



## The State Flag and the Great Seal: The Historical Ups and Downs of Two Nebraska Icons

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Article Summary: Nebraska adopted a state seal in 1867, and in 1925 used the seal as the basis for a state flag. The seal includes symbols of the state's early history, but has been criticized for a lack of artistic merit. The state capitol itself contains alternate designs. The on-again, off-again controversy speaks to Nebraskans' different ideas about what is most important about their state and how best to symbolize it.

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Photographs / Images: looking south along Centennial Mall from the Capitol View Room of the Nebraska State Historical Society's headquarters building in Lincoln; the five most badly designed U.S. state flags, according to the North American Vexillological Association: Nebraska, Montana, Kansas, South Dakota, and Minnesota; two interpretations of the Nebraska state seal; Rep. George A Williams; Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue; Goodhue's 1921 proposal for a new state seal; Rep. J. Lloyd McMaster; Sen. Charles Meacham Jr.; Florence Hazen Miller; image used for a *National Geographic* "flag number" in 1917 when Nebraska had no official state flag; three views of Goodhue's design for the state seal; state seal image in a fountain in the renovated Centennial Mall; Sen. Eugene Mahoney





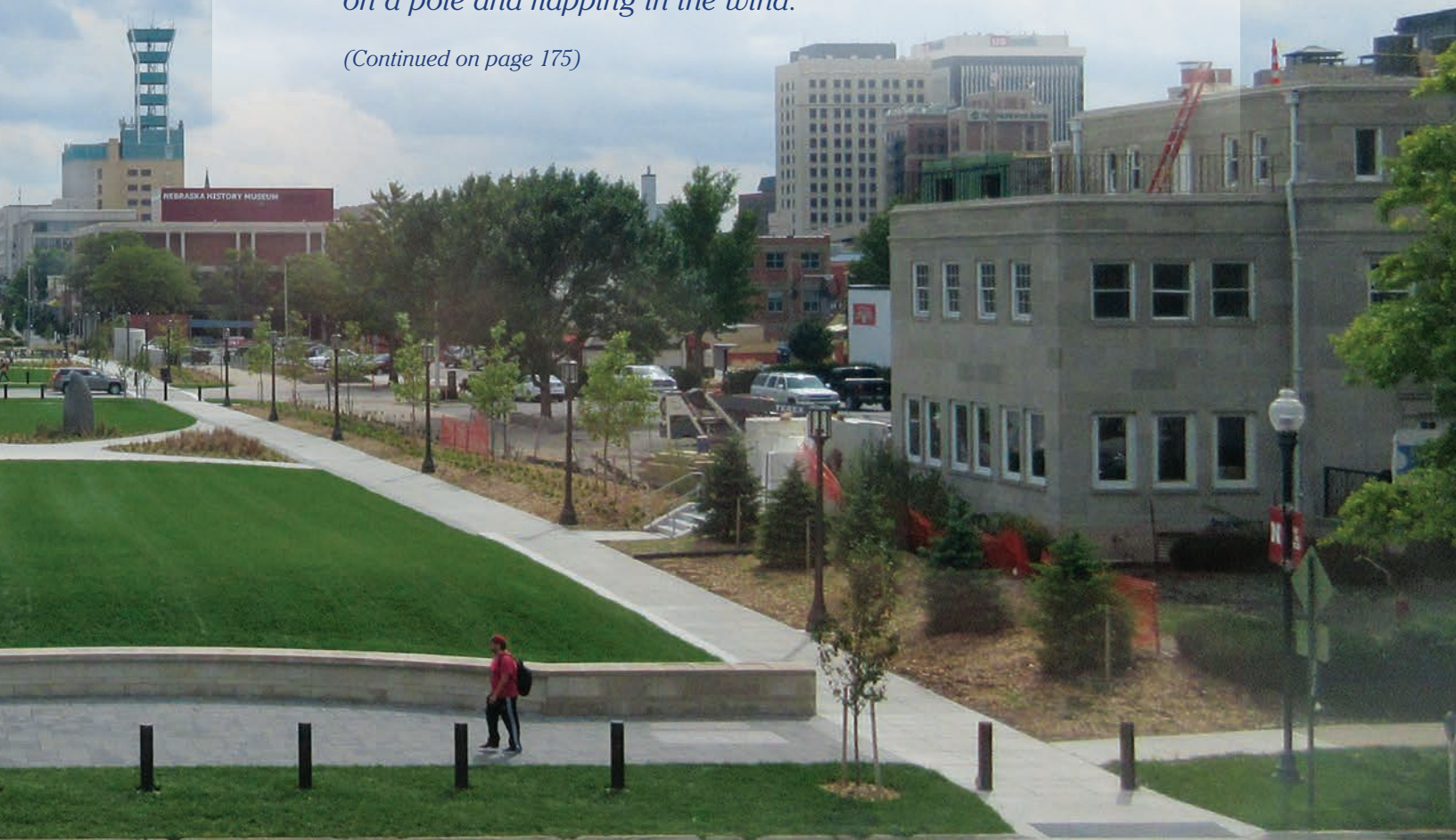
# THE STATE FLAG AND THE GREAT SEAL

## THE HISTORICAL UPS AND DOWNS OF TWO NEBRASKA ICONS

BY JAMES E. POTTER

*Is Nebraska's state flag really the worst of all the fifty state flags? That was the conclusion in a poll conducted by the North American Vexillological Association (NAVA), an organization devoted to the study of flags. According to NAVA spokesman Ted Kaye, "Try identifying this flag [Nebraska's] when it's up on a pole and flapping in the wind."*

