

History of the Great Seal

HISTORY OF THE GREAT SEAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH



Virginia's great seal was adopted by the Virginia Convention on July 5, 1776. Its design was the work of a committee chaired by George Mason, who was the principal author of the Virginia Declaration of Rights and the first Virginia Constitution. George Wythe, Richard Henry Lee, and Robert Carter Nicholas also served as members of the committee. Taking its theme from ancient Roman mythology, the seal emphasizes the importance of civic virtue.

The original design was never cast properly and a number of variations came into use. Attempting to legislate uniformity, the General Assembly of 1873 and 1903 passed acts describing the seal in detail. In 1930, a committee was named to prepare an "accurate and faithful description of the great seal of this Commonwealth, as it was intended to be by Mason and Wythe and their associates." The committee set forth the official design in use today, which is essentially the design adopted by the Virginia Convention of 1776.

The obverse side of the great seal depicts the Roman goddess Virtus representing the genius of the Commonwealth. She is dressed as an Amazon, a sheathed sword in one hand and a spear in the other and one foot on the form of Tyranny who is pictured with a broken chain in his left hand, a scourge in his right and his fallen crown nearby, implying that the struggle has ended in complete victory. Virginia's motto, "Sic Semper Tyrannis" (Thus Always to Tyrants), appears at the bottom.

On the reverse side of the seal are three Roman goddesses, Libertas (Liberty) in the center holding a wand and pileus in her right hand, Aeternitas (Eternity) with a globe and phoenix in her right hand, and Ceres (Fruitfulness) with a cornucopia in her left hand and an ear of wheat in her right. At the top is the word "Perseverando" (By Preserving). A border of Virginia creeper encircles the designs on each side.

The Art Commission established official colors in 1949 and a watercolor, the only official model for flag makers and stationers, hangs in the office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth.

The great seal, imprinted on two metallic discs two and one-fourth inches in diameter, is affixed to documents signed by the Governor and intended for use before tribunals or for purposes outside of the jurisdiction of Virginia. The lesser seal, a smaller version of the obverse side of the great seal (one and nine-sixteenth inches in diameter) is used on commissions for gubernatorial appointees and notaries, and to authenticate the signature of the Secretary of the Commonwealth.

The Secretary of the Commonwealth is designated by the *Code of Virginia* as the keeper of the seals.