

# American Symbols: The Flag, the Statue of Liberty, and the Great Seal



*Photograph of the Statue of Liberty (National Park Service)*

THE GILDER LEHRMAN  
INSTITUTE *of* AMERICAN HISTORY

**TL** TEACHING LITERACY  
**TH** THROUGH HISTORY



# American Symbols: The Flag, the Statue of Liberty, and the Great Seal

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED IN 2013, UPDATED IN 2024)

*Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute's director of curriculum development and instructional design.*

## UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on visual sources. These skills will enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate materials of historical significance.

Students will explore three iconic American symbols: the Flag of the United States of America, the Statue of Liberty, and the Great Seal of the United States. Understanding the creation and use of these iconic symbols can lead to a shared understanding of America's history, principles, and aspirations. The students will demonstrate their understanding of these symbols and their meaning through class discussions and drawn or written assessment activities as directed in each lesson.

Students will be able to

- Demonstrate an understanding of symbols in context
- Draw conclusions based on visual evidence
- Identify and explain the meaning of symbols
- Distinguish between patriotic symbols and other forms of symbols
- Explain why symbols are important in their daily life

**NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS:** Three 45-minute class periods

**GRADE LEVEL(S):** K-2

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.6: Distinguish between information provided by pictures or other illustrations and information provided by the words in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.7: Use the illustrations and details in a text to describe its key ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.2.7: Explain how specific images (e.g., a diagram showing how a machine works) contribute to and clarify a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1.5: With guidance and support from adults, focus on a topic, respond to questions and suggestions from peers, and add details to strengthen writing as needed.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.2.2: Write informative/explanatory texts in which they introduce a topic, use facts and definitions to develop points, and provide a concluding statement or section.



## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

# American Symbols: The Flag, the Great Seal, and the Statue of Liberty


by Shelby M. Balik, Metropolitan State University of Denver

Symbols can be an engaging way to introduce students to history because they forge links to major themes and concepts. Ubiquitous symbols like the American flag, the Great Seal of the United States, and the Statue of Liberty can show students how to look for history all around them.

Few symbols evoke American identity like the flag. But the nation started with no flag; when war broke out, military divisions fought under their own banners. Many flags used the British Union Jack, stripes and stars, and the colors red, white, and blue – but not all did. We aren't certain who designed the American flag, but it was likely Francis Hopkinson, a New Jersey representative in the Continental Congress who sketched flags and seals as a hobby. He designed the Navy flag, using a blue square with thirteen stars (arranged in rows) in the corner of a field of thirteen red and white stripes. Congress adopted that flag on June 14, 1777. The colors symbolize strength (red), peace (white), and justice (blue). Early on, Congress added a new star *and* stripe for each new state. But this tradition became cumbersome, so in 1818, Congress reverted to the thirteen-stripe design and added only stars after that.

Many myths are wrapped up in the flag. The most familiar one tells of a Philadelphia upholsterer, Elizabeth (“Betsy”) Griscom Ross, who supposedly designed the first flag in 1776 and met with George Washington to explain why five-pointed stars (versus six-pointed stars) allowed easier cutting and sewing. There is no evidence that this meeting took place, and Congress did not adopt an official flag for another year. In fact, the Betsy Ross story originated not during the Revolution, but in 1870, when her grandson shared it. The tale is convincing; millions have visited the Betsy Ross House in Philadelphia, where docents perpetuate it. But while this story provides a patriotic fable, it does not tell us about the flag.

Created by Congress in 1782, the Great Seal of the United States was also intended as a symbol of unity. The obverse (front) features a bald eagle under a blue glory (which evokes a halo) containing thirteen stars. The eagle holds a banner with the nation's original motto, *E Pluribus Unum* (“Out of many, one”), and bears a shield resembling the flag. It clutches an olive branch (symbolizing peace) in one talon and arrows (symbolizing power) in the other. The number thirteen recurs throughout: the stars in the glory, the stripes on the shield, the number of leaves and olives on the branch, and the number of arrows. The reverse features an unfinished pyramid with thirteen layers of brick. Above it floats the Eye of Providence (symbolizing an all-seeing god). The date 1776 appears in Roman numerals on the pyramid's base. Latin mottoes encircle the pyramid: *Annuit cœptis* (“God approves of our undertakings”) above, and *Novus ordo seclorum* (“a new order of the ages”) beneath. These symbols and phrases are spiritual but not Christian, reflecting many Americans' belief that their nation served a providential role.



