



By Guy R. Swanson

*Former Curator of Manuscripts and Archives,
The Museum of the Confederacy Journal, Summer 1987*

One of the most important objects in the Museum's collections is the Great Seal of the Confederacy, the symbol of the nation that Southerners created in 1861 and defended until 1865. After the Confederacy collapsed, the seal escaped capture by Federal authorities and remained hidden until 1912, when it was purchased by "three public spirited citizens of Richmond," Virginia. In 1915, they loaned the seal to the Confederate Museum for display during the Veteran's Reunion, and it remained there on view in the Solid South Room on the first floor. The great seal was formally presented to the organization in 1943.

When creating a national seal, the Confederacy's provisional and permanent governments faced a situation similar to that of the Founding Fathers. In 1782, they had considered designs based on Biblical scenes or European heraldry, before adopting the image of an eagle clutching arrows and an olive branch as the Great Seal of the United States. Nearly eighty years later, on 9 February 1861, the Confederate Congress created the Committee on Flag and Seal, and for the next two years it considered alternatives that might serve as an appropriate great seal.

The *Journal of the Congress of the Confederate States of America, 1861-1865*, indicates that there was considerable debate on seal designs and mottoes that might identify the new nation. One design the House of Representatives considered in 1863 had "in the foreground, a Confederate soldier in the position of charge bayonet" who

was “surrounded by a wreath composed of the stalk of the sugar cane, the rice, the cotton, and tobacco plants ...” Another alternative was “an armed youth in classic costume ... surrounded by a wreath composed of sugar cane, rice, cotton, tobacco plants ...”

During the same year, the Senate considered adopting the image of the equestrian statue of George Washington in Richmond’s Capitol Square for the seal. President Jefferson Davis had selected a spot at the foot of the statue to deliver his 1862 inaugural address. Leaders of the revolutionary generation, especially Washington, were identified as the founders of the United States and the Confederacy. The salutation of Davis’s address recalled this legacy: “*Fellow-Citizens. On this the birthday [22 February] of the man most identified with the establishment of American independence, and beneath the monument erected to commemorate his heroic virtues and those of his compatriots, we have assembled to usher into existence the Permanent Government of the Confederate States. Through this instrumentality, under the favor of Divine Providence, we hope to perpetuate the principles of our revolutionary fathers. The day, the memory, and purpose seem fitly associated.*”

Choices for the motto on the seal emerged with the various designs. Confederates believed that the motto associated with their cause should reflect their interpretation of the original Union as created in 1787, or a strong faith in blessings from God. Some of the mottoes under consideration were “Liberty and Independence,” “Glory to God in the Highest, on earth peace and good will toward men,” “Deo duce vincemus (With God as our leader we will conquer),” “Deo duce vincimus (With God as our leader we are conquering),” “Deo favente, animo fervente (With God favoring, and the soul raging),” “Deo vindice (With God as our defender),” and “Deo vindice majores aemulamur (With God as our defender we are emulating our ancestors).” What is clear from the debate over the seal’s design and motto is that Confederates wanted an identity for their nation, recognized instantly by Southerners and other nations.

A mixture of compromise and politicking yielded the final design of the great seal as approved in Congressional Joint Resolution No. 4, and signed by President Davis on 30 April 1863: “*the seal of the Confederate States shall consist of a device representing an equestrian portrait of Washington ... surrounded by a wreath composed of the principal agricultural products of the Confederacy, ... with the following motto: ‘Deo Vindice’.*”

In late May 1863, after Congress had approved the design particulars, Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin sent explicit instructions for the seal’s manufacture to James M. Mason, the Confederacy’s diplomatic representative in England. Benjamin’s letter included a photograph of the Washington statue to serve as the model, with a circle drawn on the back of the picture in the desired size of the seal. The secretary of state also noted that, “*In regard to the wreath and the motto, they must be placed in your taste and that of the artists.*” He concluded, “*Pray give your best attention to this, and let me know about what the cost will be and when I may expect the work to be finished.*”

Mason experienced delays with the artist that he initially contracted to engrave the seal, but Benjamin finally heard about significant progression on 4 April 1864. Mason had scored a great success by arranging to have Joseph S. Wyon¹, Chief Engraver of Her Majesty’s Seals, craft the one for the Confederate government. Wyon executed the