*(Continued on page 175)*



Editor's note: James E. Potter (1945-2016) worked for the Nebraska State Historical Society from 1967 until his untimely death earlier this year. He served variously as an archivist (1967-1985), as editor of this journal (1985-2002), and as senior research historian (2002-2016) while remaining on the editorial staff. Along the way he earned a reputation for broad and deep knowledge, careful scholarship, generosity, and good humor. This is his final article for *Nebraska History*, written in anticipation of the state's sesquicentennial in 2017.

A great state deserves a great flag and this isn't it." With Nebraska's flag ranked dead last, it is little consolation that the Montana flag came in forty-ninth, the Kansas flag forty-eighth, the South Dakota flag forty-seventh, and the Minnesota flag forty-sixth. One thing these flags have in common is that each features a circular state seal on a national blue background. From a distance, hoisted on a flagpole, there is little to distinguish one from another. This combination of a nearly unreadable seal on a plain background probably accounts for the flags' low ranking in the world of vexillology. Montana, Kansas, and South Dakota may have edged Nebraska in the poll only because the state names also appear on their banners separate from the seals. It is worth noting that none of the top five state flags in the survey included a circular seal.<sup>1</sup>

A list published by the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1920 indicated that each of the other forty-seven states had already adopted a flag. Nebraska finally got its flag in 1925. The story of how that happened begins in 1921 with the introduction in the legislature of HR 571, a bill to create a commission to redesign the Nebraska state seal adopted in 1867. The bill also called for the new seal to be used as the primary feature on a state banner. Rep. George A. Williams of Fairmont introduced the bill at the urging of the Nebraska Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), whose main interest seemed to be the flag. The genesis of the DAR's interest in the adoption of a Nebraska state flag is not clear, but in March 1921 Williams's wife, Mabel, presented the legislative committee report at the Nebraska Society's annual conference. The report noted that "the work of the committee in obtaining legislation providing for a state flag . . . is well underway." It is not known whose idea it was to include a redesign of the state seal as part of the legislative bill.<sup>2</sup>

Because most state seals (including Nebraska's) were created soon after statehood, it is not surprising that they included symbols of the state's early history. The Nebraska State Constitution adopted by voters in June 1866 took effect upon statehood in 1867 and it provided for the creation of a state seal to be used by the governor in the transaction of official business. Accordingly, at the first session of the state legislature held after statehood, Rep. Isaac Wiles of Cass County introduced HR 41, "An Act to Provide for Procuring a Seal for the State of Nebraska." The bill passed and on June 14, 1867, and Gov. David Butler signed it into law.<sup>3</sup>

The bill included rather imprecise specifications for the seal's design. It was to be circular, "the eastern part of the circle to be represented by a steamboat ascending the Missouri River; the mechanic arts to be represented by a smith with hammer and anvil; in the foreground, agriculture to be represented by a settler's cabin, sheaves of wheat, and stalks of growing corn; in the back ground a train of cars heading towards the Rocky Mountains, and on the extreme west, the Rocky Mountains to be in plain view." Whatever the design may have lacked in artistry or clarity, it included popularly accepted symbols from Nebraska's early days.<sup>4</sup>

Williams's 1921 bill to create a new state seal was a signal that the original design had its critics. Among them was Nebraska State Historical Society historian Albert Watkins, whose commentary "Genesis of the Great Seal of Nebraska" appeared in the January-March 1920 issue of the Society's *Nebraska History and Record of Pioneer Days*. Watkins termed the specifications provided in the 1867 bill to be "a baffling conglomerate." Because the seal appears in circular form, said Watkins, "the pictorial part . . . is a landscape, so

**According to the North American Vexillological Association, the five most badly designed U.S. state flags are, clockwise from worst to best: Nebraska, Montana, Kansas, South Dakota, and Minnesota.**







Two interpretations of the Nebraska state seal. Left: a painted glass window that was originally part of the skylight ceiling of the House of Representatives at the U.S. Capitol (NSHS 7434-2); right, the seal as it appeared in the 1920 *Nebraska Blue Book*, published by the Nebraska Legislative Reference Bureau.

