

THE GREAT SEAL OF THE CONFEDERACY

By George H. Shirk

The area of present Oklahoma occupied a special place in the history of the Confederacy, and the special significance given this western region by the Confederate government was reflected in many ways. It is generally recognized that the last surrender of an organized Confederate force was by General Stand Watie at Fort Towson, Indian Territory. By the same token the story of the Great Seal of the Confederate States of America is worthy of being told in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*.¹

Miss Annie P. Pillow, daughter of Brig.-General Pillow of the Confederate Army, published about 1912, an illustrated booklet on the Seal of the Confederate States, and much of the present information on the subject is derived from her account of the romantic story of this Great Seal.

Since from immemorial times a formal seal or signet has been the accepted evidence of sovereignty, the architects of the Southern Confederacy in keeping with this tradition at once turned their attention to providing the needed device. Several individuals made contributions to the design. Thomas J. Semmes of Louisiana suggested the wreath; Clement C. Clay, Jr., of Alabama, proposed an equestrian statue of Washington as the central device. Alexander R. Boteler, a representative to the Confederate Congress from Virginia, combined these suggestions with some of his own and introduced *House Joint Resolution 13*, approved by the Confederate Congress on April 30, 1863. The resolution read:

Resolved by the Confederate States of America, that the Seal of the Confederate States shall consist of a device representing an equestrian portrait of Washington, after the statue which surmounts his monument in the Capitol Square at Richmond, surrounded with a wreath composed of the principal agricultural products of the Confederacy, Cotton, Tobacco, Sugar, Cane, Corn, Wheat and Rice, and having around its margin the words 'The Confederate States of America, Twenty-second February, Eighteen Hundred and Sixty-two,' with the following motto, 'Deo Vindice'.

The date "22 February 1862" was placed upon the Great Seal because it was on that date that the provisional government ceased and the permanent government of the Confederate States of America was established. This date was Washington's birthday which gave another reason for the selection of his likeness as the central device.

¹ The material for this article was furnished through the courtesy of Van Dyk MacBride, of Newark, New Jersey, General Vice-President of the Confederate Stamp Alliance, a national philatelic organization. He is a member of other leading national philatelic societies, and of the Civil Round Table of New York. Mr. MacBride has made a special study of the history of the Confederate States, and has written extensively on Confederate postal history.

The equestrian portrait is very similar to Washington's monument in Capitol Square at Richmond. The Latin motto *Deo Vindice* may be translated "God will Judge." The House Joint Resolution of the Confederate Congress shows the date in words, but the Great Seal contains arabic numbers. This change was made under instructions of the Secretary of State J. P. Benjamin, as he felt that the many words would needlessly reduce the size of the lettering.

The arrangements for the actual casting and execution of the Great Seal were entrusted to James M. Mason, the Confederate States Commissioner to the Court of St. James. He was instructed that all work must be of the finest possible character and cost was not to be a consideration. Mason employed J. F. Foley, a member of the Royal Academy and a renowned British sculptor, to execute the actual design. The completed model was engraved on silver by Joseph S. Wyon, Chief Engraver to Her Majesty's Seals. The completed seal cost about \$700.00.

The seal was cast in massive solid silver, about $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter and bears on its margin the word "engraved by J. S. Wyon 287 Regent Street London." Appropriate solid silver hall mark, as appears on all English silver marking the year and details of manufacture, was included, along with the initials JSW.

Then came the task of transmitting the precious article safely to America. Lieutenant Robert C. Chapman, C.S.N., was entrusted with this most important mission. He was instructed that under no circumstances should the seal be captured and if such became likely he was authorized to throw the Great Seal into the ocean. He placed the seal in a small box and secreted it among his personal effects; and in this manner, he was able to make the crossing without difficulty. On August 4, 1864, Lieutenant Chapman delivered the Great Seal to the Confederate Secretary of State at Richmond.³

The iron press and gear for the operation of the seal, being bulky, were shipped separately. These articles left Liverpool consigned to Major Walker at Bermuda. They were lost in route, and in fact never reached the Confederacy. This circumstance required a change in the use of the seal, for without the mounting and press it could be affixed only with great difficulty. A small ivory handle was improvised which permitted its use by hand; but this arrangement was unsatisfactory and the seal was therefore seldom officially used.

Upon the evacuation of Richmond on April 2, 1865, the Secretary of State entrusted the important records of the Department of State to a Clerk in his office, William J. Bromwell. Included in the effects

³A bronze replica of the Great Seal of the Confederate States is in the Historical Society's Confederate Memorial Hall, as a part of the collection of the late Gen. R. A. Sneed, of Oklahoma, Commander in Chief of the Confederate Veterans of the South, 1929 (Information from Mrs. Helen Gorman, Curator of the Confederate Memorial Hall).—Ed.

was the Great Seal. All of the papers were boxed by him and labeled as personal effects; and tradition has it that Mrs. Bromwell concealed the seal in her clothing, and in that manner escaped with the precious article. Later these records were taken to Charlotte, North Carolina, and stored in the county court house. With the final dissolution of the Confederate government, Bromwell found himself still in possession of the records of the Department of State. He employed an attorney, John T. Pickett, to negotiate for proper disposition of the material. In 1872, through the efforts of Colonel Pickett and others, the United States government purchased all available records of the Confederate Secretary of State for \$75,000.00. The United States was represented in the negotiations by Lieutenant, later Admiral, Thomas O. Selfridge.

Colonel Pickett, however, officially retained the Great Seal as a portion of the fee for his services. The money from the sale of the documents was deposited in a Washington bank and was used to relieve widows and orphans of the Confederate cause. Colonel Pickett, for his own part, augmented the fund by selling reproductions from the Great Seal. And eventually in recognition of the service to the project by Lieutenant Selfridge, he gave the seal itself to Selfridge. True to a promise to Pickett, Selfridge kept this information private and for many years the whereabouts of the Seal was unknown.

Soon after the evacuation of Richmond there was considerable speculation as to the whereabouts of the Seal. B. J. Lossing, a contemporary historian, wrote that he was unable to locate an impression of the Seal, and had no reply to an advertisement for the purchase of one. A story that received considerable belief at the time was that the seal never actually reached America but was in Bermuda. The reproductions distributed prior to the Seal's coming into the possession of Admiral Selfridge did little to off-set the increased mystery due to Selfridge's silence.

In 1912 after a long search, Gaillard Hunt, Chief of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, discovered that Admiral Selfridge still had in his possession the Great Seal, and secured from the Admiral permission to reveal its whereabouts. As soon as the information was known three public spirited citizens of Richmond on May 14, 1912 were able to purchase the seal from Admiral Selfridge for \$3,000. It was then presented by the purchasers to the Confederate Museum at Richmond.³ The Museum occupies the former official residence of President Davis and was the "White House of the Confederacy." The Great Seal is there now in its leather case, and remains inviolate testimony to the great cause it served.

³ It has been stated that at the time of this purchase the Confederate Seal was returned to London for inspection. Its authenticity was fully confirmed as the original silver model cast by Wyon. (Allen Tankersley, "The Great Seal of the Confederate States of America," *The United Daughters of the Confederacy Magazine*, Vol. XV, No's. 5 and 6, May and June, 1952).—Ed.