

Wisconsin State Symbols

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Wisconsin state symbols: origin and descriptions of the official state symbols as specified by law

Steel framework of the north wing, 1914.

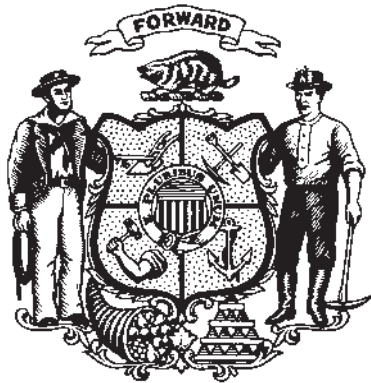


State Historical Society of Wisconsin, WHI (X3) 29194

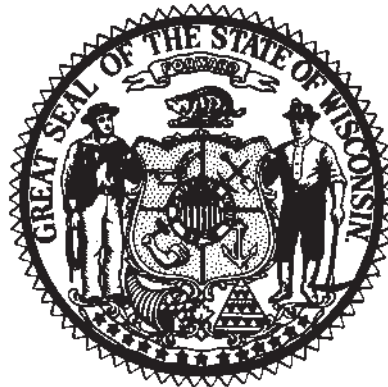
WISCONSIN STATE SYMBOLS

(See front and back endpapers)

Over the years the Wisconsin Legislature has officially recognized a wide variety of state symbols. In order of adoption, Wisconsin has designated an official seal, coat of arms, motto, flag, song, flower, bird, tree, fish, state animal, wildlife animal, domestic animal, mineral, rock, symbol of peace, insect, soil, fossil, dog, beverage, grain, and dance. (The “Badger State” nickname, however, remains unofficial.) These symbols provide a focus for expanding public awareness of Wisconsin’s history and diversity.



The Coat of Arms



The Great Seal

Seal and coat of arms. Article XIII, Section 4, of the Wisconsin Constitution requires the legislature to provide a “great seal” to be used by the secretary of state to authenticate all of the governor’s official acts except laws. The seal consists of the coat of arms, described below, with the words “Great Seal of the State of Wisconsin” centered above and a curved line of 13 stars, representing the 13 original United States, centered below, surrounded by an ornamental border. A modified “lesser seal” serves as the seal of the secretary of state.

The coat of arms is an integral part of the state seal and also appears on the state flag. It contains a sailor with a coil of rope and a “yeoman” (usually considered a miner) with a pick, who jointly represent labor on water and land. These two figures support a quartered shield with symbols for agriculture (plow), mining (pick and shovel), manufacturing (arm and hammer), and navigation (anchor). Centered on the shield is a small U.S. coat of arms and the U.S. motto, “E pluribus unum” (“one out of many”), referring to the union of U.S. states, to symbolize Wisconsin’s loyalty to the Union. At the base, a cornucopia, or horn of plenty, stands for prosperity and abundance, while a pyramid of 13 lead ingots represents mineral wealth and the 13 original United States. Centered over the shield is a badger, the state animal, and the state motto “Forward” appears on a banner above the badger.

The history of the seal is inextricably entwined with that of the coat of arms. An official seal was created in 1836, when Wisconsin became a territory, and was revised in 1839. When Wisconsin achieved statehood in 1848, a new seal was prepared. This seal was changed in 1851 at the instigation of Governor Nelson Dewey and slightly modified to its current design in 1881 when Dewey’s seal wore out and had to be recast. (See “Motto” below.) Chapter 280, Laws of 1881, provided the first precise statutory description of the great seal and coat of arms in what ultimately became Sections 1.07 and 14.45 of the statutes.

