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The Eagle's Journey from Indigenous Symbol to American Icon

This paper examines the evolution of the bald eagle as an American symbol, tracing its significance from Indigenous American traditions through its adoption as a national emblem and its contemporary cultural resonance. The bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) is one of American identity's most recognisable and enduring symbols. Its journey to becoming emblematic reflects the complex intersection of conquered Indigenous peoples and an immigrant population fleeing colonial power. Its semiotic development has been problematic, culturally and politically; sometimes organic, and now environmental.

In pre-colonial North America, eagles held a spiritual significance among indigenous peoples in a religious and social context. Jessica E. Watson's archaeological research on Martha's Vineyard reveals evidence of ceremonial practices using the eagle symbol, particularly in connection with the Thunderbird.¹ These archaeological finds show eagle remains carefully preserved and utilised in ritualistic contexts, and to this day, their use as sacred symbols within indigenous communities continues. Research of American folklore traditions shows these rituals were complex and that eagles symbolically played multiple roles, functioning not merely as spiritual symbols but as integral components of social and religious structures. Their significance extended beyond mere totemic representation, encompassing complex belief systems that saw the eagle as a mediator between the earthly and spiritual realms. Ernest Ingersoll's research looks at how eagles were perceived by indigenous tribes as manifestations of divine power, particularly in connection with the weather, which, as they were hunter-gatherer societies, was seen as a celestial force.²

The Thunderbird or great spirit is widespread indigenous North American traditions, deeply woven into the spiritual fabric of many tribes. The great spirit is considered cosmic in scale and legend, often associated with natural and celestial forces. The Eagle Dance, which is intrinsically connected to Thunderbird mythology, emerged as a significant winter ceremony

¹ Jessica E. Watson, "Bald Eagles and the Thunderbird Myth: Birds in Pre-Contact Ceremonialism on Martha's Vineyard, USA," *Quaternary International*, 543 (2020), pp. 61–70, doi:10.1016/j.quaint.2020.03.017.

² Ernest Ingersoll, *Birds in Legend, Fable and Folklore*, 1923, p. 204, doi:10.5962/bhl.title.5545.

where performers would carry sacred eagle-feather wands, these symbolised spiritual power and connection. The ceremonial significance of eagles in Native American culture is both past and contemporary. Through both the myth and the dance, indigenous peoples have preserved a profound spiritual tradition that honours the powerful connection between the earthly realm, represented by the eagle, and the supernatural domain of the Thunderbird. Feathers and claws from eagles have been used in various indigenous rituals and ceremonies, including medicine pouches and ceremonial, healing, and purification purposes, as well as in the eagle dance³. The bald eagle continues to have spiritual and cultural significance for the Indigenous peoples of North America, embodying fundamental virtues such as honesty, truth, majesty, strength, and wisdom.



The nature of worship and respect by Indigenous people may have subtly influenced the eventual adoption of the bald eagle as an American symbol, but this is by no means clear. The transformation of the eagle from a sacred indigenous symbol to America's national emblem represents a complex journey of cultural appropriation, political symbolism, and national identity formation. This evolution reflects broader patterns of how symbols cross cultural boundaries and acquire new meanings, while still retaining parts of their original significance. The transition from indigenous Sacred symbol to revolutionary American imagery marked a significant shift in its cultural meaning. During the American Revolution, the founding fathers deliberately sought symbols that could effectively represent the new nation's aspirations and values. The selection of the bald eagle as the national emblem in 1782 represented a careful consideration of various symbolic options, as documented in the official

³ William N. Fenton, *The Iroquois Eagle Dance: An Offshoot of the Calumet Dance* (Syracuse University Press, 1991), p. 54.

⁴ "Eagle Dance at the Stand Rock Indian Ceremonial | Photograph | Wisconsin Historical Society," *Wisconsin Historical Society*, 2003 <<https://wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM131286>>.

