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1958 two color seal adding "The" to University of Michigan

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The Seals of the University of Michigan

The University of Michigan has used various seals during its one-hundred-and-ninety-six year history. The story of the University of Michigan seals includes several unsolved mysteries.

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The current University of Michigan Seal *

This on-line exhibit prepared by Marjorie Barritt and Gregory Kinney, University Archives and Records Program

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A Chronology of University of Michigan Seals



1817

Temple of Wisdom Seal

Drawing based on the description by John Monteith; there is no proof that the seal was ever struck.



1825

"Mystery Seal"

Struck and declared "Seal of the University of Michigania" by the Trustees of the University of Michigan, April 30, 1825. No image of the seal has been found.



1843-1895

Minerva Seal

The image at left is believed to be a 1937 drawing by Wilfred B. Shaw, General Secretary of the Alumni Association, 1904-1929, and Director of Alumni Relations, 1929-1950.



1895

Lamp of Knowledge Seal

Founding date of 1837.



1929

Lamp of Knowledge Seal

Founding date of 1817.



1958

Adding "The" to University of Michigan.

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1817 Temple of Wisdom Seal

On Friday the 12th of September in the year 1817, John Monteith, president of the University of Michigania, recorded the following in the *Laws and Ordinances of the University of Michigania*:

An act concerning the Seal of the University of Michigania.

Be it enacted by the University of Michigania that on the Seal of the University there shall be a device representing six pillars supporting a dome, with the motto "Epistemia" at their base, and the legend, "Seal of the University of Michigania" around the margin, and light shining on the dome from above; and until such seal shall be provided the President may use any temporary seal which may be convenient.

Passed at the city of Detroit on Friday the twelfth day of September, one thousand eight hundred and seventeen.

Attest J.L. Whiting

Register



[\[Image of original of the Act\]](#)

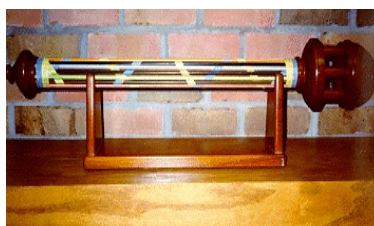
Mystery No. 1: There is no proof that this seal was ever struck. However in the holdings of the Bentley Library there is a drawing -- unattributed -- of this description.

THE TEMPLE OF WISDOM SEAL AND THE FIRST MACE OF THE UNIVERSITY

The John Monteith description of the Temple of Wisdom Seal has lived on in several reincarnations. The six pillars and dome design was used to create the first Mace of the University in 1952, when Warner Rice, who was then marshall of the faculty, mentioned to Frank E. Robbins, assistant to the president, that there was no symbol of the office of marshall. They turned to Monteith's description of the seal of the University of Michigania, which Rice and Robbins characterized as a seal incorporating a *temple of wisdom*. The new mace used a temple for the head and was fashioned of Michigan walnut taken two years earlier from a stair case in University Hall before it was razed. The handle was of fifteen rods, each enameled in the color of one of the fifteen individual schools of the University and bound together by maize and blue ribbons. [[Ann Arbor News 10/17/52, article on U of M mace](#)]

The first Mace of the University of Michigan still exists and graces the office of the director of the Bentley Historical Library.

The Temple of Wisdom design is also used in the letterhead of the Bentley Historical Library and in the Bentley Historical Library Homepage heading.



The First Mace of the University

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1825 - The "Mystery" Seal

We know that a seal was struck in 1825 as the minutes of the meeting the Trustees of the University of Michigan, held at the Academy in the City of Detroit, on Saturday, the 30th of April 1825, include the following resolution:

Resolved, That the seal procured by the President of this Board, under the instructions and authority in the resolution of the 29th of October 1824, now in the custody of the Secretary, and having upon it certain emblematic devices, and these words near the circumference, "Seal of the University of Michigan", shall be and the same is hereby declared to be the seal of the said University.

Trustees Minutes 1821-1837, Box 1, University of Michigan. Board of Regents, BHL

[\[Image of original resolution from minute books\]](#)

Frank Robbins' inquiries on the origins of the seal

Frank Robbins, assistant to the President from 1921 to 1953, and to whom we owe much of what we know of the mysteries of the university seals, made inquiries during the late thirties into the origins of the seal. In a letter to G.B. Krum of the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, he wrote:

. . . while we have impressions of the seals in use after the University came to Ann Arbor, there is none, as far as I know, of any seal used by the Trustees during the Detroit period. . . . Have you an impression of this seal or have you ever seen one? It must have been used on deeds given for University lands.