¹ In her article published in *North-South Trader*, Mrs. Ruth Ann Coski added an interesting piece of information: “*Irish-born sculptor John Henry Foley designed the seal based on the congressional instructions*”. John H. Foley is also the sculptor who executed the famous statue of General “Stonewall” Jackson presented by the English people to the State of Virginia in 1875. This statue was erected on Richmond’s Capitol grounds, a few yards away from Crawford’s equestrian statue of George Washington (Daniel J. Frankignoul).

seal in silver, which was the element used to cast those used by the English government. Silver had the advantage of resisting rust, which threatened seals that were engraved in steel. The finished product was 3 5/8" in diameter, 3/4" thick, and weighed three pounds (Troy). Included in the final transaction were an *"ivory handle, box with spring lock and screw press, 3,000 wafers, 1,000 seal papers, 1,000 strips of parchment, 100 brass boxes, 100 cakes of wax, 100 silk cords, 1 perforator, 3 packing cases lined with tin,"* and a detailed set of instructions for using the seal and its accouterments. Mason *"Thought it better to have these supplies sent, in absence of the proper materials in the Confederacy."* The final cost was £122.10, which in mid-nineteenth century exchange was around \$700.

Mason also worried, however, about the possibility of the new seal being captured in its circuitous and dangerous journey from London to Richmond. He took the liberty of holding it until he heard Secretary of State Benjamin's plan for transporting the seal. Mason was to have a trustworthy army or navy officer return it to the Confederacy, *"with the most stringent directions for having it ready to be thrown into the sea, should the danger of capture become imminent."* In addition, an impression of the seal would remain in England, so that if the unthinkable occurred there would be little problem of having another cast.

The matter was settled by 6 July 1864 when Mason entrusted Lieutenant Robert T. Chapman of the Confederate navy with delivery of the seal. The seal was placed in a small box that was carried in a leather satchel. Chapman, along with several officers from the former Confederate vessels *Alabama* and *Georgia*, left Liverpool on the Cunard liner *Africa* for Halifax, Nova Scotia. Since there were threats from the blockade he *"made no secret of talking about his anxiety and his plans for throwing it overboard ..."* When the *Africa* reached Halifax, Chapman and some of the others boarded the steamer *Alpha* for St. George, Bermuda. While in Bermuda an anxious Chapman decided to go on to Wilmington, North Carolina, ahead of the seal's press and other supplies. After four tries, and with the seal in his pocket, Chapman made it to Wilmington.

The Great Seal of the Confederacy was presented to Secretary of State Benjamin in Richmond on 4 September 1864. Back in London, Mason was relieved to learn that the seal had arrived safely in the Confederate capital, but for the next several months he and Benjamin exchanged notes on the whereabouts of the press and supplies. Without its press, the great seal was probably never used in an official capacity, and the permanent government continued to use the seal of the provisional government. The provisional seal had a design of a scroll and the *"word 'Constitution' above and 'Liberty' below."* After the Confederate government collapsed, Benjamin threw this first seal into the Savannah River as he fled the South for England.

The seal press remained in Bermuda in the care of John Bourne, a Confederate commercial agent, who held it until his death in 1867. The press was then sold at auction and disappeared until 1888, when John S. Darrell purchased it as a piece of junk. Darrell had the press cleaned, found it in good condition, and then mounted it in a glass case. After unsuccessful attempts to obtain a silver replica of the great seal to use in the press, Darrell had one cast in brass. The press is now in the custody of Darrell's descendants, the Cox family of Hamilton, Bermuda.

The best starting point for tracing the post-bellum history of the great seal is April 1865. State Department clerk William J. Bromwell had previously moved three cartons of departmental records to a barn near Richmond, and he had also been ordered to transfer seven additional cartons of records to Danville Female College in Danville,

Virginia. With the end of the Confederacy near, Secretary of State Benjamin then instructed Bromwell to take all of the records to Charlotte, North Carolina. The clerk arrived there on 1 April 1865, placing the ten containers - one of which held the great seal - in the courthouse in strongboxes. But the surrender at Appomattox, Davis's flight and subsequent capture, and Benjamin's escape to England seemingly made Bromwell the formal custodian of the records.

Bromwell returned to Richmond to practice law, and then moved to Washington, D.C. in 1866, where he was employed by John T. Pickett in his law firm. Bromwell made certain that the records followed him, and eventually he informed Pickett that he had custody of them.

