

Evolution of the Public Seal

Tracing the Administrative Seal from the Settlement of Honduras to Independent Belize

Whereas it is necessary to all well regulated Governments that a seal of arms should be had for the purpose of giving authority and credence to Public Acts and Documents.

Marshall Bennett Esquire having waited upon His Majesty Superintendent with the Device for the Arms of the Settlement and having stated that the same was not entirely approved by him; it was therefore in consequence laid aside in order that one more appropriate may be devised

March 9th 1820



GLOSSARY

Seal

An engraved instrument, or the impression it produces, used to authenticate a document. Context determines whether the word means the matrix or the resulting mark.

Public Seal

The official seal of a government or public authority, affixed to acts, proclamations, commissions, grants, and other instruments as evidence of authentic issue.

Device

The principal emblem or pictorial composition used on a seal. A device may resemble heraldry but is not automatically a formally granted coat of arms.

Supporters

Human figures, animals, or other forms placed on either side of a shield as if holding or guarding it. Their use normally requires specific authority.

Motto

A short phrase expressing an identity, principle, or aspiration, commonly shown on a scroll above or below the arms or seal device.

Die / Matrix

The engraved tool pressed into wax, a wafer, paper, or another material to make a seal impression. The design is normally cut in reverse.

Impression

The image or mark left when a seal matrix is pressed into a receiving material. The impression, rather than the tool, usually remains with the document.

Wax Seal

A seal impression made in softened wax, sometimes attached directly to a document and sometimes suspended from it by cords or parchment tags.

Embossed Seal

A raised or recessed impression formed by pressure in paper or a paper wafer, usually without a visible layer of sealing wax.

Armorial Bearings

The formally recognized heraldic insignia of a person or body: the shield and, where authorized, such elements as a crest, supporters, motto, and other ornaments.

National Coat of Arms

The official armorial emblem of a sovereign state, adopted or granted under lawful authority and used to represent the state and its institutions.

Letters Patent

An open legal instrument issued by the heraldic authority recording a grant of arms. Its text identifies the grantee and formally describes the arms.

Royal Warrant

A written instrument authorized under the Royal Sign Manual by the Sovereign's signature, directing an official act such as approving, replacing, or ordering an official seal.



Definitions are simplified for exhibition use; historical documents may use some terms interchangeably.

Introduction

A public seal was more than a decorative emblem. Although it may share imagery with armorial bearings or a national coat of arms, each can have a different origin, legal status and purpose. When affixed to laws, proclamations and other official documents, the Public Seal authenticates government business and represents the authority under which it is conducted.

As an independent Commonwealth realm, Belize retains the British monarch as Head of State, represented by the Governor-General. The Public Seal authenticates official acts and documents and forms part of the process by which assent is granted to laws passed by the National Assembly.

Following Independence in 1981, Belize continued to use a Public Seal incorporating the royal insignia of Queen Elizabeth II. Her death in 2022 did not automatically invalidate the seal.

Through surviving impressions, printed illustrations, correspondence and royal warrants, this exhibition traces the evolution of the Public Seal and its role in authenticating official authority—from the Settlement of Honduras to independent Belize.



Uniformed Supporters and Motto

Archival records reveal that prior to the device lodged in 1821, another seal was being used to certify laws and legal documents. Embossed impressions found on records transmitted to the Secretary of State feature the shield, cutting implements, mahogany tree, ship under sail and Union Jack associated with the Settlement's origins as a forestocracy. Its supporters, however, were two uniformed **military figures** bearing what appear to be a musket with bayonet. The scroll carried what appears to be the Latin phrase "**IN OMNIA PARATI**", which translates to "**prepared for all things**" or "**ready for anything**".

*In Witness whereof I have
hereunto set my Hand and
affixed the Seal of the said
Settlement, this 23rd day
of October 1821.*



1821

*Ja. S. Annichart
Spk. Keeper of the
Records*



1822



1823

While multiple records signed and certified by George Westby, Keeper of Records, bear an impression of this earlier image, the date of its first use, the designer and maker remain unidentified. Using the impressions on archival records, it appears that this earlier device remained in administrative use until at least 1824.

