

250 Years of American Symbols

University of Arkansas Little Rock
History Department
in collaboration with the
Department of the
Secretary of State

UA **LITTLE
ROCK**



Come celebrate 250
years of American
symbolism in the
gallery space on the
fourth floor!



250 Years of American Symbols

Welcome to a visual exploration of the symbols that define the United States of America.

While our country's written documents, the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights, define the political philosophy of our nation, visual and auditory symbols shape citizens' understandings of what it means to be an American. The bald eagle, Great Seal and motto, White House, flag, and national anthem all had their origins in the early national period, used to unify the populace around shared values and aspirations of liberty and unity.



Significant anniversaries of our nation's founding thrust American symbols into the forefront of our collective consciousness. In 1876, the country celebrated its 100th birthday with commemorative banners and flags featuring American icons. The Liberty Bell and American flag were featured prominently in celebrations of the nation's sesquicentennial in 1926. As the U.S. role in the world expanded in the early twentieth century, the Statue of Liberty welcomed newcomers and visitors, while Uncle Sam stood in for the country in artwork and political commentary at home and abroad. Throughout the

following century, Americans internalized values of patriotism, unity, tenacity, and thrift by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, singing the national anthem, and purchasing savings bonds. Each year, Independence Day celebrations featured patriotic music, fireworks, and parades, full of symbols that transformed historical events into enduring messages about democracy.



American symbols represent our history, and they encourage us to aspire to our country's ideals. They remind us that our democracy is a work in progress and that our history binds us together.

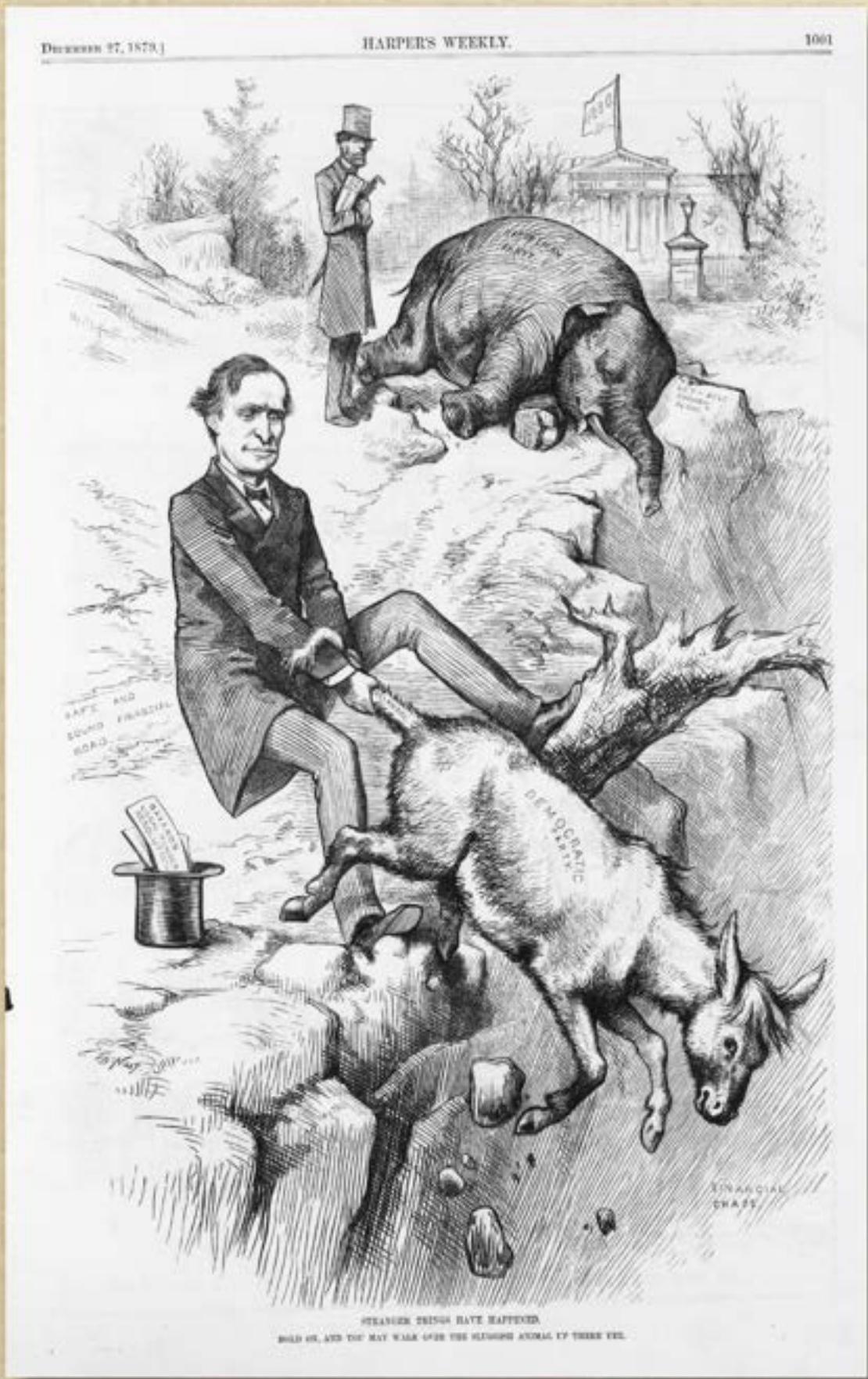
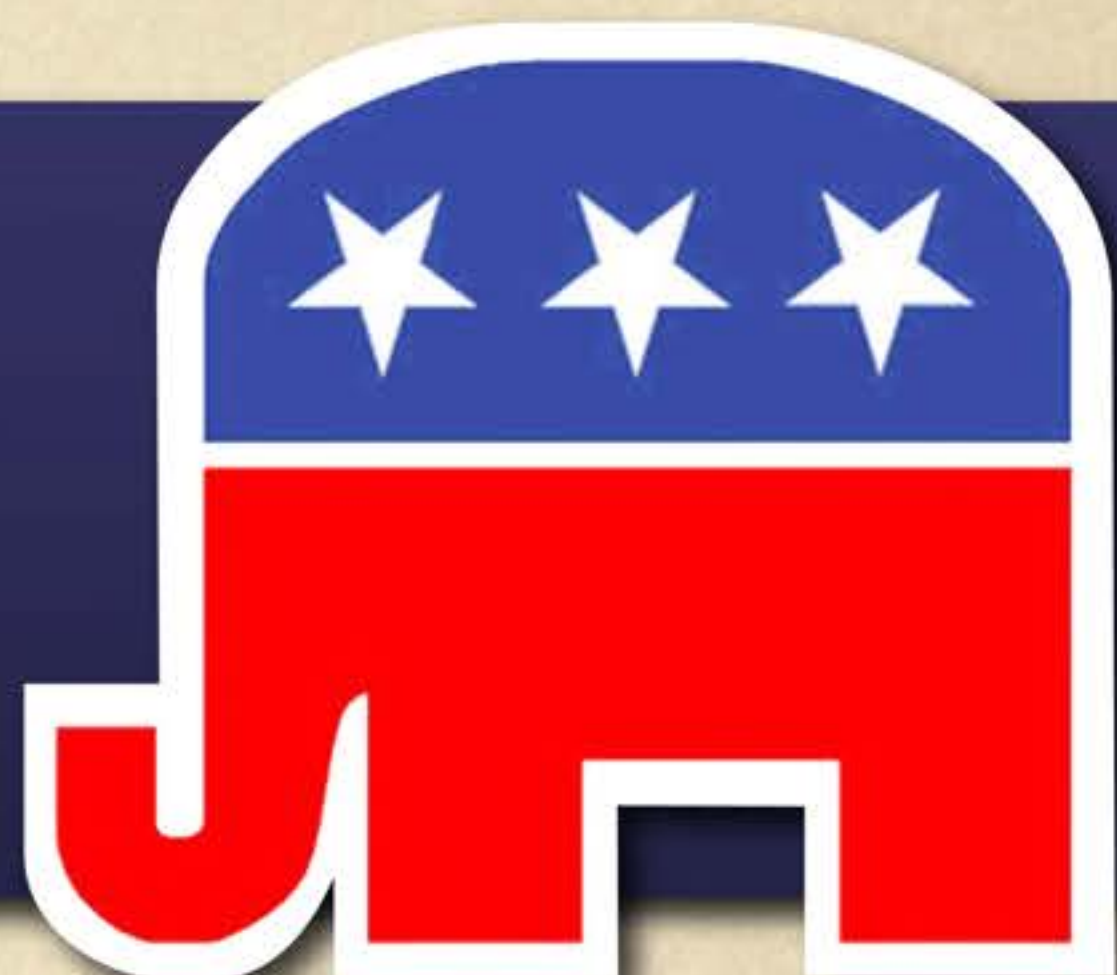
As you explore 250 years of American symbols, ask yourself: What does America mean to you?