Motto: “Forward”. The motto, “Forward”, was introduced in the 1851 revision of the state seal and coat of arms. Governor Dewey had asked University of Wisconsin Chancellor John H. Lathrop to design a new seal. It is alleged the motto was selected during a chance meeting between Governor Dewey and Edward Ryan (later chief justice of the Wisconsin Supreme Court) when the governor went to New York City, carrying the Lathrop design to the engraver. Ryan objected to the Latin motto, “Excelsior”, which Lathrop proposed. According to tradition, Dewey and Ryan sat down on the steps of a Wall Street bank, designed a new seal and chose “Forward” on the spot. It is officially recognized in Section 1.07 of the statutes.

Flag. An official design for Wisconsin’s state flag was initially provided by the legislature in 1863. Noting that a flag had not been adopted and that Civil War regiments in the field were requesting flags, the legislature formed a 5-member joint select committee to report “a description for a proper state flag.” This action resulted in the adoption of 1863 Joint Resolution 4, which provided a design for a state flag that was substantially the same as the regimental flags already in use by Wisconsin troops.

It was not until 1913, however, that language concerning flag specifications was added to the Wisconsin Statutes. Chapter 111, Laws of 1913, created a state flag provision, specifying a dark blue flag with the state coat of arms centered on each side. That provision has become Section 1.08 of the statutes.

The 1913 design remained unchanged until the enactment of Chapter 286, Laws of 1979, which culminated years of legislative efforts to alter or replace Wisconsin’s flag so it would be more distinctive and recognizable. The most significant changes made by the 1979 act were adding the word “Wisconsin” and the statehood date “1848” in white letters, centered respectively above and below the coat of arms.

Song: “On, Wisconsin!” The music for “On, Wisconsin!” was composed in 1909 by William T. Purdy with the idea of entering it in a contest for the creation of a new University of Minnesota football song. (“Minnesota” would have replaced “On, Wisconsin” in the opening lines.) Carl Beck persuaded Purdy to dedicate the song to the University of Wisconsin football team instead, and Beck collaborated with the composer by writing the lyrics. The song was introduced at the Madison campus in November 1909. It was later acclaimed by world-famous composer and bandmaster John Philip Sousa as the best college song he had ever heard.

Lyrics more in keeping with the purposes of a state song were subsequently written in 1913 by Judge Charles D. Rosa and J. S. Hubbard, editor of the *Beloit Free Press*. Rosa and Hubbard were among the delegates from many states convened in 1913 to commemorate the centennial of the Battle of Lake Erie. Inspired by the occasion, they provided new, more solemn words to the already well-known football song.

Although “On, Wisconsin!” was widely recognized as Wisconsin’s song, the state did not officially adopt it until 1959. Representative Harold W. Clemens discovered that Wisconsin was one of only ten states without an official song. He introduced a bill to give the song the status he thought it deserved. On discovering that many different lyrics existed, an official text for the first verse was incorporated in Chapter 170, Laws of 1959, and it is contained in Section 1.10 of the statutes:

On, Wisconsin! On, Wisconsin! Grand old badger state!
We, thy loyal sons and daughters, Hail thee, good and great.
On, Wisconsin! On, Wisconsin! Champion of the right,
‘Forward’, our motto — God will give thee might!

Flower: wood violet (*Viola papilionacea*). In 1908, Wisconsin school children nominated four candidates for state flower: the violet, wild rose, trailing arbutus, and white water lily. On Arbor Day 1909, the final vote was taken, and the violet won. Chapter 218, Laws of 1949, which created Section 1.10, named the wood violet Wisconsin’s official flower.

Bird: robin (*Turdus migratorius*). In 1926-27, Wisconsin school children voted to select a state bird. The robin received twice as many votes as those given any other bird. Chapter 218, Laws of 1949, which created Section 1.10, officially made the robin the state bird.

Tree: sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*). A favorite state tree was first selected by a vote of Wisconsin school children in 1893. The maple tree won, followed by oak, pine, and elm. Another vote was conducted in 1948 among school children by the Youth Centennial Committee. In that election, the sugar maple again received the most votes, followed by white pine and birch. The 1949 Legislature, in spite of efforts by white pine advocates, named the sugar maple the official state tree by enacting Chapter 218, Laws of 1949, which created Section 1.10.

