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## Maine State Seal Essay

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Adopted without controversy or alteration by Maine's first Legislature, the State Seal evoked a less cordial response from other quarters.

William D. Williamson felt that the Seal was rather crudely done owing to the haste with which it was designed and executed since there was immediate need for it by the new Legislature. "...hence people of taste and judgement have not been altogether pleased with the devises or emblems," he observed. [1]

In fact, only a week elapsed from the appointment of a joint committee for the purpose of designing a State Seal until chairman Isaac G. Reed of Waldoboro presented his full report to the Legislature. The Seal was adopted on June 9, 1820. [2]

Use of the motto *Dirigo*, emblazoned directly beneath the North Star was to provide a tempting target for neighboring States. Any number of immodest misinterpretations were advanced with appalling enthusiasm.

A truly vicious attack came from the City of Brotherly Love. Published first in the new *National Gazette and Literary Register* (ancient ancestor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*) the article was reprinted in the *Eastern Argus* on August 15, 1820. Robert Walsh, principal editor of the *Gazette* seized upon the opportunity which *Dirigo* presented, and proceeded to heap scorn upon the new State of Maine. [3] Couched in the ponderously pedantic fashion of his day, Walsh posed as Benevolent Tutor to an unenlightened northern neighbor who seemed to be having considerable difficulty with his Latin grammar.

This sneering insult was countered with an eruption of erudition filling two full columns in the *Eastern Argus* for September 12, 1820. Purposefully ostentatious, the article featured a veritable roll call of classical authors, prominent and obscure, all supporting the author's basic contention that

the State of Maine could conjugate and interperet *dirigo* as it damn well pleased. After this dazzling didactic display, the author, curiously enough, claimed anonymity and signed simply as *A Citizen of Maine*.

It really wouldn't matter much today who wrote this amusing excursion into sophistry were it not for the fact that, at the same time, the author reveals an intimate knowledge of the deliberations carried on by Isaac Reed's joint committee. Here we learn of an earlier version of the State Seal which was rejected by the committee before presentation to the Legislature:

"As the historian may feel inclined to record it, we observe that two series of brilliant northern lights ushered in the birth of our new State; one occuring while the constitution was forming; and the other while we were making our first elections under it. Had not mechanical objections presented themselves, this circumstance (as being one of good augury) might possibly have found a notice in the armorial bearings of the State, under the shape of an electric bow with rays issuing from it; accompanied with a motto from Paul's discourse to Agrippa: 'I saw in the way a light.'...The other part of the proposed arms being all adopted, the motto *Dirigo* was made to take the place of the bow, as the bow was rejected; and a new drawing was executed on the occasion suited to the wishes of the committee." [4]

It would be only logical to assume that the author of this quotation was a member of Isaac Reed's Committee, if not Reed himself. Louis C. Hatch makes just such a conclusion, ignoring the generous clue provided in the fact that the entire article appearing in the *Eastern Argus* on September 12th was a reprint from the *Hallowell Gazette*. [5]

Almost as mysterious as the appearances of the aurora borealis in 1819 and 1820, a key document has surfaced, quite by chance, from the vault at the Society Library which provides ample evidence for identifying *A Citizen of Maine*. [6] The document was written in the unmistakable hand of Dr. Benjamin Vaughan of Hallowell. [7] A note at the head of the first page written years ago by Alpheus Packard attests this conviction, and comparison with numerous known specimens of Vaughan's writing we now have at the Society leaves us without reasonable doubt. [8] Comparing the article in the *Eastern Argus* with the document at Maine Historical, stylistically and from the standpoint of identity of contents, we were led to the inexorable conclusion that both works had to proceed from the same brain. [9]

Through the research efforts of Jessica K. Haskell, carried out at about the time of the State's Centennial in 1920, we know that Dr. Vaughan was *not* a member of Reed's Committee, but that his influence on their deliberations was very marked indeed. [10] We can see clearly now why his influence was so pervasive since the document transcribed below supplies the missing documentary evidence which would have given proof to Miss Haskell's strong hunch.

Far more interesting than any identity solution is the fact that this document quite obviously represents the first idea worked upon by Reed's committee, and was in fact intended as a working paper for that committee. [11] Here we have the germinal idea for the State Seal which was accepted in all particulars except two, which, as the document reveals, were central to Dr. Vaughan's concept; the bow, representing the *aurora borealis* in the position now occupied by the motto *Dirigo*, and the accompanying motto from Saint Paul, "I saw in the way a light." [Acts 26:13]

It is really not too difficult, even in the twentieth century, to see why the gentlemen of the committee might have found Dr. Vaughan's fondness for the mysterious *aurora borealis* a bit abstruse; and as men of action, would have preferred *Dirigo* over Saint Paul's beautiful, but rather passive sounding quotation. Nevertheless, the original idea as proposed by Dr. Vaughan conveys a richness of meaning for the symbols used in the State Seal which the terse, tight prose of the official report can only suggest. [12]

Through internal evidence, it becomes apparent that the document had to be written by Dr. Vaughan sometime between April 13 and the first week in June, 1820. Herewith a literal transcription of the text:

"A seal for the new State of Maine formed of a coat of arms & of its accompaniments, ought to be original and simple, as well as characteristic; but as eighteen states have already chosen their emblems, our power of selection would be much confined, were there not circumstances in our situation which make us stand alone, & of which a part may easily find a place in our seal.

