

“The Kentucky State Seal”

By Ron Bryant, Kentucky Historical Society

One of the most frequently asked questions regarding Kentucky symbols is, "Who are the two men on the state seal?"

The answer is simple. The two male figures on the official state seal are symbolic. The man in buckskin is not Daniel Boone and the man in the frock coat is not Henry Clay. In fact, the two men represented on the seal do not look like the two characters on the original seal. To understand what the symbols on the state seal and the state flag represent, one should look at the evolution of these symbols from 1792 to the present.

The Commonwealth of Kentucky was less than a year old when, on December 20, 1792, the General Assembly approved an act to create the state seal. The act states: "Be it enacted by the General Assembly, 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.' Until the seal could be crafted, the Kentucky Constitution provided that "The Governor shall be at liberty to use his private seal."

David Humphreys, a Lexington silversmith, was awarded twelve pounds sterling to make the first seal and press for the state. This seal was lost in a fire which destroyed the capitol building in 1814.

The seal of the Commonwealth of Kentucky has changed from two men in formal dress embracing, to two men in frontier buckskin shaking hands. Another version of the seal shows two men clasping both of each other's hands. One of the most fantastic images of the seal portrays two men dressed in cloaks embracing each other with little enthusiasm. Other versions of the seal show men with stovepipe hats, slouch hats, no hats, in various forms of convivial embraces and hand clasps.

The state motto of Kentucky, "United we stand, divided we fall," was from a popular 1768 tune entitled the "Liberty Song," by John Dickinson. Kentucky's first governor, Isaac Shelby, was particularly fond of a stanza of the song which proclaimed, "Then join in hand, brave Americans all; By uniting we stand, by dividing we fall."

In 1962, the General Assembly passed an act making the seal of Kentucky depict a frontiersman clasping the shoulder and shaking the hand of a statesman. The frontiersman represents the spirit of Kentucky frontier settlers. The statesman represents the Kentuckians who served their state and nation in the halls of government.

The state flag incorporates the seal wreathed with the state flower, the goldenrod.

