Symbols of the United States

Every nation has *symbols*—specific objects that represent beliefs, values, traditions, or other intangible ideas that make that country unique. While these symbols may change over time, they can help to bind a nation together by reminding its people of their nation's history and most important principles. Six U.S. symbols are depicted in this primary source set: the Liberty Bell, the U.S. flag, the bald eagle, the national anthem, Uncle Sam, and the Statue of Liberty.

Liberty Enlightening the World
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2006678312/

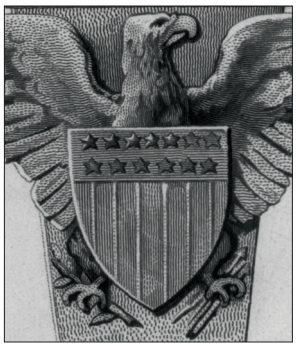
Historical Background

The **Liberty Bell** was commissioned by the Pennsylvania colony in 1752. The colony's leaders wanted a bell for its state house (now known as Independence Hall) that could be heard around the city. One side of the bell has a biblical quote: "Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." The most notable feature of the bell, though, is a crack in the metal that runs up from the bell's lip. Although there is no proof, many people believe that the Liberty Bell was rung to mark the reading of the Declaration of Independence on July 8, 1776. In the 1830s, abolitionists adopted the bell as a symbol of their struggle to abolish slavery; they popularized the name the Liberty Bell. Between 1885 and 1915, the bell traveled around the country for exhibitions and patriotic events. The bell currently resides in the Liberty Bell Center on Philadelphia's Independence Mall. The bell's crack is the source of many stories that have reached nearly mythic proportion; the crack's appearance may have added to the bell's symbolic power.

The **flag of the United States** is commonly known as the "Stars and Stripes" or "Old Glory." On June 14, 1777, the Continental Congress adopted a resolution stating: "Resolved, That the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new Constellation." It is unknown whether Betsy Ross sewed the first flag created under this resolution; many historians view this story as a myth. The current 50-star flag is the 27th "edition" of the flag and the one that has been in use the longest, since 1960. In 1818, Congress passed a law stating that a new star be added for each new state; the 13 stripes would remain constant to represent the 13 colonies. (At the time this

law was passed, the flag had 15 stripes; two stripes had been added to represent the first two states added to the union—Vermont and Kentucky.)

The **bald eagle** has long been the national bird of the United States. In 1782, the Continental Congress adopted the Great Seal of the United States, which depicts a bald eagle holding 13 olive branches in one talon and 13 arrows in the other. The olive branch stands for the power to make peace, while the arrows stand for the power to make war.



The eagle, emblem of America
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002736841/

The **national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner,"** has a colorful history. Francis Scott Key wrote the lyrics to the anthem as a poem in 1814, after he witnessed the British Navy bombarding ships during the Battle of Fort McHenry in the War of 1812. The melody was "borrowed" from the tune of a popular British song. The song became the official national anthem in 1931, replacing several other songs commonly sung at public events. The anthem is somewhat controversial because of its war-related imagery and the challenge that the music poses to singers.

Uncle Sam, whose image appeared during the War of 1812, is a symbol of the U.S. government. He is portrayed as an older, bearded man dressed in clothes that evoke the U.S. flag. Uncle Sam is commonly used in political cartoons, as well as in advertising. Perhaps the best-known image of Uncle Sam was as a recruiting tool for the U.S. Army during World War I. A poster by artist James Montgomery Flagg, shows a stern Uncle Sam pointing at the viewer over the caption: "I Want YOU for the U.S. Army."

Volunteer...
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3g09047/

The Statue of Liberty (its formal title is *Liberty Enlightening the World*) was a gift to the United States from the people of France. Dedicated in 1886, the statue shows Libertas, the Roman goddess of freedom. Located in New York Harbor, the statue holds a torch in one hand and a tablet representing the law in the other. The date of the Declaration of Independence is inscribed on the tablet. A broken chain sits at Libertas's feet. The statue is an iconic symbol of freedom. Protestors around the world have used the image of the statue in their struggles for political freedom; a replica was erected in 1989 in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

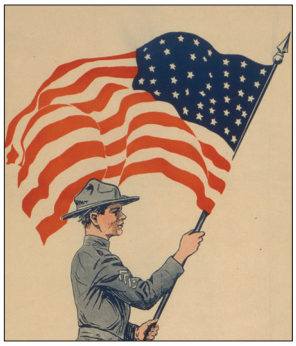
The Statue of Liberty
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/99403911/

Suggestions for Teachers

Before having students work with the documents in this primary source set, you may find it useful to print multiple copies of each document, mount them on poster board, and affix a brief caption to each document.

Create a display of *symbols*—an object that represents something else—in your classroom. Some symbols may be actual objects, such as the U.S. flag (if one is displayed in your room) or a stuffed animal representing a local sports team. Other symbols may be pictures, including images from the primary source set, a photo of your school mascot, etc. Write the word *symbol* on the board and tell students that all of the items you have displayed are symbols. Talk through how your school mascot represents your school; for example, you might say "Snortner the Dragon represents Emerald School. It represents our history because it is named after the first principal of the school. It represents our students because dragons are fierce and fun, just like our students." Students can add to the display by bringing in symbols that represent things about their own lives.

Tell students that they are going to be looking at symbols of the United States. Organize the class into small groups and give each group a picture of one symbol from the primary source set. You may want to begin by choosing the image of each symbol that is the most straightforward. Ask students to identify the symbol that is shown and to explain how it represents the United States. Have groups share their ideas. Give each group a second picture of their symbol and ask them what they can learn from the second image. Their statements can be relatively simple. For example, they might say, "The arrows in the eagle's claw make me think of fighting. Maybe this means that the United States is powerful."



Territory of Hawaii registration day July 31
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/00652949/

Have students look closely at the three documents related to the flag. How do these images show that symbols can change over time? For example, there are different numbers of stars on each image. Why might some symbols change and others stay the same? Note that while the United States may change over the years, some of its people's ideas about the nation remain the same. Challenge students to think of other examples of symbols that have changed over time.

Show students the "All American Medley" quilt. Ask students to identify the symbols of the United States that appear on the quilt (the Liberty Bell, the bald eagle, the flag, fireworks, popular American foods, figures representing the diversity of the American people, and so on). You may need to help students identify symbols not already covered in discussion of the primary source set. Ask students why they think this quilt was made. Explain that the quilt might have been designed to show the quilt maker's pride in America. Ask students how they feel about living in the United States. Challenge students to create their own design for a quilt that uses American symbols to show how they feel.

Play the sound recording of the national anthem. Ask students where they might have heard this song before. Do any of the students know the words to the song? Give students a chance to sing the song. Then, use "The Star-Spangled Banner" public school song sheet and the sound recording to teach the class the national anthem.

Additional Resources

Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers

http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/

Prints and Photographs Division

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/

Posters: WPA Posters

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/wpapos/

Primary Sources with Citations

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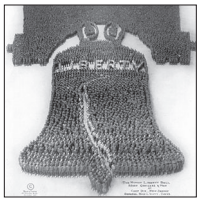

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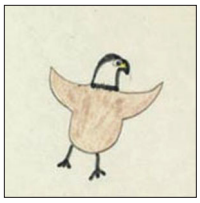

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