup> Connecticut’s originally showed fifteen grapevines, reduced in the early eighteenth century to three, with a hand issuing from clouds at the upper edge holding a scroll inscribed *Sustinet qui transtulit* (He who transplanted sustains).<sup>7</sup> Rhode Island’s design originated in 1647 when the colony’s General Court ordered at its first meeting “that the seale of the Province shall be an anchor,” a well-known Christian symbol of hope.<sup>8</sup> The colonies used these devices not only on seals, but also in contexts where we would ordinarily expect a coat of arms, such as currency, the headings of gubernatorial proclamations, and militia flags and accoutrements.

All three charters were cancelled in 1687 and the seal matrices confiscated. Connecticut and Rhode Island’s charters were restored in 1689, and each immediately procured a new seal of the same basic design as before.<sup>9</sup> Massachusetts’ old charter was not restored, and the new, more limited charter of 1691 reserved to the crown the right to prescribe the provincial seal. What it prescribed was the seal with the royal arms discussed above.<sup>10</sup>

### **Status Quo Ante: off the Seal**

Two colonies were using heraldic symbols distinct from their seals at the time of independence. The most notable was Virginia’s, *Argent a cross gules* for St. George, and in each quarter a crowned escutcheon, each escutcheon being charged with the corresponding quarter of the royal arms. The crest was the bust of a “maiden queen” and the supporters two men-at-arms wearing surcoats of St. George. The arms were originally designed c.1620 as a new seal for the Virginia Company of London, but the company went bankrupt before the grant could be issued. Knowledge of the arms had already become public, however, and a century and a half later they were nearly as prominent in the colony as the royal arms themselves.

The province of New York did not possess arms of its own but borrowed (or usurped) those of New York City for use in settings ranging from currency, to tax stamps, to silver presentation pieces given by the governor as rewards for service, and tokens of favor.

### **The Revolution and the Adoption of New Symbols**

Why did the states need new symbols of sovereignty as they split from their imperial overlords? Could they not simply drop the royal imagery and go without such devices for the time being, at least while more pressing issues loomed? The answer can be found in a principle of English law which legally trained colonists accepted as given. Unlike a monarchy, a republican government is a corporate body, and corporations could act officially only through their seals.<sup>11</sup> The main motivation for acquiring new symbols was therefore not a mere desire for decorative display, but a practical legal necessity.

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Three of the new states – Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Maryland – continued to use their previous arms, both on seals and for stand-alone decorative purposes.<sup>12</sup> The other ten all adopted new devices between 1775 and 1779.



Left: *Figure 1*: Massachusetts Seal 1775 from Zieber, *Heraldry in America* (1895); right: *Figure 2*: Massachusetts arms 1780, source: handbill, c. 1780–81 (New England Historic Genealogical Society).

**Massachusetts.** On 26 July 1775, the General Court (legislature) appointed a committee “to consider what is necessary to be done relative to a Colony Seal.” Ten days later, the committee submitted a proposal derived from the pre-1687 seal, “an Indian holding a tomahawk and cap of liberty.” It is somewhat surprising that this proposal was rejected, considering that the image of the Native American had, over time, become a popular symbol of nostalgia for the rights lost when the 1629 charter was taken away. Instead, the General Court adopted a seal showing “an English American holding a sword in the right hand, and Magna Charta in the left hand ... and around him these words: *Ense petit placidam sub libertate quietem* (By the sword [this hand] seeks a quiet peace under liberty)<sup>13</sup> [Figure 1]. The motto is a quotation from the seventeenth-century Whig politician and theorist Algernon Sidney, whose works were highly influential with the state’s revolutionary leaders.