that in facing it, one takes the top as north, as in the case of maps. By this view the specification of the legislature is disobeyed, the Rocky Mountains being at the extreme north instead of the west.” Although the bill called for the Missouri River to appear in “the eastern part of the circle,” Watkins believed the seal gave the river “the appearance of running west with the steamboat going in the same direction.” Finally, although the bill had not designated the location of the blacksmith, he “usurps the stipulated place of agriculture in the extreme foreground, where he is every bit monarch of all he surveys.” Historical Society Superintendent Addison E. Sheldon agreed that “there is room to do much” in securing a more artistic design for the state seal, but “it may well be doubted that a better motto for seal or flag can be devised than the one of 1867.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1921 George Williams seemed less concerned with how the elements were arranged within the Great Seal than what they represented. “The man with the anvil does not fittingly represent the industry and labor of the state. The river and steamboat do not in the least symbolize transportation. The log cabin spells nothing . . . There is not a feature of the present seal, however much it stood for in the past, that fitly speaks of the modern Nebraska, save the sheaves of wheat.” The goal of his bill and of the commission it created was “to secure a design for the State Seal that will really be emblematic of all that Nebraska is today, and at the same time meet with the approval of the people of the State.” And now that Nebraska was embarking on the construction of a new state capitol, the time seemed right to develop a new seal that could be a

prominent decorative feature of the building.<sup>6</sup>

The *Nebraska State Journal* in Lincoln also commented about the state seal when it learned that Williams had introduced the bill to redesign it. “It must be conceded that it is archaic in conception and mediocre in drawing, but the fact remains that it is an interesting creation and that its main features still have vital significance. . . . Agriculture, transportation, and the mechanical trades remain our greatest industries. The steamboat has disappeared. The Rocky Mountains never belonged in the picture, perhaps, but in view of the importance they held to the plainsmen of fifty and seventy-five years ago, their presence is easily accounted for.”<sup>7</sup>

The *Journal* added a cautionary note: “States do not readily change their seals. The more ancient art around a seal, the prouder some of the states are of their original seals and the slower they are to modernize them. Representative Williams will find much support for his bill for redrawing the Nebraska seal, but the traditions of other states rather militate against success.”<sup>8</sup>

Once the state seal revision bill, HR 571, had been passed by the legislature and approved by Gov. Samuel R. McKelvie, the governor appointed a commission to select a new design. Representative Williams was the chair, with Mrs. E. B. Penney of Fullerton and Prof. George E. Condra of Lincoln the other members. At the commission’s first meeting on August 5, 1921, it invited suggestions from the people of Nebraska. “What does Nebraska stand for today and what should be incorporated in the seal that will symbolize the biggest and best of Nebraska?”

In 1921 Rep. George A. Williams of Fairmont introduced a bill to create a commission to redesign the state seal, which would be the primary feature on a state flag. NSHS RG2141-2404a

Should the present motto be retained, or could an improvement be made on the present one—'Equality before the Law?'"<sup>9</sup>

These questions were answered in part when the commission issued its report to Governor McKelvie on December 29, 1921. Although the motto was retained, "there has been no attempt to burden the [new] seal with heraldic symbols, but rather to make use of those material objects readily understood and comprehended by the people . . . The wheat, corn, locomotive, steamboat and blacksmith with his anvil are retained. Three bound volumes stand for education and included are also two antelopes and a buffalo head. The golden rod finds a place, and taken all in all, the design is a work of beauty and artistic skill that is sure to give satisfaction."<sup>10</sup>

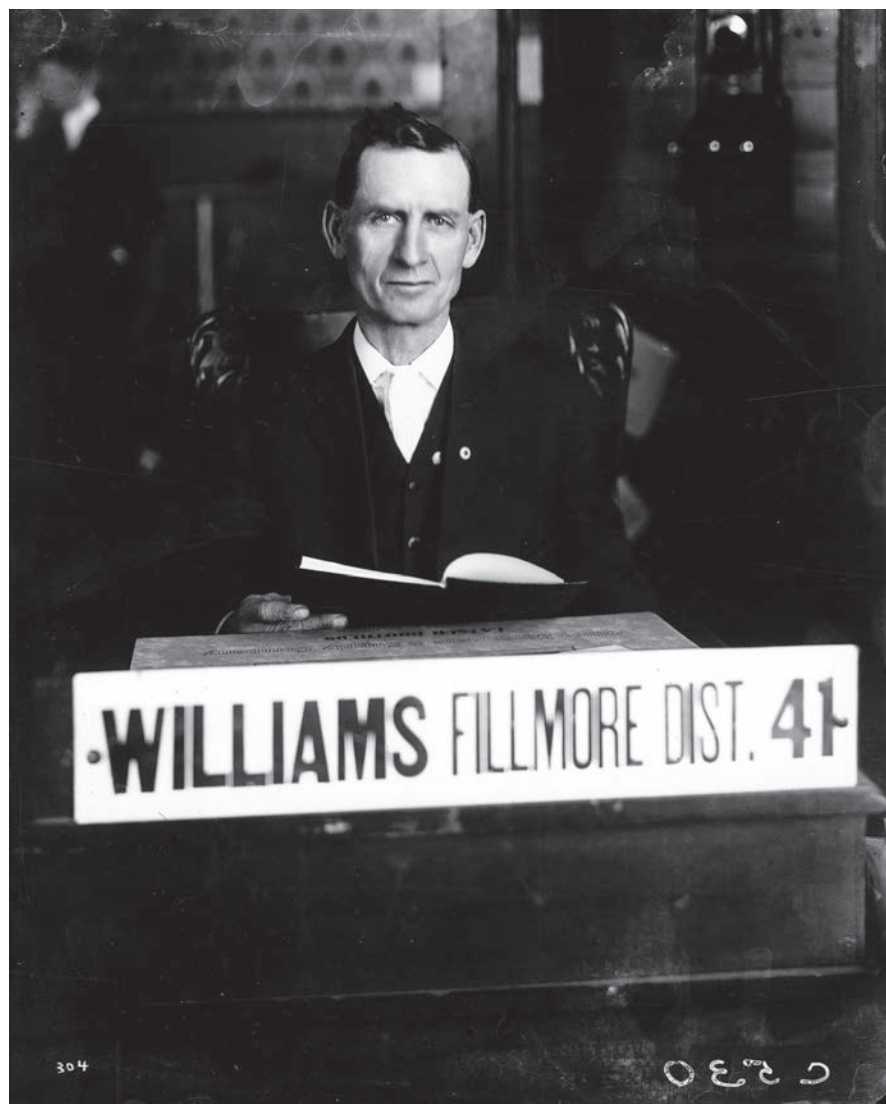
The report was not accompanied by an illustration of the new design or of any of its

