

# JOURNAL

OF THE

# HOUSE OF DELEGATES

OF THE

# STATE OF VIRGINIA

FOR THE

SESSION OF 1883-4.

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RICHMOND:

R. F. WALKER, SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC PRINTING.

1883.

THE NEW YORK  
PUBLIC LIBRARY  
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TILDEN FOUNDATIONS.  
1898.

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JAMES E. GOODE, PRINTER.

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COMMUNICATION

FROM THE

GOVERNOR OF VIRGINIA,

RELATIVE TO

THE GREAT SEAL OF THE STATE.

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COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA,

GOVERNOR'S OFFICE,

RICHMOND, *February 25, 1884.*

*To the Speaker of the House of Delegates:*

SIR:

I communicate herewith a clear and learned report from Col. Sherwin McRae in regard to the recent restoration, under the act of 1878, of the great seal of the commonwealth. The report explains the subject fully, and I request, after presentation to the House, when printed, you will cause the document to be transmitted to the Senate.

Yours, respectfully,

WILLIAM E. CAMERON.

## REPORT ON STATE SEAL.

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To His Excellency WILLIAM E. CAMERON,  
*Governor of Virginia:*

SIR:

I have the honor to inform you that the metallic discs, obverse and reverse, of which the great seal of the commonwealth consists, the engraving of which, at your request, has been superintended by me, have been received, and await your direction. This new seal, it may be safely affirmed, is a perfect reproduction of the great seal of the commonwealth, adopted by the convention of 1776 and intended to be reproduced by the law of 1873 directing the governor to cause new seals to be engraved. Indeed, no other seal but the original great seal of 1776 as readopted in 1779 will ever be satisfactory to the people of Virginia. This seal is not only indissolubly linked with the great names of Richard Henry Lee, George Mason, George Wythe, Robert C. Nicholas, John Page, and Arthur Lee, but Mason will be particularly remembered, not only as the member of the committee who reported the device of the seal, but as the author of its description—one of the most remarkable specimens of precision in expression to be found in any language, and showing unmistakably that its paternity is the same as that of the celebrated declaration of rights.

The question here arises, is the new great seal above mentioned, in devices and mottoes, a reproduction of the great seal of 1776 as reaffirmed in 1779? The following narrative answers the question affirmatively:

On the fifth day of July, 1776, George Mason, from the committee appointed to devise a proper seal for the commonwealth, reported the following devices and mottoes thereof:

To be engraved on the great seal—Virtus, the genius of the commonwealth, dressed like an Amazon, resting on a spear with one hand and holding a sword in the other, and treading on Tyranny, represented by a man prostrate, a crown fallen from his head, a broken chain in his left hand, and a scourge in his right. In the exergon, the word Virginia over the head of Virtus; and underneath, the words, Sic semper tyrannis. On the reverse, a group: Libertas with her wand and pileus; on one side of her, Ceres with the cornucopia in one hand and an ear of wheat in the other; on the other side, Aeternitas with the globe and phoenix. In the exergon, these words, Deus Nobis haec otia fecit—changed in 1779 to the single word, Perseverando. It was then resolved that George Wythe and John Page, esquires, be desired to superintend the engraving of the said seal and to take care that the same be properly executed, indicating by the selection of these accomplished classical scholars the importance of a thorough knowledge of the form and significance of the devices of the seal to insure its correct engraving. In compliance with this request, John Page, for the proper execution of the seal, immediately sought Spence's