Political Icons



For over 150 years, iconic figures have defined American political identity. The name “Uncle Sam” instantly calls to mind a lean, serious man with a white beard, striped pants, and a tail coat, reminding Americans of their duties. Although his origins are unclear, one popular theory traces him to Sam Wilson, a War of 1812 businessman who labeled supply barrels “U.S.,” leading to the nickname. Early artists drew inspiration from “Brother Jonathan,” a parody of New Englanders, adopting his signature long coat and striped trousers. Following the Civil War, cartoonist Thomas Nast and publications like *Harper’s Weekly* solidified

Uncle Sam’s appearance. While the female figure Columbia represented the American people, Uncle Sam became the face of the government. His most iconic iteration—James Montgomery Flagg’s stern-faced recruiter—became a global symbol during World War I.



Just as Uncle Sam represents the United States government, the donkey and elephant have served as visual stand-ins for its two major political parties since the 1870s. Although the iconic donkey began as a Whig Party insult directed at Democrat Andrew Jackson’s stubborn character, Jackson reclaimed the symbol, using it to represent his determination and connection to the common American. The Republican elephant was popularized by Thomas Nast in 1874; it came to symbolize strength and collective political power. Together, these symbols allowed 19th-century cartoonists to quickly communicate partisan arguments to a broad audience, a tradition that continues to shape American political commentary.



Great Seal of the United States



Shortly after approving the Declaration of Independence, the Continental Congress appointed a committee to create a seal for the new country. Charles Thomson, Secretary of the Continental Congress, completed a design for the Great Seal of the United States in 1782, synthesizing ideas from three previous committees.

The face (obverse) of the Great Seal features a bald eagle clutching three symbols: the olive branch, representing a commitment to peace; thirteen arrows, illustrating the nation's ability to defend itself; and a shield, demonstrating the United States' unity and self-reliance. The eagle faces the olive branch in its right claw to signify a preference for peace. The motto E Pluribus Unum—suggested in 1776 by Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams—translates to "Out of Many, One." Like the thirteen arrows, stars in the cloud above the eagle, and stripes on the shield, the thirteen letters of the national motto correspond to the original thirteen states.



The back (reverse) of the Great Seal details an unfinished pyramid with MDCCLXXVI (1776) inscribed at the base, overseen by the Eye of Providence. In his official report to Congress, Thomson explained the symbolism: "The Pyramid signifies Strength and Duration: The Eye over it & the Motto allude to the many signal interpositions of providence in favour of the American cause."



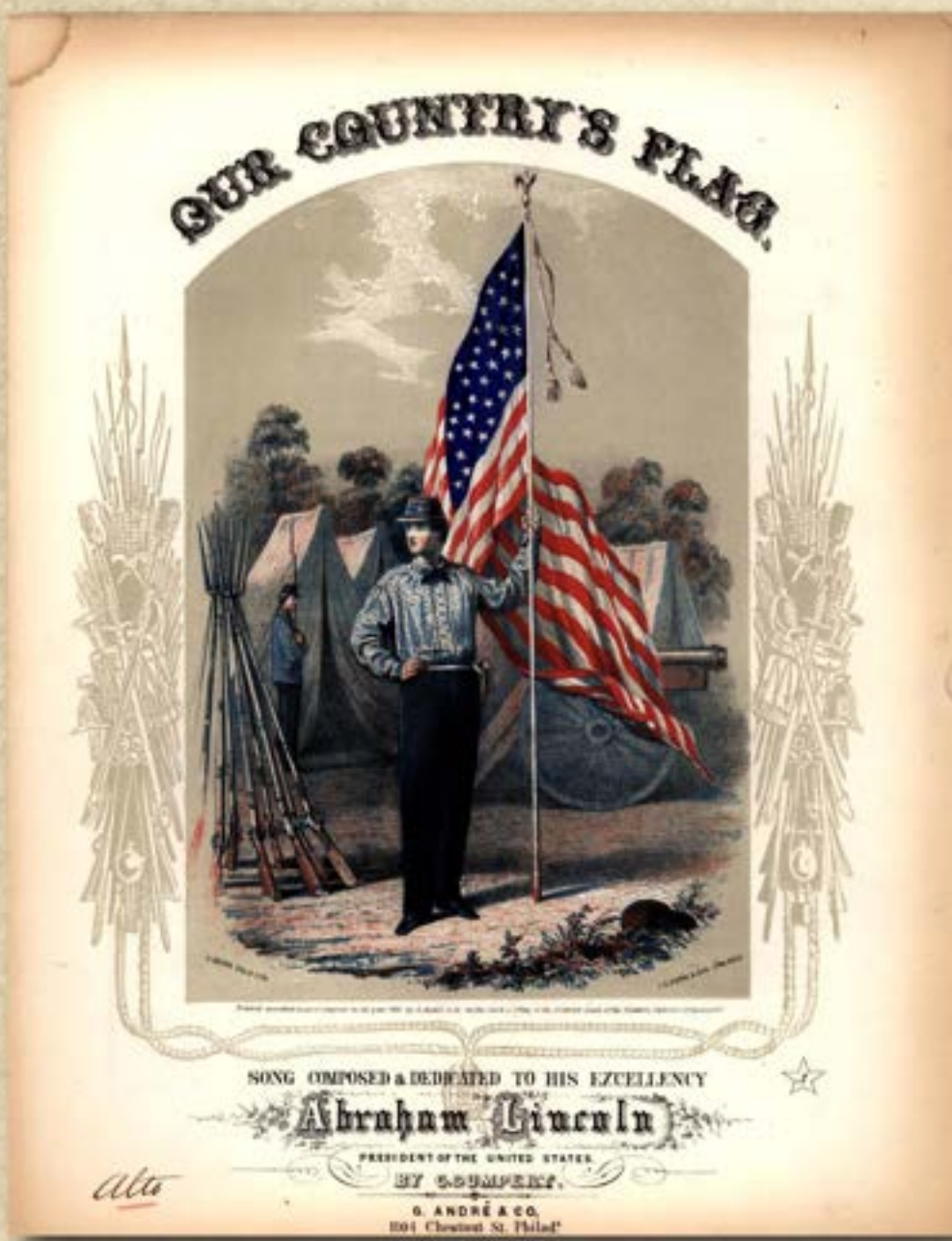
The two mottos, Annuit Coeptis and Novus Ordo Seclorum, translate to "He [Providence] has favored our undertakings" and "A new order of the ages." These phrases reflect the 18th-century belief that the American nation was a significant new chapter in human history protected by divine oversight. Both sides of the Great Seal have been printed on the back side of the one-dollar bill since 1935, during Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration.



The American Flag

From the nation's beginning, the American flag has reflected our history and identity. On June 14, 1777, the Second Continental Congress officially endorsed our flag with alternating red and white stripes and a circle of thirteen stars on a blue field. In 1818, Congress permanently fixed the stripes at thirteen to honor the original colonies, decreeing that a new star be added every July 4 following the admission of a new state to the country. Until President Taft's executive order in 1912, no specific pattern of stars was required. Hawaii was admitted as the 50th state in 1959, by which time Congress

had received over a thousand suggestions for the flag's new pattern. President Eisenhower selected the current flag design, originally created by 17-year-old Bob Heft for a school project.