For example: we are the most northern state in the Union; & hence, though all may claim their share in the thirteen stars, yet what is an ordinary star for all other states, becomes the north star for us. Massachusetts has indeed a star near the face of its Indian; but it could have no title to give it a name, excepting through ourselves; & as our connection with her is dissolved, we may

ourselves assume this star, by making it into a crest, under the above name. ----- In this situation it will be found in the inclosed sketch.

Below this north star, a bow will be seen crossing the paper. This is a luminous bow, such as is occasionally seen as a portion of the aurora borealis\* or northern lights; & to ascertain this to be its nature, clusters of rays issue from its northern side, as in fact often happens in the heavens. This emblem has no necessary reference in our plan to our geographical position; but chiefly regards a more pointed circumstance. When the convention for forming the Constitution of Maine was sitting in Portland, in October last, the appearances of the Aurora were brilliant & frequent; & their visit was repeated in a splendid manner on April 3rd, when we chose our Governor & Legislators; being followed by a number of fainter traces of light within the next ten nights. It has seemed therefore interesting to record what is significant as an emblem, and may to many seem encouraging as an event.

Farther to avail ourselves of this impression, and to anticipate & set aside the puny jest, that we mean to consider ourselves as "northern lights;" a motto to our seal is given, from the address of Paul to Agrippa, shewing that we simply refer to our entry upon a new state of things, at a time when we saw a celestial light. The words of Paul are "I saw in the way a light." - Other applications may possibly be found hereafter for our motto; but we must first try to merit them, and history must next enumerate them. In the mean [sic] the introduction of this motto (if our motto be accepted) may add respect to our government, as similar incidents have done in certain infant governments in antiquity; while on the other hand, its singularity will induce strangers to inquire into its meaning, & thence lead them to be informed of what respects the bow. - But what regards the motto is not insisted upon; and we shall again touch upon the subject of the aurora.

The white pine or mast is another of the peculiar marks of Maine; & therefore it has a conspicuous place in our sketch. Whatever pines once existed in other parts of New Englad, they no where continue to abound so as to figure in commerce, excepting with ourselves. Hence this pine fills nearly the whole shield of our coat of arms; & for the sake of simplicity, it stands as the representative of all our forest trees. It is beautiful as an object; it produces wealth & convenience to us; and it

commonly indicates good soil. - Vermont has a pine tree in its seal, but it is mixed with other trees.

The moose deer lying at the foot of the pine denotes the abundance of our wild lands; & therefore our future increase of people. The moose it will be observed, can only exist at a distance from inhabitants.

The supporters of the shield containing our arms properly so called, will nearly exhibit what remains of our story. Our extent of sea-coast & fondness for navigation is denoted by a mariner resting on an anchor; which anchor is also the anchor of hope. The cultivator of the soil stands as his counterpart; his scythe denoting that after his pasturage is spent, he has still a reserve of winter-fodder. We reject his other tools, as well as the signs of his principal crops; for simplicity requires that we should figure nothing which will naturally occur to our recollection or imagination.

For the same reason we are silent respecting manufactures. Our domestic manufactures will be known; & we do not meddle with the subject of forced manufactures, since many will object to them while we have millions of acres of vacant lands to colonize.

If it be thought expedient to explain in our seal of state, that we have fisheries close at hand, a cod-fish with its head bent, so as to mark it to be in an inanimate state, may be placed at the foot of the shield containing our arms. But in figuring a sailor, it may be thought that we have figured also a fisherman.

But let us return to the subject of the aurora borealis; for this meteor may appear to some to be too transient, & to have uses too obscure, to be an object worthy of attention. - To this we reply, that the world at large has always treated it with respect; & that our ignorance of its causes & connections is one of the reasons for drawing it into notice. Our northern situation is particularly favorable for its examination; since it enables us to discover the base & summit & often the whole breadth of its appearance, & to view it more closely than can be done by our more southern friends; as well as through a less deep & less dense body of air: circumstances which render it our peculiar duty to study it. Our situation has already enabled us to discover that the modern European hypothesis, that the centre of the bow ----- of the aurora borealis lies every where in the magnetic meridian of each place, will not extend to Maine; where the magnetic meridian lies to the west of north, &

the centre of the bow to the East. The appearances of the 3rd of April have shown also, that the band of light (like a narrow strip of cloud) which sometimes traverses the heavens from the East to the West in a right line, passing to the south of the spectator's zenith, connected with the aurora borealis; since a band of this kind on that evening, had projections of luminous matter towards the north, resembling portions of the matter of the aurora: & a similar occurrence in Great Britain on the 17th of October, 1819, confirms the observation. We shall only add on the subject of this emblem, that it will certainly not form an objection to its adoption, if it elevates the minds of our people, & makes them anxious to do what shall be approved; nor yet if it tends to create philosophical observers.