Polymetis, the recognized highest authority for the figures of Roman deities. He wrote to Mr. Jefferson, then in Philadelphia, requesting his aid in procuring the Polymetis for the figures of Virtus and Libertas, to be engraved on the seal by the most skilful artist to be found. Philadelphia being at that time the centre of art in America, it has heretofore been considered an established fact that the great seal was engraved in that city; but this is a mistake, as the sequel will show; and this mistake became the source of an entire misconception of the devices of the obverse of the great seal. After the most strenuous and persistent efforts of John Page to cause the great seal to be engraved in America had proven unsuccessful, Dr. Arthur Lee, one of the most accomplished classical scholars of the time, then in Paris (in public employment), was induced to superintend its engraving, which was done in Paris, in the style to be expected from that great centre of art, and delivered to Dr. Lee as the agent of Virginia on or before the fourth day of September, 1779. The late George Wythe Munford, so long and favorably known as secretary of the commonwealth, testifies that this original great seal was used until the year 1856, when, being so worn by use as to be incapable of making an impression, it was substituted by a new seal, which was engraved from the standard figures which constitute the devices of the original great seal of 1776. This seal, although much worn, and incorrect in some particulars, indicates clearly the purpose of its designer and engraver, to make it a copy or reproduction of the original great seal, adopted by the convention of 1776, and readopted by the General Assembly of 1779, with a change of the motto of the reverse side of the seal.

A summary embraces the following facts: That the convention of 1776 adopted a seal, described in language so lucid, precise, and brief as to admit of but one interpretation—that George Wythe and John Page, who knew the character of the seal, were requested to superintend its engraving; that John Page immediately sought the Polymetis as the recognized repository of the standard figures to be engraved on the great seal; that finding it impracticable to procure the seal to be engraved in the United States, Dr. Arthur Lee, then residing at Paris (an eminent classical scholar, and thus familiar with the rare and costly Polymetis), was induced by John Page to superintend the engraving of the said seal, which was done, and the seal delivered to Dr. Lee as the agent of Virginia, on or before the fourth day of September, 1779. This seal, after its reception in Virginia, was used until the year 1856, when, being too much worn for use, it was substituted by the great seal now in the custody of the secretary of the commonwealth, and is officially used as the great seal of state at this time. The authenticity of the great seal, the precision with which it is described, the definite forms and significance of the figures which constitute its devices, would seem to make it impossible to misunderstand or misrepresent it; yet, strange as it may appear, Virtus, the genius of the commonwealth, which gives to the seal its chief grace and beauty and peculiar significance, is so completely misunderstood and misrepresented as wholly to destroy its significance. A fact so remarkable requires explanation.

When it was found impracticable to procure the great seal to be engraved in a proper manner in this country, and Europe was resorted to for the purpose of procuring it, the first General Assembly of the commonwealth, having been informed by John Page that although the utmost diligence had been used to procure the seal, the same had not yet been completed, empowered the governor to issue all necessary commissions under his signature, without any seal, till the great seal of the commonwealth could be provided, as directed by the ordinance of the convention. This reso-

lution evinces the firm determination of the General Assembly that the most impetuous necessity should not be permitted to prevent the procurement of the exact seal adopted by the convention. The dispensation with the seal, however, was of short continuance, as the commonwealth, in its great need, found it necessary to borrow a large sum of money for the purchase of arms for the defence of the state, which could only be effected in a foreign state. The agent, to negotiate this loan, required a power from his government, and this power required the seal of state as the evidence of authentication and the symbol of state sovereignty. Thus when, in 1778, William Lee was appointed Virginia's agent in France to borrow two millions of livres to purchase arms for the defence of the state, the seal of state became necessary to authenticate his power. The necessities of the state would not admit of delay until the completion of the great seal, then to be prepared in France.