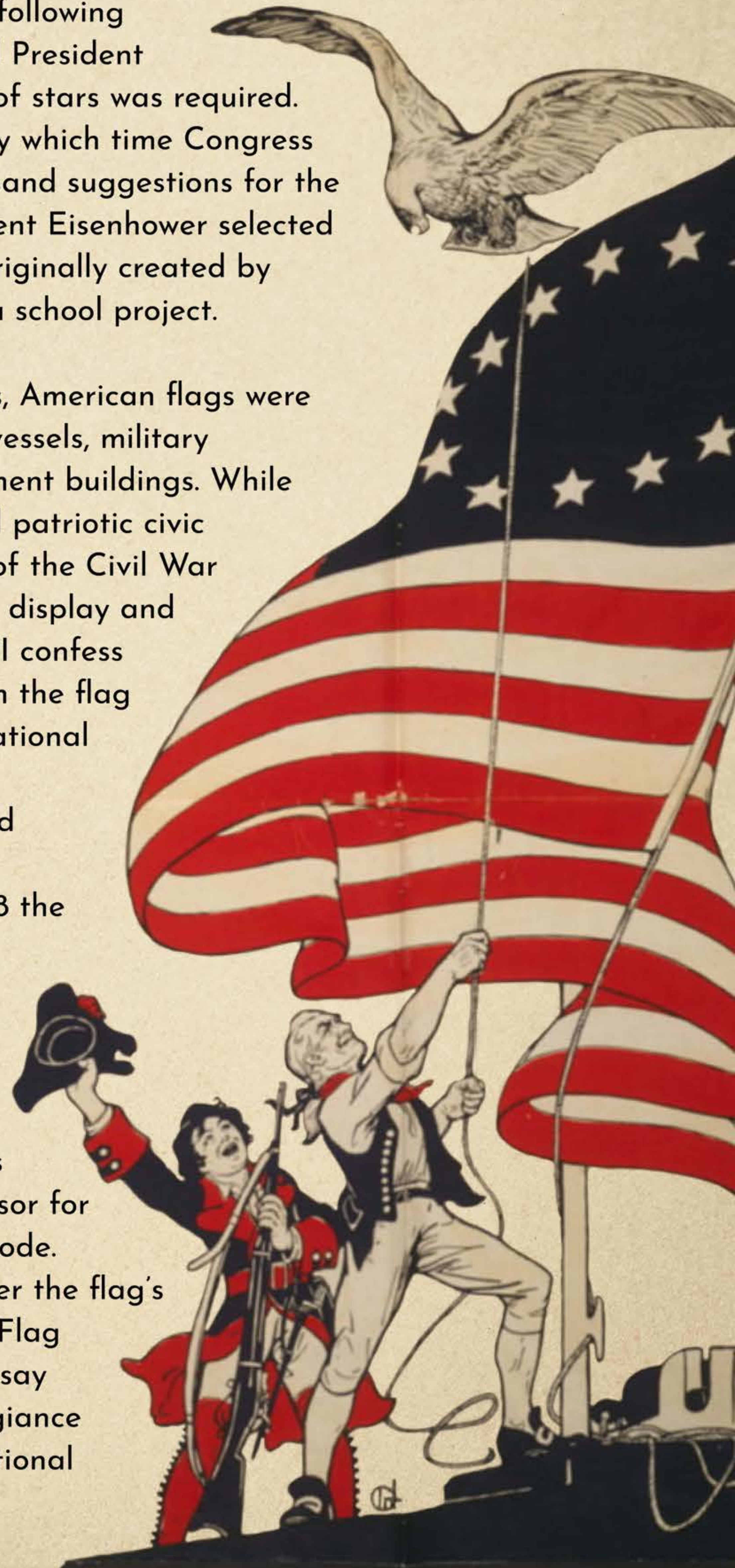
In our earliest decades, American flags were flown over federal naval vessels, military installations, and government buildings. While 19th century wars sparked patriotic civic displays, it was the crisis of the Civil War that motivated citizens to display and

honor the flag. President Abraham Lincoln said, "I confess that I do not want to see a single star struck from the flag of my country," as he raised troops to preserve national unity.

In the 1880s, a movement led by veterans and civic groups aimed to instill patriotism through honoring the flag. Beginning in New York, in 1888 the Grand Army of the Republic began presenting schools with flags. Youth's Companion, a monthly family magazine, called for a flag in every house and school. In 1923, the National Flag Conference wrote guidelines for the display and treatment of the American flag. These standards



became the precursor for today's U.S. Flag Code. Today, we remember the flag's history on June 14, Flag Day, and when we say the Pledge of Allegiance or listen to the National Anthem.



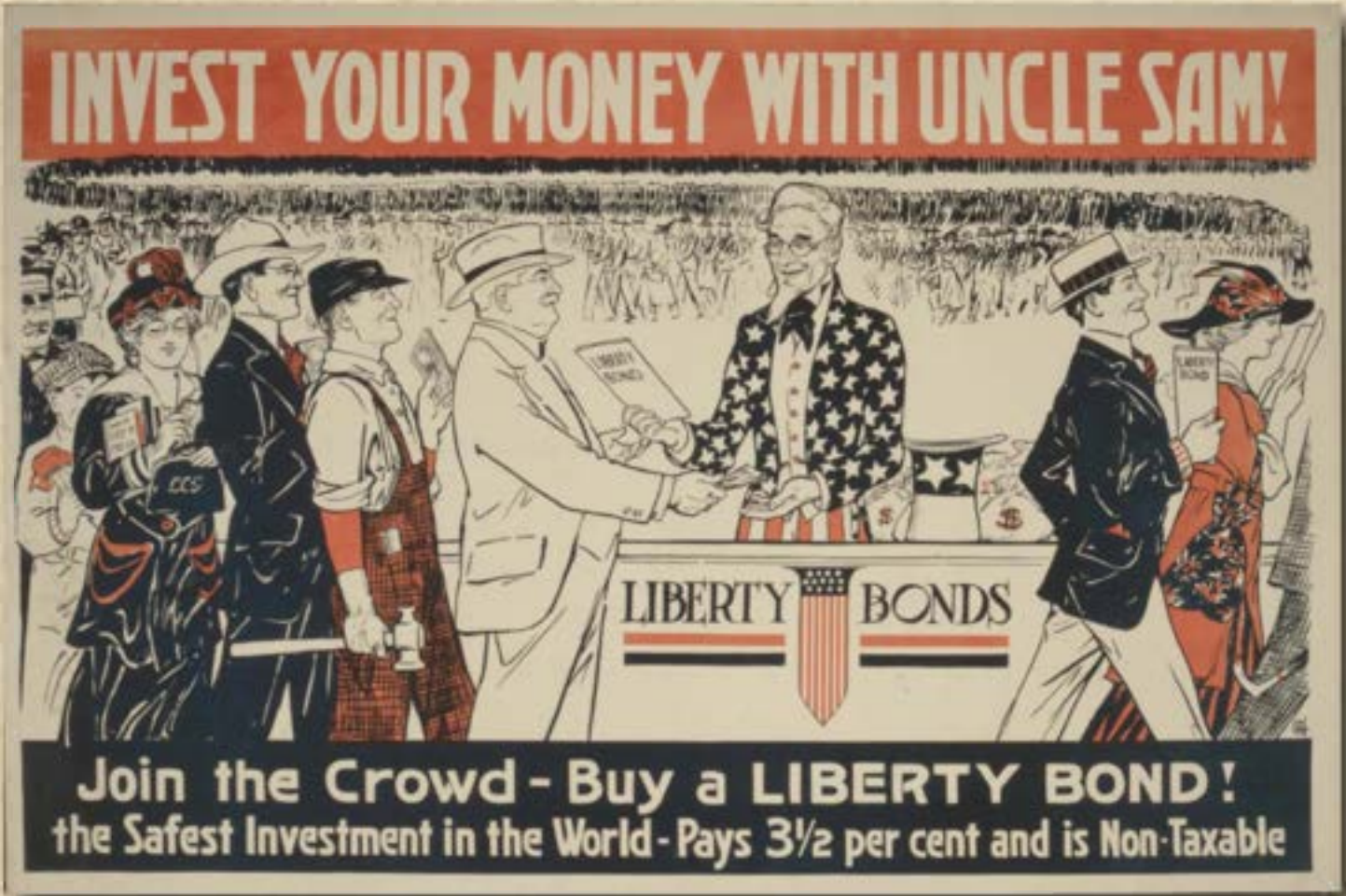
Savings Bonds

While the U. S. Treasury has issued debt since the American Revolution, the modern savings bond was born in 1935. These bonds transformed government financing from a pursuit of the wealthy and elite into a tool for everyday Americans. Through the Treasury Department’s extensive advertising campaigns, they became intimately connected to the American Dream of prosperity and stability.