competitors. The commission noted that although several designs had been submitted, "the one accepted is the work of B. G. Goodhue, the capitol architect, and is executed free of all cost." The actual design would not be revealed to the public until a fully detailed model was available. The commission's report neglected to mention that a legal issue had come up that needed to be resolved before the new design could become the official state seal.<sup>11</sup>

That issue had been raised in a September 2, 1921, opinion by the Nebraska Attorney General's office issued at Williams's request. Although Williams had asked only whether a new state seal would conflict with the requirements for seals used by notaries public (to which the answer was no), Assistant Attorney General Mason Wheeler went on to say that HR 571 had neglected to repeal the 1867 statute creating the original state seal. Therefore, "the present seal remains the state seal until the act is repealed and a new seal is approved by the legislature."<sup>12</sup>

There the matter rested until Governor McKelvie unveiled Goodhue's final design on August 26, 1922. It was in circular form, as was the original state seal. As Williams had revealed in the earlier report, symbols from the old seal were incorporated, although Goodhue's design was more explicitly heraldic than Williams had claimed.<sup>13</sup> What he had also not made clear in his earlier statement, which an *Omaha World-Herald* reporter clarified in describing Goodhue's seal, was that the elements carried over from the original seal had been rendered "in very low relief in the distant background on the top of the [new] seal, overshadowed by the high relief of the new heraldic composition. The old pioneer's cabin is removed, the train is backed out of the picture until only the cowcatcher of a modern engine shows, the hill [the mountains] has been lowered, the valley spread out to a plain, the river narrowed, but the old steamboat is still kept."<sup>14</sup>

Although Williams was quoted as saying that he did not think further legislative approval of the new seal was necessary because the statute creating the original seal had been repealed "by implication" with the passage of HR 571, apparently Governor McKelvie and Secretary of State Darius M. Amsberry did not agree and continued using the original seal. When the 1923 legislature convened, Sen. Charles J. Warner on January 31 introduced SF 267, an act to adopt the revised state seal "of the form and design approved by the State Insignia Commission" and repeal the 1867 statute





creating the original seal. Not only were hundreds of bills introduced during this session, much time was spent debating the possible repeal of the controversial Civil Administrative Code adopted during former Governor McKelvie's term and strongly opposed by Charles W. Bryan, the current governor. As a result, time ran out on Warner's state seal bill and it died on April 30 when the legislature voted to indefinitely postpone all bills not yet reported out of committee.<sup>15</sup>

Well before the actual Goodhue seal design was unveiled in August 1922 and even before the attorney general's September 2, 1921, opinion that a new state seal could not be adopted without further legislative action, the architect and his sculptor, Lee Lawrie, had planned for a modified version of the new seal to be carved on the exterior of the capitol's north entrance and also to appear inside. In early May 1921 Lawrie provided the Capitol Commission with estimates to prepare models of the sculpture and carving that included "four ornamental panels" on the north pylons. In June, the Capitol Commission authorized Goodhue to engage Lawrie as his collaborator.<sup>16</sup>

As the first phase of construction of the new capitol proceeded, including the monumental north entrance, the Nebraska Capitol Commission considered which seal should end up on the building. At its November 27, 1923, meeting, the commission still had hope for the Goodhue seal but if it were determined that "it is not the legal seal it will use the design of the old seal as one of the pieces of sculpture to be placed at . . . the main entrance."<sup>17</sup>

It may have been an account of this meeting that caught Goodhue's attention, prompting him to write the Capitol Commission in early December noting, "I have received a newspaper clipping in which it is stated . . . that there is a likelihood, or at any rate a possibility, that the State Seal, Arms, and Banner which we designed for a special committee may be scrapped." If that was true, said Goodhue, it would be a serious matter. "Not only has the State Seal, in accordance with the new design, been carefully modeled by Mr. Lawrie, but numerous variants of both Seal and Arms have been employed in the drawings . . . the outstanding example at the present time being the pylon ornament that flanks the main entrance." If his and Lawrie's designs could not be used, "entirely new drawings or in some cases, very radically changed ones, will become necessary."<sup>18</sup>