The Statue of Liberty was unveiled in New York Harbor in 1886. A gift from France, it was proposed by humanitarian Édouard de Laboulaye, designed by sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, and engineered by Gustave Eiffel. Laboulaye wanted to commemorate the countries' friendship, the centennial of American independence, and the abolition of American slavery. The statue's construction was complicated. Due to its size, it had to be transported in pieces across the Atlantic. It had to be light enough to support its weight but strong enough to withstand the marine environment. So Eiffel devised hollow iron and wooden frames to support a lightweight copper skin. Meanwhile, Americans built the pedestal on Bedloe's Island, inside the walls of an abandoned fort. When the statue was finished, President Grover Cleveland proclaimed, "Liberty has here made her home."

The Statue of Liberty honors patriotic ideals. "Lady Liberty" holds a book inscribed with "1776" to commemorate independence. Broken shackles, recognizing emancipation, lay at her feet. Located near Ellis Island, the statue also came to symbolize immigration; Emma Lazarus's poem, "The New Colossus"—written to raise funds for the pedestal—welcomed "huddled masses yearning to breathe free." The reality was more complicated. Speakers at the unveiling ignored emancipation, just as Jim Crow persecution was on the rise. Woman suffragists noted the ironic choice of a goddess of liberty when actual women lacked full rights of citizenship. The unveiling also came amid new immigration restrictions and nativist violence. The nation was failing to live up to Liberty's promise.

The Statue of Liberty, the flag, and the Great Seal of the United States reveal much about American history. But each also encourages students to consider the myths and memories of American history. Symbols can give students tools to examine the past with a critical eye.

*Shelby M. Balik is a professor of history at Metropolitan State University of Denver. She is the author of *Rally the Scattered Believers: Northern New England's Religious Geography (Indiana, 2014)* and has published in such journals as the *New England Quarterly*, *Church History*, and *the Journal of Social History*. She is currently working on a book on household religion in eighteenth-century America.*

# THE FLAG OF THE UNITED STATES

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED IN 2013, UPDATED IN 2024)

## OVERVIEW

In this first lesson, the students will examine the current US flag and the Revolutionary-era “Betsy Ross” flag. They will learn about the symbolism of the different parts of the flag and demonstrate their understanding through drawing and writing about one of the parts of the flag.

## MATERIALS

- The Flag of the United States of America
- The “Betsy Ross” Flag (Although the attribution is disputed, Betsy Ross is traditionally given credit for sewing the first national flag.)
- Graphic Organizer: The Flag of the United States of America (p. 20)

## PROCEDURE

1. **Class Discussion:** What is a symbol? Discuss the fact that a symbol is a picture or object that stands for an idea. For example, in math a “+” symbol means to add one number to another number. On a traffic light, the color red means “Stop,” while the color green means “Go.” Let your class brainstorm other symbols that they are familiar with.
2. **Class Discussion:** The students will closely examine the flag of the United States of America. Use your own classroom flag or the illustration in this lesson. Ask the following:
  - a. What colors are on the flag?
  - b. How many stripes are there and how many stripes are there of each color?
  - c. How many stars are there?
3. Use the illustration of the “Betsy Ross” flag and ask the same questions, as well as this one: Why is this flag different from the one in our classroom? Use this question to introduce the information in the Historical Background and the meaning of each element of the flag.
  - The thirteen stripes represent the original thirteen colonies.
  - The number of stars on the flag represent the number of states in the Union.

*Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s director of curriculum development and instructional design.*

GRADE LEVELS: K–2

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on visual sources. Students will explore three iconic American symbols: the Flag of the United States of America, the Statue of Liberty, and the Great Seal of the United States.

