

# Eagle and Shield

In 1782 Congress adopted the Great Seal of the United States, which featured an American bald eagle with wings proudly spread. William Barton, one of the Great Seal's designers, explained that, "The Eagle displayed is the Symbol of supreme Power & Authority, and signifies the Congress."<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising that the eagle, which occupies such a prominent position on the seal, was meant to symbolize congressional strength. The Articles of Confederation, ratified the previous year, had established Congress as the only federal authority, assigning to it alone many of the powers that the Constitution of 1787 later divided among three separate branches of government.

Shortly after the seal's adoption the eagle became a symbol, not just for Congress, but for the nation as a whole. The eagle soon began appearing on fabrics, coins, buttons, furniture, and ships' figureheads. As successive events inflamed patriotic fervor—from the adoption of the Constitution, to George Washington's inauguration, to the War of 1812—a profusion of eagles spread throughout the American decorative vocabulary.

The shield is no less important in American iconography. First appearing in 1782 as the escutcheon on the eagle's breast in the Great Seal, the shield proved an apt metaphor for the recently united nation. The pales, or vertical stripes on the shield, symbolize the original 13 colonies standing as one. They support—and at the same time are joined by—the chief, or field at the top of the shield, which represents the unifying authority of Congress under the Articles of Confederation. Like the eagle, the shield also is more broadly associated with patriotism and the strength of American democracy.

It is difficult to document the origin of the Senate's gilded wood *Eagle and Shield*, which currently adorns the dais in the Old Senate Chamber. An 1809 plan for the room shows that architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe intended to hang an eagle crest and elaborate canopy over the vice president's desk. His drawing also includes an oval cartouche or escutcheon of unspecified design on the eagle's breast. However, Latrobe's bird, with drooping wings, lacks the majesty and drama of the soaring eagle that exists today in the Old Senate Chamber. It is unclear whether his design ever became reality—any evidence would have been destroyed when British troops burned the Capitol in 1814.

Further, records of the art in the Old Senate Chamber are notably scarce. The first reliable evidence of an eagle and shield located in this

room appears in an 1838 article in the *Daily National Intelligencer*. It describes a "rich burnished shield, with an outer margin in the old French style, surmounted by an eagle of the size of life" hanging above the vice president's dais in the room.<sup>1</sup> From this report it appears that the shield we know today existed from at least 1838, although the official records remain unclear on the matter. In 1846, Senate records indicate payment for "taking down curtains and drapery & irons for Eagle & shield." The eagle and shield also appear in two mid-19th-century engravings: Thomas Doney's *United States Senate Chamber*, published in 1846, and Robert Whitechurch's *The United States Senate*, A.D. 1850, dated 1855. In



**The Supreme Court, which occupied the Old Senate Chamber for 75 years, moved the shield to the Chamber's entrance while the eagle remained inside.**

*(Life, July 2, 1951 © Arnold Newman / Getty Images)*

*Eagle and Shield*

**Unknown artist**

Gilded wood, ca. 1838

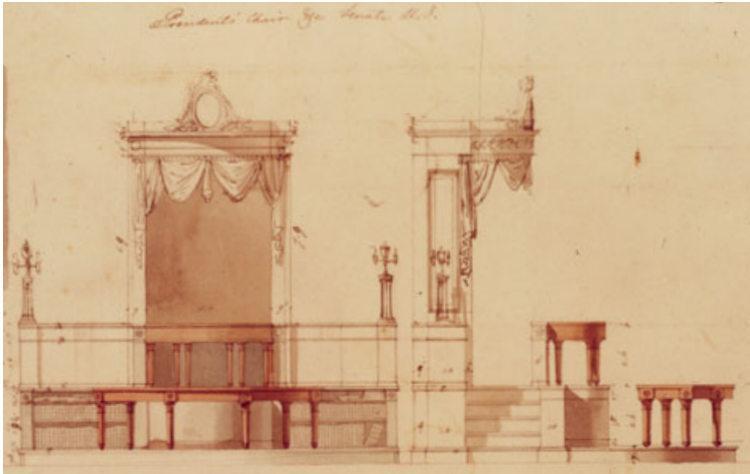
53 ½ x 72 x 23 inches (135.9 x 182.9 x 58.4 cm)

Unsigned

Acquisition undocumented

Cat. no. 25.00003





*President's Chair &c. Senate U.S. (detail)* by Benjamin H. Latrobe, 1809. In his drawing, Latrobe shows an eagle with an oval cartouche surmounting the presiding officer's dais. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

addition, Senate records note that in 1847 a John Wagner was paid \$10 for “carving & gilding 1 scroll for eagle,” although the Whitechurch engraving shows no such ribbon in the eagle’s beak.

After the Senate left the room and moved into its new Chamber in 1859, the Supreme Court of the United States used the space. Photographs from this period show that the shield was placed in the outer vestibule, over the door to the Chamber, while the eagle remained in the room. The ornate canopy that hung over the vice president’s desk was removed, and the eagle, now perched on a ribbon-draped horizontal

bar, was affixed to the gallery balustrade above the chief justice’s desk. The Court occupied the room until 1935, when it moved to its new building across the street from the Capitol. For several more decades the *Eagle and Shield* remained in the same locations they occupied during the Court years—the eagle inside the room on the gallery balustrade, and the shield outside over the Chamber’s door. In 1976 the two pieces were reunited inside the room for the restoration of the Old Senate Chamber.

Numerous artistic renderings of eagles are found in the United States Capitol, but the *Eagle and Shield* in the Old Senate Chamber has become the enduring symbol of the Senate. In 1838 Daniel Webster immortalized the Senate’s eagle as an icon of American patriotism when delivering one of the impassioned speeches for which he was famous. From the floor of the Senate, with the gilded eagle gazing down on him from above the vice president’s dais, he proclaimed, “We have made these struggles here, in the national councils, with the old flag, the true American flag, the Eagle, and the Stars and Stripes, waving over the chamber in which we sit.”<sup>2</sup>



In his 1846 engraving of the United States Senate Chamber, Thomas Doney depicted the eagle and shield above the canopied dais.