Accordingly, a seal was *improvised* under the pressing necessity, and impressed on the power, which was immediately transmitted to Mr. Lee. This seal was not the seal in its essentials which was adopted by the convention; it was not only rude and inartistic, but palpably *different* in its devices from the great seal. This seal had just enough of resemblance to the great seal of the convention to show the intent of the designer and engraver, and enough of difference to impair the beauty and utterly destroy the significance of the great seal. It accomplished its purpose, however, in accrediting the agent, but became the source of an error which remains to this day. The agent encountered much difficulty in his negotiation: the power of the governor to borrow money was questioned, and the jealousy of some, excited by the exercise by a single state of such a supreme act of sovereignty as borrowing money, retarded much the accomplishment of the state's purpose. The want of the state's seal on the agent's power would have closed all the avenues to negotiation and made his mission fruitless. After the loan of the two millions of livres had been obtained by the aid of the incorrect seal, it was perceived that there was no warrant in law for its use, the first General Assembly having dispensed with the use of the seal by the governor until the great seal of the convention was ready for use, which was not the case when this loan was effected. In good faith to France, who had lent her money, and to others interested in the validity of the seal, the General Assembly, in 1779, legalized this incorrect seal and its past use; but, to avoid the possibility of its being regarded as anything more than a temporary expedient, the same law which legalized the lesser seal re-enacted the ordinance of the convention adopting the great seal and required the governor to cause the great seal to be engraved in Europe if not practicable to obtain it in America. Soon after the passage of the law of 1779, legalizing the incorrect lesser seal (designed to be temporary), the great seal, perfect in design and artistic in the highest degree in execution, was received in Virginia from Paris. This lesser seal was intended to be disused after the reception of the great seal; but as a correct and artistic lesser seal would have involved a resort to Paris and an expenditure which the state in her financial condition at that time could not bear, its procurement was deferred to a more propitious time. In waiting for this event this incorrect lesser seal, which was in constant use, became familiar to the people, and its devices to be regarded as the devices of the great seal adopted by the convention of 1776.

With the great seal, which is comparatively little used, the people have no familiarity, and thus the incorrect familiar lesser seal readily obtained recognition as the original great seal of the convention of 1776. The effect of this mistake is best seen by a comparative exhibition and description of the two seals: The metallic discs,

obverse and reverse, of which the great seal consists, have engraved on them five classical figures, two on the obverse and three on the reverse. The obverse is the principal disc, not only as the model of the lesser seal, but the one on which Virtus, the chief and ruling figure, designated the genius of the commonwealth, is engraved. Virtus is a Roman goddess, dressed either in a flowing white robe, or like an *Amazon*, holding in the left hand a peculiar sword, called a *parazonium*, sheathed and inverted, or point upward and not pendant, worn as a *badge of honor*, and not as a weapon of attack or defence. The right hand resting on a spear point downward and touching the earth; her head erect and face upturned; her foot on the globe—the world at her feet; posture indicating proud consciousness of victory—conquest completed. Such is the Roman Virtus, and such the Virtus of the seal, substituting *Tyranny* for the globe, and especially prescribing the dress of the *Amazon* for Virtus. The significance of the entire seal depends on the significance of Virtus—fortitude, courage—which with the Roman was the chief of virtues and the foundation of Roman greatness. This deity represented the idea on which the colossal power of Rome rested, and with Janus furnished the key to the Roman conquest of the world. Rome, ever sustained by Virtus, the type of courage, “commanded victory by not admitting the possibility of defeat,” and went on conquering until she planted her foot on the globe—the world conquered and lying at her feet. As by the theory of Rome, it was her destiny to accomplish everything which she undertook, she is represented not in progression, but at the time of completion; not in action, but as having finished her work. This is the significance of Virtus as represented by the standard figure of that deity in the *Polymetis*, and adopted by the convention of 1776 as significant of Virginia's triumph over Tyranny.

The description of Virtus in the ordinance of the convention, with the figure in the *Polymetis* as a diagram, is a demonstration as exact as any proposition in Euclid. Virtus, then, is as mathematically exact in figure as a given circle or triangle, and when misrepresented can always be corrected by the recognized standard. For the representation of Tyranny there is no standard but the *prostrate* figure engraved on the obverse of the great seal of 1776, described as a “*man prostrate*, a crown fallen from his head, a broken chain in his left hand, and a scourge in his right.” In the execution of the new seals this standard has been followed. If there was no standard the forms of this figure would be as various as the taste or caprice of engravers or others could suggest. The standard of the *Polymetis*, with the aid of the original seal of the convention of 1776, will ever hereafter protect the state from incorrectness in the devices and mottoes of the great and lesser seals. A comparison of the lesser seal with the obverse of the corrected great seal, will show the incorrectness of the lesser seal in the essentials of form, posture, arms, badges, and other particulars plain to see but difficult to describe.

