



THE original die
of the great seal,
actual size

The Great Seal

of the STATE of MINNESOTA

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THE ORIGINAL great seal of the state of Minnesota — one of the treasures owned by the Minnesota Historical Society — has a colorful history. The design which came into use in 1858 was not the one agreed upon by the legislature; the engraved seal was in official use for three years before it received legislative approval; and it was lost in the disastrous fire which destroyed the Capitol in 1881, only to be dramatically recovered in England twenty years later.

Exactly two weeks after Minnesota was admitted to the Union on May 11, 1858, the lack of a great seal precipitated a crisis. On

May 25 the first secretary of state, Francis Baasen, wrote to Governor Henry H. Sibley: "My office being without a Seal, I can of course do no official act, unless you make some direction in the matter." In response, Sibley authorized the use of the territorial seal until a new design could be agreed upon and engraved.

Although under its constitution the new state was required to have a great seal, the fact that it lacked one was not due to oversight or to disinterest on the part of the framers of that document. Designs were proposed to both the Republican and Democratic wings of the convention that drafted the constitution in 1857, but efforts to adopt them proved futile.

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Two designs considered by a special committee of the Republican wing are reproduced herewith. The original drawing for the one by Louis Buechner, St. Paul lithographer and engraver, is in the Sibley Papers, which are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. The second was the work of Robert Ormsby Sweeny, a St. Paul druggist of some artistic ability. It is reproduced here from William H. Folsom's *Fifty Years in the Northwest*, p. 659. It is of interest that Buechner's name appears on this design as engraver.

In a letter written to J. Fletcher Williams in 1887, Sweeny recalled that the committee asked him to submit designs for a seal. The druggist complied by submitting two orig-



BUECHNER'S design for a state seal

inal patterns, and he soon was told that one had been accepted. For it he was given a vote of thanks.

Official records, however, disclose that early in January, 1858, a Senate committee recommended to the regular session of the legislature that one of Sweeny's designs be adopted. The matter did not receive serious consideration until after the opening of the adjourned session in June of the same year, when the Senate agreed on a resolution adopting that design. Later in the month the House concurred. Although a bill accepting the design passed both

houses of the legislature, it never became law. There is no record of its enrollment and it is not in the printed *Laws* of 1858. An ancillary resolution (Joint Resolution number 2), however, was passed, approved, and printed in that volume. It merely authorized the governor to cause the great seal to be engraved.

Governor Sibley acted promptly upon this authorization. Regarding the design, however, he exercised his own judgment, deciding simply to modify that of the territorial seal. Under his instructions, the phrase "The Great Seal of Minnesota, 1849" was changed to "The Great Seal of the State of Minnesota, 1858"; the diameter was reduced from three to two inches; the drawing was reversed to picture the Indian riding westward and the plowman moving eastward; and the inaccurate Latin motto, "Quo sursum velo videre" was supplanted by the French "L'étoile du Nord," the north star.

Apparently Sibley did not feel compelled to use the design favored by the legislature, and he does not seem to have considered one submitted to him by Edward Duffield Neill, pioneer St. Paul clergyman, educator, and historian. Neill himself must have been highly impressed with his own pattern, for he used it at the end of the introductory chapter to his *History of Minnesota* published in 1858, and also on his office station-



SWEENEY'S design for a state seal



THE territorial seal, actual size

ery when he became Minnesota's first superintendent of public instruction in 1860.

Sibley's liking for the territorial seal, for which he had been largely responsible in 1849-50, was well known. It was not, however, generally known that he had devised a state seal until August 25, 1858, when the *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat* carried an advertisement of J. H. Felch, "Seal, Card, and Wood Engraver," with a statement that he had been employed to engrave the official seal of the state. The news of Sibley's connection with the design was not well received in all quarters. For example, another *St. Paul* newspaper, the *Daily Minnesotian*, criticized the governor on September 10 and later for acting independently, as well as for selecting a French motto which the editor considered inappropriate. Despite these protests, the great seal of the state as designed by Sibley came into use.