Request for a Seal of Arms, 1819-1821

At the 2nd November, 1819 Special General Meeting of the Inhabitants, a motion was raised as to the propriety of having a Seal of Arms for the Settlement. Marshal Bennett Esqr. stated, "*Whereas it is necessary to all well-regulated Governments that a seal of arms should be had for the purpose of giving authority and credence to Public Acts and Documents and whereas this Settlement stand in great need of the same.*" It was resolved that the Superintendent should be solicited to use his influence with the Government, for the Settlement to be allowed to have a seal of arms for the settlement. Thomas Iles seconded the motion, which was carried unanimously.

An order on the Treasury on the 12th December 1819 reveals a payment of £79 7s. 11d to Marshal Bennett for a Coat of Arms for the Court House.

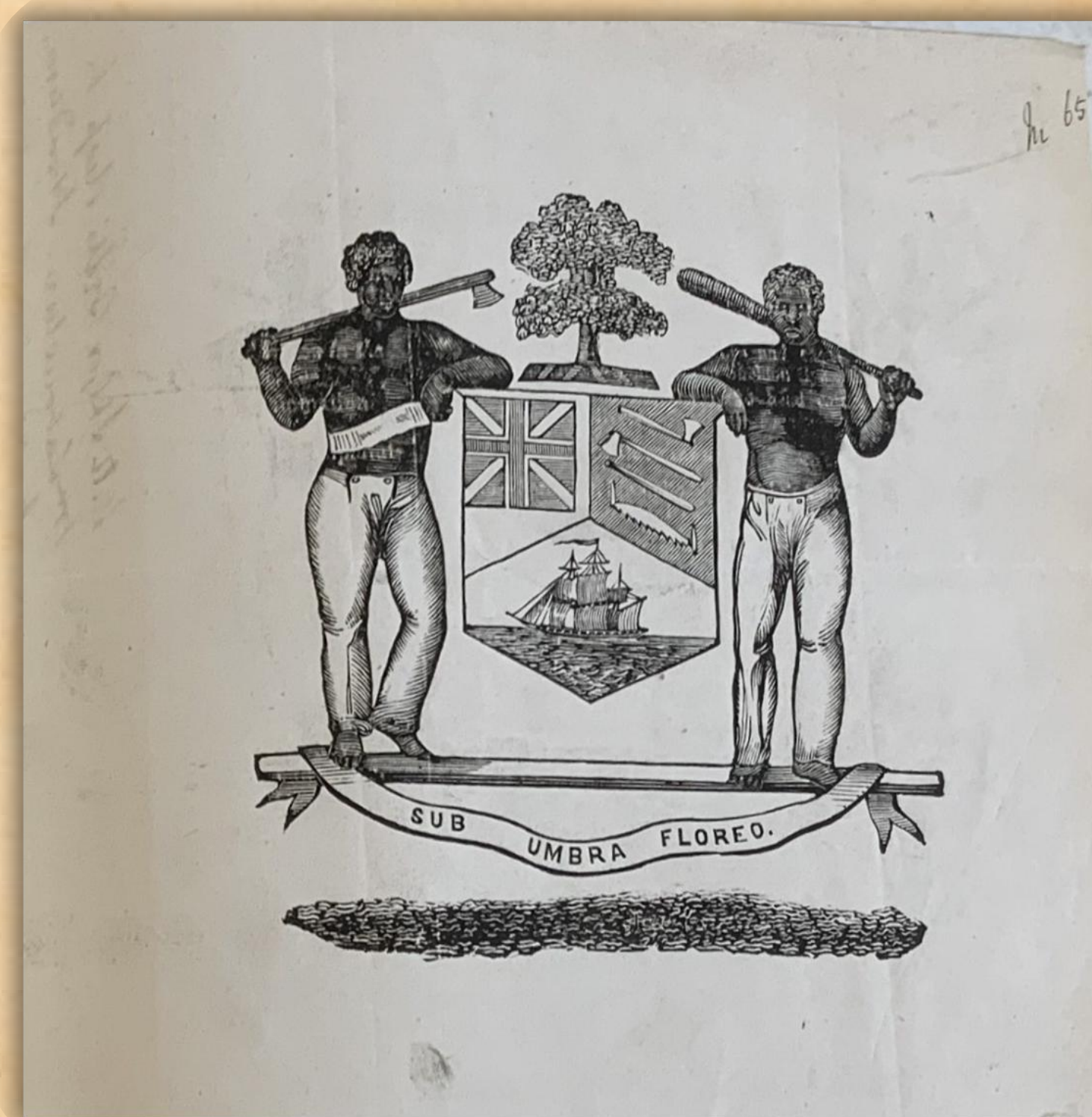
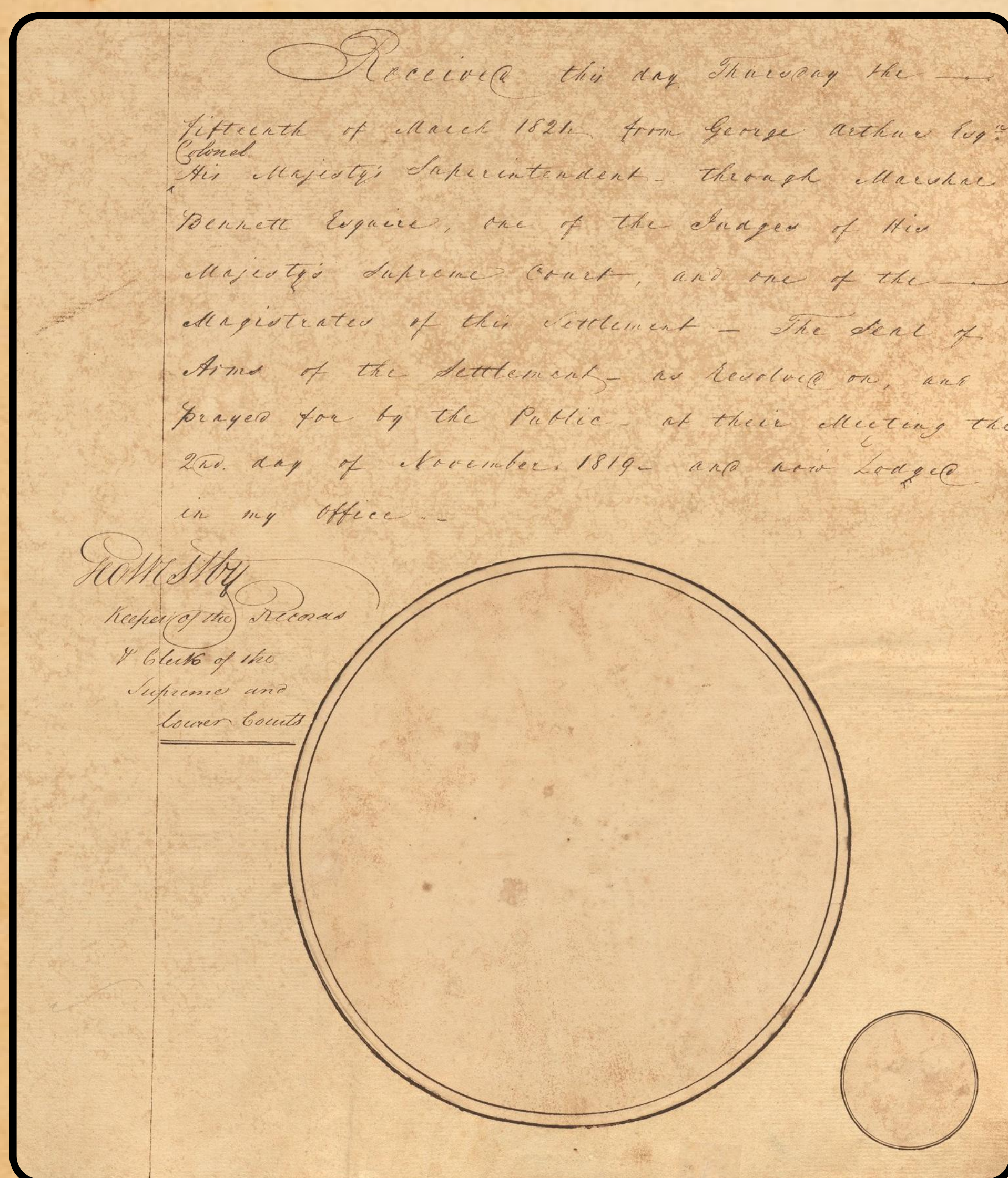
In March of the following year, Bennett presented the Superintendent with a sample of the Device which was created. Stating that it was not entirely approved by him, it was suggested that it be set aside in order for a more appropriate one to be designed and leaving the final choice to H.M. Superintendent's discretion.