The sword-bearing “English-American” remained the symbol of Massachusetts until late 1780, when the commonwealth adopted a constitution to replace the 1691 charter, and a new seal to go along with it. This time, popular sentiment in favor of the 1629 device would prevail. The arms were blazoned as *Sapphire [azure], an Indian dressed in his shirt and mogossins, belted proper; in his right hand a bow topaz [gold]; in his left, an arrow, its point towards the base, of the second; the dexter side of the Indian’s head, a star, pearl [argent], for one of the United States of America*. The motto was the one from the revolutionary seal, the crest an arm brandishing the sword to which the motto refers [Figure 2].<sup>14</sup>

**New Hampshire.** In late summer 1775, with the collapse of royal authority in the colony, New Hampshire’s Provincial Congress found itself in need of a seal to conduct business. No legislative basis is known, but by 5 September a new seal was in use, depicting a sheaf of five arrows palewise, bound with a cord, flanked by a codfish on



one side and a pine tree on the other [Figure 3]. The bundle of arrows represented New Hampshire's then-five counties, and also provided a gloss on the motto, *Vis unita fortior* (Strength united is stronger).<sup>15</sup>



Left: Figure 3: seal of New Hampshire 1775, source: Zieber, *Heraldry in America* (1895); right: Figure 4: arms of Pennsylvania 1777, source: proclamation of 1780 (Library of Congress).

**Pennsylvania.** On 31 August 1775, the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety (a body created by the Assembly to manage the strengthening of the militia) ordered the acquisition of a small seal depicting a liberty cap accompanied by the motto "This is my right and I will defend it."<sup>16</sup> A few months later a different device, a bundle of licitor's rods set diagonally and surmounted by the word "SEAL," was created for printing on officers' commissions.<sup>17</sup> Neither, however, was truly a symbol of the province as such.

On 28 September 1776, the same day the state's new constitution was ratified, a committee was appointed to prepare the seals required by that document to replace the old proprietary seals. The design of the arms was evidently complete by early 1777, *Per fess argent and azure, on a fess or a plow between in chief a three masted ship under sail on waves of the sea proper and in base three garbs or*.<sup>18</sup> The matrix of the great seal was delivered by early 1778, with the shield of the arms on the obverse and an emblematic image of Liberty with her foot on a lion's neck (accompanied by the motto "Both can't survive") on the reverse. A full achievement was later engraved for broadsides issued by the state government, including a rising eagle as the crest and two horses in draft harness as supporters [Figure 4].<sup>19</sup>

**South Carolina.** The process of designing a seal was initiated by the Executive Council on 2 May 1776 and completed within a few months.<sup>20</sup> The principal element of the obverse (defined in the design committee's report as "the Arms") was dominated by a palmetto tree standing on a shore with an uprooted oak trunk lying at its foot. Below was the inscription *Meliorē lapsa locavit* (A better has replaced that which is fallen). The reverse depicted the figure of Hope walking along another shoreline, this one strewn with discarded weapons. Both faces referred to the recent battle of Sullivan's Island, at which South Carolina militia fighting behind palmetto-log breastworks repulsed a

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numerically superior British landing force.<sup>21</sup> But the basic concept of the obverse, at least, was already in hand more than two months earlier, when South Carolina issued a £25 banknote bearing the image of a tree of uncertain species – although clearly not a palmetto – with a fallen tree at its foot and the same motto. This in turn derived from a medal struck in 1690 to celebrate the coronation of William III and Mary II as co-monarchs of England, on which a fruit-bearing orange tree supplants the uprooted royal oak of the Stuarts [Figure 5].<sup>22</sup>



Left: *Figure 5*: obverse of great seal of South Carolina 1776, sources: A. S. Salley, *The Seal of the State of South Carolina* (1906); right: coronation medal of William and Mary 1689, see *Medallic Illustrations of the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1908), pl. 71.

**Virginia.** As the only colony with a seal and coat of arms that were iconographically distinct from one another, Virginia could have taken either the heraldic or emblematic route (or both) in selecting its new symbols. It opted for the allegorical emblematic style, notwithstanding the independent development of two heraldic designs that could have been considered, but apparently were not.

Virginia took only four days between appointing a committee to design the seal and approving its recommendation on 5 July 1776. The obverse shows the classical figure of Virtus, “the genius of the Commonwealth,” as an Amazon holding a spear and sword and trampling on a fallen king, accompanied by the motto *Sic semper tyrannis* (Thus ever to tyrants).<sup>23</sup> In this context, the term ‘genius’ refers either to a semi-mythological personification of a collective entity, or to an abstract concept.<sup>24</sup> The kneeling native American on Virginia’s former seal, for example, could be interpreted as the genius of the colony. Thus, juxtaposing the new seal against the old one, we can perceive a dramatic reversal of fortunes. Virginia was once on its knees in submission but now stands in triumph; King George used to be up and is now emphatically down [Figure 6].<sup>25</sup>



Left: *Figure 6*: obverse of colonial seal of Virginia 1767–75; right: later redrawing of the obverse of state seal of Virginia 1776 Source: Evans, *The Seals of Virginia* (1910).