Frank Robbins to G.B. Krum, April 8, 1937, Vertical File, Fimu D1, Seals, BHL

[\[Robbins letter to Krum\]](#)



Frank E. Robbins

In a newspaper article Robbins stated: "Considerable research . . . has failed to come upon any instance of its use, although there are records of transactions in which its imprint must have been employed."

[newspaper article, paper and date unknown, Vertical File, Fimu D1, Seals, BHL]

[\[Image of article, undated\]](#)

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1843-1895 The Minerva Seals

The Minerva seal was authorized by the Regents in 1843, six years after the university moved to Ann Arbor. Its device and legend as described in the minutes of the Regents:

Minerva pointing a youth to the Temple of Wisdom, surrounded with the inscription, "University of Michigan," and "*MINERVA MONSTRAT ITER QUAQUE OSTENDIT SE DEXTRA SEQUAMUR*"

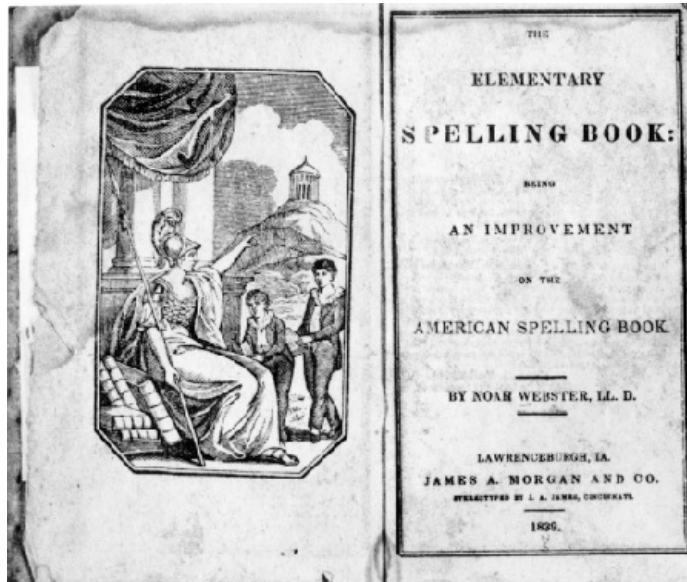
University of Michigan Trustees Meetings, 1821-1837, University of Michigan Board of Regents, Box 1, BHL

[\[Image of original minutes\]](#)

To Frank Robbins the Minerva seal also presented a mystery: what were its origins? After considerable research and letter writing, he published his conclusions in a 1937 *Michigan Alumnus* article. [*Michigan Alumnus* Oct. 2 1937, p.5-6]

[\[Text of Robbins' article\]](#)

The original Minerva seal was presented to the Regents by Regent Jonathan Kearsley on April 5, 1843. Robbins decided that the Kearsley design was based on the frontispiece of the 1839 reissue of Noah Webster's speller. In 1829 Webster's speller had been revised and given the new name of *The Elementary Spelling Book* and issued in blue paper-covered boards which gave it its familiar name of the "blue back speller."



Frontispiece of 1839 reissue of Noah Webster's *The Elementary Speller*

The frontispiece, according to Robbins, has all of the components of the Minerva seal. Minerva with a young person pointing with her right hand up a hill to the left of the design; on the hill, in the frontispiece, is a Pantheon-like temple with the inscription "Knowledge" on the architrave of the gable in front and "Fame" below the round dome behind; in the seal it is a simpler, round temple, with "Sophia" ("wisdom") in Greek letters above the columns.

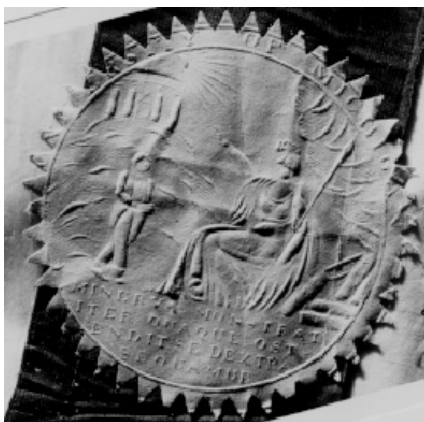
Next Robbins hypothesized about the Latin motto used by Kearsley and decided it was a revision of line 388 of the second book of Virgil's *Aeneid*. The original translated as

"Friends," said he, "where first the chance of escape shows a way, and where her hand points, let us follow."