Marshal Bennett Esquire having waited upon His Majestys Superintendent with the Device for the Arms of the Settlement as considered March 9th 1820. and having stated that the same was not entirely approved of by him; It was therefore in consequence laid aside in order that one more appropriate may be Devise. And that His Majestys Superintendent be solicited to carry into effect such Device as may appear to him the most suitable.

On 3rd April 1820, it was ordered that the Public Treasurer be directed to lodge in Great Britain the sum of **£200** sterling to defray the expense of procuring the Arms of the Settlement.

Request for a Seal of Arms, 1819-1821

Receipt of the Seal of Arms was recorded on 15th March 1821. It was received from Colonel George Arthur, through Magistrate and Judge Marshal Bennett, and was lodged in the Records Office. Although the design was not copied into the Minute Records, two circles were drawn on the acknowledgment.



Seal of this Settlement.

Though the image engraved on the matrix was not copied onto the 1821 Minute Records, Superintendent Seymour provided an image or impression of the said device to the Colonial Office in 1857. The image he transmitted can be confirmed through multiple seal impressions affixed onto outgoing despatches containing certified copy of records.

Request for a Seal of Arms, 1819-1821

The 1819/1821 Seal of Arms replaced the Military supporters with two men wearing what appears to be osnaburg trousers, one holding a paddle and the other a felling axe...both implements of the Mahogany Trade. The Motto on the scroll banner also changed from “In Omnia Parati” to “Sub Umbra Floreo” which translates to Under the Shade I flourish.