Had the committee followed British precedent, the reverse would have been engraved with a heraldic coat of arms, although naturally not the existing one. A few weeks earlier, the publisher of one of Williamsburg’s competing newspapers – all confusingly named the *Virginia Gazette* – had replaced the colony’s arms on his paper’s nameplate with an original armorial achievement, in which the shield bore a rattlesnake curved in a circle on a field gules. But the seal committee took no note of this example – of which it must have been aware – and instead produced a reverse in the same allegorical style as the obverse: the goddess of Liberty standing between Plenty (Ceres) and Eternity, accompanied by the motto *Deus nobis hæc otia fecit* (God has given us this leisure).<sup>26</sup>

Thomas Jefferson, one of the state’s delegates to the Continental Congress, was then asked to find a qualified seal cutter in Philadelphia to produce the matrix.<sup>27</sup> He did so, but also wrote back expressing strong dislike for the seal’s reverse, both the image, and especially the motto.<sup>28</sup> He then proceeded to develop an alternative in concert with the Swiss-born Pierre Eugène du Simitière, a heraldically knowledgeable Philadelphia artist. Du Simitière proposed a traditional armorial achievement based loosely on the old arms, replacing the crowned escutcheons in the first three quarters with images of characteristic agricultural products, and that in the fourth with bars wavy representing the state’s major rivers [*Figure 7*].<sup>29</sup>

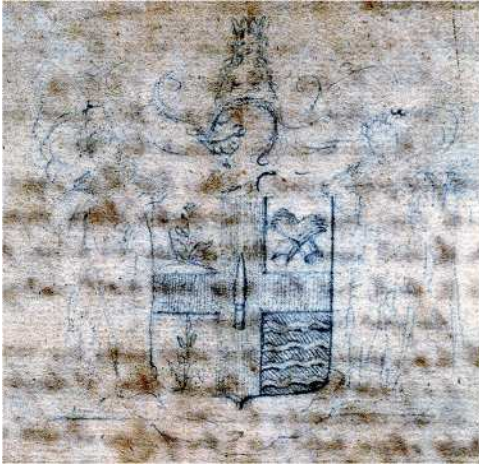
The seal’s principal designer, George Wythe, expressed openness to altering the reverse (although whether he ever saw the Jefferson-Du Simitière design is unknown),<sup>30</sup> but ultimately nothing came of it. The only substantive change – a minor one – occurred in 1779, while Jefferson was governor, revising the motto on the reverse to *Perseverando* (By persevering).<sup>31</sup>

**New Jersey.** The legislative committee appointed on 6 September 1776 to develop New Jersey’s seal<sup>32</sup> immediately sought the advice of Francis Hopkinson, a member of



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the state's Congressional delegation with an interest in heraldry, emblems, and related subjects.<sup>33</sup> Based on Hopkinson's work and a drawing prepared by Du Simitière, the General Assembly on 3 October approved an armorial seal engraved with "three Ploughs in an Escutcheon, the Supporters Liberty and Ceres, and the Crest a Horse's Head" [Figure 8].<sup>34</sup>



Left: *Figure 7*: arms of Virginia proposed by Jefferson and Du Simitière, August 1776, source: Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress; right: *Figure 8*: New Jersey seal of 1776, source: New Jersey State Archives.

**Delaware.** The initial item of business for independent Delaware's legislature, when it convened for the first time on 30 October 1776, was to appoint a committee "on the subject matter of making a Great Seal for this State." Three days later the committee came back with its recommendation, a complicated allegorical scene in which Britannia instructed the goddess of Liberty, "Go to America," accompanied by representations of books labeled "The Bill of Rights" and "The System of Government" [of Delaware]. The proposal was immediately approved, and two members were appointed to procure a matrix.<sup>35</sup>