The Capitol Commission met on December 14 realizing, no doubt, that the failure of Warner's

bill earlier that year had made it likely that the Goodhue seal would not become the official state seal during the construction of the capitol building, if ever. Accordingly, the commission instructed its secretary, State Engineer R. L. Cochran, to advise Goodhue of the status of the "new seal" and instruct him to make no further use of it in capitol designs until further notice. Cochran duly wrote Goodhue to that effect on December 15. At the same time the *Nebraska State Journal* argued that no one wanted the old state seal to be part of the decoration of "this new building" and the commission should consider Goodhue's seal simply as "an artistic piece of work completely in harmony with the other good things created by Mr. Goodhue for the consolation and delight of the people of Nebraska"<sup>19</sup>

While Goodhue realized that the building was too far along to abandon the use of his modified seal on walls that were already up and waiting to be decorated, he was able to forestall its use other parts of the structure. On December 23, 1923, he instructed Edward Ardolino, whose firm was in charge of the carving, that the seal "should not be carved in the limestone wall back of the judges' bench in Court Room #1 . . . . In case a decision has not been reached to execute the work by the time you have completed the rest of your contract, we will ask you to submit a credit for the amount of this carving."<sup>20</sup>

By the spring of 1924 construction of the capitol's north entrance was nearly complete and the exterior carving needed to be finished while the Indiana limestone was still "green" and relatively soft. Notwithstanding the Capitol



**Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, architect of the Nebraska State Capitol.**



**Goodhue's 1921 proposal for a new state seal. Symbols from the old seal—train, mountains, river, and steamboat—are barely indicated in the background. *Nebraska Blue Book* (1922), 18.**



**In 1925 Rep. J. Lloyd McMaster of Lincoln introduced the bill to create an official state banner.** NSHS RG3823

Commission's decision at its December 1923 meeting, the adapted version of the Goodhue seal that Lawrie had modeled in clay was being carved on the pylons flanking the north entrance. On April 24 Goodhue died unexpectedly, which meant the Capitol Commission and Goodhue's associates were distracted from the day-to-day work being done on the building. The *Nebraska State Journal* was pleased with the pylon carving, recognizing that it "contains some of the objects in the proposed new state seal" even though Goodhue's design "as a whole was abandoned." The paper further noted that "visitors are much impressed with the carving on the main entrance" and glimpses of the work that could be discerned through the scaffolding gave observers "the impression that the carving will greatly add to the beauty of the capitol." By mid-summer 1924 the carving on the pylons at the north entrance, including the adaptation of the Goodhue seal, had been completed.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, questions involving which seal should be the official state seal seemed of less concern to some than the reality that Nebraska still had no state flag even though a debate over the seal would soon resurface. The suspension of Williams' HR 571 by the attorney general's 1921 opinion had also forestalled the adoption of the state banner that was supposed to feature the redesigned seal. Nebraska DAR members, particularly Mrs. Florence Hazen Miller of Crete, had expressed frustration at being unable to respond to requests from officials in Washington D.C. for a Nebraska flag to be displayed in the U. S. capitol building or during presidential inaugurations. In the minds of state flag advocates, not having one was "a disgrace to the state." With the 1925 session of the legislature about to convene, Mrs. Miller began giving a presentation entitled "Shall Nebraska have a State Banner?" at meetings of chambers of commerce and women's organizations around the state to drum up support. When the legislature met in January, she prevailed upon Rep. J. Lloyd McMaster of Lincoln to introduce HR 67, a bill to create an official state banner. The bill specified that the banner would be national blue with the seal of Nebraska in the center. It said nothing about the redesigned Goodhue seal, so if it were to pass, the original and still official state seal would appear on the banner.<sup>22</sup>

HR 67's introduction sparked a minor flurry of debate about whether Nebraska already had a state flag. Several individuals wrote to Rep. McMaster or to the newspapers noting that a 1917 "flag



**Sen. Charles Meacham, Jr., of Dorchester sought successfully to strip from the 1925 flag bill an amendment replacing the old seal with Goodhue's design. The old seal was retained, and the bill passed.** NSHS RG3823



**A version of Goodhue's seal at the capitol's north entrance. St. Mary's Catholic Church on K Street is visible in the background.** Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

number" of *National Geographic* had illustrated the "Nebraska State Flag." The flag had the Nebraska state seal centered in a yellow field. One correspondent went so far as to suggest that the DAR and Representative McMaster had been lax in checking their facts before introducing HR 67.<sup>23</sup>

On January 30 Miller asked the National Geographic Society for an explanation of the Nebraska "state flag" illustrated in its book. Editor Gilbert Grosvenor replied, "[Y]ou will find no statement in the Geographic's Flag Book that Nebraska has ever adopted, by legislative action, the flag described therein." Grosvenor went on to say that the yellow banner had been an unofficial flag used by the Nebraska National Guard. "This kind of flag has always been used as a State flag by the State troops in the absence of any other officially-adopted emblem."<sup>24</sup> After this controversy had been settled, HR 67 moved ahead in the Nebraska House, where it passed 91 to 4 on February 9 without amendment, and was sent to the senate.<sup>25</sup>

