

The American Eagle

Family Tradition

Displaying the eagle is a traditional practice that celebrates the individual's freedom of choice guaranteed to all citizens of The United States of America. Americans through the years have displayed sculptures of eagles in prominent locations in their homes. Many families have an eagle with spread wings above their hearth or displayed on the external surfaces of their homes above doors, entries or garages. It is often used as an ornament for flagpoles.

Background



¹ The eagle represents Freedom. The bald eagle was chosen June 20, 1782 as the emblem of the United States of America, because of its long life, great strength and majestic looks, and also because it was then believed to exist only on this continent. It has become a tradition to display the eagle, or the Seal of the United States which contains the eagle, in locations where the Federal Government has offices or conducts official business. The eagle is found on U.S. currency and coins and also forms the basis for many emblems of government agencies.

More About The American Eagle

The Eagle, Our National Emblem:

On the backs of our gold coins, the silver dollar, the half dollar and the quarter, we see an eagle with outspread wings. On the Great Seal of the United States and in many places which are exponents of our nation's authority we see the same emblem. The eagle represents freedom. Living as he does on the tops of lofty mountains, amid the solitary grandeur of Nature, he has unlimited freedom, whether with strong pinions he sweeps into the valleys below, or upward into the boundless spaces beyond. It is said the eagle was used as a national emblem because, at one of the first battles of the Revolution (which occurred early in the morning) the noise of the struggle awoke the sleeping eagles on the heights and they flew from their nests and circled about over the heads of the fighting men, all the while giving vent to their raucous cries. "They are shrieking for Freedom," said the patriots. Thus the eagle, full of the boundless spirit of freedom, living above the valleys, strong and powerful in his might, has become the national emblem of a country that offers freedom in word and thought and an opportunity for a full and free expansion into the boundless space of the future. --Maude M. Grant



The Eagle became the National emblem in 1782 when the great seal of the United States was adopted. The Great Seal shows a wide-spread eagle, faced front, having on his breast a shield with thirteen perpendicular red and white stripes, surmounted by a blue field with the same number of stars. In his right talon the eagle holds an olive branch, in his left a bundle of thirteen arrows, and in his beak he carries a scroll inscribed with the motto: "E Pluribus Unum." The Eagle appears in the Seals of many of our States, on most of our gold and silver coinage, and is used a great deal for decorative patriotic purposes. At the Second Continental Congress, after the thirteen colonies voted to declare independence from Great Britain, the colonies determined they needed an official seal. So Dr. Franklin, Mr.



J. Adams, and Mr. Jefferson as a committee prepared a device for a Seal of the United States of America.

However, the only portion of the design accepted by the congress was the statement E Pluribus Unum, attributed to Thomas Jefferson. Six years and two committees later, in May of 1782, the brother of a Philadelphia naturalist provided a drawing showing an eagle displayed as the symbol of "supreme power and authority." Congress liked the drawing, so before the end of 1782, an eagle holding a bundle of arrows in one talon and an olive branch in the other was accepted as the seal. The image was completed with a shield of red and white stripes covering the breast of the bird; a crest above the eagle's head, with a cluster of thirteen stars surrounded by bright rays going out to a ring of clouds; and a banner, held by the eagle in its bill, bearing the words E Pluribus Unum. Yet it was not until 1787 that the American bald eagle was officially adopted as the emblem of the United States. This happened only after many states had already used the eagle in their coat of arms, as New York State did in 1778. Though the official seal has undergone some modifications in the last two hundred years, the basic design is the same. While the eagle has been officially recognized as America's national bird, there have been dissenters who feel that the bird was wrong choice. Benjamin Franklin wrote:



I wish that the bald eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country, he is a bird of bad moral character, he does not get his living honestly, you may have seen him perched on some dead tree, where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches the labor of the fishing-hawk, and when that diligent bird has at length taken a fish, and is bearing it to its nest for the support of his mate and young ones, the bald eagle pursues him and takes it from him.... Besides he is a rank coward; the little kingbird, not bigger than a sparrow attacks him boldly and drives him out of the district. He is therefore by no means a proper emblem for the brave and honest...of America...For a truth, the turkey is in comparison a much more respectable bird, and withal a true original native of America . . . a bird of courage, and would not hesitate to attack a grenadier of the British guards, who should presume to invade his farmyard with a red coat on.

Franklin was clearly against the eagle and let everyone know it. Likewise, the artist John James Audubon agreed with this opinion of the bald, or white-headed, eagle. Nevertheless, selected as our national bird, the eagle has appeared on all official seals of the United States, as well as on most coinage, paper money, and on

many U.S. stamps. It is curious to note the minted eagles have been issued in a great variety of shapes and positions. Also, there is great variation in the species depicted. Some of the famous images have species other than the bald eagle----for example the famous ten-dollar gold pieces exhibit the "double eagle" instead. Numerous people have complained because many, if not most, of these illustrations show the wide-ranging golden eagle rather than our own national bird, the bald eagle. They feel these representations mislead the general public into believing that they are looking at a bald eagle. The easiest way to distinguish between the golden and bald eagles is by the feathering on the legs. The golden is feathered down the entire leg, while the bald eagle has no feathers on lower part of the leg until at least two or three years of age, when bald eagles also start developing the white head and tail.