Two and a half months later, on 16 January, the two men returned to say that (a) all the competent engravers were otherwise engaged, and (b) they had consulted "an ingenious gentleman in the art of heraldry" who had advised them that the device chosen was "more suitable for a medal than the seal of a State." A new committee was then appointed and came back the very next day with a coat of arms depicting a "river" (i.e., a fess wavy) between a wheat sheaf and an ear of corn in chief and an ox in base, supported by an American soldier and a husbandman, with a ship under sail for a crest [Figure 9]. The accompanying drawing was by Du Simitière; either he or Hopkinson was presumably the "ingenious gentleman" mentioned in the report. This proposal was promptly accepted and within a few weeks the arms were being printed on state currency.<sup>36</sup>



Left: *Figure 9*: seal of Delaware 1777, source: Credentials of Sen. Joseph Reed, 1789 (National Archives and Records Administration); right: *Figure 10*: obverse of great seal of Georgia 1777.

**North Carolina.** North Carolina’s Provincial Convention appointed commissioners to design and procure a great seal on 22 December 1776, only four days after the state’s new constitution was adopted, but there is no evidence that they ever made a report. No further record appears until 2 May 1778, when a law was passed appointing William Tisdale to engrave the matrix under the governor’s direction. It is unclear whether any design had yet been settled upon even then. In any case it took a further eighteen months before the work was completed and Tisdale received payment.<sup>37</sup>

Like Virginia’s, North Carolina’s new seal derived from the royal provincial seal. The figure of Liberty, formerly standing at the king’s shoulder, now appeared by herself on the obverse (in her guise as “Armed Liberty,” wearing a helmet) holding an open scroll inscribed “Constitution.” The goddess of Plenty was placed alone on the reverse, now standing upright instead of kneeling. The two sides of the seal taken together seem to signify that North Carolina remained what it had always been – except for having gotten rid of George III [Figure 11].<sup>38</sup>

**Georgia.** Alone among the states adopting new seals, the design of Georgia’s was prescribed in the state constitution itself, adopted on 5 February 1777. The obverse was described simply as a scroll inscribed “The Constitution of the State of Georgia,”<sup>39</sup> but on the actual seal (delivered almost exactly a year later) the upper edge of the scroll is held by a hand issuing from above and appearing to pass the document down through the branches of a tree [Figure 10].<sup>40</sup> The reverse contains the only genuine landscape among all the original state seals, described by the constitution as “an elegant house, and other buildings, fields of corn, and meadows covered with sheep and cattle; a river running through the same, with a ship under full sail, and the motto, ‘*Deus nobis haec otia fecit.*’”<sup>41</sup>

That the constitution is being handed down from on high is an obvious expression of belief in the aid of divine providence in attaining independence. A recent historian further

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Figure 11: North Carolina: left – Provincial seal, 1767–76 (obverse); center – Great seal, 1779 (obverse); right – Great seal, 1779 (reverse). Source: Grimes, *The Great Seal of the State of North Carolina* (1916).

suggests that the tree (presumably an oak) may be intended to symbolize the strong roots of the republican cause and perhaps also its pedigree in the rights of Englishmen, the tree and hand together thus signifying both “ancient right [and] divine sanction.”<sup>72</sup>

**New York.** New York was the last state to undertake the development of its new symbols, a design committee having been appointed only on 15 April 1777, nearly two years after the outbreak of fighting, and nine months after independence was declared.<sup>43</sup> Even then, five months passed with no apparent progress, at which point the state’s Council of Safety intervened by requesting that the governor take charge of the matter personally.<sup>44</sup> The design was then settled within a few months, the matrix for the great seal being completed by the end of December.<sup>45</sup>

The obverse of the two-sided seal depicted a range of hills or mountains with a sun rising above them, accompanied by the motto *Excelsior*, meaning “higher yet, more exalted, ever upward.” This image (usually with a narrow strip of the sea appearing in base) also served as the shield of the complete arms that were developed in conjunction with the seal, the crest of which was an eagle rising from a terrestrial globe, the supporters the goddesses of Liberty and Justice.

The arms of New York have been interpreted in recent times as straightforward landscape heraldry, but are better understood as an emblem in the Renaissance tradition, on which the pictorial components express in graphic form the idea stated verbally in the motto: the expectation that New York will grow ever more exalted. The emblematic nature of the reverse of the great seal is equally and perhaps even more obvious, a rock battered by waves of the sea, accompanied by the motto *Frustra*, “in vain.”

