

*History of the
Great Seal of the Commonwealth*

HISTORY OF THE GREAT SEAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH



Virginia Convention adopted Virginia's Great Seal on July 5, 1776. Its design was the work of a committee composed of George Mason, George Wythe, Richard Henry Lee, and Robert Carter Nicholas. George Wythe, a classical scholar, was probably the principal author of the design, which took its theme from ancient Roman mythology.

The original design was never properly cast and a number of variations came into use. Attempting to legislate uniformity, the General Assemblies 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 the Commonwealth, as it was intended to be by Mason and Wythe and their associates." It set forth the official design in use today, substantially that adopted by the 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. Virtus stands with 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 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 Great Seal are three Roman goddesses. Libertas (Liberty) stands in the center holding a wand and a pileus in her right hand. Aeternitas (Eternity) stands to the left with a globe and a phoenix in her right hand. Ceres (Fruitfulness) stands to the right with a cornucopia in her left hand and an ear of wheat in her right. At the top is the word *Perseverando*, which means "by persevering". A border of Virginia Creeper encircles the designs on each side.

The Art Commission established official colors in 1949. A water color, the only official model for flag makers and stationers, hangs in the Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth.

The Great Seal is affixed to documents signed by the Governor and intended for use before tribunals or for purposes outside the jurisdiction of Virginia. The Lesser Seal, a smaller version of the obverse side, is used on commissions for gubernatorial appointees and notaries, and to authenticate the signature of the Secretary of the Commonwealth.

Law prohibits use of the Seal for non-governmental purposes. The Secretary of the Commonwealth is designated by the *Code of Virginia* as the Keeper of the Seals.