



Seal of the Supreme Court, 1849–1866
CALIFORNIA STATE ARCHIVES



Seal of the Supreme Court adopted in 1866
CALIFORNIA STATE ARCHIVES

Scales, Swords, and Squares

THE SEALS OF THE SUPREME COURT OF CALIFORNIA

BY SEBASTIAN A. NELSON*

FOR MOST OF its history the Supreme Court of California has used a seal bearing an image of the Roman goddess of justice, with her familiar blindfold, holding a sword in one hand and scales in the other. The first seal of the court, however — in use from 1850 to 1866 — used a very different image. The original seal depicted a Masonic altar, decorated with a square and set of compasses, beside the figure of an ancient Roman. The figure is shown pointing to or holding his hand above an open book, presumably the Bible, on top of the altar.

The original seal of the Supreme Court was the only seal used by any state agency whose design included symbols from Freemasonry, according to former California State Historian Dr. Jacob N. Bowman. Bowman speculated that the design was influenced by the Court's first leader, Chief Justice Serranus C. Hastings (1814–1893), who was an active Mason. By examining historic state and county records, Bowman identified the last known impression of the first seal on a document dated March 2, 1866. The earliest known impression of the Supreme Court's new seal bearing

the goddess of justice was located by Bowman on a document dated April 23, 1866. Bowman concludes the design of the seal was changed because the justices felt that Masonic symbolism "was inappropriate for a seal of a court of all the people."¹

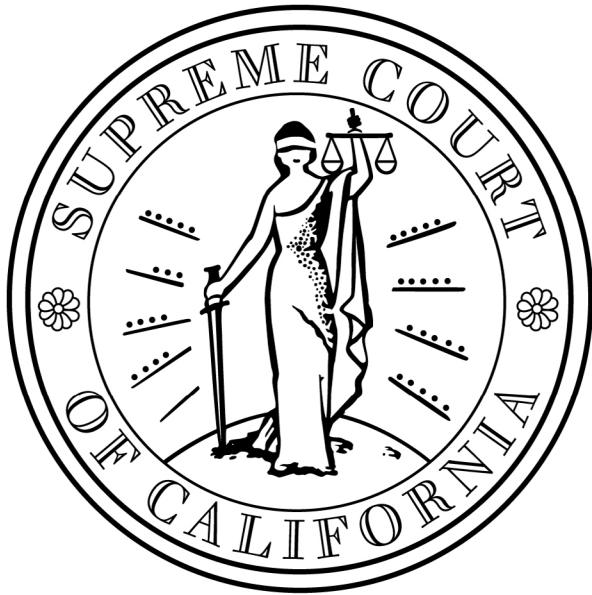
In January 1886, state Senator Chancellor Hartson (1824–1889) introduced Senate Bill 128, titled *An Act relating to the Seal of the Supreme Court*.² Hartson's bill was approved on February 9 as chapter 89 of the 1866 Statutes, and reads in part:

The Judges of the Supreme Court are hereby authorized to procure a seal for said Court, to be used in the place and stead of the seal heretofore and now in use by said Court, such seal to have such device as may be selected by said Judges . . . the seal so devised and made shall, by order of Court, be described in its records, and shall thenceforth be the seal of the Supreme Court of this State.

The minutes of the Court from February 19, 1866, contain a description of the new seal:

Ordered that the clerk of this Court pursuant to the Act of the Legislature procure a new seal

* Court Records Archivist, California State Archives.



Current seal

SUPREME COURT OF CALIFORNIA

for the Court, one and a half inches in diameter, with the figure of Justice blindfolded holding a scale in one hand, and a sword in the other, and the words "Supreme Court of California" around the outer edge.³

Although anti-Masonic sentiment was, for a time, a powerful force in 19th century American politics, Senate Bill 128 probably had nothing to do with Freemasonry. Hartson in fact was a Mason himself.⁴ The reason for the change was apparently more prosaic. According to an article in the *Daily Alta California* newspaper of January 18, 1866, "Senator Hartson, this morning, introduced an act for a new seal for the Supreme Court. The present one is defaced, and besides not expressive of its design." ☆

ENDNOTES

1. J. N. Bowman, "The Seal of the California Supreme Court," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 33:1 (March 1954), p. 75.
2. Original Bill File, Senate Bill 1228, 1866, Secretary of State Records, California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento.
3. Minutes, February 19, 1866, Supreme Court of California Records, California State Archives.
4. Tom Gregory, *History of Solano and Napa counties, California, with biographical sketches of the leading men and women of the counties who have been identified with its growth and development from the early days to the present time*, (Los Angeles: Historical Record Co., 1912), p. 184.

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