



## The Great Seal of the State of New Mexico

BY CARMELLA PADILLA

It has, during its convoluted and colorful history, been called “not easy to read,” “paternalistic,” and a “heraldic mess.” It has also been deemed “equal to the best.”

All that Article V, Section 10, of the New Mexico State Constitution required is that it “be called the ‘Great Seal of the State of New Mexico.’” The emblem was sanctioned to appear on official documents and other expressions of New Mexico’s statehood, and the constitution entrusted it to the care of the secretary of state.

Adopted by legislative commission in 1913, the New Mexico state seal is a disc-shaped jumble of imagery and adage with the mandated words “Great Seal of the State of New Mexico” flowing round its rim. At center, an American bald eagle with three arrows in its talons unfurls its massive wings. In its shadow, a Mexican harpy eagle seizes a snake in its beak while clawing a *nopal* cactus. The Latin phrase “Crescit Eundo,” roughly translated “It grows as it goes,” adorns a ribbon below. The date 1912 anchors the tableau.

The story of today’s state seal begins decades before statehood, in territorial times. Like most creations of government, it took countless visions and opinions to reach its final design. Laws passed by the first territorial legislative assembly of 1851 employed an unofficial seal favored by Territorial Secretary William S. Allen. The illustration featured an American eagle clutching an olive branch and three arrows, and the words “Grand Seal of the Territory of NM” imprinted on its rim. Also in 1851, Territorial Governor James S. Calhoun stamped a military commission with a seal that included both the binational eagles and the “Crescit Eundo” phrase central to today’s design. Other unofficial renderings followed, but by the early 1860s

**Upper Left:** *New Mexico Territorial Seal from Solicitor General Envelope* [detail], undated, History Files Collection, Folder 1, Courtesy of the New Mexico State Records and Archives Center.



**Left:** *New Mexico State Seal*, by unnamed artisan at the Shapleigh Hardware Company, Saint Louis, Missouri, 1912. Courtesy New Mexico History Museum, #10030.45. Gift of Mrs. Helen Smith. Photograph by Blair Clark. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 200032.

these main elements were commonly featured in most designs.

As the national symbol of both Mexico and the United States, and an ancient Roman symbol of the power of the state, eagles were an obvious way to express New Mexico’s 1846 transition from Mexico to the United States.

The Mexican bird references the founding of Tenochtitlán by the Aztecs, whose gods ordered the capital built on the site where an eagle was perched on a cactus with a serpent in its mouth. The American eagle represents the United States taking the Mexican territory under its wing.

If the eagles emphasized the authority of the United States over its fledgling territory, the motto “It grows as it goes” expressed hope for its future. Taken from the Latin poet Lucretius’s epic *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), the phrase describes the growing strength of a thunderbolt arcing across the sky. Although the motto appears as early as Governor Calhoun’s 1851 seal, its meaning was given particular emphasis in a dramatically embellished rendering created by Territorial Secretary William G. Ritch for the cover of the first *New Mexico Blue Book*, published in 1882. Ritch’s seal highlighted agriculture, mining, and manufacturing scenes to illustrate the territory’s burgeoning industry. Standing before the eagles, an Aztec Indian looks into the sunrise, and presumably, toward New Mexico’s promising future.

On January 1, 1882, the *Daily New Mexican* declared Ritch’s flowery pictorial “most satisfactory to our people at home.” Nonetheless, in 1887, when the territorial legislature adopted its first official seal, it favored a simpler illustration of the binational eagles with the words “Territory of New Mexico” and “MDCCCL” (1850 in Roman numerals) on its perimeter. The 1887 seal represented the territory through statehood.

In 1913, while a legislative commission pondered a new design for an official state seal, they authorized the secretary of state to substitute the words “Great Seal of the State of New Mexico” on the rim of the 1887 seal so it could remain in use. When they announced their selection, they essentially stuck with the same design but for the addition of 1912 in place of the Roman numerals.

## SEALED WITH A SPOON

There have been countless impressions of the seal, pictorially and in the die stamps of the secretary of state, though few early territorial examples survive. A December 1852 receipt in the treasurer's records of Santa Ana County (today's Bernalillo County) itemizes a reimbursement to Territorial Secretary Charles Blummer for \$2 paid to one Blacksmith Finnegan "for making the seal of 1850." According to the secretary of state's office, however, the original territorial seal "has long since disappeared."

