

FACTSHEET

H. 1707, *Resolve Providing for the Creation of a Special Commission Relative to a New Seal and New Motto for the Commonwealth*

Lead Sponsor: Representative Byron Rushing

Legislative Session: 2017-2018

Why is this bill needed?

The present seal and motto of the Commonwealth, as officially codified by Chapter 360 of the Acts of 1971, is historically inaccurate and culturally insensitive, and should be revised.

The seal contains many disturbing features which in juxtaposition run counter to our Commonwealth's commitments to peace, justice, and equality. Examples of these features include the violence inherent in the image of the sword-wielding arm above the Native American. The motto, translated from the Latin, reads "By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty." This motto seems to justify the European settlers' violence against the Commonwealth's original residents and supports violence as the only means for resolving a conflict.¹ Like the motto, the sword was not originally intended to have a meaning connected to the figure of the Native American.



Another feature is the Native American emblazoned on the seal. This is a portrait drawn from a photograph of an Ojibwa Indian named Little Shell. Little Shell was the Chief of Little Shell Band of Chippewa Indians, which is based in Great Falls, Montana.² Though not from a Massachusetts tribe, his portrait was selected because "he was a fine specimen of an Indian." It was coincidental that his tribe happened to belong to the greater Algonquin family of which the Massachusetts tribes were also members.³

To revise the seal is neither unprecedented nor destructive of ancient history. Since the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629, the seal has gone through several distinct versions, including one that depicts an English-American man holding the Magna Carta.⁴

¹ Bowen, Richard LeBaron. *Massachusetts Records: A Handbook for Genealogists, Historians, Lawyers, and Other Researchers*. 1957.

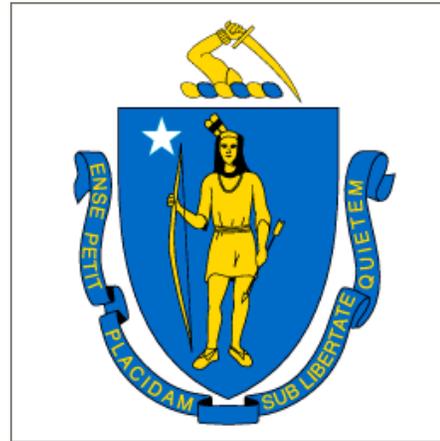
² Little Shell Band of Chippewa Indians, <http://www.littleshelltribe.us/>.

³ E.H. Garrett, *The Coat of Arms and Great Seal of Massachusetts*, *New England Magazine*, February 1901, p. 627.

⁴ Public Records Division. *The History of the Arms and Great Seal of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*. <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/pre/presea/sealhis.htm>, April 5, 2013.

The seal, in its current form, has existed since 1780, and it was made the official seal of Massachusetts in 1898.

Interestingly, in 1989, a fourth-grade class in Amherst wrote letters to the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, asking it to revise its logo, which featured a stylized pilgrim's hat with an arrow through it. The students and others were bothered by the ethnically charged symbol. The Turnpike Board and then Chairman, Allan R. McKinnon, voted to review a logo redesign process which resulted in the removal of the arrow from the logo.



We must account for the messages conveyed by the Commonwealth's most widespread symbols. A symbol represents history, and we must, therefore, strive for the historical accuracy and sensitivity in creating our seals.

What would the bill do?

This bill would establish a special commission for the purpose of examining the seal and motto of the Commonwealth to determine that they accurately reflect the historic and contemporary commitments of the Commonwealth to peace, justice, liberty and equality, and to spreading the opportunities and advantages of education.

The commission would make recommendations for a new or revised design of the seal of the Commonwealth, as described in sections 2 through 6 in Chapter 2 of the General Laws. The commission would report to the General Court the results of its findings by December 2018. It would not receive funds appropriated by the Commonwealth, but would be able to seek and accept grants of money from the federal government and any other private or public sources.

The 14 person commission would be composed of two members of the Senate; three members of the House of Representatives; the Secretary of the Commonwealth or his designee; the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Historical Commission or his designee; the Executive Director of the Council on Arts and Humanities or his designee, the chair of the Massachusetts Arts Commission or designee; and five persons to be appointed by the governor, three of whom shall be of Native American descent from Massachusetts tribes, to be selected from a list of six nominees to be submitted by the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Commission on Indian Affairs.

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