Robbins decided that Kearsley had substituted Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, for Vergil's "fortuna salutis," the hand of fortune, and gave the quotation an entirely different meaning.

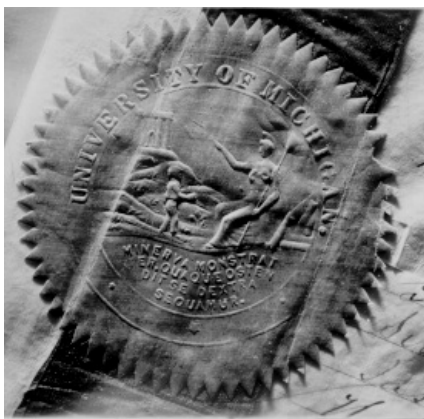


Impressions made from two versions of the 1843 Minerva Seals found in the Office of the President, September 1995.



1843 Minerva Seal

The Minerva seal went through at least one major recutting in 1865 and one minor one. As first adopted, a straight line divided the motto from the design.



1866 Minerva Seal

The later seal has a curved line below the design and the boy's figure looks quite different. The last cutting includes the curved line but adds more stars in the outer margin and several other differences in detail.

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1895 Lamp of Knowledge Seal

The 1895 design bore the date 1837, the year of the founding of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and included a "lamp of knowledge" and a sun in its device. In 1937 Robbins commented on the design,

As far as I know, there is no official explanation of the symbolism of the present seal. The significance of the lamp of knowledge, however is obvious, and the rising sun back of the shield was taken from the coat of arms of the State of Michigan.

Frank E. Robbins to Theodore R. Johnson, September 16, 1937, Vertical File, Fimu D1, Seals, BHL

[\[Image of Robbins' letter\]](#)



1895 Seal with 1837 founding date

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1929 Lamp of Wisdom Seal with Founding Date of 1817

1920'S CONTROVERSY OVER THE FOUNDING DATE OF THE UNIVERSITY

The John Monteith seal had yet one more important part to play in the university's history. In the 1920's a controversy developed between two groups of alumni over the birth of the institution. As the *Washtenaw Tribune* of November 6, 1928, put it, the Regents "settled the controversy regarding the birth of the institution. . .

The University will continue

to operate under the present seal, showing that it was founded in 1837, the opinion of rabid alumni to the contrary."

[[Washtenaw Tribune, 11/6/1928](#)]

But in May of 1929 the regents reversed themselves. The deciding event was a communication from university librarian William Warner Bishop calling attention to an enclosed photostatic copy of a document recording the "Laws and Ordinances of the University of Michigan." We have come full circle, for what had come to Bishop's attention was the [description of the 1817 seal in John Monteith's handwriting](#).

The *Ann Arbor Daily News* reprinted Bishop's facsimile and described his discovery as follows:

While University librarian W. W. Bishop was engaged upon a systematic search in the rare book room of the main library for material which might have a bearing upon the real founding date of the University, he came upon a work called "Laws and Ordinances of the University of the University of Michigan." In this original work, which had been presented to the school in 1892 by Chas. Farmer of Detroit, Dr. Bishop found a page relating to the seal of the University. He made a photostatic copy of the page and sent it to the board of regents. The copy, reproduced above, plainly indicates the date of Sept. 12, 1817 as the date upon which the seal was declared to be in effect, although not actually in existence.

The appearance of the copy reopened the question as to whether 1817 was the correct date instead of 1837. Together with evidence presented by the committee on history of the General Alumni Association in support of the 1817 date, the regents considered Dr. Bishop's find and decided to revoke its earlier stand in favor of 1837. At the meeting of May 24, it was decided to accept 1817 as the founding date, thus adding 20 years to the age of the school. The seal will be changed to conform with the decision. [*Ann Arbor Daily News*, undated, 1929, Vertical File, Fimu D1, Seals, BHL]

In 1929, the university seal incorporated the 1817 founding date.

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Lamp of Wisdom Seal with 1817 founding date

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1929 Seal with "The" Added to University of Michigan

In 1958 the word "The" was added to the 1929 seal.

We are still left with several mysteries however:

- Was the 1817 seal ever created and used?
- What was the seal adopted by the Trustees of the University on April 30, 1825? Are there any images of it?
- Was the design of the Minerva seal based on the Webster "blue back speller."



The 1929 Lamp of Wisdom Seal with "The" added in 1958.

We invite any of you to attempt to solve these mysteries. The staff of the Bentley Historical Library would be happy to help you research the mysteries of the university seals or any other topic on which the library holds documentation.

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