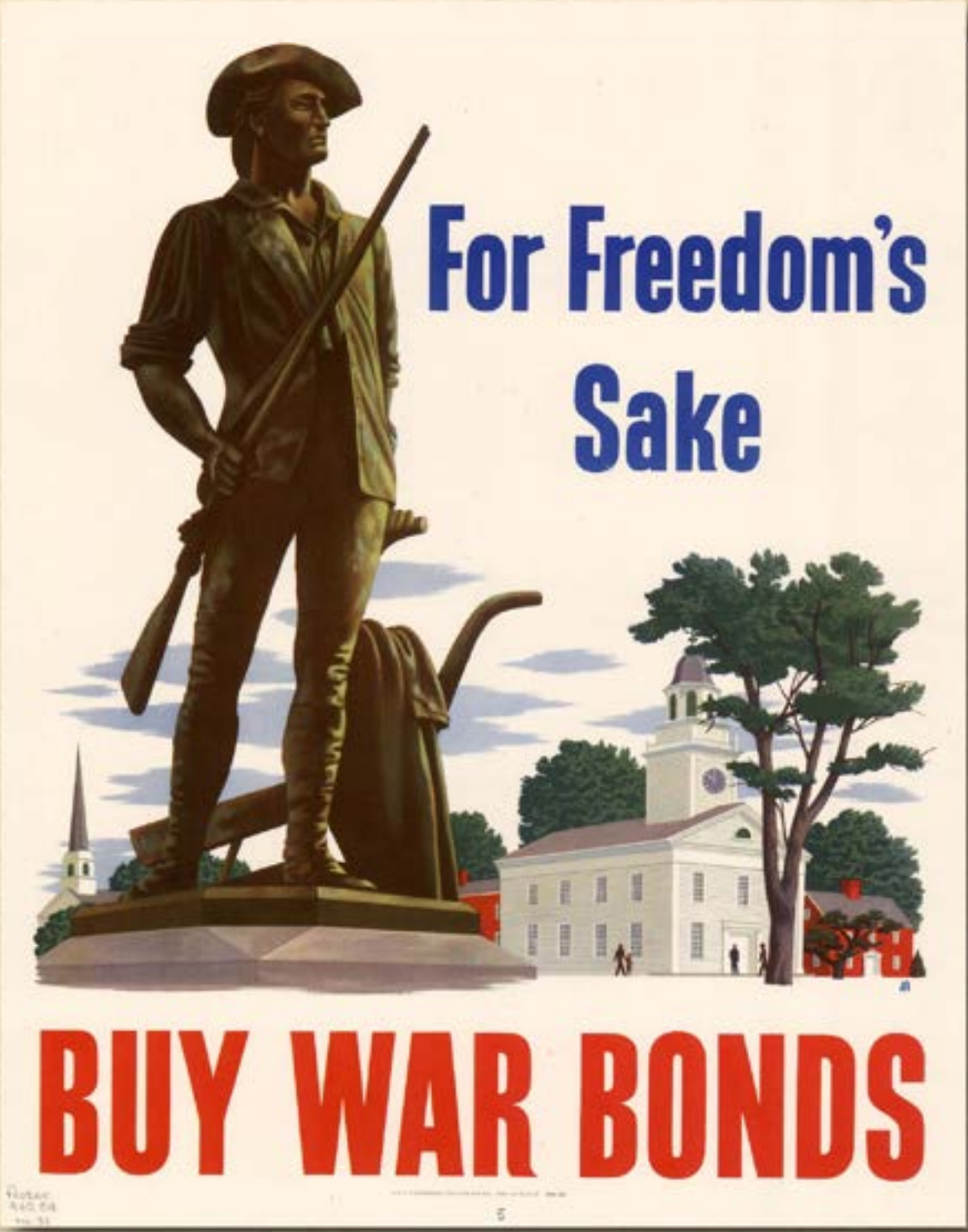
During World War I, Americans bought “Liberty Bonds” to support the country’s war effort, but this was not without risk. The value of Liberty Bonds changed with the market, sometimes leaving citizens with losses if they sold early. To remedy this, President Franklin Roosevelt’s

administration issued “Baby Bonds” sold in increments from \$25 to \$1000.

Protected from the market fluctuations, Series A-E bonds were safer investments, sold at 75% of face value, with full maturation after a period of 10 years or more. War bond drives helped support the country during World War II. The Treasury Department continued to tie bond purchases to citizenship in the postwar period, including through a school savings bond stamp program.



Did you give or receive a Savings Bond to or from a friend or family member for a birth, graduation, or birthday? Currently, Americans can invest in the nation through two primary options: Series EE Bonds, which are guaranteed to double in value in 20 years with a fixed interest rate of 2.5%, and Series I Bonds, with an adjustable rate. Over eight million American households currently hold savings bonds. Today, savings bonds remain symbols of investment in our government, personal thrift, and national stability.



The Bald Eagle

On June 20, 1782, the Continental Congress selected the bald eagle as the centerpiece of the Great Seal of the United States. Congress chose the eagle for its historical association with victory, strength, and freedom. By adopting this bird, the Founders connected the new nation to an emblem of the Roman Republic. Benjamin Franklin, who was in France, critiqued the eagle's "bad moral character" in a letter to his daughter, and wondered whether it was the best choice.



The bald eagle was a uniquely effective choice for an American symbol. Unlike the lions or griffins found in European heraldry, the bald eagle was a native species, found soaring over rivers and lakes in the new nation. On the Great Seal, the bald eagle clutches an olive branch and thirteen arrows, representing a nation that desires peace but is prepared for defense. This imagery signaled that the United States was a sovereign power, distinct from European empires and rooted in its vast land.



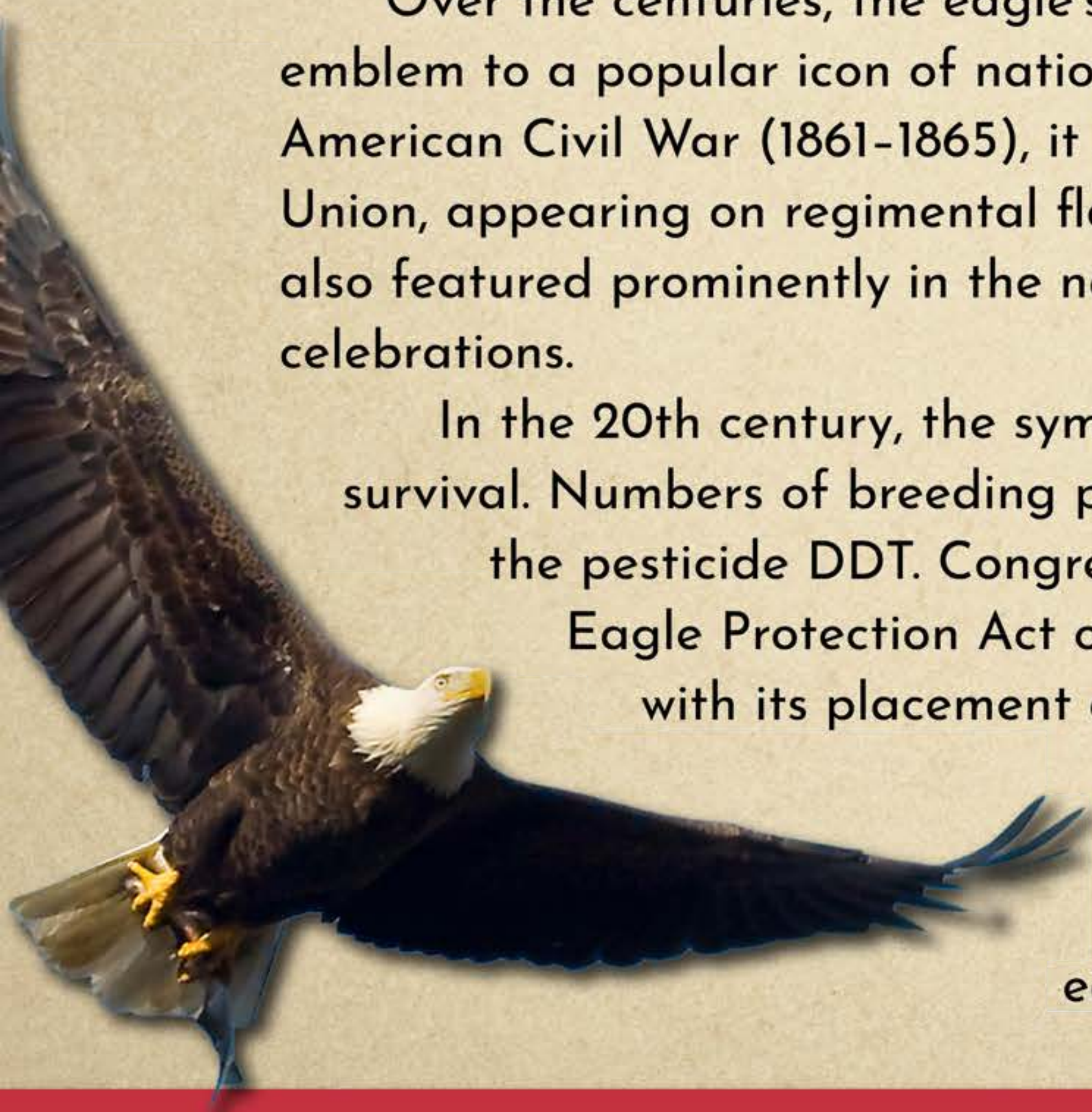
Did You Know?

