

The Eagle and the Shield:
A History of the Great Seal of the United States
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Chapter XVI – THE SEAL OF THE PRESIDENT
Excerpts from pages 409-417

**THE MYSTERY OF GEORGE WASHINGTON
AND THE "DORSETT SEAL"**

One day in early June 1894 a young man named Palemon Howard Dorsett, who had come to Washington from Illinois three years before to take a position with the Department of Agriculture, presented himself at the entrance to the south wing of the State, War, and Navy Building... In the building Dorsett sought out Gaillard Hunt, of the Department of State, a man about his own age, whose brochure entitled *The Seal of the United States* had been published in 1892. Dorsett showed Hunt a metal die incised with the arms of the United States and told him of its having been handed down in his family from a kinsman who had received it from a nephew of George Washington.

Hunt examined the die and wrote the following memorandum about it, dated June 2, 1894, which he handed to Dorsett:

This seal is almost identical with the first seal, cut in 1782. The differences are:

The wings are more displayed in this seal.

The arrows are in the sinister talon – not the dexter talon as in the official seal.

The lines are deeper. It is cut on the same metal and no other seal is as much like the first seal.

In the President's seal, as used now, the arrows are in the sinister talon as in this seal.

It is fair to presume that this seal is contemporaneous with the seal of 1782; that it was cut officially and probably for the President of Congress from whom it would naturally have passed to the President of the United States.

Hunt's memorandum is in error in saying that the arrows of the Dorsett seal are "in the sinister talon", for they are in the dexter, whereas the arrows of the Great Seal – and likewise those of the President's seal – are in the eagle's sinister talon. Furthermore, Hunt's guess that the Dorsett seal was cut for the President of the Continental Congress is wide of the mark. There is no evidence of any kind to connect that seal with the President of Congress. Even if it had belonged to that officer, however, it could not "naturally have passed to the President of the United States". An act of Congress was required to make "the Great Seal of the United States in Congress assembled" available for President Washington's use.

Hunt took no further interest in the matter. Dorsett's curiosity, however, led him eventually to continue his search. On June 9, 1932, he went to the National Museum "to try and get additional information", but to no avail. On March 9, 1936, he addressed a letter to Secretary of State Cordell Hull that included these paragraphs:

This Seal has been in the possession of the Dorsett family for more than a century. From earliest childhood I recall innumerable occasions when the Seal was under discussion, that my parents invariably stated that it was given to Jim Starr, a nephew of Grandmother Winchester, on my mother's side, by a nephew of General Washington, and that the two young men were very warm personal friends.

When Mr. Starr's mother died the Seal reverted to my grandmother, Mrs. Julia E. Winchester, who was living with us. At grandmother's death it passed to father and mother, and at their death it reverted to me...

In due course this letter reached the desk of Hunter Miller, then the Department's Historical Adviser. In response to Miller's invitation of March 17, Dorsett called at the Department on March 23, told what he knew about the seal die, and left it with Miller, together with Hunt's memorandum and seven pages of typewritten genealogical material, for examination and subsequent return....

As for Dorsett himself, he was born in Carlinville, Illinois, April 21, 1862, son of William Newman and Laura Oceola (Winchester) Dorsett. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Missouri in 1884. In 1891 he began a career in the Department of Agriculture, where his specialty was the introduction of foreign plants into the United States. In Columbia, Missouri, on September 12, 1892, he married Mary Virginia, daughter of James and Cynthia Payne.

He was one of the founders of the Agriculture Department's Plant Introduction Service. Commencing in 1914, he traveled widely, sending back plants and seeds from various parts of the world. As perhaps his most notable achievement, on an expedition to China, 1924-1926, and on another to Japan, Korea, Manchuria, and northern China, 1929-1931, he collected more than two thousand strains and varieties of soy beans, which were used for experimental purposes.

Dorsett served the Department of Agriculture for forty-one years, most of the time as a senior horticulturist, retiring in 1932 at the age of seventy. He remained active without compensation, however, as an adviser to the Department, making his home at Bell, near Glenn Dale, Maryland. On June 13, 1936, the Council of the American Genetic Association awarded him the Frank N. Meyer Medal. This was shortly after his meeting with Miller at the Department of State.

Miller initiated various lines of investigation. Examination of the die showed it to be $2 \frac{5}{16}$ inches in diameter and $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch thick, its back a solid flat surface, with no handle or place for attaching one and no evident provision for fixing it in a press. On April 17, 1936, the Division of Chemistry of the Bureau of Standards

analyzed a "whisker" of metal taken from the die and reported it to be of "copper and tin" – that is, bronze.