records of the Great Seal's development.⁵ Robert Hieronimus and Laura Cortner's analysis of American symbolism reveals the complex deliberations behind the eagle's adoption. The selection process involved significant debate.⁶ As an emblem of freedom for a people fighting colonial domination, emerged a desire to find a distinctive representation for their own evolving identity. The eagle's natural impressive statue, its huge encompassing wingspan, fierce independence, unique appearance, and native presence in North America made it an obvious choice for a new nation seeking a distinctive symbol. However, this decision was not immediate; it took three committees before settling on the bald eagle. Early designs depicted the golden eagle until the third committee revised the design to adopt the bald eagle as the official Great Seal. This was a moment of historical importance for a fledgling nation, and not everyone supported the selection of the bald eagle. Benjamin Franklin⁷ famously described the bald eagle as a 'bird of bad moral character,' saying it did not earn its 'sustenance honestly'. He criticised the eagle for being 'too lazy to fish for itself,' choosing instead to steal from the hardworking osprey. Franklin suggested that the turkey, a true native bird with courage, would be a better symbol, as it would not hesitate to 'attack a redcoat who walked into his barnyard.' Despite Franklin's arguments, Charles Thomson favoured the bald eagle over the golden eagle for the national seal. Thomson aimed to emphasise that the United States was to be a democracy, not an imperialist nation. This choice aligned with the foundational principles of the new republic, which sought to establish itself as distinct from

⁵ Anonymous, *The Great Seal of the United States*, 1977 <<https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/27807.pdf>>.

⁶Robert Hieronimus and Laura Cortner, *The United Symbolism of America: Deciphering Hidden Meanings in America's Most Familiar Art, Architecture, and Logos* (Red Wheel/Weiser, 2008), p. 158.

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⁷ Peter Smagorinsky and Joel Taxel, *The Discourse of Character Education: Culture Wars in the Classroom* (Routledge, 2005), p. 293.

the monarchies, empires and colonial domination of the old world of Europe.



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The bald eagle's selection as America's national symbol was neither immediate nor uncontested. As well as Thomson's and Franklin's quotable debate, Lawrence's research¹⁰ in the *Journal of American Culture* says the decision sparked significant debate in Congress. The bird's selection process, finalised in May 1782, reflected a complex intersection of cultural and political considerations. The symbolic Eagle was seen and still is seen as martial symbol. The Roman Empire used the aquila (eagle) as its military standard, representing power and territorial dominion as documented by Matthew¹¹. This classical precedent significantly influenced America's choice, as the founding fathers sought to legitimise their new nation with historical symbols of authority and strength. As the indigenous cultures had also long revered the bald eagle, viewing it as a sacred messenger between humans and the spirits Shirakawa¹², it added a uniquely 'American' dimension to its symbolism. The bird's dual nature, both as a continuation of ancient imperial traditions and as a symbol of the New World, would indeed prove prophetic. America evolved from a fledgling nation into a global superpower. The eagle ultimately captured the aspirational spirit of the new republic,

⁸ [ps://www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org/lesson-plans/objects-of-revolution/the-great-seal-of-the-united-states/](https://www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org/lesson-plans/objects-of-revolution/the-great-seal-of-the-united-states/)

⁹ [ps://www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org/lesson-plans/objects-of-revolution/the-great-seal-of-the-united-states/](https://www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org/lesson-plans/objects-of-revolution/the-great-seal-of-the-united-states/)

¹⁰ Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, "Symbol of a Nation: The Bald Eagle in American Culture," *Journal of American Culture*, 13.1 (1990), pp. 63–69, doi:10.1111/j.1542-734x.1990.1301_63.x.

¹¹ Matthew Dillon and Christopher Matthew, *The Roman Republic* (Pen and Sword Military, 2020), p. 130.

¹² Shirakawa, Keiko. *The American Bald Eagle and the bird woman: Early America's nation building and its native American policy*. Diss. Doshisha University, 2011.

embodying both the nation's martial strength and its soaring ambitions, ironically by exploiting the indigenous wealth of resources.

Benjamin Franklin's famous preference for the turkey as the national bird, though ultimately unsuccessful, highlighted the thoughtful consideration given to choosing a national symbol. The eagle's perceived qualities of strength, freedom, and vision aligned closely with revolutionary ideals for the new republic. The Eagles appropriation of others Sustenance, however, foreshadowed American expansion. The eagle's symbolism underwent significant transformation during America's period of imperial expansion. Alvita Akiboh's¹³comprehensive study of national symbols in the U.S. colonial empire demonstrates how the eagle evolved from a symbol of liberation to one of imperial authority.¹⁴ This transformation reflected the nation's changing self-perception and its emerging role as a global power. The eagle became increasingly associated with American military might and territorial expansion. It was seen as ideal for projecting an image of American influence across new territories. Preston Cook's visual history of the American eagle documents how artistic representations of the bird evolved during this period, reflecting changing national attitudes.¹⁵ The eagle's depiction in government seals, military insignia, and public architecture became increasingly militaristic and imposing, symbolising America's growing imperial ambitions.