The largest recorded nest ever built by a bird was a bald eagle nest found in St. Petersburg Florida! It measured nearly ten feet in diameter and 20 feet in depth. It was discovered to weigh nearly three tons (three times the weight of an average bald eagle nest).

Over the centuries, the eagle's role shifted from a formal state emblem to a popular icon of national resilience. During the American Civil War (1861-1865), it became a rallying cry for the Union, appearing on regimental flags and recruitment posters. It also featured prominently in the nation's 1876 centennial celebrations.

In the 20th century, the symbol took on a new meaning: survival. Numbers of breeding pairs dwindled, due to overuse of the pesticide DDT. Congress passed the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act of 1940. Further protection came with its placement on the endangered species list in

1967. Today, the successful recovery of the species is a symbol of environmental stewardship. Legislation in 2024 made the bald eagle the official bird of the United States.



The Statue of Liberty

In 1886, President Grover Cleveland dedicated the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. The collaborative project began in 1875 to celebrate one hundred years of friendship between France and the United States. It was conceived by Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi and Édouard de Laboulaye as a monument to the American ideal of liberty. A fundraising drive in France financed the 151-foot copper colossus La Liberté éclairant le monde (Liberty Enlightening the World), and the United States provided its massive 154-foot stone pedestal. A deed of gift formally transferred the statue from the people of France to the people of the United States.

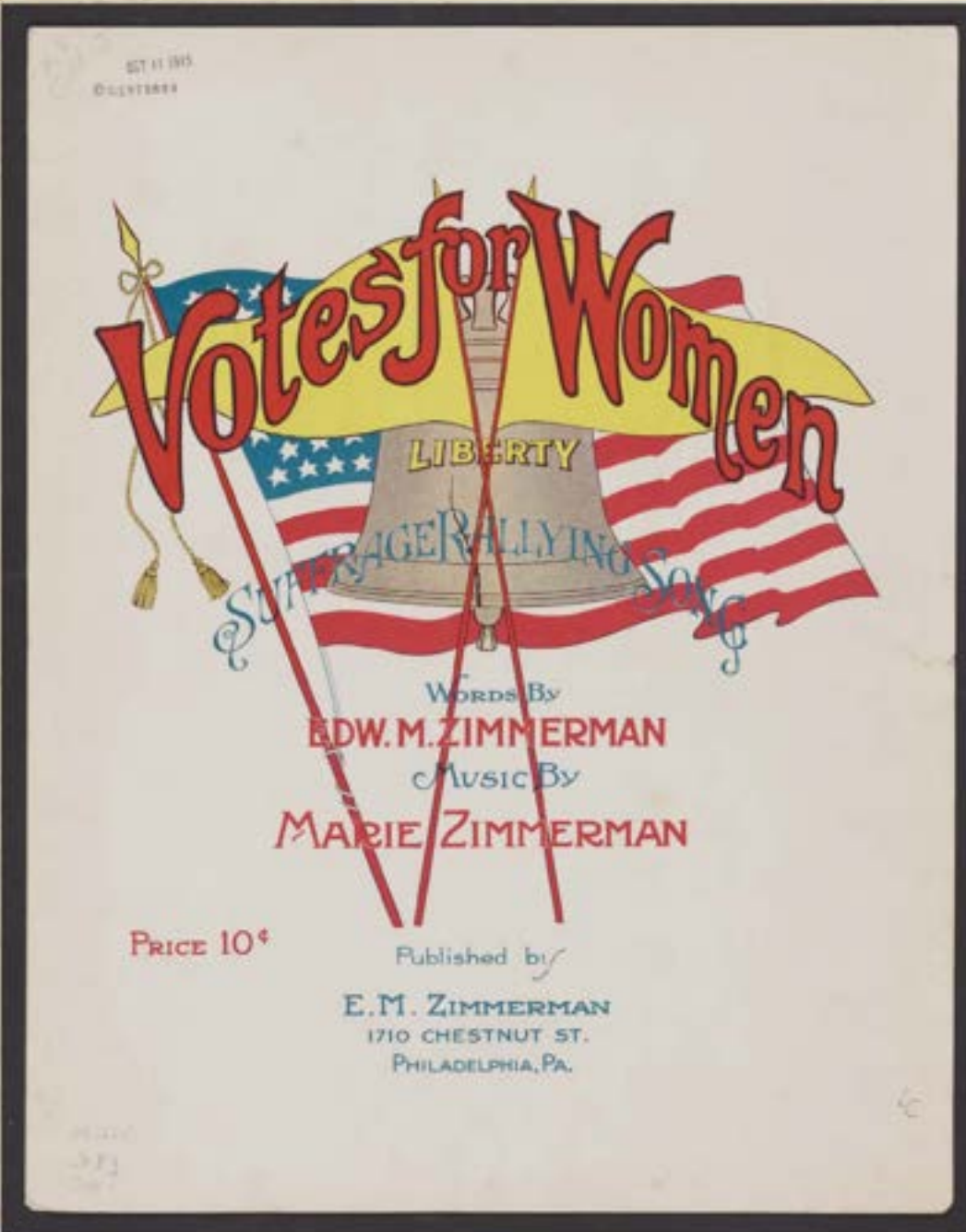
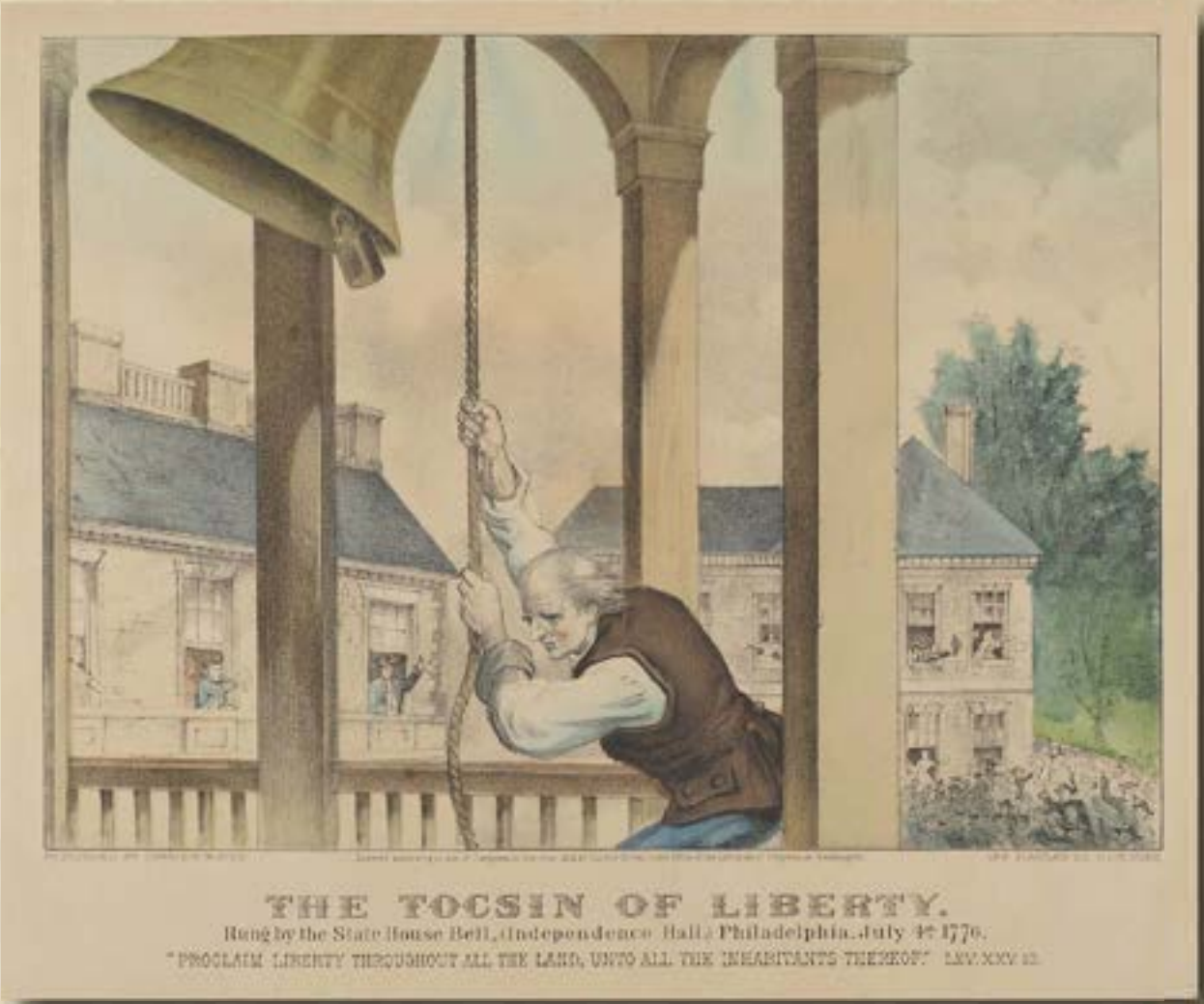