In 1868, the two agreed that Pickett would act as Bromwell's agent, and Pickett approached the Federal government about purchasing the papers for \$500,000. U. S. Secretary of State William Henry Seward was interested in purchasing them, but expressed concerns about their authenticity and the price. Negotiations broke down until the next year when the government indicated its willingness to purchase the papers for an undisclosed amount. Pickett must have been unimpressed for he broke off the talks, and later tried to sell the records to a group of Southerners for \$25,000. It was not until 1871 that Congress appropriated \$75,000 for the purchase, when Pickett (and Bromwell) accepted. Federal authorities were now interested in the papers because of damage claims being made against the United States by former Confederates; the records could help determine if the accusations were genuine.

Seward then appointed Navy Lieutenant Thomas O. Selfridge as the State Department's representative to inspect the papers. All along, from the start of the negotiations, Pickett claimed that the Confederate records were in Hamilton, Ontario, affording them protection from confiscation by the U. S. government. In reality the papers were still concealed in the Washington, D. C. area. In June 1872, Pickett and Selfridge traveled by railroad to the announced storage site, with the papers heading to the same destination on the same train! Once in Canada, Pickett carefully produced the papers. Selfridge made the inspection and determined the records were genuine. The pair returned to Washington with the papers once again following them on the train. After additional inspections by government officials, Pickett received the \$75,000 payment on 3 July 1872, and the sum was divided with Bromwell.

At some point during the trip, Pickett gave Selfridge the Great Seal of the Confederacy. The reasons why the exchange took place are unclear, and both men knew it had to remain a secret between them. In 1873, however, a third party gained knowledge of who possessed the seal.

Pickett had arranged for Selfridge to loan him the seal in order to have 1,000 electrotype replicas manufactured and coated in gold, silver, and bronze. New York electrotyper Samuel H. Black completed the task for \$778 and gave Pickett his Masonic oath that he would never divulge information about the seal's owner. The two signed an agreement on 15 May 1873 that completed the transaction. The replicas were then placed on sale with all generated revenue going to relieve Southern widows and orphans. The amount that Pickett raised is unknown. "The understood," as Selfridge referred to the seal, arrived back in his custody on 21 May. By 1885, he and Black were the only two who knew the truth about the great seal. Bromwell had died in 1875, and Pickett, in 1884.

Pickett's electrotypes and his correspondence with Selfridge left clues that would eventually reveal who owned the great seal. Questions arose about the authenticity of the item from which the copies were made, and Pickett sent an electrotype to London to

the firm that had engraved the true seal. J. S. and A. B. Wyon confirmed that it was identical to the one produced in 1864. They added further that *"we have no hesitation in asserting that as perfect an impression could not have been produced except from the original Seal. We have never made any duplicates of the Seal in question."*

Ever so slowly, detective work by several individuals interested in the great seal, and working apart from one another, began to reveal who had custody. Miss L. T. Munford, of the Confederate Memorial Literary Society and its Confederate Museum in Richmond, contacted the War Department in 1905 seeking information about the seal's location. Acting Secretary of War Robert Shaw Oliver informed her that the department had never held the seal and suggested that South Carolina was supposed to be the custodian. Miss Munford also received notification from the Smithsonian Institution that the United Daughters of the Confederacy held the seal.

North Carolina Judge Walter A. Montgomery was also interested in the seal and came close to locating it. While researching the Confederate government at the Library of Congress in 1910 and 1911, he, too, started wondering what had happened to the great seal. After carefully reading Pickett's correspondence with Selfridge - the Library of Congress had only recently acquired the Pickett Papers - Montgomery concluded that Selfridge held the seal. In an October 1911 article for the Richmond *Times-Dispatch* he reported his conclusions, hoping that Selfridge would release the seal. Nothing resulted from his efforts.

Not until Gaillard Hunt, Chief of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, began working to locate the seal was the mystery truly solved. After examining Pickett's papers, Hunt concluded, just as Montgomery had, that Selfridge owned the seal. Hunt then took his efforts one step further and informed Selfridge that he intended to publish his findings unless he gave up the seal. Fearing a scandal over his acquisition and ownership of the seal, Selfridge agreed to Hunt's demand, but only if he received \$3,000. Hunt now faced a financial dilemma and enlisted the help of Lawrence Washington, descendant of the first president and a fellow employee at the Library of Congress. Washington quickly found three prominent residents of Richmond - Thomas P. Bryan, Eppa Hunton, Jr., and William H. White - who agreed to give \$1,000 apiece for purchasing the seal. The buyers signed a preliminary agreement with Selfridge in May 1912 but had one important stipulation: the seal in question must receive authentication as the Great Seal of the Confederacy.