In contemporary America, the eagle serves in multiple symbolic functions, extending beyond its traditional role as a national emblem. Jack E. Davis's extensive research on the bald eagle's history in America reveals how the bird's near-extinction and subsequent recovery became a narrative of environmental consciousness and conservation success.¹⁶ The eagle's journey from the brink of extinction to recovery mirrors broader environmental movements and conservation efforts in American society. The Journal of American Folklore provides valuable insights into how the eagle's symbolism has evolved in popular culture, noting its continued significance in both official and unofficial contexts.¹⁷ This dual role as both a national symbol and an environmental icon has added new layers of meaning to the eagle's symbolic significance. Contemporary views increasingly examines the complex implications of appropriating indigenous symbols. The all-Conquering American imperial Eagle is a prime

¹³ Alvita Akiboh, *Imperial Material: National Symbols in the US Colonial Empire* (University of Chicago Press, 2023).

¹⁴ Akiboh, *Imperial Material: National Symbols in the US Colonial Empire*.

¹⁵ Preston Cook, *American Eagle: A Visual History of Our National Emblem* (Goff Books, 2019).

¹⁶ Cook, Preston, *American Eagle: A Visual History of Our National Emblem* (Goff Books, 2019)

¹⁷ *The Journal of American Folklore*, 1988.

example. Margaret Hobbs and Carla Rice's¹⁸ analysis of cultural appropriation questions the power dynamics involved in the transformation of indigenous symbols into national emblems. This new critique examines how cultural symbols are not adopted, but appropriated and transformed across different contexts.

Anne Wagner and Richard K. Sherwin's examination of visual symbolism in American legal and cultural contexts provides additional insight into how the eagle continues to function as a power symbol in contemporary society.¹⁹ Their research demonstrates the ongoing influence of this symbol in shaping American identity and legal discourse. The Great Seal's design features the eagle grasping thirteen arrows, (the thirteen original colonies) symbolising its readiness to defend liberty, and an olive branch, with its head turned towards the olive branch, signifying a preference for peace. In its beak, it holds the motto 'E Pluribus Unum - From many into one' many people into one nation. The eagle was meant to represent the strength and power of the nation. Despite being featured on the Great Seal, the fate of the real bird has faced numerous challenges. The Bald Eagle was saved from extinction on two occasions. In the 1940s, legislation was passed to prohibit the hunting and possession of eagles. This law provides protection for both the Bald Eagle and the Golden Eagle (as amended in 1962) by prohibiting the taking, possession, sale, purchase, barter, transport, export, or import of any Bald or Golden eagle, alive or dead, including any part, nest, or egg, unless permitted.

By 1963, the bald eagle was close to extinction once again, with its population dropping to just 417 known nesting pairs due to the use of the pesticide DDT²⁰, which caused eagle eggshells to become too thin and shatter. However, as of 2007, it has been removed from the endangered list. Thanks to legal protections, the bald eagle remains a living symbol. The eagles protected status presents new challenges for Indigenous practices and beliefs. As highlighted in the work of Wagner and Sherwin in law and visual studies²¹, conflicts have emerged. In 2005, Winslow Friday, a member of the Northern Arapaho tribe, shot a bald eagle to obtain feathers for his cousin, who needed them for an upcoming Sun Dance. He was arrested and convicted under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. Despite exceptions

¹⁸ Margaret Hobbs and Carla Rice, *Gender and Women's Studies, Second Edition: Critical Terrain* (Canadian Scholars, 2018).

¹⁹ Anne Wagner and Richard K. Sherwin, *Law, Culture and Visual Studies* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2013).

²⁰ Ann C. Cooper, *Eagles: Hunters of the Sky* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1992), p. 56.

²¹ Anne Wagner and Richard K. Sherwin, *Law, Culture and Visual Studies* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2013).

in the law for religious practices, he argued that the required permits violated his right to religious practice and infringed upon his First Amendment rights.

The eagle's evolution as a symbol reflects America's complex historical narrative and continues to influence contemporary discussions about national identity, cultural appropriation, and environmental conservation. Janine Rogers'²² comprehensive analysis of eagle symbolism suggests that this evolution is ongoing, with new meanings and interpretations continuing to emerge. The symbol's journey from indigenous spiritual icon to national emblem, and its subsequent transformations, provides a insights into the dynamic nature of cultural symbols and their role in national identity formation and subsequent subjugation of conquered peoples.

²² Rogers.

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