Over time, the Statue of Liberty has been a powerful symbol for people around the world, who have connected it to their own aspirations. It sparked dialogues about the full promise of liberty for all, including the abolition of slavery, voting rights, and equal treatment under the law. In 1903, the statue's pedestal was inscribed with Emma Lazarus's 1883 poem, "The New Colossus." The poem's most memorable lines, "Give me your tired, your poor/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," linked the statue to the dreams of millions of immigrants passing through nearby Ellis Island. During the 50th anniversary of the statue's dedication, on the eve of the Second World War, President Franklin Roosevelt reminded the world that liberty is a "living thing" that each generation must "guard and vitalize anew". Today, the Statue of Liberty continues to stand as a universal icon of hope, drawing over 3.5 million visitors annually to reflect on the values it represents.



The Liberty Bell

In 1751, Isaac Norris, speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, commissioned a tower bell from the Whitechapel Foundry in London. When it cracked upon ringing, it was recast in Philadelphia in 1753. It rang out from atop the Pennsylvania State House to signal meetings and important news, such as the repeal of the Stamp Act. Its inscription, from the King James Bible, Leviticus 25:10, reads, "Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land Unto All the Inhabitants thereof."



Nineteenth-century abolitionists seized on the inscription and employed the bell in their fight to end slavery, leading to its "Liberty Bell" nickname. In the 1840s, after ninety years of use, the bell cracked, and following failed repair attempts, the bell could not be rung again. This didn't stop its use as a powerful symbol of American liberty. Women referenced the Liberty Bell in their fight for voting rights in the early twentieth century. By the mid-twentieth century, the two-ton bell had made seven tours of the United States and furnished its image and legend to Liberty Bond campaigns that raised money for both world wars.



The U.S. Treasury Department featured the Liberty Bell in its 1950 "Save for Your Independence" Series E Savings Bond campaign. U.S. industries funded a Liberty Bell Replica for each state, and these bells toured each state to sell savings bonds, emphasize American virtues, and headline demonstrations of civic pride.



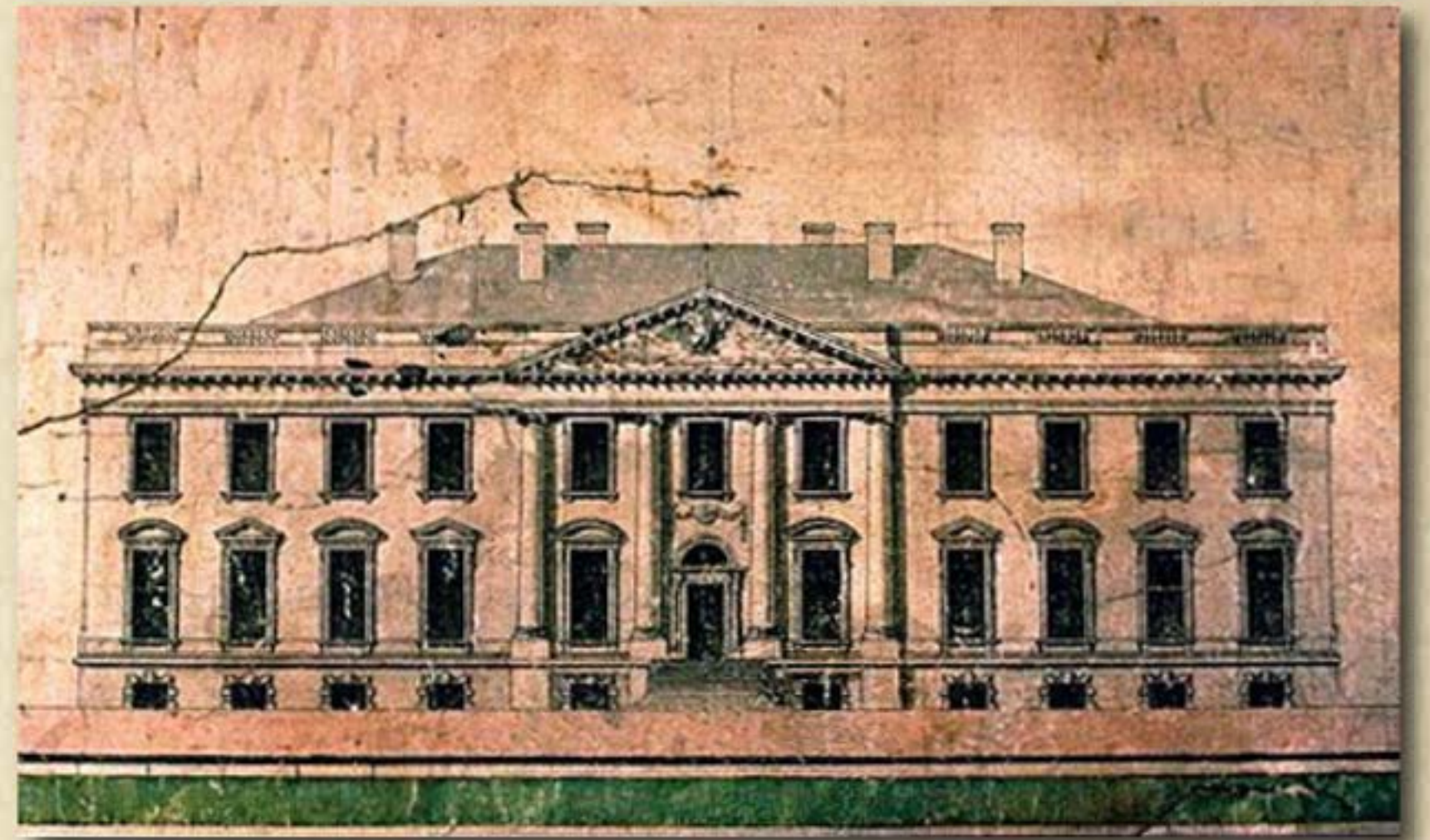
Arkansas's Replica Liberty Bell was incorporated into the state's Bicentennial Memorial on the grounds of the state capitol in 1976. The original Liberty Bell is on display in Philadelphia at Independence National Historic Park.



The White House

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue is arguably the most famous address in American history. The White House, more than an official residence, is a symbol of the presidency. George Washington oversaw its location, and John Adams and his family became its first residents in November 1800. Designed by Irish architect James Hoban, the building's Neoclassical design featuring soaring columns and balanced symmetry was meant to evoke the democratic ideals of ancient Greece and the stability of a republic.

Despite early critics calling it the "President's Palace," the White House was designed to reflect a



government by and for the people. Andrew Jackson famously opened the White House to the public, a tradition that continues today through public tours and events like the annual Easter Egg Roll on the South Lawn.