So fixed is this error that the state itself, in response to requests from other states and individuals for the true representation of the seal of Virginia, is in the habit of furnishing the devices of the lesser seal as the true devices of the great seal of 1776, and thus misrepresenting the figure and significance of Virtus.

Perfect photographs of the great seal, obverse and reverse, should be placed in the library-room to familiarize the people of the state with its devices and mottoes, and their true significance. Letter-heads and similar papers used in the public offices should be required by law to bear the impression of the obverse of the great seal. This requirement would prevent the differing and conflicting representations of the state's insignia by the public officers, so significant of the ignorance of the true in-

signia which now so generally prevails. The ordinance of the convention of 1776 prescribing and defining the great seal, prepared by George Mason as the sequel of his declaration of rights and his complement to the state's equipment as a government—a paper so remarkable in merit—should at once be re-enacted, and, like the declaration of rights, ever remain untouched by the hand of innovation. The original draught of this law of the seal having been lost, a copy of it from the journal of the convention should be made, and placed in the library as the associate of the celebrated declaration of rights, and as a key to the significance of the seal. It may not be inappropriate to suggest that the present would be a fit occasion for the General Assembly to provide by law for the inscription of the devices of the obverse of the correct great seal on the block of stone contributed by Virginia to the national Washington monument about the year 1850. The state insignia of all the original thirteen states, I am informed, has been inscribed on the blocks contributed by the separate states to the national monument to Washington. Virginia's insignia, symbolic of her as a separate state, is the only exponent beside her declaration of rights of the ideas which lie at the basis of her government. The omission of the insignia on the national monument to Washington would seem to be an omission which requires correction. The correspondence between Mr. Corcoran's representative and myself (in your name) furnishes important information as to the character of Virginia's block in the national monument to Washington. Should the General Assembly deem it proper that the state's insignia should be inscribed on Virginia's block, permission from competent authority will be necessary for that purpose; and in the event that space for the inscription cannot be found on the block, permission should be obtained to substitute a new block for the old one. The state of New York having recently corrected her coat-of-arms, sought and obtained the liberty to insert a new block in place of the old one, which contained the incorrect coat-of-arms. This is suggestive. Virginia should not lose the opportunity of recording on the monument dedicated to the most illustrious of her sons her state insignia, which is symmetrically classical, and surpassed by none in beauty and grandeur of significance. The facts on which the correction of the seal depends, are sustained by evidence of the most conclusive character, but too voluminous for insertion in this paper. When we remember that the ablest statesmen, the deepest thinkers, and most accomplished scholars in the several states were engaged contemporaneously in devising the seals and other insignia adopted by these states; that six of the most distinguished of Virginia's sons, including the two Lees (Richard Henry and Arthur) and George Mason, were engaged on Virginia's seal; that Dr. Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson were engaged on the seal of the United States—names suggestive of wisdom and learning; that in every state requisition was made for the thinker, the scholar, and the wise; that during the six years which succeeded the declaration of independence the men who were engaged in devising the seals of the states were so remarkable for their great abilities as to show that of all the subjects demanding attention in the organization of a new commonwealth, none is so comprehensive as devising its seal. If great abilities and learning had not been needed in this service, Franklin, Jefferson, Adams, and Mason would never have been engaged in it. The seal, then, is not a bauble, but an important and necessary element of government; indeed, the