Bryan, Hunton, and White arranged for J. St. George Bryan and Granville Gray to travel to London to visit the Wyon studio to obtain the needed authentication. The firm was then headed by Allen G. Wyon, nephew of the original engraver, and after making a wax impression he confirmed that the seal was genuine. Wyon signed a document attesting to its authenticity and attached it to the seal.

While Hunt was in the process of proving that Selfridge held the seal and raising the \$3,000, he was also in touch with Miss Susan B. Harrison of the Confederate Memorial Literary Society. The two had met earlier when Miss Harrison had traveled to the Library of Congress to study the preservation of manuscripts. In April 1912, he told her in a confidential letter that he had located the great seal and added that he hoped a Southern institution would eventually become its custodian. In additional correspondence of the same month, he remarked that he hoped to receive some of the credit for helping the Museum obtain the seal and the *"sole credit"* for having located the item. Hunt assured Miss Harrison that *"no one [would] have the Seal who does not promise to give it to a public institution in Virginia - preferably your Museum."* *"If you*

restrain yourself for a couple of weeks,” he concluded, “you will see the drama closed.”

Miss Harrison notified Hunt on 26 April 1912 - Confederate Memorial Day in the Deep South - that, *“Since reading your letter ... I have been floating on pink clouds ...”* She said that if the seal were given to the Museum he would *“be the Hero of the whole play,”* and the *“Society will give you a reception and crown you King of Kings, waving Confederate flags and singing Dixie ...”* The matter, unfortunately, remained unsettled for three more years.

In October 1913, Miss Sally Archer Anderson, President of the Confederate Memorial Literary Society, approached Eppa Hunton, Jr., about depositing the seal at the Museum. *“I do not know if you and your associates have made up your minds,”* she began, *“as to the proper place in which to put as a gift The Confederate Seal, but I feel so intensely ... that our Museum is the place for it, that I venture to impose on you this letter.”* Miss Anderson recounted the special care that objects and manuscripts received when given to the Museum, and noted the special training that Miss Harrison received from Hunt at the Library of Congress. She added that the Museum owned fireproof cases for its documents and a fireproof safe for the most valuable items in the collections. Miss Anderson’s letter, and no doubt other efforts that followed, must have influenced Bryan, Hunton, and White. On 24 May 1915, Hunton presented Miss Harrison with the great seal and all the papers that certified its authenticity. The items were loaned to the Museum, and Hunton added, *“It is a pleasure to be able to put the Seal with you ... I know your organization will value and care for it as it deserves to be.”*

The seal remained on loan to the Museum until 1943 when the heirs of Bryan, Hunton, and White decided to give their interests to the Confederate Memorial Literary Society. With urging from Miss Anderson, the transfer took place in June and July of that year, and the descendants signed deeds of gift that formally completed the donation.

In 1970, the seal was put in active use for the first time.² The Confederate Memorial Literary Society established Literary Awards in that year to honor outstanding scholarship in Confederate history. The Jefferson Davis Award honors narratives and the Founders Award honors edited primary sources. Each prize winner received a framed citation bearing an impression of the great seal in red wax.

The history of the Great Seal of the Confederacy and its journey to the Museum is a story of mystery and luck, and the determination of Bryan, Hunton, and White to ensure the preservation of this unique object. That they perceived the Museum as the proper custodian for such a famous treasure, almost three-quarters of a century ago, is indicative of this institution’s long-standing reputation as the principal center for the study of the Confederacy.

This history of the Great Seal of the Confederacy was prepared using the resources of The Museum of the Confederacy’s Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library. Also helpful were the narratives by William A. Albaugh III in the January 1974 issue of North-South Trader and John Hollister in the March 1982 issue of Civil War Times Illustrated.

The CHAB kindly thanks Mr. John M. Coski, Historian and Director of Library and Research, the Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia, for allowing the association to publish his article.

² See the next article written by Daniel J. Frankignoul concerning two official uses of the Great Seal of the Confederacy, which has been discovered after the publication of Guy Swanson’s article.