But there is a second objection to our sketch; which is that it calls upon the world too strongly to remark upon our northern position. But silence on our side cannot prevent the operation of prejudice on theirs. Let us not then shew ourselves ashamed of our situation. Then grow great not by the warmth of their sun, but by their habits; and if their climate is of a nature to produce in them good habits, their powers and success will be in proportion. Mrs. Barbauld [13], an eminent English poet, says of the north of England, what we shall apply to Maine:

"Man is the nobler growth our realms supply,  
And souls are ripened in our northern sky."

Note\* This is pronounced as if written Au-rò-ra Bo-re-à-lis. It means a dawning light in the north. - This meteor, when it appears to the south in the southern hemisphere, is called Aurora Aus-trâ-lis."

-----NOTES-----

1. William D. Williamson, *History of the State of Maine...* Hallowell, 1832. vol. 2, p. 677.
2. *Resolves of the State of Maine from 1820 to 1828*. Portland, 1828. vol. 1, p. 21-23. Haskell, Jessica, "Origin of the Seal of State of Maine," [*Portland*] *Evening Express & Advertiser*, January 18, 1922.
3. The article is unsigned, but Benjamin Vaughan identifies Robert Walsh (1784-1859) in his article of rebuttal in *Eastern Argus*, September 12, 1820. Walsh's biography appears in *Dictionary of American Biography*. Considering the careers of Walsh and Vaughan, it would be surprising if this were the

first time they crossed literary swords.

4. *Eastern Argus*, September 12, 1820.

5. Louis C. Hatch, *History of Maine*. New York, 1919. vol. 1, p. 171. The Hallowell origins are clearly indicated in the *Eastern Argus*. Either Hatch or his printer wrongly attributes the quotation in question to Isaac Reed by means of juxtapositioning a quotation from the September 12, 1820 issue with a June 13, 1820 issue of the *Eastern Argus* without identifying same.

6. The Curator of Manuscripts discovered this document in October while engaged in a routine project. This project involves the removal of manuscripts from scrapbooks to preserve them from being destroyed by acid migration from inferior scrapbook mounting pages. Since we have more than 300 scrapbooks destined for such treatment, it was pure chance that the scrapbook containing this particular document was one of the first selected.

7. A good bibliography of biographical sources for Benjamin Vaughan (1751-1835) appears at the end of his entry in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. One of the most interesting accounts of this truly extraordinary man is to be found in the *Collections of the Maine Historical Society*, Series one, vol. 6, p. 85-103.

8. Alpheus S. Packard (1798-1884) distinguished Bowdoin professor, was librarian of Maine Historical Society, 1835-1881. His note, undated, at the head of the Vaughan document reads: "I am confident that this is the hand writing of Benjamin Vaughan, L.S.D. of Hallowell. A.S.P."

9. The temptation was great to reprint the September 12th *Argus* article in full, so that readers could draw their own conclusions. However, this would have left us with room for little else in the *Newsletter*.

10. Miss Jessica J. Haskell (1879-1954) of Hallowell dug into the files at the Office of the Secretary of State. She found an unpublished list of the joint committee members which we include here as a matter of record: from the Senate, William Moody of York and William D. Williamson; from the House, John F. Scammon of Saco, Silas Estes of Westbrook, and Stephen Purrington of Harpswell. The only remnant of Miss Haskell's research we can locate presently is contained in an article for the [Portland] *Evening Express & Advertiser*, January 18, 1922.

11. Two observations urge the conclusion that the committee actually used this document for a working paper. First, Dr. Vaughan would certainly not have included a pronunciation guide for *aurora borealis* for his own edification. Secondly,

paragraph four of the document, beginning with the words, "Farther to avail ourselves..." is excised by three vertical pen strokes through the entire paragraph. It will be noted that this paragraph contains precisely those features of Vaughan's proposal which the committee rejected.

12. Frequently reprinted in text books, etc. as an explanation for the State Seal, the original report is to be found in *Resolves of the State of Maine* for June 9, 1820. An instructive, albeit academic, exercise is to compare the amount of verbiage in the official report attributable directly to Vaughan's proposal. Authorship for the official report is traditionally given to chairman Reed. Dr. Vaughan would have been the last to worry about that. His brilliance was matched by his exceptional modesty. Of the books he wrote while in England and America, not one shows the fact that Vaughan was author. (See his biography in *Dictionary of American Biography*)

13. Anne Letitia Barbauld (1743-1825), see *Dictionary of National Biography*.

G. Morris