Fish: muskellunge (*Esox masquinongy masquinongy Mitchell*). Members of the legislature attempted to adopt the muskellunge as the state fish as early as 1939. The trout was a very distant alternative suggestion. In 1955, the legislature unanimously passed Chapter 18 to amend Section 1.10 and designate the muskellunge as Wisconsin's official fish.

Animals: badger (*Taxidea taxus*), **white-tailed deer** (*Odocoileus virginianus*), **dairy cow** (*Bos taurus*). Although the *badger* has been closely associated with Wisconsin since territorial days, it was not declared the official state animal until 1957. Over the years its likeness had been incorporated in the state coat of arms, the seal, the flag, and even State Capitol architecture, as well as being immortalized in the song, "On, Wisconsin!" ("Grand old badger state!"). "Bucky Badger" has long been the mascot of the UW-Madison. In 1957, a bill to establish the badger as state animal was introduced at the request of four Jefferson County elementary school students who discovered from a historical society publication that the badger had not been given the official status most people assumed. Serious opposition developed, however, when a faction from Wisconsin's northern counties introduced a bill to make the *white-tailed deer* the official animal, citing the state's large native deer population, the animal's physical attributes, and the considerable economic benefits derived from the annual deer hunt. The legislature reached a compromise by adding two official animals to Section 1.10. In Chapter 209, Laws of 1957, it named the badger the "state animal", and Chapter 147 designated the white-tailed deer as the state "wildlife animal".

The *dairy cow* was added to Section 1.10 as Wisconsin's official "domestic animal" by Chapter 167, Laws of 1971, in recognition of the animal's many contributions to the state. This action was termed a logical and long overdue step, consistent with the state's promoting itself as *America's Dairyland*, the slogan placed on state automobile license plates by Chapter 115, Laws of 1939. 1972 Executive Order 32 designated Wisconsin's first official dairy cow, but the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection is now required to establish an annual rotation among Wisconsin's remaining purebreds. The Holstein-Friesian was selected for 2001, followed by the Ayrshire in 2002.

Badger nickname. History, rather than the law, explains Wisconsin's unofficial nickname as the "Badger State". During the lead-mining boom that began just prior to 1830 in southwestern Wisconsin, the name was first applied to miners who were too busy digging the "gray gold" to build houses. Like badgers, they moved into abandoned mine shafts and makeshift burrows for shelter. Although "badgers" had a somewhat derogatory connotation at first, it gradually gained acceptance as an apt description of the hardworking and energetic settlers of the Wisconsin Territory.

Mineral and rock: galena (lead sulphide) and **red granite**. Chapter 14, Laws of 1971, amended Section 1.10 to make galena the official state mineral and red granite the state rock. The proposal was introduced at the request of the Kenosha Gem and Mineral Society to promote geological awareness. Galena met the criteria for selection, as set by the Wisconsin Geological Society, including abundance, uniqueness, economic value, historical significance, and native nature. Red granite is an igneous rock composed of quartz and feldspar. It is mined in several sections of the state and was selected as the state rock because of its economic importance.

Symbol of peace: mourning dove (*Zenaidura macroura carolinensis linnaeus*). Various individuals and organizations concerned with conservation and wildlife long sought a protected status for the dove. Concluding an effort that stretched over a decade, the mourning dove was added to Section 1.10 of the statutes as Wisconsin's official symbol of peace and removed from the statutory definition of game birds by Chapter 129, Laws of 1971.

Insect: honey bee (*Apis mellifera*). The honey bee was designated as the official state insect when Section 1.10 was amended by Chapter 326, Laws of 1977. The bill was introduced at the

request of the third grade class of Holy Family School of Marinette and the Wisconsin Honey Producers Association. Attempts to allow all elementary school pupils in the state to decide the selection by popular ballot were unsuccessful. Other contenders for the title were the monarch butterfly, dragonfly, ladybug, and mosquito.