Comparison of an impression from the Dorsett seal with one from the Great Seal die of 1782 reveals some striking resemblances. The two are of exactly the same diameter; the encircling ornamental borders are similar; and the general arrangement of the device on the Dorsett seal shows unmistakably that it was copied from that of the seal of 1782. There are differences, however, and at least some of them are improvements. The engraving of the Dorsett seal is more spirited and vigorous. The eagle is a sturdier and livelier bird; its wings are more widely extended – more like those of the eagle on the present Great Seal; its neck and legs are more fully developed; its feathering is more detailed; and the tail shows nine instead of seven feathers – anticipating the nine of the present Great Seal.

The Dorsett seal differs from that of 1782 in one conspicuous way: its olive branch and bundle of arrows are transposed. In this respect it departs from the specifications of the resolution of Congress of June 20, 1782.

Note: A similar transposition of olive branch and arrows appears on the reverse of certain coins, namely, the half dime of 1800-1805, the dime of 1798-1807, the 20-cent piece of 1875-1878, the quarter dollar of 1804-1807, the half dollar of 1801-1806, the dollars of 1798-1803 and 1804, the trade dollar of 1873-1885, the quarter eagles of 1796 and 1796-1807, the half eagle of 1795-1807, and the eagle of 1797-1804. Incidentally, the designer or co-designer of many of these coins was Robert Scot (engraver of the 1782 die).

Searches in the records of the Department of State, in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, and in the British archives among documents there sealed with the Great Seal of the United States, disclosed no impression of the Dorsett seal. It can be said with certainty that at no time was that seal ever used as the Great Seal of the United States. In fact, no impression from the Dorsett seal die has been found anywhere, except as Miller had some made in black ink on a proof press in the National Museum print shop. Searches of printed sources of various kinds, including legislative records, have failed to reveal any further information.

Dorsett stated that his seal had been in the possession of his family for more than a century and that, according to family tradition, it had been given to Jim Starr, a nephew of Dorsett's maternal grandmother, by a nephew of George Washington who was Starr's personal friend. The relevant genealogy, excerpted from the material mentioned above which Dorsett lent to Miller, is as follows:

Benjamin Stephenson, son of James S. and Dolly (Reed) Stephenson; born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, July 8, 1769; died at Edwardsville, Illinois, October 10, 1822; married, November 1803, Lucy Van Swearingen. Children:

(1) Julia E. Stephenson; born at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), November 25, 1804; died at Columbia, Missouri, August 18, 1880; married at Edwardsville, July 16, 1820, Palemon Howard Winchester, born at Westminster, Maryland, February 11, 1794, died at Carlinville, Illinois, April 28, 1860, son of Stephen W. and Sarah (Howard) Winchester. Six children, of whom the fifth was:

(a) Laura Oceola Winchester; born at Carlinville, October 10, 1838; died at Washington, D.C., September 17, 1919; married at Carlinville, June 26, 1861, William Newman Dorsett, born in Maryland, May 6, 1835, died at Columbia, March 1, 1895. Three children, of whom the eldest was:

1. Palemon Howard Dorsett, who possessed the Dorsett seal in 1936.

(2) Elvira Amanda Stephenson; born December 1809; died at Carlinville; married, first, William E. Starr; married, second, Enoch Wall; married, third, William Maddox. Son by her first husband:

(a) Jim Starr.

According to Dorsett's account, the seal passed from Jim Starr to the latter's mother, nec Elvira Amanda Stephenson, who evidently survived him. On her death it passed to her sister, Mrs. Julia E. (Stephenson) Winchester. On Mrs. Winchester's death it passed to her daughter, Mrs. Laura Oceola (Winchester) Dorsett, and on her death it passed to her son, Palemon Howard Dorsett.

Lending credence to the Dorsett story, "An Inventory &c. of Articles at Mount Vernon" that was prepared shortly after Washington's death, lists as being "In the Iron Chest ... 1 Brass engraving of the Arms of the U. States", valued at \$10. [Prussing, *Estate of George Washington*, pp. 417-418.]

In the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress is the record of sales held at Mount Vernon on July 21 and 22, 1802, following the death of Martha Washington. That document, which is headed "Private sales, which took place up stairs among the Legatees, to be settled on the final adjustment without interest - 22nd July 1802", includes the following items: [George Washington Papers, 866, accession 2793, Ms. Div., L.C.]

Sam. Washington - a seal	[\$36
W. A. Washington - one gold chain & seal.....	66
Mr Law - one seal with ivory handle	10
Mr Hammond - plates arms U.S.	6
W. A. Washington - seal with ivory handle.....	8

Three of the five items, namely, the second, third, and last, can be eliminated from consideration, because the Dorsett seal does not have and could not have had attached to it either a gold chain or an ivory handle. The first item, the seal sold to Samuel Washington for \$36, is likewise eliminated, thanks to a contemporary manuscript. This is a duplicate record of the same private sales - although dated July 21. This record is preserved in a volume entitled "Book of Sales and of Mount Vernon Property", which has been in the manuscript collection at Mount Vernon since 1917. In this volume, under the heading "Private Sale 21st July 1802", the item in question is thus identified as bearing the Washington arms: "Sam Washington Seal with W arms \$36".