- The stars on a blue field represent the creation of a new constellation.
  - Red symbolizes Hardiness and Valor.
  - White symbolizes Purity and Innocence.
  - Blue symbolizes Vigilance, Perseverance, and Justice.
4. Explain unfamiliar vocabulary as necessary. Terms you might discuss include *constellation*, *hardiness*, *valor*, *purity*, *innocence*, *vigilance*, *perseverance*, and *justice*.
  5. Hand out the Graphic Organizer: The Flag of the United States of America. Ask the class what the “=” symbol in the middle of the organizer represents.
  6. Direct the students to complete the organizer based on their grade level and language ability. The students will complete the organizer by first drawing one of the symbols of the flag (a white star, a red stripe, a white stripe, or a blue field) in the left-hand box. Then, they will add an illustration, keywords, or even sentences to identify and explain what the star, stripe, or field symbolizes. For example, a drawing of a red stripe might be followed by a drawing of a superhero or a sentence alluding to strength and bravery. If time allows, you can have them analyze more than one symbol.
  7. Debrief with the class and have them share and explain their analyses.



# THE STATUE OF LIBERTY

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED IN 2013, UPDATED IN 2024)

## OVERVIEW

In this lesson, the students will examine the Statue of Liberty. They will learn about the symbolism of the different parts of the statue and demonstrate their understanding through drawing and writing about one of the parts of the statue.

## MATERIALS

- The Statue of Liberty, View #1. Source: National Park Service
- The Statue of Liberty, View #2. Source: National Park Service
- The Statue of Liberty, View #3. Source: National Park Service
- The Statue of Liberty, View #4. Source: National Park Service
- Graphic Organizer: The Statue of Liberty (p. 21)

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GRADE LEVELS: K–2

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

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## PROCEDURE

1. Class Discussion: What is a symbol? Review the concept introduced in yesterday's lesson.
2. Class Discussion: Hand out the Statue of Liberty, View #1. The students will closely examine the image of the Statue of Liberty. Ask the following:
  - a. Describe what the statue looks like.
  - b. What is the statue doing?
  - c. What are some interesting details that you can see?
3. Show the students the other three views of the Statue of Liberty and discuss the information in the Historical Background and the symbolism.
  - The Statue of Liberty has an iron framework with a copper skin. That copper skin is only a little thicker than a penny. Even with such a thin skin, the statue weighs about 450,000 pounds. It rises 305.5 feet from the ground to the tip of the torch, and Lady Liberty herself is more than 111 feet tall from her feet to the top of her head. The Statue of Liberty, a symbol of Liberty itself, is also a combination of many other symbols:

- The tablet in her left hand is inscribed with “JULY IV MDCCLXXVI” (July 4, 1776) to recognize the creation of the United States of America.
  - The seven rays on her crown represent the seven continents of the Earth.
  - At her feet are broken chains and shackles to represent the throwing off of tyranny and oppression.
  - The torch is a symbol of liberty. In fact, it is the source of the statue’s official name: Liberty Enlightening the World.
  - Lady Liberty is striding forward, symbolic of leading the way and lighting the path to Liberty and Freedom.
4. Explain unfamiliar vocabulary as necessary. Terms you might discuss include *tablet*, *continents*, *shackles*, *tyranny*, *oppression*, *liberty*, *enlightening*, and *striding*.
  5. Hand out the Graphic Organizer: The Statue of Liberty.
  6. Direct the students to complete the organizer based their grade level and language ability. First, they will draw one of the symbols of the statue (the tablet, the crown, chains and/or shackles, the torch, or another illustration that shows a symbolic aspect of the statue) in the left-hand box. Then, with an illustration, keywords, or even sentences, the students will identify and explain what the image symbolizes. For example, a drawing of the tablet that the statue is holding might be followed by a drawing of a birthday cake for America or a sentence describing a Fourth of July celebration. If time allows, you can have them analyze more than one symbol.
  7. Debrief with the class and have them share and explain their analyses.