Soil: Antigo Silt Loam (*Typic glossoboralf*). An official state soil was created by 1983 Wisconsin Act 33 to remind Wisconsinites of their soil stewardship responsibilities. Advocates argued that soil, a natural resource that took 10,000 years to produce, is essential to Wisconsin's economy and is also the foundation of life. Selected to represent the more than 500 major soil types in Wisconsin, Antigo Silt Loam is a productive, level, silty soil of glacial origin, subsequently enriched by organic matter from prehistoric forests. The soil, named after a Wisconsin city, is found chiefly in Wisconsin and stretches in patches across the north central part of the state. It is a versatile soil that supports dairying, potato growing, and timber. The amendment to Section 1.10 was the result of a successful drive led by Professor Francis D. Hole, UW-Madison soil scientist.

Fossil: trilobite (*Calymene celebra*). 1985 Wisconsin Act 162 amended Section 1.10 to designate the trilobite as the official state fossil. Pronounced "TRY-loh-bite", the Latin term describes the 3-lobed anatomy of this small invertebrate body divided by furrows into segments. The trilobite is an extinct marine arthropod with multiple sets of paired, jointed legs. Its head and tapering body were armored in an exoskeleton that was repeatedly molted as the animal grew. Trilobites flourished in the warm, shallow salt water sea that periodically covered Wisconsin territory hundreds of millions of years ago. Their fossil remains average 1 to 2 inches in length. The largest complete specimen is 14 inches, while incomplete parts indicate some were possibly much longer (over 30 inches). Trilobite fossils are abundant and distinctive enough to be easily recognized. Good specimens are preserved in rock formations throughout most of Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin Geological Society proposed the fossil to symbolize Wisconsin's ancient past and encourage interest in the state's rich geological heritage. A major rival for recognition as state fossil was the mastodon, a large prehistoric, elephant-like creature.

Dog: American water spaniel. 1985 Wisconsin Act 295 amended Section 1.10 to name the American water spaniel as Wisconsin's official state dog. Enactment of the law was the culmination of years of effort by eighth grade students of Lyle Brumm at Washington Junior High School in New London. The American water spaniel is said to be one of only five dog breeds indigenous to the United States and the only one native to Wisconsin. A New London area physician, Dr. Fred J. Pfeifer, is generally credited with developing and standardizing the breed and working to secure United Kennel Club registration for it in 1920. American Kennel Club recognition followed in 1940. The American water spaniel was developed as a practical, versatile hunting dog that combined certain physical attributes with intelligence and a good disposition. No flashy show animal, the American water spaniel is described as an unadorned, utilitarian dog that earns its keep as an outstanding hunter, watchdog, and family pet.

Beverage: milk. The Wisconsin Legislature designated milk as the official state beverage in 1987 Wisconsin Act 279. This action recognized Wisconsin's position as the nation's leading milk-producing state and the contribution of milk to the state's economy. World Dairy Expo and various Wisconsin dairy production and dairy cattle associations supported the amendment of Section 1.10.

Grain: corn (*Zea mays*). 1989 Wisconsin Act 162 amended Section 1.10 to designate corn as the official state grain. During legislative debate, sponsors claimed designating corn as the state grain would draw attention to its importance as a cash crop in Wisconsin and make people more aware of corn's many uses, including livestock feed, sweeteners, ethanol fuel, and biodegradable plastics.

Dance: polka. The newest state symbol was created when 1993 Wisconsin Act 411 amended Section 1.10 to name the polka as the state dance. The bill was introduced at the request of a second grade class from Charles Lindbergh Elementary School in Madison and supported by several groups, including the Wisconsin Polka Boosters, Inc., and the Wisconsin Folk Museum. Supporters documented the polka heritage of Wisconsin and provided evidence that the polka is deeply ingrained in Wisconsin cultural traditions.