Both images have precedents in early modern emblem books. A rock battered by waves is found in Orazio Carrara’s *Theatrum Honoris et Amoris* with the motto *Frustra conantur* (They strive in vain).<sup>46</sup> As it was already axiomatic by the late eighteenth century that Britannia ruled the waves, the emblem as used on New York’s seal seems to assert that Britain’s efforts to subjugate New York that will be in vain [Figure 12]. As for the obverse of the seal, the shield, and especially the crest of the arms, a possible source is the emblem entitled *His altiora* (Loftier than these) in Henry Peacham’s 1612 *Minerva Britannia*.<sup>47</sup> It includes all the elements that are present in the New York’s shield





Figure 12: New York: left – Great seal, 1778 (reverse), source: Credentials of Sen. Rufus King (National Archives and Records Administration); right – “Frustra Conantur,” *Theatrum Honoris et Amoris* (1687).

and crest – eagle and globe, sun, mountains, and sea [Figure 13]. Moreover, the motto of Peacham’s emblem is practically identical in spirit with New York’s *Excelsior*.

On 16 March 1778, the state legislature officially adopted the arms and the great and privy seals as delivered and assigned the governor to have verbal descriptions prepared “as soon as conveniently may be.”<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, that task seems never to have been completed; the earliest known blazon is the unofficial one published in Philadelphia’s *Columbian Magazine* in October 1787, “Argent, a sun rising over a hilly country, proper.”<sup>49</sup>

### Interpreting the New Devices

From a purely statistical perspective, the revolutionary era ultimately saw a net gain of three colonies/states with symbols of armorial form, from five to eight. Four states that had no official armorial bearings before the war adopted them: Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Delaware. Two of these, Delaware and Massachusetts, found their way to heraldic arms only after initially approving seals of allegorical-emblematic form, although in the former the change took only a matter of months, in the latter more than five years. Only one that previously had arms – Virginia – rejected the heraldic idiom entirely.

It is important, in analyzing the results, to bear in mind that all the new devices were created first and foremost for use on seals. This was an important factor in both the process and the results, especially in explaining what modern heraldists have seen as defects in their design. Most obviously, the images on a seal, whether matrix or impression, inherently have no colors. This may explain the almost universal omission of tinctures in the laws adopting even armorial seals. In other words, it was the image that mattered, not what color it was. The need to create new seals quickly, understood to be a legal necessity, also had an impact on the process and the outcomes – the time from



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Figure 13: New York: left – Coat of arms, 1778, source: gubernatorial proclamation, 1792 (Library of Congress); right – “His altiora,” *Minerva Britanna* (1612).

initiation of the design process to approval of the result was generally quite short. And once a seal was adopted it was rarely altered.

Although the process was driven mainly by legal necessity, the new devices also served purposes beyond the purely utilitarian. Just as British seals reinforced an image of royal dignity and authority, the new American state seals offered a vehicle for propagating republican ideals and post-colonial identity. They provided an exceptionally potent vehicle, given their inherent aura of authority.<sup>50</sup> Impressions of provincial/state seals were surprisingly ubiquitous, surpassed only by the devices printed on currency (which were generally replicas of those on the seal), and thus were singularly effective in disseminating knowledge of the state’s new graphic identity.<sup>51</sup>

With few exceptions, state leaders sought to utilise the devices on the new seals to reinforce the political messages found in their writings and speeches, messages aimed not only at their own citizens, but at British opinion-makers as well. In some ways the emblematic genre could be more effective for this purpose than traditional heraldry. Even such an enthusiastic heraldist as Francis Hopkinson remarked how the emblematic style, properly employed, permitted mutual reinforcement of a message in both words and picture in a way traditional heraldry often did not. “I have often puzzled my brains to no purpose,” he wrote, “to translate some of the mottos in heraldry; there being seldom any connection between the device and the inscription.”<sup>52</sup>

Of the political messages to be transmitted, the highest priority seems to have been framing the American Revolution as a logical extension of the English Revolution of 1689. South Carolina’s borrowing from the *Melioram lapsa locavit* medal was the most overt example, but the theme can also be detected in the allusions to the sanctity of written charters on Massachusetts’ seals of 1775 (Magna Charta) and 1780 (its own 1629 charter); Delaware’s abortive first design (the English Bill of Rights and the state’s own new System of Government); and the scrolls labeled “Constitution” on North Carolina and Georgia’s seals. It is also implicit in Connecticut and Rhode Island’s retention of the devices they had previously adopted under their own colonial charters.