# THE GREAT SEAL OF THE UNITED STATES

BY TIM BAILEY (CREATED IN 2013, UPDATED IN 2024)

## OVERVIEW

In this lesson, the students will examine the Great Seal of the United States. They will learn about the symbolism of the different parts of the seal and demonstrate their understanding through drawing and writing about one of the parts of the seal.

## MATERIALS

- The Great Seal of the United States, Front. Source: US Department of State
- The Great Seal of the United States, Back. Source: US Department of State
- The Back of a \$1 Bill
- Graphic Organizer: The Great Seal of the United States (p. 22)

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GRADE LEVELS: K–2

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on visual sources. Students will explore three iconic American symbols: the Flag of the United States of America, the Statue of Liberty, and the Great Seal of the United States.

## PROCEDURE

1. Class Discussion: What is a symbol? Review the concept from the last two lessons.
2. Class Discussion: Hand out the image of the front of the Great Seal and have the students examine it closely.
3. Ask the following:
  - a. Count and list the different objects on the seal. Is there a pattern? (arrows, leaves on the olive branch, stars, and stripes)
  - b. Why does the number thirteen keep recurring? (the original thirteen colonies)
  - c. What are some interesting details that you can see? (List the symbols as the students identify them.)
4. Show the students the illustration of the dollar bill (or an actual dollar bill) and discuss the information in the Historical Background. (The illustration of the pyramid on the dollar bill is the reverse side of the Great Seal. However, other than being printed on the dollar bill, it is not used on official documents or commonly used for display.)

- The purpose of the Great Seal is to serve as the recognized symbol of America, and for more than 200 years it has been used as the official emblem displayed and stamped on treaties, government appointments, and other important documents, including US passports. However, it is probably most recognized as the illustration on the back of the \$1 bill. The metal die and counter die of the Great Seal and its press are housed at the State Department in Washington, DC, and can only be used with the permission of the Secretary of State. While the Great Seal is a symbol of America, it is composed of many other symbols:
    - The American bald eagle, our national bird, symbolizes Liberty, Freedom, and Independence.
    - The shield held by the eagle shows that we can protect and defend our country independently, without aid from others.
    - Just as on the American flag, the stripes on the shield represent the first thirteen colonies, and just as on the flag, the colors themselves are symbolic. Have the students recall what the colors represent from Lesson 1.
    - The blue field on top of the stripes represents the US Congress and how it binds the states together. In addition, the color blue is symbolic. Have the students recall what the color means from Lesson 1.
    - The banner in the eagle's beak bears the country's motto, "E Pluribus Unum" (Out of many, one), meaning that while we are many individual states and people, we are one country.
    - The olive branch represents Peace.
    - The arrows represent War.
    - The eagle is facing the olive branch, meaning that peace is always the first choice, but we can fight if we must.
    - The stars in the cloud represent the new constellation of the United States surrounded by rays of light (called a "glory") shining through as America takes its place among the countries of the world.
5. Explain the unfamiliar vocabulary as necessary. Terms you might discuss include *treaties*, *emblem*, *die* and *counter die*, *independence*, and *constellation*.
  6. Hand out the Graphic Organizer: The Great Seal of the United States.
  7. Direct the students to complete the organizer based on their grade level and language ability. First, they will draw one of the many symbols of the Great Seal. Then, with an illustration, keywords, or even sentences, the students will identify and explain what it symbolizes. For example, a drawing of the shield might be followed by a drawing of people behind a shield with arrows, bombs, and bullets bouncing off of it or perhaps by a few sentences describing how it is the job of the government to protect the people. If time allows you can have the students analyze more than one symbol.
  8. Debrief with the class and have them share and explain their analyses.
  9. Extension Activity: If time permits or as a follow-up you can have the students analyze the reverse (back) of the Great Seal. The US State Department website has information on the reverse side's symbolism.