There, HR 67 was assigned to the Judiciary Committee, where it languished until late March; then it was amended to substitute the Goodhue



seal for the old seal and reported to the floor. The *Lincoln Star* noted that the amended bill would probably pass the senate and go back to the house, “where it is understood that there is some opposition to the adoption of the new seal. . . . [T]hough there may be some difficulty encountered over the seal, it is believed the banner will not be molested.”<sup>26</sup>

As it turned out, there was also some opposition to the new seal in the senate. On March 27 the *Lincoln Evening State Journal* reported that in a vote “that was never recorded,” the senate failed to pass the amended flag bill but before the vote could be announced, Sen. Charles Meacham Jr. of Dorchester, representing Mrs. Miller’s district, asked for the bill to be returned to the committee of the whole “to strike out the senate amendment which on the previous day had substituted the seal designed four years ago for the old state seal to be used in connection with a state banner.” The amendment was promptly stripped from the bill, which then passed the senate on a vote of 32-0. Only Sen. Henry Behrens, a Beemer banker, offered remarks recorded in the senate journal, though other senators must have shared his sentiments: “The Great Seal of the state has served the people so well in the early days of this great State of Nebraska I am not ready to discard it now.” In a letter to Miller written the same day, Judiciary Committee chairman Sen. John W. Cooper blamed his committee colleagues for amending the bill. Substituting the new seal for the old one had not been his idea. “Personally I was inclined to want to retain the old seal.”<sup>27</sup>

While opposition to the Goodhue seal had clearly been strong enough to settle its fate in the senate, the origin and depth of this opposition are difficult to quantify. A *Crete Vidette* editorial authored by Florence Miller made it clear that she had mobilized some of it. She praised “the statesmanship of the senator from Saline County [Meacham]” and noted that the Saline County commissioners had opposed the amendment replacing the old seal. Her editorial went on to ask, “But have we outgrown our pioneer days and our pioneer people that we are ashamed to have the nation see that Nebraska was ever a pioneer state? . . . What Nebraska is today is what our pioneers of yesterday have made.” With the defeat of the amendment to substitute the Goodhue seal, Nebraskans had shown they were not ashamed of their “pioneer” seal even after being offered one “designed by an architect in New York.”<sup>28</sup> Miller’s rather dismissive reference did not take into account that this same “architect in



Florence Hazen Miller of Crete, right, with the Nebraska state flag for which she was the leading advocate. The woman on the left is unidentified. NSHS RG3753-01

New York” had been praised by many Nebraskans for breaking with the past in his conception and design of the new capitol.

With the passage of HR 67 in its original iteration now accomplished, it was time to produce the state banner that the bill authorized. It was no surprise that Secretary of State Charles W. Pool appointed the bill’s introducer, Representative McMaster, and its leading advocate, Florence Miller, to help accomplish that task. Lue R. Spencer of Lincoln also served on the committee. Completing the work did not take long. On July 16, 1925, the new Nebraska banner, four and one-half by five and one-half feet with a gold fringe and the state seal in a field of national blue, was unveiled and presented



Since Nebraska had no official state flag, *National Geographic* printed the state seal on a yellow banner for its 1917 “flag number.” When asked about it, Editor Gilbert Grosvenor explained that the yellow banner had been an unofficial flag used by the Nebraska National Guard.





Despite its failure to be adopted as the state seal, Goodhue's design appears in several places in the Capitol. Above, left to right: a carving in the Law Library (NSHS RG5118-7-4); in the legislature's seal; above the speaker's desk in the East Senate Chamber, now known as the Warner Memorial Chamber (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division); and, at right, above the bench in the State Supreme Court chamber (Office of the Capitol Commission).



to Gov. Adam McMullen. It had been manufactured by the National Permanent Decoration Company of Mason City, Iowa, at a cost of \$100. A state banner of the official design had already been flown, however. At one second after midnight on July 1, 1925, the day the banner law took effect, a small Nebraska flag with a fifteen-inch-diameter state seal embroidered in gold and silver was hoisted on a pole in Crete, probably by Mrs. Miller, and it remained flying until 8 a.m.<sup>29</sup>

While the battle over the flag and seal had been underway, with an outcome that finally seemed to eliminate any expectation that the original state seal would be replaced, so too had construction of the capitol building proceeded according to the plans and decorative program developed by Goodhue and his collaborators. With the precedent established by the pylon carvings, modified versions of the Goodhue seal design were also incorporated into later phases of the capitol's construction. These vary somewhat from the pylon carving but all include the bison head above three books, the fasces, and the scales of justice. A pierced wood carving on an ash balcony railing in the south reading room of the Law Library does not include the state motto. The motto is incorporated on a polychrome plaster version attached to the limestone wall above the bench in the Supreme Court chamber. A circular "composition" version



that includes most elements of the 1921 Goodhue state seal design (two antelopes, and the faintly rendered mountains, blacksmith, and locomotive, but not the encircling words “Great Seal of the State of Nebraska”) hangs above the speaker’s desk in the East Senate Chamber, now the Warner Memorial Chamber. It was installed in 1927 and explained in a letter by Hardie Phillip, an associate in the Goodhue firm: “Please note that this design

does not represent in any way an effort to impose the new State Arms that were suggested at one time but have never been approved—but is simply an effort to represent symbolically the various elements of Nebraska’s traditional heraldry.”<sup>30</sup>

With the state banner adopted in 1925 and the capitol finally completed in 1932, the saga of Nebraska’s seal and banner had seemingly come to an end. Such a conclusion would turn out to be



**The state seal is part of a new fountain in the renovated Centennial Mall on the capitol's north side.** Photo by David Bristow.