Today, examples of the state seal are ubiquitous in the office of the secretary of state and at the State Capitol, where the image is set in turquoise and brass in the floor of the central rotunda. One unique and enduring depiction is in the collection of the New Mexico History Museum. Created in 1912 as a tribute to the new state of New Mexico by the Shapleigh Hardware Company of St. Louis, Missouri, the three-dimensional seal is a masterpiece of period hardware. The eagles' plumage, detailed with spoons, quills, and tacks, shimmers in silver and brass on a dark velvet ground. Everyday hook latches and keys define the border. The artwork was crafted by an unidentified Shapleigh artisan, then shipped to Wood-David Hardware Company, the Shapleigh dealer in Santa Fe.

Located on the plaza's south side, where the F. W. Woolworth store stood later, Wood-Davis displayed the piece until selling it to M. C. Bland Jamison of Santa Fe, who stored it in his attic. In 1954 it was purchased by Mr. and Mrs. S. Lynn Smith, who moved it to Clines Corners. There it hung behind the cashier's stand of an unidentified store. Its image also graced the front of a postcard enticing visitors to Clines Corners.

In 1976 the seal was donated to the Palace of the Governors by Mrs. Helen Smith. It now hangs gloriously above a stairwell in the history museum, leading to an exhibition on New Mexico statehood.

## WHAT'S IN A SYMBOL?

The value of the state seal as an object worthy of reproduction is in the eye of the beholder. Critics have complained the obscure state motto muddles the seal's meaning. And the question of whether the seal is a symbolically or aesthetically great accomplishment has inspired frequent debate.

The first state flag, adopted in 1915, featured the new state seal in the lower right corner. In his 1959 classic, *Santa Fe: The Autobiography of a Southwestern Town*, Oliver La Farge recounts the 1925 push for a new and improved version, attributing the change to an overly "elaborate" seal for "an unsatisfactory flag." The simpler Zia sun symbol prevailed.

In 1965 New Mexico State Archivist (later state historian) Myra Ellen Jenkins exposed the seal's double eagles as anatomically incorrect, and erroneously depicted, since 1887. The American eagle, Jenkins wrote, was shown with a "yellow head, sans feathers, with the beak of a vulture." The Mexican eagle was simply a smaller replica of the same mistake.

News of Jenkins's discovery brought letters pouring in. Margaret Kimbrough of Albuquerque further claimed that, according to military heraldry, the left-facing American eagle was "a cowardly eagle." "Is New Mexico proclaiming its cowardice?" she asked. Meanwhile, Arch Napier of Albuquerque urged Jenkins to move the next legislature "to allow that uncomfortable little Mexican eagle to drop that cactus. It must have been hurting for 50 years." Jenkins declined. Instead, she advised state agencies to portray the American eagle with a snowy white head and tail and the Mexican harpy with brown feathers and crested head.

As it turns out, the fact that the binational eagles are used at all in the state seal was a legislative mistake. The original legislation submitted by the 1913 state seal commission specified that the eagles be "perfect types of the American Golden Eagle." But when New Mexico's state statutes, including the state seal legislation, were codified in 1915, the wording for the legislation adopting the 1887 territorial seal was erroneously retained. Thus the official statute directs that the state seal feature a "Mexican eagle" to be shielded by "the American eagle."

Twenty years ago in *El Palacio* (97 [3], Fall 1992), Richard Bradford put the seal in the category of American heraldry gone wrong. Proclaiming it "an aesthetic disaster" resembling "a nineteenth-century political cartoon," Bradford bashed the seal's "paternalistic arrogance" and nonsensical motto. He proposed a less political emblem promoting the state chile industry. His suggested motto: "May chile peppers flourish forever."

Like it or not, today's state seal is emblazoned daily on official documents throughout state government. While it's safe to assume that variations remain, the seal's purpose in celebrating the history of New Mexico as a US territory and the forty-seventh state hasn't changed. But if history proves true, there's plenty of time in the century ahead for New Mexicans to discuss and fuss with the seal's design—ensuring that its legacy grows as it goes. ■

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