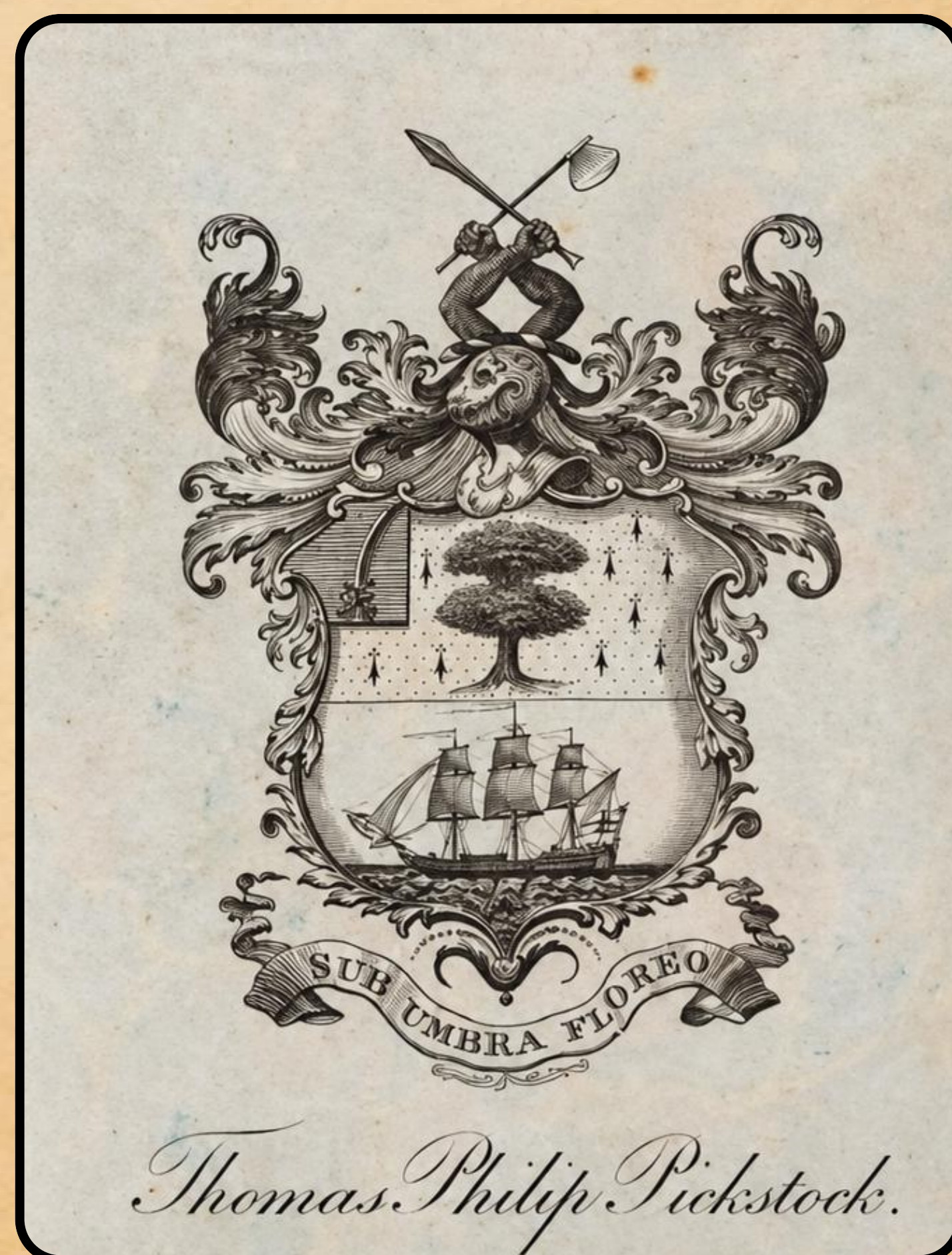


The Motto

While there are a few theories for where the new Motto originated, it is evident that its use preceded the 1819/1821 Seal.

The original drawing of H.C. Du Vernay's 1814 Sketch of the British Settlement of Honduras, as seen below, contains an armorial device in the cartouche depicting a shield with a British Union Jack flying above a mahogany tree, a hand gripping a snake above the crest, and a scroll bearing the motto Sub Umbra Floreo.

Thomas Pickstock, who arrived in the Settlement in 1816, later employed the same motto for his bookplate. He commissioned the bookplate from John Warwick, a seal engraver whose heraldic engraving and copper-plate printing workshop was at 145 Strand, London. The reproduced bookplate includes a tree and a ship, with the motto on the scroll beneath the armorial design.