The structure has been a work in progress for over two centuries. After British troops burned it during the War of 1812, it was rebuilt and expanded by successive administrations. Notable additions include the South Portico (1824), the West Wing, (1902), and the East Wing (1934). Renovations during President Truman's term stabilized and modernized the structure and added the Truman balcony, while President Nixon added a media briefing room in 1970.



Inside, the building's spaces reflect its multiple uses. The first floor hosts ceremonies, while the upper floor is the First Family's private home. The West Wing holds the Oval Office and the Situation Room. Over the years, presidents have added a bowling alley, putting green, movie theater, and swing set to make the "People's House" their home.

Finally, why is it white? The iconic color began as a lime-based whitewash in 1798, applied to protect the sandstone. While the building was nicknamed "The White House" in the early 19th century, Theodore Roosevelt made the name official in 1901.



National Capitol

The United States Capitol is one of the most iconic government buildings in the world. Like other U.S. government buildings, its style is neoclassical, and the exterior is white. It contains the meeting rooms, or chambers, for the House of Representatives and the Senate. Inside, elected officials write, debate, and pass legislation, and the President delivers the annual State of the Union address. The rotunda and crypt also function as important gathering places to receive visiting dignitaries, as well as host state ceremonies upon the deaths of esteemed Americans. Every four years, the exterior forms the backdrop for presidential inaugurations.



The location of the capital in Washington, D.C., was one of the nation's first political compromises; southern states agreed to help pay the war debts of northern states in exchange for the building of a new government district along the Potomac River in the southern part of the country. George Washington set the cornerstone for the National Capitol in 1793. First home to Congress in 1800, the structure was partially burned by British troops during the War of 1812. While Congress repeatedly debated slavery within its walls, enslaved laborers worked to build, restore, and enlarge the structure. They expanded the building to accommodate new chambers for the House and Senate as the nation added more states. The bronze Statue of Freedom, ringed by the motto E Pluribus Unum, topped off the newly-completed dome in 1863.



The National Capitol features artwork celebrating important figures and events in the country's history. Constantino Brumidi painted The Apotheosis of Washington, which depicts George Washington alongside Greek and Roman gods, on the underside of the dome. A frieze on the base of the dome, as well as murals and paintings in the rotunda, illustrate historic vignettes from the colonial period through the 19th century. Each state furnished two statues of notable figures for the National Statuary Hall Collection. Arkansas is represented by Civil Rights pioneer Daisy Gatson Bates and musician Johnny Cash.



Symbolic Words

Do you remember beginning your school days by saying the Pledge of Allegiance? Have you heard the American's Creed at a patriotic event? How did the tradition of saying these words become symbolic of national unity and good citizenship?



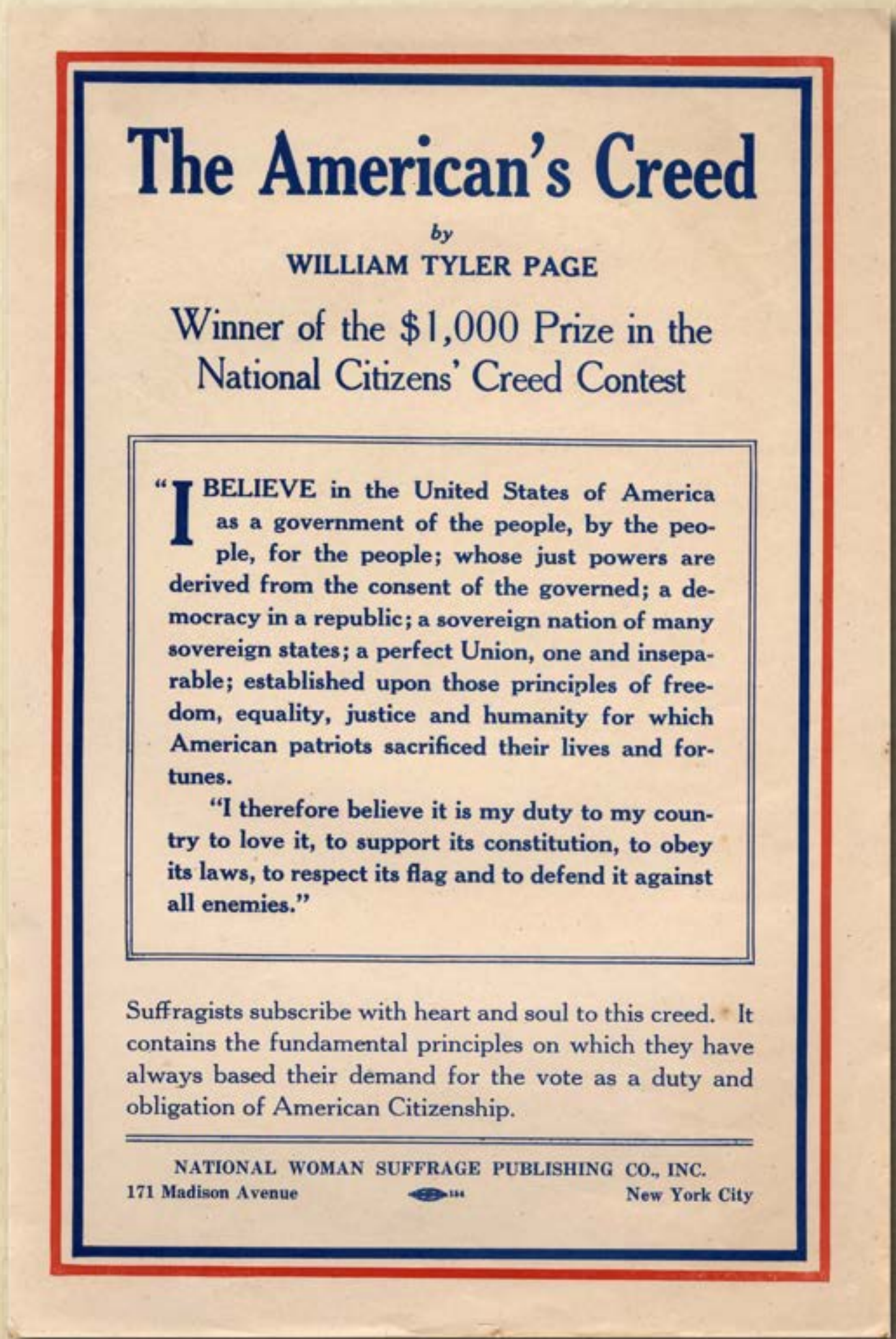
In 1892, the country celebrated the 400th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage to the Americas. The magazine Youth's Companion advised schools and communities to mark the occasion with Francis Bellamy's Salute to the Flag:



"I pledge allegiance to my Flag and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation indivisible- with Liberty and Justice for all."