Its legality was questioned by Neill two years later, when in his capacity as superintendent of public instruction he asked the acting governor, Ignatius Donnelly, what constituted the great seal of the state. Neill contended that the legislature had not acted under its constitutional mandate and provided an appropriate device and motto for a seal. His inquiry was referred to the at-

torney general, Gordon E. Cole, who stated that Sibley's modified territorial seal could be used and that its employment had been sanctioned by usage. Although Cole's opinion seemed to suggest that Sibley had acted without authority in selecting the design, the matter was settled satisfactorily the next year, when legislation was enacted providing "that the seal heretofore used as the seal of the state, shall be the seal thereof."

TWENTY YEARS AFTER the legislature had effectively put an end to questions relating to the legality of the seal, the Minnesota Capitol burned. When the fire was discovered on the evening of March 1, 1881, the legislature was in session. Its members as well as *St. Paulites* living in the vicinity of Wabasha and Exchange streets, where the Capitol was then located, hastily helped remove records and other valuables from the offices of state departments and of the Minnesota Historical Society, then located in the building. In the confusion, the removal was made with more celerity than system, and many items were lost or destroyed. Among them was the great seal, which was taken from a vault and dropped while being transported to a place of supposed safety.

The story of its subsequent adventures can be traced in a series of letters recently discovered in the state archives and in the



NEILL'S design for a state seal

archives of the Minnesota Historical Society. They reveal that on the evening after the fire, Peter A. Bergsma, a native of Holland who was engaged in business in St. Paul, passed the ruins of the Capitol while on his way to his residence at 56 Summit Avenue. Near the corner of College and Wabasha he picked up a brass object and took it home with him. It proved to be the great seal.

Bergsma later returned to Holland and eventually he settled in Torquay, England, a seaport and resort town on the south coast of Devon. With him went the seal, which he forgot until one day in 1894, when he came upon it in his desk. He then realized that it should be returned to Minnesota, where he hoped it might "be accorded a place in some of the rooms of the historical society." Some day, he felt sure, he would meet a person from St. Paul who could be asked to return it.

The opportunity came in the summer of 1901, when Mr. and Mrs. William J. Dyer of St. Paul stopped in Torquay while on a European trip. A music importer and dealer who had known Bergsma in St. Paul, Dyer was delighted when his old friend called on him at his Torquay hotel and explained that he had seen Dyer's name in a list of recently arrived American travelers. Dyer was more than surprised when his visitor told of finding the great seal, produced the device, and asked that he take it back to Minnesota with him.

In compliance with Bergsma's wishes, when Dyer returned to St. Paul in September, 1901, he promptly presented the seal to Governor S. R. Van Sant. He, in turn, contacted Peter E. Hanson, secretary of state, and the two officials agreed that the original seal should be placed with the Minnesota Historical Society. Dr. Warren Upham, then secretary of the society, acknowledged the gift on October 18, 1901, assuring the donors that the much-traveled seal would "be preserved with religious care."



THE present great seal of the state

Though the general design is the same, the original seal and the one now in use differ somewhat in detail. Variations, for example, occur in the scroll bearing the motto, the number and arrangement of the trees, the character of the ground being plowed, the pace of the horse, the position of the Indian's spear, and the placing of the white man's gun. Entirely absent from the present design is an ax, with its blade imbedded in the tree stump, which appears in the original design. Apparently engravers have been careless about including details from the die made in 1858 when new seals were needed.

Although details may not be important, it should be noted that the original seal of 1858 shows far more action and exhibits much more artistic merit than does the device now affixed to state documents. Quite apart from its sentimental interest, it is worth keeping as an example of midcentury craftsmanship. Thus it is fortunate that, after an absence of two decades, the great seal found its way back to Minnesota, there to be cared for and preserved among the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

THE ORIGINAL dies of the state and territorial seals here pictured are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. The Minnesota division of publicity furnished a picture of the present seal. The account of the adoption of the design follows that in William W. Folwell's *History of Minnesota*, 2:357-361 (St. Paul, 1924). Utilized in addition to sources noted in the text, were letters and designs in the Sibley Papers, the Sweeney Papers, and the Minnesota State Archives.



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