

# OFFICIAL

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**C**an you name our national bird? Can you describe our nation's Great Seal? Did you know we have a national tree? A national motto? Check out these symbols of the United States.

## The Bald Eagle

**A**fter many conversations about appropriate symbols for the new nation, the Founding Fathers selected the bald eagle as the national bird in 1782. Benjamin Franklin, however, believed that the fearsome bird of prey—one that steals food from other birds—was not the best symbol for the young nation. As he wrote in a letter to his daughter, the bald eagle “is a Bird of bad moral Character.” Franklin thought the wild turkey made a more “respectable” choice. He considered the wild turkey a “Bird of Courage.” Today, the bald eagle is on so many American items that it’s hard to imagine any other bird as a U.S. symbol. And the turkey became a symbol associated with a classic American holiday: Thanksgiving Day. Since Americans have set aside the fourth Thursday in November as a day to feast on turkeys, perhaps the bald eagle got the better end of the deal!

As a fellow bird,  
I salute you!



## Uncle Sam

**I**n red-and-white-striped pants, a top hat, and a blue coat, illustrations of Uncle Sam have become a familiar symbol of the United States. The first “Uncle Sam” traces his roots to a real person. Samuel Wilson was an honest, patriotic man in the meatpacking business in Troy, New York. During the War of 1812 (1812–1815), he provided barrels of meat for the U.S. Army. The barrels were marked with “U.S.” for United States, but his workers joked that the initials really stood for “Uncle Sam” Wilson.

In time, “Uncle Sam” was adopted as a personification of the U.S. government. Famous political cartoonist Thomas Nast was the first to draw Uncle Sam with whiskers in 1869. But using his own face for a model, artist J.M. Flagg gave Uncle Sam his now-familiar tall, thin, and serious look. Flagg’s famous World War I (1914–1918) enlistment poster shows Uncle Sam pointing a finger and saying, “I Want You for U.S. Army.”



# SYMBOLS

## The Great Seal

**I**n the same year that the Confederation Congress chose a national bird, 1782, it also approved an official seal for the country. It had taken six years and the incorporation of various ideas before the final design emerged. On the **obverse**, a bald eagle faces to its right. In its mouth is a ribbon bearing the Latin quote, *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of Many, One). It grips 13 arrows (representing war) in its left talon and an olive branch (representing peace) in its right talon. In front of the eagle is a shield with 13 red and white vertical stripes, representing the original 13 states. The blue rectangular field across the top of the shield represents Congress. Above the eagle's head float 13 five-pointed white stars as a symbol of the new United States taking its place among other nations.

On the seal's reverse is a pyramid for strength and endurance with an Eye of Providence at its top. Two Latin mottoes, *Annuit Coeptis* (He [God] has Favored Our Undertakings) and *Novus Ordo Seclorum* (A New Order of the Ages) also appear. At the base of the pyramid is the date of independence in Roman numerals: MDCCLXXVI (1776).

Today, the Great Seal is used to ratify or announce treaties and international agreements and to appoint certain federal commissions.

Do you recognize any of the images that were incorporated into the Great Seal? Take a look at a handful of coins. Some of the elements that appear on U.S. currency are required by law. In the 1950s, Congress specified that one side of all U.S. coins must bear the word "liberty" and "In God We Trust," and that "United States of America" and *E Pluribus Unum* must be inscribed on the reverse. Did you notice the bald eagle on the quarter? And the olive branch on the dime? Recognize the building on the back of the penny? What other symbols can you find?



The **obverse** is the side of a coin or a medal with the principal design.



# Mottoes

**T**he Latin inscription *E Pluribus Unum* means “Out of Many, One.” It was considered the unofficial national motto for nearly 170 years. First appearing on the initial design for the Great Seal in 1776, it referred to the fact that from 13 individual states, one unified nation was made. Over time, as the United States became a land of opportunity for immigrants, the motto took on an additional meaning: Americans can trace their roots to many cultures and nationalities, but we are one people. “In God We Trust” first appeared on U.S. currency during the Civil War (1861–1865). In 1955, a law was passed to include “In God We Trust” on U.S. currency. The following year, another law was passed to make it the official motto of the United States.



# The Pledge of Allegiance

**T**he Pledge of Allegiance has gone through a few changes since it was introduced in September 1892. Minister and author Francis Bellamy wrote the original 23-word version. It appeared in *The Youth's Companion*, a popular children's publication. Bellamy hoped to get young people feeling patriotic and involved in the upcoming World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. President Benjamin Harrison approved the pledge's recitation in public schools during dedication ceremonies for that international fair on October 12, 1892. The pledge has been revised by the addition of words over the years. Bellamy's draft did not include “the United States of America” or “under God.” It also has been contested by some people for violating First Amendment rights. It was officially recognized as the nation's oath on June 22, 1942, during World War II (1939–1945).



I pledge allegiance to the Flag  
of the United States of America,  
and to the Republic for which it stands,  
one Nation under God,  
indivisible,  
with liberty and justice for all.



**O**ak and elm trees have long been symbols of strength, endurance, and freedom in America's history. Both trees live hundreds of years and grow to majestic sizes. With more than 60 species of oak trees found throughout the United States, the oak was officially recognized as the national tree in 2004.

In the years leading up to the Revolutionary War (1775–1783), the supposed “first” Liberty Tree—an elm—was identified in Boston. It served as a rallying symbol of freedom, justice, and an end to tyranny. In newspaper cartoons, the tree often was seen in the background as a pillar of strength in the colonists' fight against Great Britain. During and after the war, many towns designated their own liberty trees to represent their hard-earned freedom.

The rose became the national flower in 1986. The plant is believed to be more than 30 million years old. It grows naturally throughout the United States. The rose traditionally has been used to symbolize love, war, and beauty. Roses also figure prominently on the White House grounds—in the famous Rose Garden. ★



## Trees and Flowers