**Sen. Eugene Mahoney of Omaha in 1961. Calling the Nebraska flag “the homeliest in the nation,” In 1972 Mahoney introduced a resolution to study changing the flag’s design. Public opposition soon persuaded him to back down. NSHS RG2141-1410**

wrong, at least with respect to the banner. Only minor issues would surface during the next forty years, however. For example HR 62, the 1925 bill creating the banner, had been silent about how and when it should be flown. Whether the new banner was regularly flown at the capitol building is unclear but one can infer that it was not. Why else would the legislature in 1941 enact a law to provide that the legislature’s sergeant at arms was to be responsible for procuring a state banner and flying it over the capitol when the legislature was in session? The same bill required the banner to be taken down when the legislature was adjourned.<sup>31</sup>

Then, in 1963, State Senator Eugene Mahoney of Omaha sponsored the passage of LB 556, which designated the banner as the “official state flag” and further provided that it could be flown on such occasions and in such places where the U.S. flag would be flown. Having succeeded in giving the state flag more visibility in 1963, some nine years later Mahoney decided to try more drastic measures to rectify what he saw as this Nebraska symbol’s shortcomings. During the legislative session of 1972, he introduced a resolution to study changing the flag’s design. Newspaper articles quoted Mahoney as saying that the Nebraska state flag was “the homeliest in the nation” and “a poor symbol for the state.” Both the Lincoln and Omaha papers invited readers to weigh-in, the *Journal* soliciting designs from the public and the *World-Herald* printing a ballot that readers could mark and send in.<sup>32</sup>

The response could not have been what the senator expected. Samples of new flag designs that the *Journal-Star* illustrated (of some two hundred received) seemed uninspired or graphically obtuse. The *World-Herald*’s ballot tallied 2,091 votes against changing the flag’s design and only 342 in favor, a seven to one landslide. Elizabeth G. Hall, the granddaughter of Isaac Wiles, the state seal’s originator, could not understand why the legislature would waste time and money redesigning the flag because the current one “is very appropriate. There’s no reason to mess around with screwy little things like that. We could spend our money in far better places.”<sup>33</sup>

A minority of respondents on the *World-Herald*’s ballot liked the idea of a new flag design. An eighteen-year-old girl thought it would be “catching up with the Joneses” and “I want my children to be able to look at our flag and see some type of meaning in it.” An elementary teacher in Central City preferred a simpler design. Her pupils were

assigned to draw miniature flags of the fifty states and Nebraska’s “is just too hard to draw.” Faced with apparently overwhelming resistance to tinkering with Nebraska’s flag, it did not take Senator Mahoney long to cave in. “I’m going to recommend that the study never be made. It’s obvious that the people of Nebraska are well satisfied with the flag we’ve got. I’m dropping the whole thing.”<sup>34</sup>

After all was said and done, Nebraska’s state seal has remained unchanged since 1867, and the state flag is still just as it was adopted in 1925. Nebraskans have been steadfast in clinging to the state symbols they have grown used to. Should we care then whether flag experts (vexillologists) think our flag is the worst of all the state flags—largely due to its detailed and hard-to-decipher state seal? Is there anyone among us with the courage to risk Senator Mahoney’s fate by daring to suggest that our seal and flag lack pizzazz? To propose that it may be time once again, as the state observes its sesquicentennial, to reconsider whether the seal and flag effectively represent Nebraska to the world? If so, you can be pretty sure your name will appear prominently, for better or worse, in any subsequent history of these two Nebraska icons. 🇺🇸

*The author acknowledges the assistance provided by Capitol Tour Guide Jamison Wyatt’s January 2012 research paper, “The Nebraska State Seal and Flag: History and Development,” which included several important documents from the records of the Nebraska Capitol Commission that would have required significant time to locate.—JEP*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Sorry, Montana! America’s Best and Worst State Flags,” [www.cnn.com/2015/05/07/living/mike-rowe](http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/07/living/mike-rowe) accessed July 23, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> “Flags of the States,” *Nebraska History and Record of Pioneer Days* 3 (Apr. – June 1920): 4; “Report of the Legislative Committee,” *Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual State Conference, Nebraska Society, Daughters of the American Revolution, March 15, 16, 17, 1921*, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln (hereafter NSHS); HR571, in Nebraska State Flag scrapbook, RG 2, Records of the Office of the Secretary of State (microfilm), NSHS.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Watkins, “Genesis of the Great Seal of Nebraska,” *Nebraska History and Record of Pioneer Days* 3 (Jan.-Mar. 1920): 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*; Addison E. Sheldon, “Nebraska State Flag and State Seal,” in *ibid.*



<sup>6</sup> "State Seal Commission Meets," *Fillmore Chronicle* (Fairmont, Nebraska), Aug. 12, 1921; "The State Seal," *Fillmore Chronicle*, Aug. 19, 1921. HR 3, passed by the 1919 session of the legislature, created a capitol commission to oversee the design and construction of a new capitol building and established the means of funding it. Williams cosponsored the bill.