convention of 1776 was so impressed with this truth that the great seal was made a *specific constitutional* provision. The great seal of Virginia is an essential part of George Mason's plan of government. The first is his declaration of rights, then the constitution, and then the great seal—a Corinthian column with its base, shaft, and capital. To Mason belongs the enviable distinction of conceiving and composing the three parts of the plan of government. No other of the great men of his time performed so difficult a task, and of the three achievements, it is probable that the profoundest and most subtle thoughts were brought out in devising the great seal. As a type of ideas, the significance of Virtus is the grandest and most comprehensive in the whole range of Roman mythology. Her identity is denoted by figure, dress, posture, and badges; but to insure infallible certainty, the standard figure of Virtus in the Polymetis is designated as the *particular figure* to be engraved on the great seal. Virtus is the genius of the commonwealth, and the seal is so strictly classical—containing nothing heraldic in language or representation, having neither shield, supporters, nor crest—that to assign to the seal a coat-of-arms would not only be inconsistent with the general character of the seal, but destructive of its classical purity and the significance of its devices. To make the obverse of the great seal the state's coat-of-arms on the assumption that the classical character of the seal would not be affected, and that the true significance of Virtus would be preserved, is a mistake of grave import. The distinction between ancient insignia and a coat-of-arms is so plain that it would not receive this notice but for the fact that there is a modern tendency towards this mistake, and that it occurs sometimes in legislation and official action. While we are correcting the errors of the seal, and endeavoring to render it perfect, it will be well to guard against this insidious danger. To give to the entire seal its full significance, and impart to the people correct knowledge of its devices, nothing would contribute more than the representation of the three beautiful figures of the reverse of the seal on one side of the flag; in other words, the devices of the obverse of the seal on one side of the flag, and the devices of the reverse side on the other side of the flag, with their respective mottoes, instead of the devices and mottoes of the obverse of the seal on both sides of the flag. The reverse side of the seal would add much to the beauty of the flag, and exhibit interesting figures now rarely seen. This side of the seal, with its beautiful group of figures, has always been correct, with the exception of the head-dress of Ceres, which error has been corrected. The length of time which has elapsed since the passage of the law of 1873, requiring new seals to be procured (now more than ten years), may produce the impression that the obligation to execute this law has not been fully recognized. Such impression would be erroneous. Governor Kemper not only recognized his duty under the law of 1873, but he caused new seals to be prepared, which proved to be incorrect and unsatisfactory, and therefore were never used.

Governor Holliday, appreciating the importance of restoring the original great seal of 1776, requested my assistance in ascertaining the true devices of the seal preparatory to the execution of a new one. I was engaged in that work when his administration closed. It is interesting to know that the true devices of the original seals and arms of the several states of the Union are so highly valued that in some of these states, the devices of whose seals or arms

had become doubtful, requisition has been made on all the resources of the government to ascertain the truth or falsity of these devices. New York, we are informed, has been thirty years endeavoring to find the original description of her coat-of-arms and the original drawing as adopted. Governor Cornell regards the doubt and uncertainty as to the correct arms of the state as a "reflection upon the boasted cultivation and pride of her people." He states that "there are nearly one hundred different devices of the coat-of-arms, and that there is not a single person in the state of New York able to prove what is the true and legal design," and therefore urges prompt attention to the matter. The fact that two inconsistent devices of Virtus have been used at the same time by official authority; that the figure of Virtus, the ruling figure on the obverse of the seal, on which its significance depends, is so flagrantly misrepresented on the lesser seal as not to be recognized by those familiar with Virtus, proves that the officials and people of Virginia are very much in the condition of the officials and people of New York in regard to the seal of state.

A statement of the remarkable causes which produced the substitution of an incorrect and rude seal for one *correct in design and elegant in execution*, and which state of things has continued for more than a century, has expanded this paper beyond my purpose. I have only to add that the facilities furnished by you, especially in causing one of the most accomplished engravers in this, and probably any country, to visit Richmond, and *study the standards* by which the original great seal was made, have contributed much to what I hope may prove the successful termination of a laborious work.

I have the honor to be, respectfully yours,

SHERWIN McRAE.