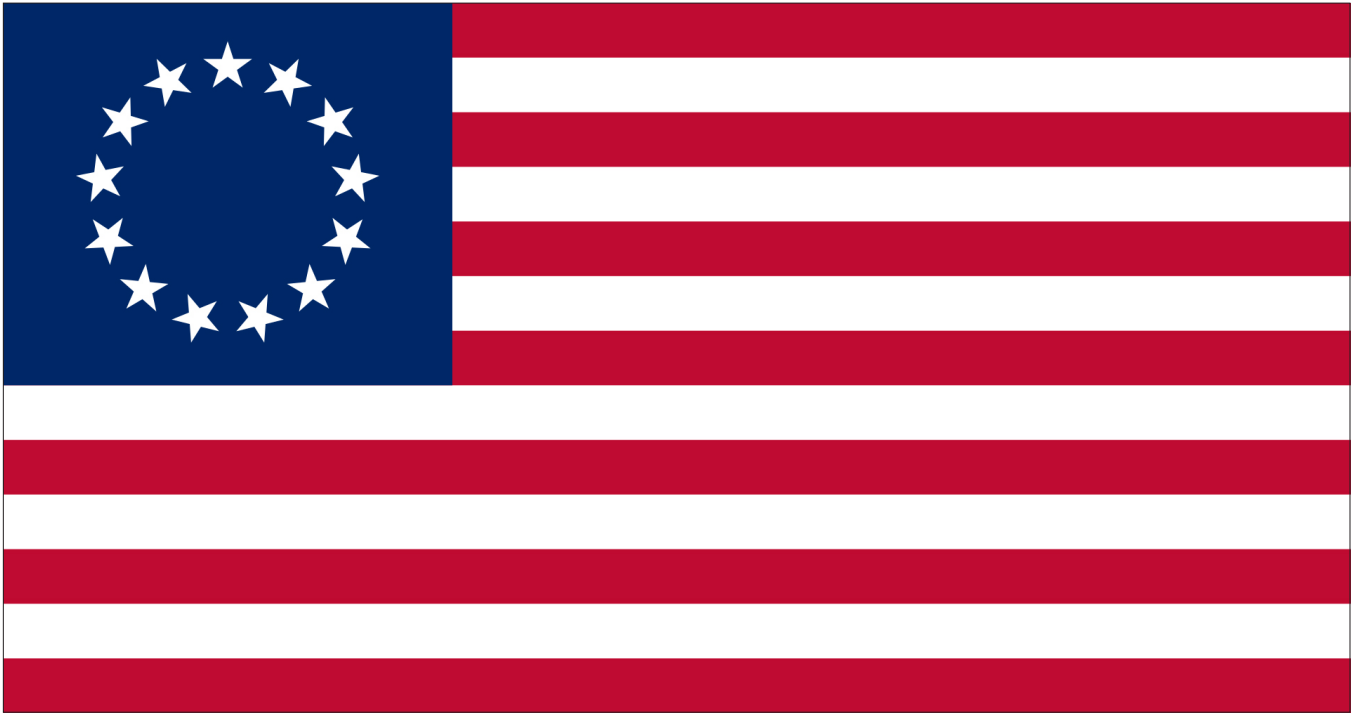


## The Flag of the United States of America





## The “Betsy Ross” Flag



## The Statue of Liberty, View #1



*National Park Service*



## The Statue of Liberty, View #2



*National Park Service*



## The Statue of Liberty, View #3



*National Park Service*

## The Statue of Liberty, View #4



*National Park Service*



# The Great Seal of the United States, Front



*US Department of State*

## The Great Seal of the United States, Back



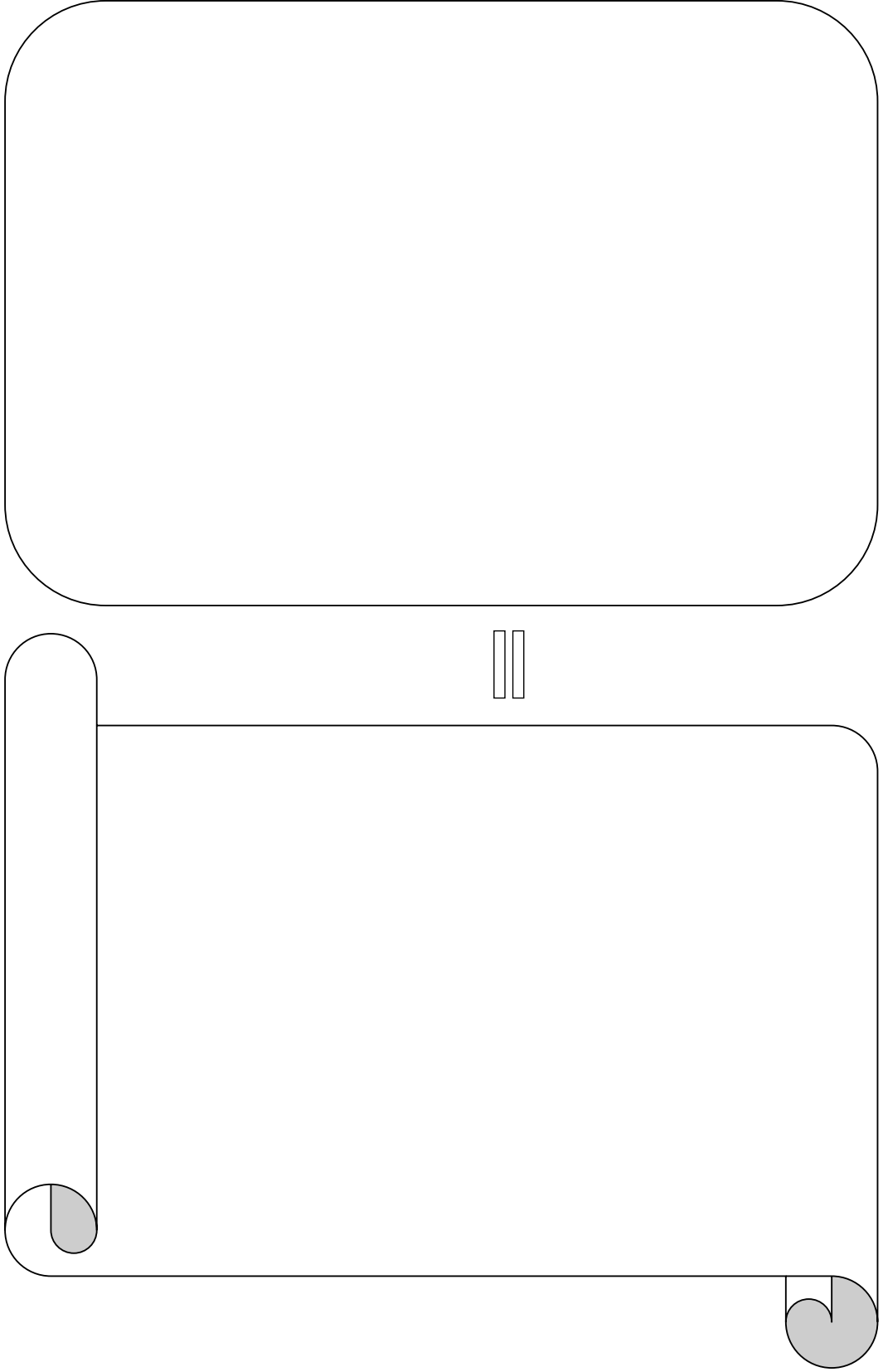
*US Department of State*

## Back of a \$1 Bill



Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Graphic Organizer: The Flag of the United States of America





Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Graphic Organizer: The Statue of Liberty

The graphic organizer consists of a large central rectangular area with rounded corners, divided into two main sections by a vertical line. The left section is a vertical column with a rounded top and a grey semi-circle at the bottom. The right section is a larger area with a rounded top and a grey semi-circle at the bottom. In the center, between the two sections, are two horizontal lines representing the crown of the statue. The entire graphic is enclosed in a blue rounded rectangular border.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Graphic Organizer: The Great Seal of the United States of America

The graphic organizer is a large, rounded rectangular frame. It is divided into three main sections: a large central rectangular area with rounded corners, and two vertical columns on either side. The left column has a scroll-like top and bottom, and the right column has a scroll-like bottom. A small icon of a scroll is positioned between the two columns.