Of the five items, the only one that might have been the "Brass engraving of the Arms of the U. States" in "the Iron Chest", valued at \$10, is the "plates arms U.S." that Captain Thomas Hammond bought for \$6. Hammond was the husband of

Mildred G. Washington, a daughter of Charles Washington, and thus a nephew by marriage of George Washington. [Washington, *Writings* (Ford, ed.), XIV, 429.] The word "plates", however, is puzzling – both the word itself and its use in the plural.

Usually the word "plate" brings to mind a smooth, flat or nearly so, and relatively thin piece or disk of metal, china, or other material, such as the plates forming part of a dinner service; a polished sheet of copper or steel engraved to print from; or a printer's electrotype or other embossed metal sheet employed in printing. One might suppose that the "plates" Hammond bought were china or metal for use on a dinner table. On this point, however, Miss Christine Meadows, Curator at Mount Vernon, has written as follows: "The Washington china has been thoroughly researched and much of it has survived. If there had been any with the device of the Great Seal, I believe we would know about it." [The Washingtons had silver waiters, which might have been referred to as plates, but they were decorated with the Washington crest, not the U.S. coat of arms. See Buhler, *Mount Vernon Silver*, p. 75.]

The Dorsett seal, a bronze disk 2 5/16 inches in diameter and 3/8 of an inch thick, could conceivably be called a plate. Furthermore, the arms of the United States have a reverse, the device of which, engraved on another bronze disk, would have been reason for use of the plural. Similarly, Trenchard's engravings of the obverse and reverse, discussed in Chapter XV and reproduced as illustrations 63 and 64, are correctly termed "plates". Perhaps the Dorsett seal was one of a pair, the reverse of which is now missing.

A further circumstance, which Miss Meadows points out, is that Hammond in 1792 invested in the new community of Charles Town (now West Virginia) and may have been living there in 1802, while Dorsett's grandmother, as indicated above, was born in 1804 at Harpers Ferry, "which places the family within easy reach of the Charles Town area" – the two places being something like seven miles apart.

At this point questions arise. How and why did the Dorsett seal die come into existence, and what purpose was it intended to serve? Lacking facts, one must speculate as to the answers.

The transposing of the olive branch and the arrows was certainly intentional. It constituted a "difference", in the heraldic sense of the term, that distinguished this seal unmistakably from the Great Seal without obliterating evidence of close relationship to it. Such treatment of coats of arms is not unusual. Comparable "differencing" appears today in the seal of the President of the United States, in the seal of the Department of State, and in a number of other seals used within the Federal Government (see Chapter XX). In such cases the device of the Great Seal serves as the basic design but is modified in one or more details, thus reflecting both kinship and distinctness. In the case of the seal of the Department of State, for example, the major change from the Great Seal, except its smaller size, is its encircling legend (see Chapter XVIII).

There would have been no point or purpose in Washington's having a seal such as the Dorsett seal until he became President. Thus presumably it was cut after his inauguration in 1789. While he occupied that office it would have been a fitting symbol, as the President's seal is today. The transfer of the arrows, with their military significance, to the eagle's right talon would have been peculiarly

appropriate for President Washington, who had previously won fame as Commander in Chief. It seems highly unlikely, however, that Washington commissioned the engraving or purchased the die himself. In the first place, he seems never to have used it; and in the second place, as Miss Meadows points out, "It is contrary to all we know about George Washington that he would have affected such an elaborate seal or device for personal or social reasons." It was simply out of character for him to have bought the Dorsett seal die.

This leaves, as the only remaining possibility, the conclusion that Washington received the die as a gift. Such a gift could have come either from an engraver who had cut the die himself or from someone else, who had employed an engraver to cut it.

In 1936 Dorsett had asked Miller for his views regarding disposal of his seal die or a depository for it. Miller recommended Mount Vernon, and the Department so informed Dorsett when it returned his papers and the seal die to him in September 1937. In 1941 Dorsett and his sister, Ellen Winchester (Mrs. George C. Husmann), placed the seal on loan at Mount Vernon. Dorsett died in Washington on April 1, 1943, just short of the age of eighty-one. His wife and son James H. had predeceased him, leaving his sister as his only survivor. In a letter to the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association dated March 6, 1945, Mrs. Husmann changed the loan to an unrestricted gift to the Association. The seal has since been placed on exhibit in the museum at Mount Vernon.

The Association has supplied a photograph of the incised face of the die, printed with the negative reversed, to show how an impression would look. This photograph is reproduced as illustration 80.



The Dorsett Seal
(reversed image of die)

In the absence of further information, the Dorsett seal may be counted as either the immediate predecessor or the earliest example of the seal of the President of the United States.