<sup>7</sup> "The State Seal," *Nebraska State Journal*, Feb. 3, 1921, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> "State Seal Commission Meets." Mrs. Penny was president of the American Legion Auxiliary and the Nebraska Federation of Woman's Clubs. *Nebraska State Journal*, Mar. 30, 1922, 6. Adoption of the state motto is discussed in James E. Potter, "Equality before the Law: Thoughts on the Origin of Nebraska's State Motto," *Nebraska History* 91 (Fall/Winter 2010): 116-21.

<sup>10</sup> "Proposed New Seal," *Nebraska Blue Book*, 1922, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> *Report of the Attorney General, State of Nebraska, Biennium Ending Dec. 31, 1922* (Lincoln: Kline Pub. Co.), 363-64.

<sup>13</sup> Goodhue had often created heraldic designs for coats of arms, bookplates, and illustrations before becoming architect of the Nebraska Capitol. Personal communication from Matt Hansen, State of Nebraska, Office of the Capitol Commission, July 17, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> "New State Seal Symbol of the Future Nebraska," *Omaha World-Herald*, Aug. 27, 1922, 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Senate Journal*, Legislature of Nebraska, Forty-Second Session (1923), 549, 1678.

<sup>16</sup> Lee Lawrie to Capitol Commission, May 9, 1921, and Minutes, Nebraska Capitol Commission, June 30, 1921, Capitol Archives, Office of the Capitol Commission.

<sup>17</sup> "Marble for New Capitol," *Nebraska State Journal*, Nov. 28, 1923, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Goodhue to Capitol Commission, Dec. 7, 1923, Capitol Archives.

<sup>19</sup> Minutes, Nebraska Capitol Commission, Dec. 14, 1923; Cochran to Goodhue, Dec. 15, 1923, Capitol Archives; "More or Less Personal," *Nebraska State Journal*, Dec. 16, 1923, 6B.

<sup>20</sup> Goodhue to Ardolino, Dec. 23, 1923, Capitol Archives.

<sup>21</sup> "Carving on New Capitol," *Nebraska State Journal*, Apr. 24, 1924:12; "More or Less Personal," *Sunday State Journal*, May 18, 1924.

<sup>22</sup> HR 67, *House Journal*, Legislature of Nebraska, Forty-third Session (1925), 114.

<sup>23</sup> "Nebraska Adopts Banner," *Crete Vidette*, Apr. 2, 1925, 1, 3; The "flag number" of the magazine also appeared as *Flags of the World* by Lt. Commander Byron McCandless, USN, and Gilbert Grosvenor (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1917), with the yellow Nebraska flag illustrated on 331.

<sup>24</sup> Gilbert Grosvenor to Mrs. B. G. Miller, Mar. 3, 1925, copy in Nebraska Flag Scrapbook.

<sup>25</sup> HR 67, *House Journal*, Legislature of Nebraska, Forty-third Session (1925), 114, 476

<sup>26</sup> "State Banner Bill Advanced," *Lincoln Star*, Mar. 26, 1925, 1.

<sup>27</sup> "State's Old Seal Stands," *Evening State Journal*, Mar. 27, 1925, 1; *Senate Journal*, Legislature of Nebraska, Forty-third Session (1925), 1188; Cooper to Miller, Mar. 27, 1925, Nebraska State Flag Scrapbook.

<sup>28</sup> "Nebraska Adopts Banner."

<sup>29</sup> "New State Flag now on Display," *Lincoln Star*, July 16, 1925, 2; Mrs. B. G. Miller account, Nebraska DAR Scrapbook, 1924-26, RG 3823, Nebraska DAR, Box 3, f. 5, NSHS. This "first" state banner was hanging in the Secretary of State's office in the capitol as of January 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Hardie Phillip, AIA, to Capitol Commission, June 21, 1927, Capitol Archives.

<sup>31</sup> LB 44, *Laws of Nebraska*, Fifty-fifth Session (1941), 419.

<sup>32</sup> LR 75, *Journal of the Nebraska Legislature*, Eighty-second Legislature, second session (1972), 1357, 1712; "Ideas for New State Flag Requested," *Sunday Journal-Star*, Apr. 9, 1972, 1B; "Cast a Ballot in 'Flag Poll,'" *Omaha World-Herald*, Apr. 15, 1972, 1.

<sup>33</sup> "Deadline for State Flag Ideas Extended," *Sunday Journal-Star*, Apr. 23, 1972, 1B; "Vote 7-1 Against New State Flag," *Sunday Omaha World-Herald*, Apr. 23, 1972, 1; "Miss Hall: Changing Flag Plan 'Screw,'" *Sunday Journal-Star*, July 2, 1972, 2B.

<sup>34</sup> "Vote 7-1 Against New State Flag."

