Elusive Meanings in City Seal

In city archives, Louisiana Division, Public Library, an embossed, faded design whispers faintly through 164 years, trying unsuccessfully to answer the major questions raised about the city seal since a heraldry expert from England commented thereon some weeks ago. What it does say, as noted by division head Collin B. Hamer Jr., is that it is the first known imprint of the mayoralty of New Orleans (June 17, 1805) and that succeeding versions derived from it their basic pattern. What it can't report is the significance of its central system (mostly now a mishmash) suggesting a tree-dominated mountain side with torrent, and disclosing in foreground, an axe-armed, recumbent nude.

The seal is vertically oval rather than circular; the stars that appear in various forms and numbers in later designs are limited to 16, in a thin horizontal ellipse, representing the states (Louisiana not yet included) of the Union. The sun rays that have undergone various treatments appear to descend from this topmost feature—and not so brazenly as in recent drawings.

Indian warrior and maiden appear as has become usual, the latter in blouse and skirt and two-strand shell necklace; and both clad also in dignity. And the characteristic alligator, at bottom, rounds out the familiar design.

The seal long used and still being used on City Hall stationery, pending (we understand) transition to a more artistic reconstruction, actually has stirred as much curiosity as the symbolism of its shield: Rather than a surviving product of early primitive art, as might once have been imagined, it seems now more and more to owe itself to the tracing or imperfect photographing of an earlier version, such as that used in the time of Mayor Behrman (1904-20). The latter's 33 stars (two ellipses of 13 stars each; central star; six on the sides) shrank to a jumbled 26. The old Man of the Mountain pulled himself to a sitting position some time in the 19th century and acquired a keg or conduit with gushing water indiscernible in the 1805 embossment.

It's interesting that Mr. Hamer ran across this original on a document in French signed by the remarkable Bernard Marigny, and the city's first mayor, Jacques Pitot, whose old home on Bayou St. John was the object of a remarkable preservation job by the Louisiana Landmarks Society. It was in 1805 the 20-year-old Marigny laid out faubourg Marigny, just below the Vieux Carre—to which faubourg the document relates.

Like all "seal" records found, those of the Orleans Territory Council of Feb. 17, 1805, fail to prescribe or describe a general design or symbolism. A city ordinance of June, 1852 (apparently not repealed by the existing code) left details and ordering to the mayor and mentioned its use only for copies of documents he might furnish the "city attorney and the several courts." An act of 1898 (RS 33:421) requires each municipality to provide and keep a seal under custody of its clerk but doesn't prescribe its uses or (if not used) what.

More research, however, may make a monkey out of our own offhand supposition: The 1805 shield was a tribute to Oceanus, onetime Greek Titan of the stream that encircled and received all waters of the flat earth (flat except for mountains); its mountainous backdrop represented no misconception of Louisiana terrain but Homer's Elysium or happy land on the west of earth near the stream; and with sunbeams marking East, the flow of water from right to left (South to North) was in accord with the prescribed current of River Ocean on that edge of earth.