

"Kentucky Can't Make Up Its Mind What the State Seal Should Show"

The Courier-Journal, Louisville, Kentucky, Thursday, August 28, 1952

Under a 1792 law, the seal should depict "two friends embracing." But it wasn't very explicit; so through the years a series of only vaguely recognizable symbols has evolved. And in most of them the "embrace" has become a most unnatural handclasp.

By Allan M. Trout, The Courier-Journal Frankfort Bureau

FRANKFORT, KENTUCKY -- The elasticity of democratic government is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the diversity of official conceptions Kentucky has put upon the simple phrase, "two friends embracing."

The story properly begins on December 20, 1792, when the Commonwealth was 6 months and 20 days old. That was the date the General Assembly approved this act:

"That the Governor be empowered and is hereby required to provide at the public charge a seal for this Commonwealth; and procure the same to be engraved with the following device, viz:

"Two friends embracing, with the name of the state over their heads and around about the following motto: United we stand, divided we fall."

The next entry is found on Page 25 of Auditor's Book No. 1 -- "July 10, 1793, warrant issued to David Humphries for making a seal and press for use of the commonwealth, 12 pounds sterling."

Blows Hot and Cold

So for 160 years, Kentucky has been blowing hot and cold about precisely what is meant by "two friends embracing." And the question arises afresh at the recent gift of a historic old State seal to Kentucky from the federal government.

Back in 1857, an anonymous artist painted seals of the various States in a skylight of the House of Representatives at Washington.

The skylight was eliminated in the last renovation of the House. David Lynn, architect, presented to each of the states its seal.

Thus to Secretary of State Charles K. O'Connell, official keeper of the Great Seal of Kentucky, came the ornate version of "two friends embracing." He has substituted wood for the original frame of heavy-iron, and has mounted the painted glass in his office.

Figures Startled?

The scene depicts a frontiers-man in buckskin and a Colonial statesman in broadcloth standing in front of columns reminiscent of a Greek temple. Their outer coverings are reminiscent of Roman togas. The

statesman's head is bare, but on the frontiers-man's is a pancake beret with ear flaps. They stand in a halfhearted embrace, as if each startled the other with his gesture.

Scrambled? Yes, but not more so than other official versions of "two friends embracing."

The seal on bronze fittings of the State Capitol shows a bewigged statesman of the Benjamin Franklin era shaking hands with a bearded statesman of the William Goebel era.

They stand in a library facing. But the handclasp is by the right hand of one, the left hand of the other. Nowhere on the face of the earth do men clasp right hand with left. When facing, they clasp right with right, or left with left. There is simply no other way for two men, face to face, to clasp hands.

The Capitol's most prominent replica of "two friends embracing" is on the bronze elevator doors installed when the system was overhauled about six years ago.

That Phony Clasp

Here two statesmen with Henry Clay faces, identically dressed in long-tailed coats, knee pants and ballet slippers, stand shoulder to shoulder. They face the public. Again, they affect the false clasp of right hand with left.

At the new Capitol Annex, the seal on bronze elevator doors shows a statesman in pre-Revolution knee breeches greeting a statesman in pre-Civil War pants of long and severe cut. Their right and left hands are joined in a finger-tip clasp, while they grasp each other at the elbows with the remaining two hands.

The false handclasp is shown, also on the official State flag. It is carried on the embossed letterheads of all State departments and indeed on the Great Seal that the secretary of state affixes to important documents.

Fortunately for the precise-minded historian, however, there runs through the chaos one thread of order. We are afforded a glimpse of perhaps what was intended as the full message to be carried by the State seal.

Governor Isaac Shelby is supposed to have appointed an advisory committee, and John Brown; the first United States senator from Kentucky, is believed to have been a member.

In 1866, Adjutant General David W. Lindsay talked with Senator Brown's grandson, and this led General Lindsay to write: "Colonel Brown had it by tradition from his grandfather...that the original intent of the seal was to represent two friends in hunter's garb, their right hands clasped, their left resting on each other's shoulder, their feet on the verge of precipice, which gave significance to the legend, 'United we stand, divided we fall.'"

And that is exactly the scene depicted in the Great Seal that is carved on the State Monument in Frankfort Cemetery, erected in 1850 to commemorate heroes of the Mexican War and War of 1812.

So far as a casual search shows, that is the only seal in public view which shows the two friends in a natural, right-handed hand-clasp, and with their left hands placed naturally upon the shoulders.

One Head Hidden

But against this version must be noted what actually appeared on the original seal of Governor Shelby--the one David Humphries made for 12 pounds of sterling. Imprints of this seal are owned by the State Historical Society. It shows two colonially-garbed men in such a close embrace that the head of one is hidden.

But this seal was destroyed when the Capitol burned in 1814. Then and there began the race for variety as succeeding generations of diemakers tried to reduce "two friends embracing" into deathless art.

The "two friends" have been depicted at various times as dressed in stovepipe hats and swallowtail coats; in frock coats, slouch hats, boots, and string ties; in the courtly accouterments of Colonial days.

...arisen. Some say certain diemakers have deliberately depicted two friends drunk on Kentucky bourbon, each trying clumsily to hold the other up. Others say the unusual handclasp and awkward embrace are secret symbols from fraternal orders, known only to certain diemakers and their lodge brothers.

We are not, however in such confusing uncertainty about the origin of the legend. "United we stand, divided we fall." Fred A. Vaughan, secretary of state in 1920-24, traced it back to the fondness that Governor Shelby, a veteran of the Revolution, must have had for "Liberty Song," a popular ballad of his fighting days. Written by John Dickinson, the Maryland patriot, it carried these four stirring lines:

Then join in hand,
Brave Americans all,
By uniting we stand,
By dividing we fall.