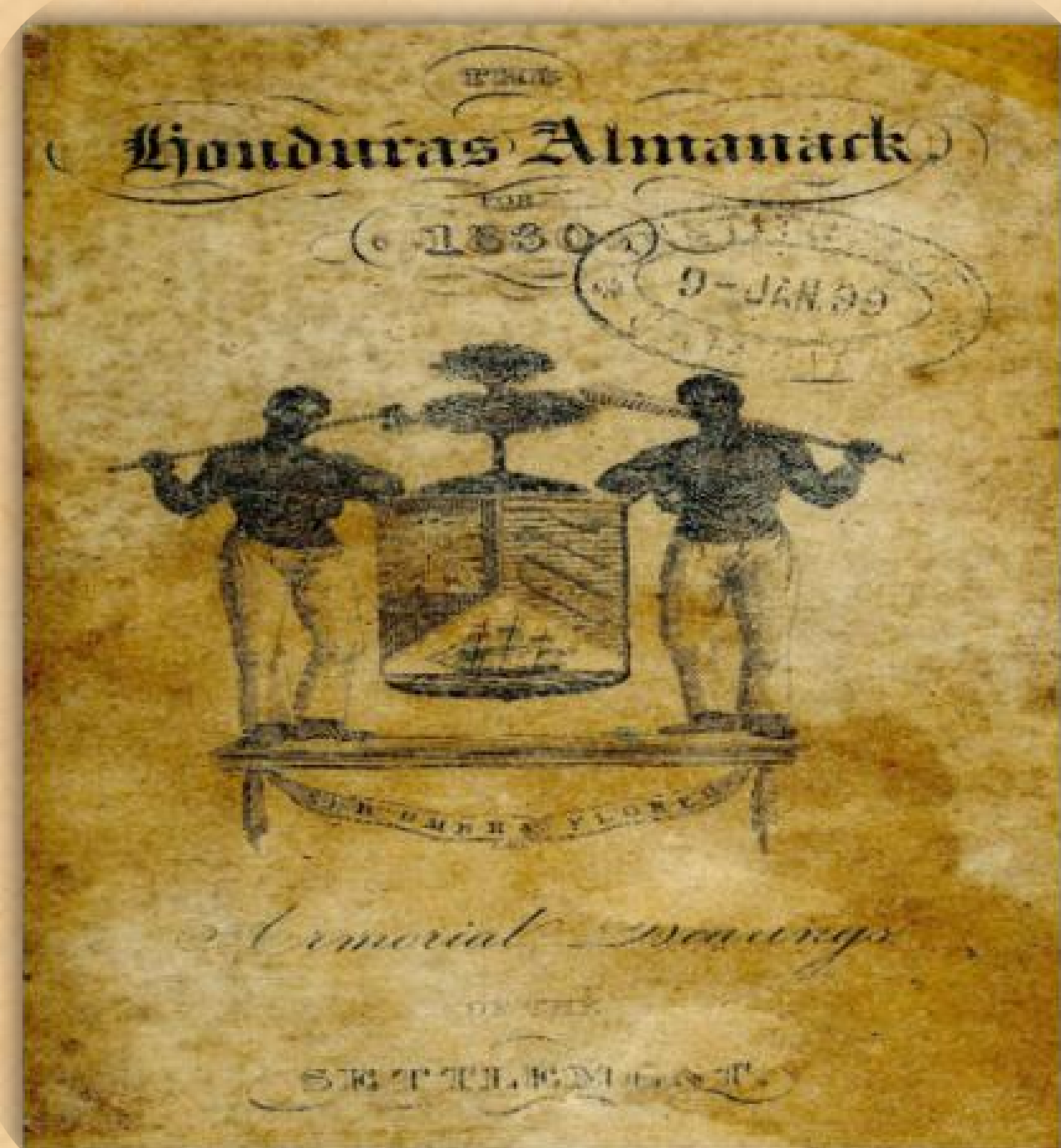


The Almanack Rendition and The 1856 Ordered Replacement

Lodged records, including Proclamations, the 1834 Slave Register and records transmitted to the Secretary of State show that the 1819 metal matrix was in use from about 1828 to at least 1856. In June 1856, the Council approved the request of William Farquharson, Keeper of the Public Seal, for a new seal for the Records Office.

A requisition from Mr Farquharson for a new seal for the Record Office was sent and the Council directed that the seal for the Records Office and that for the Supreme Court should be ordered at the same time. A book required by Mr Farquharson was directed to be purchased.

The green impression below may represent the seal requested in 1856. It differed slightly from the original design and closely resembles the Arms of the Settlement that was introduced as the Armorial Bearings and printed in the Honduras Almanack from 1826 to 1830.



Issued by the Boston engravers Annin and Smith, the bills itemized work on copper plates and the printing of illustrations including the altering, engraving and printing of copper plates of the Arms of the Settlement of Honduras. Could this account for the differences between the seal device of 1819 and that which later appears?

The Royal Warrant and Public Seal 1858

In 1857, Edward Bell, Lieutenant-Governor of Jamaica, raised the question of appointing a Public Seal for the Settlement to authenticate laws and important public documents. Replying to Bell on June 13th, Superintendent Frederick Seymour stated that "*no other than the public seal is or has been used for authenticating public instruments*". He explained that the seal in the Settlement's possession had been transmitted by His Majesty's Government in response to the 1819 resolution and was "*almost worn out*". He confirmed that in accordance with an 1856 resolution, the Colonial Secretary had written to the Settlement's agent in England to have a new seal prepared and sent to Belize, this occurred prior to his arrival. The Secretary of State permitted the updated seal to "*remain in use for the present, pending a further communication on the subject*."