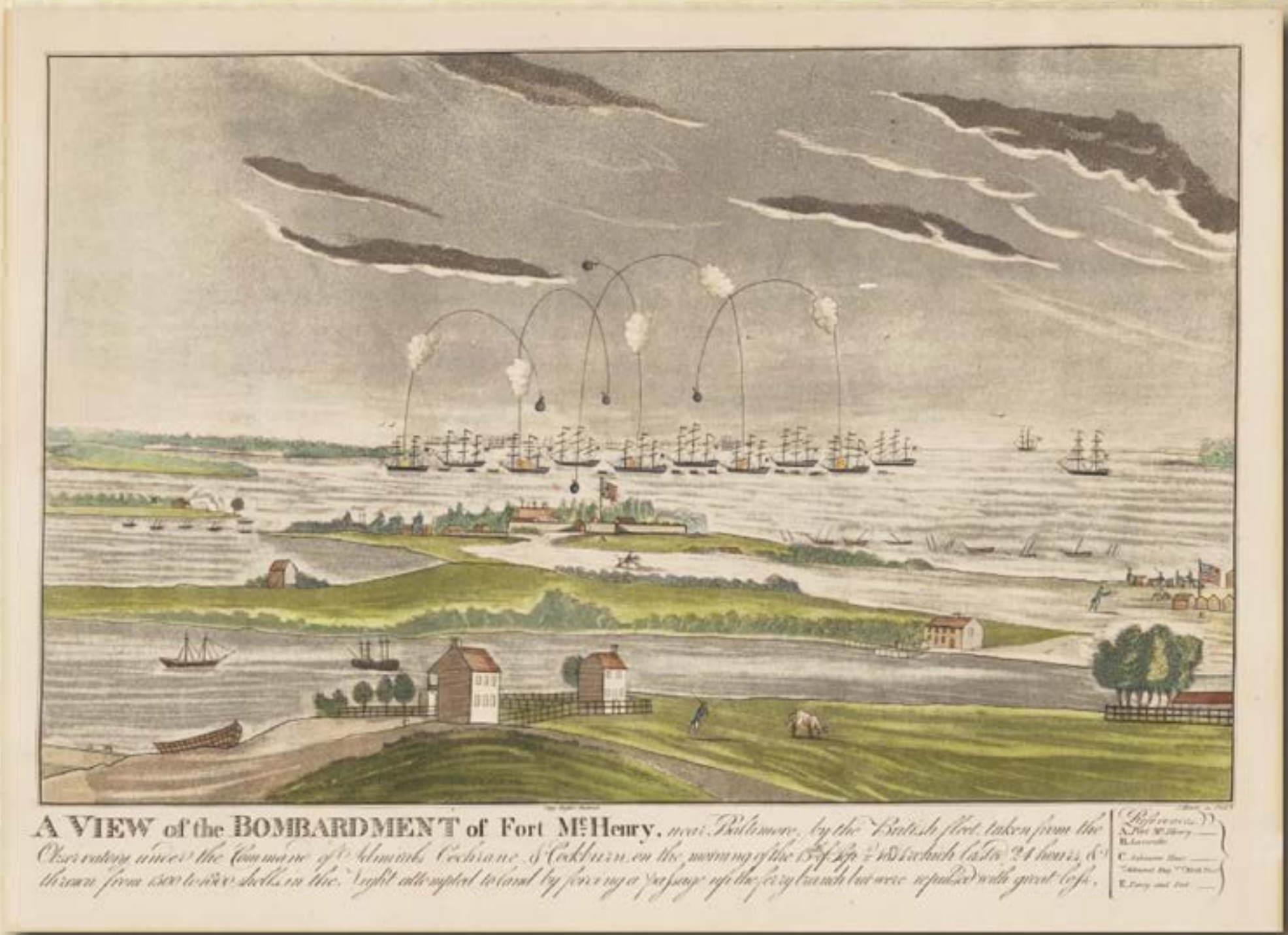
In the 1920s, the National Flag Conference added "of the United States of America" to Bellamy's original words. Congress included the Pledge of Allegiance in the Federal Flag Code in 1942; it also standardized the "hand over heart" salute. President Eisenhower signed a Congressional Resolution adding the words "under God" in 1954, emphasizing American religiosity over communist atheism in the early years of the Cold War.

In 1916, civic leaders organized a contest to compose a creed that more clearly defined what it meant to be an American. William Tyler Page created the winning entry, which borrowed from our founding documents. In 1918, Congress recognized Page's words, "The American's Creed," as our official national creed. While it was recited during the first half of the twentieth century in naturalization ceremonies, schools, and meetings of civic organizations such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, it is less often used today.

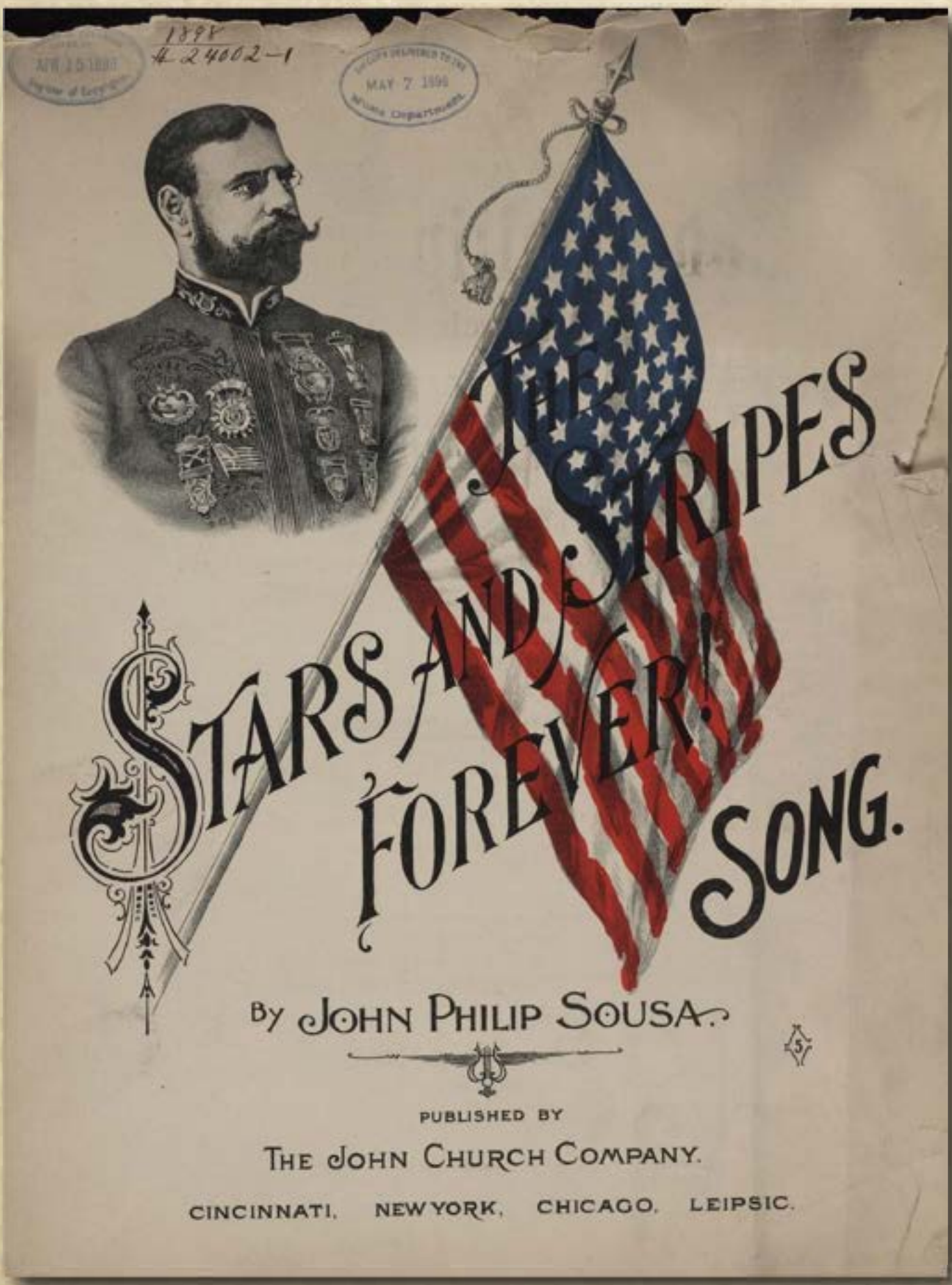


National Music

On September 14, 1814, Francis Scott Key witnessed a moment he would never forget. While aboard a truce ship, Key watched as British forces bombarded Fort McHenry for nearly twenty-five hours in an attempt to capture the city of Baltimore during the War of 1812. At dawn, he looked toward the fort and observed its massive American flag still flying above the walls, a sign that its defenders had not surrendered. Inspired by this sight, he penned a four-stanza poem that would later become known as “The Star Spangled Banner.” Set to the tune of the popular British song “To Anacreon in Heaven,” the song gained popularity across the United States, particularly among veterans. On March 3, 1931, President Herbert Hoover signed a bill making it the official national anthem of the United States. Today, we sing Francis Scott Key’s first stanza, a soaring tribute to the resilience of the nation.



O say can you see ~~through~~ by the dawn's early light
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming,
Whose broad stripes & bright stars through the perilous fight
O'er the ramparts we watch'd, were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket's red glare, the bomb bursting in air,
gave proof through the night that our flag was still there



In 1896, while on vacation in Europe with his wife, John Phillip Sousa—the “March King”—received news of the death of his close friend and band manager, David Blakely. Deeply affected, Sousa wrote a tribute to his friend on his return voyage to the country. “Stars and Stripes Forever” was Sousa’s favorite composition, featured in Fourth of July parades and concerts, as well as presidential inaugurations throughout the twentieth century. Nearly 100 years after its 1897 debut, Congress named this quintessential piece of American music as the country’s national march.

