

# The Seal of the City of Charleston

By Rebecca Schultz

The seal of the City of Charleston has gone through several incarnations since its adoption in 1783, although its main components have remained essentially the same.

A 1903 Ordinance described the seal as follows:

*On the right in the foreground is a female figure seated, her right arm raised and forefinger pointing, her left arm down and left hand holding a sceptre; on the left is a ship under full sail; in the background is a water view of the City, with the steeples towering; immediately below the female figure are the words, "Carolopolis Condita A. D. 1670" [Charleston, founded in 1670]; encircling the whole are the following inscriptions in Roman capitals: "Aedes mores juraque curat" [she guards her buildings, customs, and rights]. "Civitatis Regimine Donata A. D. 1783" [given to the rule of the citizens in 1783].<sup>1</sup>*

An early picture of the seal is found in *The Charleston Directory and Revenue System* published in 1790.<sup>2</sup> Present in this depiction are the steeples of St. Philip's Church on the right and St. Michael's Church on the left (immediately behind the ship) with the City Exchange shown between (note the missing cupola). The woman is seated with her outstretched hand pointing towards the harbor. Historian David C. R. Heisser, who researched the seal's history in an essay for *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, noted that "tradition identifies the woman as the personification of the city itself, and the design evokes an image of Charleston deriving its livelihood from the sea and prepared to defend itself."<sup>3</sup> The Phrygian or Liberty cap atop the woman's spear is most likely a reference to themes of liberty and autonomy emanating from the French Revolution. It is not present in the earliest known seal impression from 1804 (located in the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society), although it became a prominent symbol on later impressions and remains so to this day.<sup>4</sup>



1790 Seal

The following representation of the seal, printed in the 1818 edition of the *Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston* shows an updated skyline of Charleston. The woman is seated and wears clothing reflective of the time period;

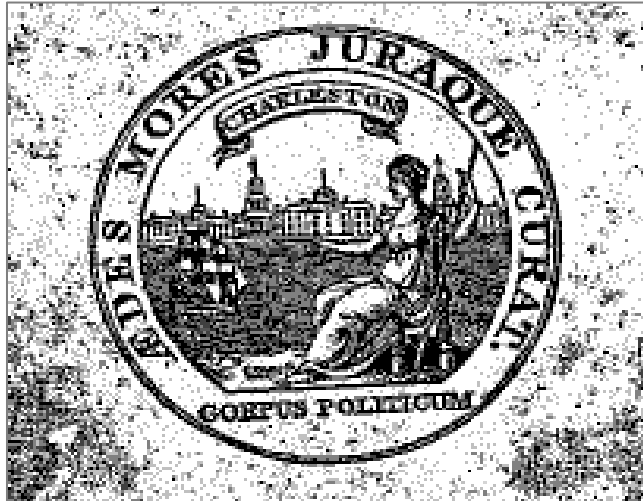
<sup>1</sup> *The Revised Ordinances of the City of Charleston, South Carolina*, (Charleston, SC: Walker, Evans & Cogswell Co. Printers, 1903), 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Milligan, Jacob, *The Charleston Directory and Revenue System* (Charleston, SC: T. B. Bowen, 1790).

<sup>3</sup> Heisser, David C. R. "Warrior Queen of Ocean": The Story of Charleston and its Seal," (*South Carolina Historical Magazine* v. 93, 1992), 167.

<sup>4</sup> Heisser, "Warrior Queen," 184-185.

note that the Liberty cap is no longer present. Her arm is outstretched with her palm facing up, rather than pointing, in a welcoming gesture.



1818 Seal<sup>5</sup>

The following image which sits atop the front of City Hall, dates from the same time period (circa 1818-1820). Again, the woman is shown with an open palm and the Liberty cap is missing from her staff. By this time period, the excesses of the French Revolution had made the cap a somewhat vitriolic symbol, which City officials and artisans possibly sought to avoid.<sup>6</sup>



City Hall, circa 1818-1820

In the years leading up to and immediately following the Civil War we see few significant changes in the design of the seal. This impression from the 1848 *Census of the City of Charleston* displays updated dress and hair, but otherwise shows no noteworthy differences from earlier depictions.



1847 Seal<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston, From the Year 1783 to July 1818*, (Charleston, SC: Archibald E. Miller, Printer, 1818).

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion see Heisser, "Warrior Queen," 184-186.

<sup>7</sup> Dawson, J. L. and H. W. DeSaussure, *Census of the City of Charleston, South Carolina, For the Year 1848*, (Charleston, SC: J. B. Nixon, Printer, 1849).

Significant changes do not occur in the seal’s design until the administration of Mayor William Ashmead Courtney. Sometime in 1880 or 1881, Courtney commissioned a new seal design that condensed the harbor view, allowing for additional inscriptions. The Latin name, Charlestownia is now displayed with the city’s founding date beneath the seated woman (Charlestownia is changed to Carolopolis soon after). Along the bottom edge of the seal appears the inscription “Civitatis Regimine Donata A. D. 1783” (incorporated in the year of our Lord 1783). Notably, the Liberty cap has reappeared atop the woman’s staff. Various decorative elements, including an oil lamp, a laurel base (other variants employ palm fronds), and shelf of books, are also added to the seal.<sup>8</sup>



Circa 1880 Seal<sup>9</sup>

The next significant change to the City’s seal occurs in 1907 when a laurel crown is added to the woman’s outstretched hand. The use of a laurel wreath as a crown is a common theme in many ancient reliefs and is typically viewed as a symbol of victory or success in battle. David Heisser noted that this element may have been inspired by the seal of the College of Charleston, which depicts a seated woman crowning a graduate.<sup>10</sup>



1908<sup>11</sup>



1952<sup>12</sup>

While undergoing minor stylistic changes, the seal of the City of Charleston continues virtually unchanged from its 1907 version. The seal remains under the care of the Clerk of Council and is applied to all official documents, including Mayoral Proclamations, Ordinances, and Resolutions.



***City of Charleston***  
***South Carolina***

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of the 1880 seal see Heisser, “Warrior Queen,” 189-191.

<sup>9</sup> *Annual Report of 1880. Board of Health, Charleston, S. C.*, (Charleston, SC: Walker, Evans & Cogswell, Printers, 1881).

<sup>10</sup> Heisser, “Warrior Queen,” 192.

<sup>11</sup> *Year Book 1908, City of Charleston, So. Ca.* (Charleston, SC: The Daggett Printing Co., 1909).

<sup>12</sup> *Year Book 1949-1950-1951, City of Charleston, South Carolina*, (Charleston, SC: Nelsons’ Southern Printing, 1952).