The violation of rights guaranteed by charter was felt most acutely in Massachusetts, whose citizens understood their ancient charter as “an inviolable compact between them and the king,” and where, even nine decades after the fact, the unilateral abrogation of the 1629 charter continued to rankle.<sup>53</sup> Against that background, the 1775 decision not to revive the old “Indian” seal, even in modified form, is noteworthy. One might surmise that restoring the old seal would have put the focus on the colonists themselves. By contrast, an “English-American” defending Magna Charta portrayed the struggle as being not about the colonists alone, but about the rights of all Englishmen.

Another element of seventeenth-century Whig ideology was the principle that rebellion against tyrants is not merely a right but a positive duty.<sup>54</sup> This is directly expressed by the mottoes of Massachusetts and Virginia. Politically attuned observers on both sides of the Atlantic would have recognized the sources of both. That of Virginia – *Sic semper tyrannis* – would have had special resonance to the classically educated as the words attributed to Brutus when he thrust his dagger into the body of Caesar on the ides of March.

Allusions to the Roman republic in particular served not only to connect the American Revolution with the English one (the figure of Liberty with her staff and cap having first assumed a major role in British political iconography at that time) but also asserted a classical foundation for “the new republican order.”<sup>55</sup> At the same time, such motifs also expressed the widely-held view that republicanism was naturally suited to the agrarian society which many American thinkers held up as the ideal. This concept is expressed just as clearly in the pairing of an “American soldier” and a husbandman as supporters in the arms of Delaware<sup>56</sup> as in the subsequent selection of the farmer-general-statesman Cincinnatus as the namesake for the fraternal society of former officers of the Continental Army. The predominance of agricultural and, to a lesser extent, commercial charges in the arms of all three Delaware Valley states also expresses the same concept.

The states also used their new symbols to assert that independence was a *fait accompli*. As John Higham points out, Americans “needed symbols that would connect them to the civilized world while declaring their political separation,”<sup>57</sup> the specific symbolic idiom employed being less important than the message conveyed. It is striking that, with the exception of Massachusetts (the 1775 seal), Virginia’s obverse, and Pennsylvania’s reverse, the new devices contain little overt reference to the conflict in the midst of which they were created. Nowhere is this clearer than in the use of the motto *Deus nobis hæc otia fecit* on the seal reverses of Virginia and Georgia. Although Jefferson was puzzled by the sentiment that (as early as July 1776) God had granted the colonists peaceful leisure<sup>58</sup> the original context clarifies the intent. The phrase comes from a scene in Virgil’s *Eclogues* in which two shepherds discuss the successful outcome of a long struggle to recover property that had been unjustly taken away, one of whom attributes the peaceful enjoyment of their restored rights to divine assistance.<sup>59</sup> Like South Carolina’s assertion that a better tree had already replaced the one that had fallen, and New York’s emblematic claim that efforts to thwart its rise to greatness would be in vain, the references to Virgil’s shepherds conveyed confidence in the ultimate triumph of American Independence.

Despite the rush to completion, the symbols adopted between 1775 and 1780 have proven remarkably durable. Of the thirteen state seals and arms in use when Britain recognized American independence, only three would be substantially altered, and for

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one of those three – Maryland – the original form was subsequently restored. This, I would contend, is the ultimate proof that the committees' efforts were a success.

<sup>1</sup> From 1704 to 1776, the present state of Delaware was a semi-autonomous appendage of Pennsylvania known as the "Lower Counties upon Delaware," under the authority of the proprietary governor appointed by the Penn family but with its own elective legislature.

<sup>2</sup> J. B. Grimes, *The Great Seal of the State of North Carolina, 1606–1909* (Raleigh, 1916), pp. 6–7. The design may have alluded to the royal takeover of the former proprietary province of Carolina, whose arms were two cornucopias in saltire.

<sup>3</sup> The proprietor as of 1775 was not a Calvert but an illegitimate son of the 5th and last Baron Baltimore. This had no effect on Maryland's use of the Calvert arms on its seals and for other purposes.

