

OPINION COLUMNS

Grim's Tales: What is the history of the Minnesota state seal?

An 1850 poem sheds light on what the Minnesota state seal was meant to stand for.



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Even as I wrote my last Grim's Tales I was still thinking, "Sure, the state flag should change, but why the state seal?"

Since then I've learned a lot.

For those of you who have a translation of the seal's meaning based on modern sensitivities, please consider the original meaning, as

explained in a poem by Mary Henderson Eastman, wife of Seth Eastman, the artist who designed the seal.

Mary presented this poem in celebration of the seal and Minnesota's statehood.

For the Pioneer.

The Seal of Minnesota

By Mrs. Eastman, 1850

*Give way, give way young warrior,
Thou and thy steed give way —
Rest not, though lingers on the hills,
The red sun's parting ray.
The rocky bluff and prairie land
The white man claims them now,
The symbols of his course are here,
The rifle, axe and plough.*

*Not thine, the waters bright whose laugh
Is ringing in thy ear;
Not thine the otter and the lynx,
The wolf and timid deer.
The forest tree, the fairy ring,
The sacred isle and mound
Have passed into another's hands —
Another claimant found.*

*Give way, give way young warrior —
Our title would you seek?
'Tis "the rich against the poor,
And the strong against the weak."
We need thy noble rivers,
Thy prairies green and wide,
And thy dark and frowning forests
That skirt the valley's side.*

*The Red man's course is onward —
Nor stayed his footsteps be,
Till by his rugged hunting ground
Beats the relentless sea!
We claim his noble heritage,
And Minnesota's land
Must pass with all its untold wealth
To the white man's grasping hand.*

*Give way, give way young warrior
Thy father's bones may rest
No longer here, where earth has clasped
Them, closely to her breast —
Here, were thy fiercest battles fought —
Here, though through the valleys rung
The voices of the victors brave,
As they, their triumph sung.*

*Here too with long and braided hair
Thy maidens in the dance
Rivalled the wild deer's fleetest step,
The wild deer's brightest glance.
And here they gathered oft at eve
From aged lips to hear
How flowed the warrior's heart's best blood,
How fell the maiden's tear.*

*Give way — I know a thousand ties
Most lovingly must cling,
I know a gush of sorrow deep
Such memories must bring.
Thou and thy noble race from earth
Must soon be passed away,
As echoes die upon the hills,
Or darkness follows day.*

*Yet hear me still, young warrior,
Thou and thy steed give way —
Rest not, though lingers on the hills
The red sun's parting ray.
The rocky bluff and prairie land
The white man claims them now,
The symbols of his course are here —
The rifle, axe and plough.*

Modern times might make us feel the need to cling to the old seal and soften the more despicable intentions behind its creation. It's the modern re-interpretation that makes us say, "It symbolizes our pride for our heritage in hunting, logging and farming."

Mary Eastman makes it clear, though, that in 1850 it was a symbol celebrating literal genocide.

You could summarize the poem: "We don't care how important this land is. Leave, don't look back, and die. It belongs to us now."

And that makes sense in the historical context of the poem.

The seal was commissioned by Minnesota's first state governor, Henry Sibley. Eastman gave him four designs and he chose the one we are familiar with.

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Former territorial Gov. Alexander Ramsey had suggested the seal could be mistaken for having an anti-Native slant and suggested replacing the stump and rifle with a teepee.

Sibley instead had Eastman add an ax.

Sibley was also the governor who, in 1892, attempted to eradicate the Dakota tribe in Minnesota by raising the bounty on Dakota scalps from \$75 to \$200.

Sure, this was a surprisingly normal mindset at the time and it may be foolish to hold historical figures to our modern morals, but we aren't talking about going back in time and arresting Sibley.

We are talking about our modern willingness to fly a flag that symbolizes a celebration of genocide, according to the wife of the man who designed it.

We all celebrate the modern 50-starred U.S. flag, and that changed for a lesser reason. The U.S. flag has changed 26 times — not because modern people didn't want to be identified for embracing genocide, but because we had more states.

From a historical standpoint, we could easily have kept the original 13 stars as a celebration of where we started. But our country changed, and on 26 different occasions we felt that was reason enough to change the flag, just to celebrate our current country.

The most recent change was to add one star in 1960.

Our state (hopefully) no longer thinks Native Americans should leave and die. Why should we fly a flag that suggests that we, as modern Minnesotans, still do? Unless you still fly the 13-star U.S. flag at your house and oppose the 50-star version, then the "history erasing" story doesn't really work.

I'm not one to suggest people are clinging out of racism. As someone who very much clings to the familiar, I understand sometimes we oppose things from more innocent, harder-to-explain sources.

But unless you knew the actual history of the flag, the actual symbolism, and either felt shame (or, God forbid, pride) in that fact, then it's clear history has nothing to do with it.

After all, how can you think this seal preserves history if you defend it but don't actually know what history it represents?

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