



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington, D.C. 20420

CELEBRATING AMERICA'S FREEDOMS

The American Bald Eagle



The bald eagle has been the national bird of the United States since 1782, when it was placed with outspread wings on the Great Seal of our country. It appears in many government institutions and on official documents, making it the most pictured bird in all of America. The eagle appears on the president's flag, the mace of the House of Representatives, military insignia, and billions of one-dollar bills.

The bald eagle first appeared as an American symbol on a Massachusetts copper cent coined in 1776. Since then it has appeared on the reverse side of many U.S. coins, notably the silver dollar, halfdollar and quarter, as well as the gold coins which were christened the eagle, half eagle, quarter eagle, and double eagle.

For six years, the members of Congress held a bitter dispute over what the national emblem should be. It wasn't until 1789 that the bald eagle was finally chosen to represent the new nation.

One of the most prominent opponents to the bald eagle's status was Benjamin Franklin. In a letter to a friend, Franklin wrote:

I wish the bald eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country; he is a bird of bad moral character; like those among men who live by sharping and robbing, he is generally poor, and often very lousy. The turkey is a much more respectable bird and withal a true, original native of America.

But not all of Congress shared Franklin's sentiments. Bald eagles, like other eagles worldwide, had been seen by many as symbols of strength, courage, freedom and immortality for generations. And, unlike other eagles, the bald eagle was indigenous only to North America.

Some eagles have become notable in American history. "Old Abe," the mascot of a Wisconsin regiment during the Civil War, was a constant target of enemy riflemen, but survived 42 battle engagements relatively unscathed.

Today, the American bald eagle is protected under the National Emblem Act of 1940. Although once plentiful throughout the continental United States, the bald eagle population has greatly declined in recent times. Farmers and fishermen have killed many eagles for getting too close to their poultry or fishing nets; game keepers have captured them for falconry; and pesticides have killed many eagles. Most of the bald eagle population can now be found in northern regions of North America and Florida breeding sanctuaries.

President John F. Kennedy wrote to the Audubon Society:

The Founding Fathers made an appropriate choice when they selected the bald eagle as the emblem of the nation. The fierce beauty and proud independence of this great bird aptly symbolizes the strength and freedom of America. But as latter-day citizens we shall fail our trust if we permit the eagle to disappear.