<sup>4</sup> See J. McMillan, 'From Provincial Arms: Heraldry and Colonial Identity in British North America,' in *Genealogica & Heraldica: Origin and Evolution*, Proceedings of the XXXII International Congress of Genealogical and Heraldic Sciences 2016 (Edinburgh: Heraldry Society of Scotland, 2021), pp. 289–303.

<sup>5</sup> Charter of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay, 4 March 1628/29; patent of incorporation of Providence Plantations, 14 March 1643/44; charter of the Colony of Connecticut, 23 April 1662.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 16:9–10.

<sup>7</sup> S. E. Baldwin, 'The Seal of Connecticut', *Papers of the New Haven Colony Historical Society* vol. 8 (1914), pp. 91–100. At the same time the number of vines was reduced the motto was rearranged (with no change of meaning) to *Qui transtulit sustinet*.

<sup>8</sup> H. M. Chapin, *The Seal, the Arms and the Flag of Rhode Island* (Providence, 1913), [pp. 1–2].

<sup>9</sup> Baldwin, p. 97; Chapin, [p. 8].

<sup>10</sup> Charter of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, 7 October 1691.

<sup>11</sup> Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, I:475.

<sup>12</sup> Maryland's retention of the old proprietary seal was rationalized as a stopgap until a new seal could be devised; it was ultimately not until 1794 that a new, non-armorial seal was adopted.

<sup>13</sup> T. C. Amory, 'Seals of Massachusetts', *Proc. Mass. Hist. Soc.*, vol. 10 (1867–69), pp. 94–99.

<sup>14</sup> Amory, p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> Whitney Smith, *The Flag Book of the United States*, rev. ed. (New York, 1975), pp. 167–68.

<sup>16</sup> *Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania, 1771–76*, Colonial Records of Pennsylvania 10 (Harrisburg, 1852), p. 328.

<sup>17</sup> W. H. Egle, *The Arms of Pennsylvania and the Great Seal of the Commonwealth* (Harrisburg, 1895), p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> There was no legal text prescribing the tinctures but they are indicated on impressions of various lesser seals as early as February 1777, currency issued by the state the following month, and later on the great seal itself.

<sup>19</sup> J. E. Pilcher, *The Seal and Arms of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, 1902), pp. 7, 12.

<sup>20</sup> A. S. Salley, Jr, ed., *Journal of the General Assembly of South Carolina, March 26, 1776-April 11, 1776* (Columbia, 1906), p. 29; *Seals and Symbols of South Carolina Government through Three Centuries* ([Columbia:] S.C. American Revolutionary Bicentennial Commission, 1982), no. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Salley, "The Seals of South Carolina," *S.C. Historical Mag.* vol. 7 (1906), pp. 226–27.

<sup>22</sup> E. E. C. Nicholson, "Revirescit, Y'All: The South Carolina Afterlife of an Old *Impresa*," in Simon McKeown, (ed.), *The International Emblem from Incunabula to the Internet* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2010), p. 350.

<sup>23</sup> E. S. Evans, "The Seals of Virginia," *Seventh Annual Report of the Library Board of the Virginia State Library* (Richmond VA, 1910), p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> D. J. D. Boulton, "The Origins of a *Damnosa Haereditas*," *Genealogica et Heraldica: Brugge 2004* (Brussels, 2006), p. 135.

<sup>25</sup> Boulton, p. 139, makes the same observation.

<sup>26</sup> Evans, p. 34.

<sup>27</sup> John Page to Thomas Jefferson, 20 July 1776, *Founders Online*, U.S. National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-01-02-0189>

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, Jefferson to Page, 30 July 1776, *Founders Online*.

<sup>29</sup> 'DuSimitière's Design for a Coat of Arms for Virginia, [August 1776]', *Founders Online*/

<sup>30</sup> George Wythe to Jefferson, 18 November 1776, *Founders Online*.

<sup>31</sup> Du Simitière's design for the shield would be adopted by Jefferson when he was governor for use on the seal of the state land office.

<sup>32</sup> Resolution of 6 September 1776, *Votes and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the State of New-Jersey, at a Session begun at Princeton on the 27th Day of August 1776* (Burlington, NJ, 1777), p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Hopkinson would later design the American flag and the armorial seals of the Continental treasury and admiralty boards and participate in designing the seal of the United States.

<sup>34</sup> *Votes and Proceedings*, pp. 33, 118.

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- <sup>35</sup> *Minutes of the Council of the Delaware State from 1776 to 1792*, Papers of the Historical Society of Delaware vol. 6 (Wilmington, 1887), pp. 12–13, 16–17.
- <sup>36</sup> *Minutes of the Council*, pp. 42–46; Report of Committee to Settle the Public Accounts, 18 Jan 1779, *Delaware Archives* 3 (Wilmington, 1919), p. 1088. The law does not mention tinctures but the seal matrix and woodcuts for the currency show the field hatched for *azure*.
- <sup>37</sup> Grimes, pp. 8–9.
- <sup>38</sup> Cf. Boulton, p. 135.
- <sup>39</sup> Constitution of Georgia (1777), art. 57.
- <sup>40</sup> B. Marsh, “The Meanings of Georgia’s Eighteenth-Century Great Seals,” *Ga. Historical Qlty* 96 (2012), p. 223.
- <sup>41</sup> Minutes of the Executive Council, 6 Feb 1778, cited in A. D. Candler, ed., *Revolutionary Records of the State of Georgia*, 1 (Atlanta, 1908), p. 26.
- <sup>42</sup> Marsh, p. 225.
- <sup>43</sup> Journal of the Provincial Convention, 15 Apr 1777, *Journals of the Provincial Congress ... of the State of New-York, 1775–77*, 1 (Albany, 1842), p. 882.
- <sup>44</sup> Journal of the Council of Safety, 10 Sept 1777, *Journals of the Provincial Congress*, p. 1059.
- <sup>45</sup> Journal of the Council of Safety, 31 Dec 1777, *Journals of the Provincial Congress*, p. 1105.
- <sup>46</sup> Orazio Carrara, *Theatrum Honoris et Amoris* (Brixen, 1687), pl. 8.
- <sup>47</sup> Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna* (London, 1612), pl. 15.
- <sup>48</sup> “An Act to Organize the Government of this State,” 16 Mar 1778, secs. 2 and 5, *Laws of the State of New-York*, 1 (New York, 1792), p. 18.
- <sup>49</sup> “The Armorial Bearings of the State of New-York,” *Columbian Magazine* vol. 1 (1786–87), p. 715. The lack of a legal blazon ultimately led to the legislature’s requiring by law that the arms be depicted as a naturalistic landscape, obscuring the apparent intent of the design. See B. R. Betts, “The Arms of the State of New York and How They Have Been Altered,” *N.Y. Genealogical and Biographical Record*, vol. 16 (1885), pp. 145–53.
- <sup>50</sup> Nicholson, p. 352; Marsh, p. 196. Cf. the mocking comment of Peter Stuyvesant, Director General of New Netherland, that an Englishman in sight of the great seal “commonly gapes as at an idol” (letter to the directors of the Dutch West India Company, 10 Nov 1663, in J. R. Brodhead, *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York* 2 (Albany, 1858), p. 488).
- <sup>51</sup> Something not adequately recognized by modern observers; see, e.g., the description of seals as being used in an ‘intimate’ rather than public context (Boulton, p. 122). The southern states in particular were issuing hundreds of land grants a year, each patent bearing the seal of the state.
- <sup>52</sup> F. Hopkinson, “On Motto’s [sic],” *Miscellaneous Essays and Occasional Writings*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, 1782), p. 42.
- <sup>53</sup> J. F. Hrdlicka, *War and Constitution-Making in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1754–1788*, PhD Diss, Virginia, 2016, pp. 96–7.
- <sup>54</sup> R. Ashcraft and M. M. Goldsmith, “Locke, Revolution Principles, and the Formation of Whig Ideology,” *The Historical Journal*, vol. 26 (1983), p. 773.
- <sup>55</sup> Marsh, pp. 205–06, 226.
- <sup>56</sup> Marsh, p. 230.
- <sup>57</sup> J. Higham “Indian Princess and Roman Goddess: The First Female Symbols of America,” *Proc. Amer. Antiquarian Soc.* vol. 100 (1991), p. 57.
- <sup>58</sup> Jefferson to Page, 30 July 1776.
- <sup>59</sup> Marsh, p. 225–26; Evans, p. 34.