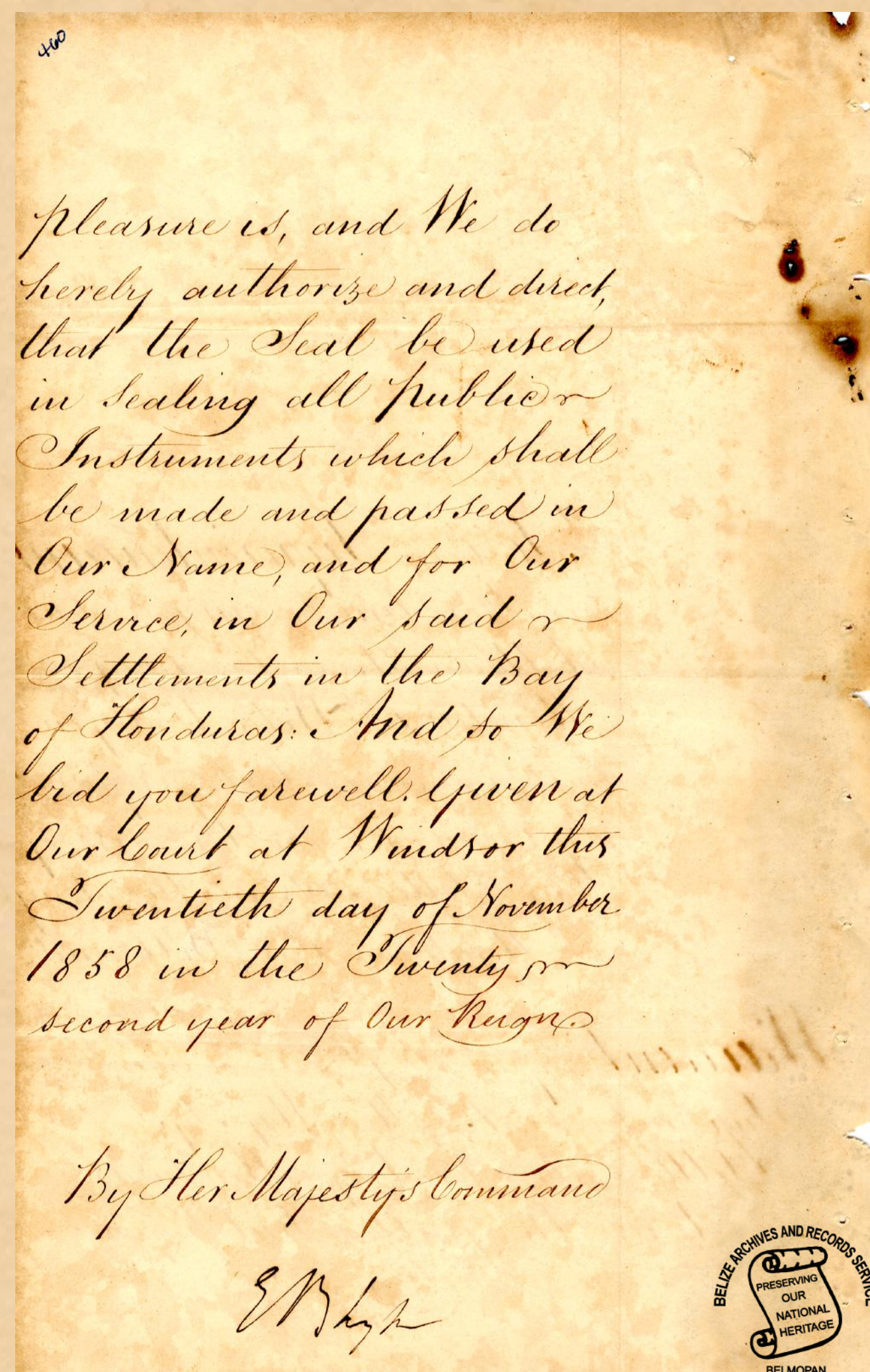
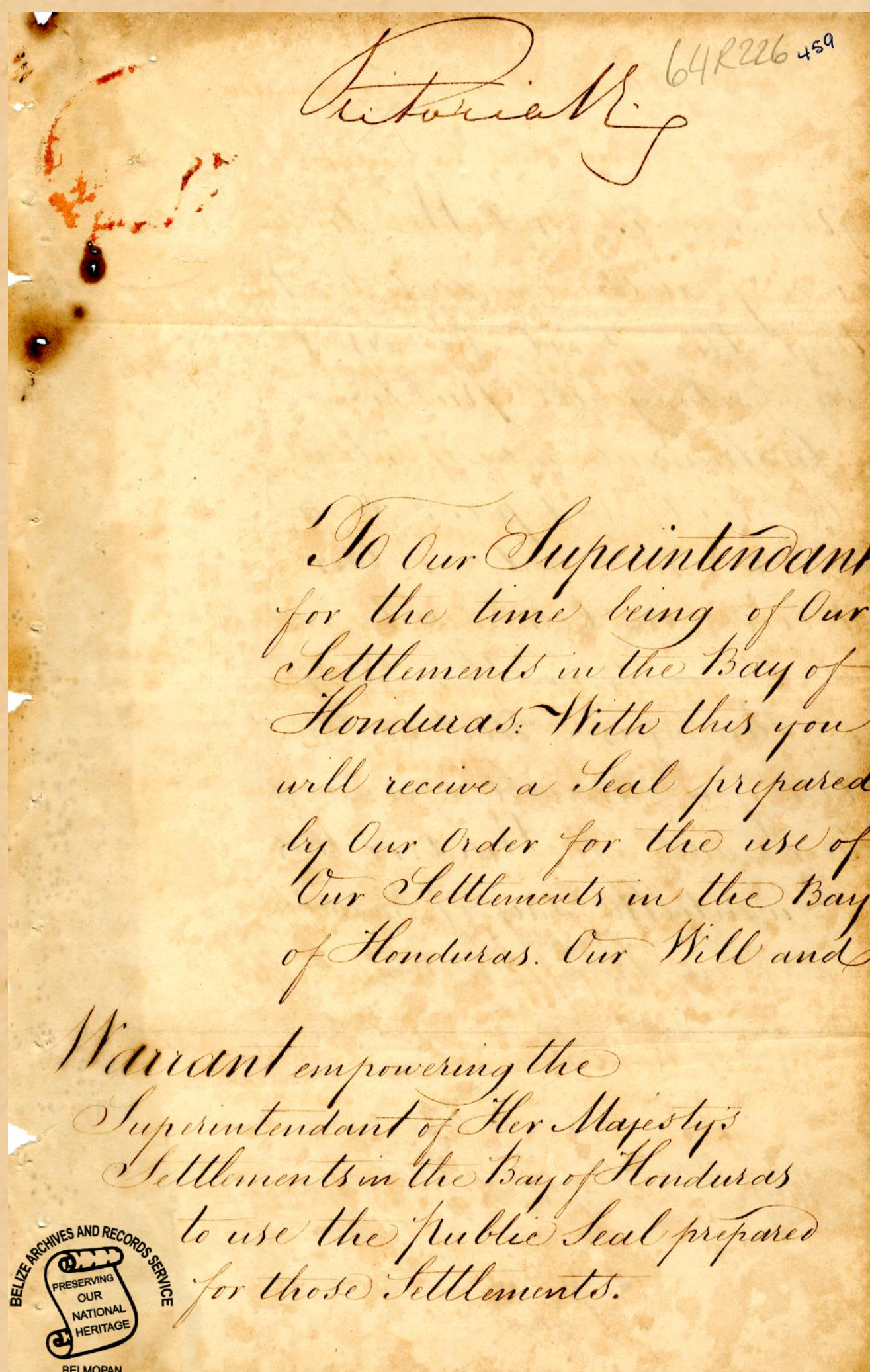
*I forward also an engraving representing
the public seal. It will be seen that
there is no reference to the Sovereign upon
it.*

On 19 November, H. Labouchere asked the Lord President to submit to the Queen in Council whether a Public Seal should be appointed for Honduras. He described the Settlement as not a British colony "properly so called" and not endowed with a civil government, but as having a regular legislature and an officer appointed by competent authority, styled the Queen's Superintendent.

In 1858, a new Public Seal and an accompanying royal warrant were issued with Queen Victoria's approval. On the 22nd November, Secretary of State E. B. Lytton directed Governor Darling, to forward the Seal and Warrant to Superintendent Seymour.



The Royal Warrant and Public Seal 1858



Lytton's instructions placed the seal in the Superintendent's custody and made him responsible for its use under the terms of the warrant. Its principal purpose was to authenticate public instruments that did not partake of a judicial character, including Public Acts, Formal Appointments and Proclamations. Acts of office, certificates and minor appointments were to be authenticated more properly under the Superintendent's own Seal of Arms.

On 17 January 1859,
Seymour acknowledged
their receipt and accepted
responsibility for the seal's
safe custody, confirming
that it would be used
strictly for the intended
purposes.



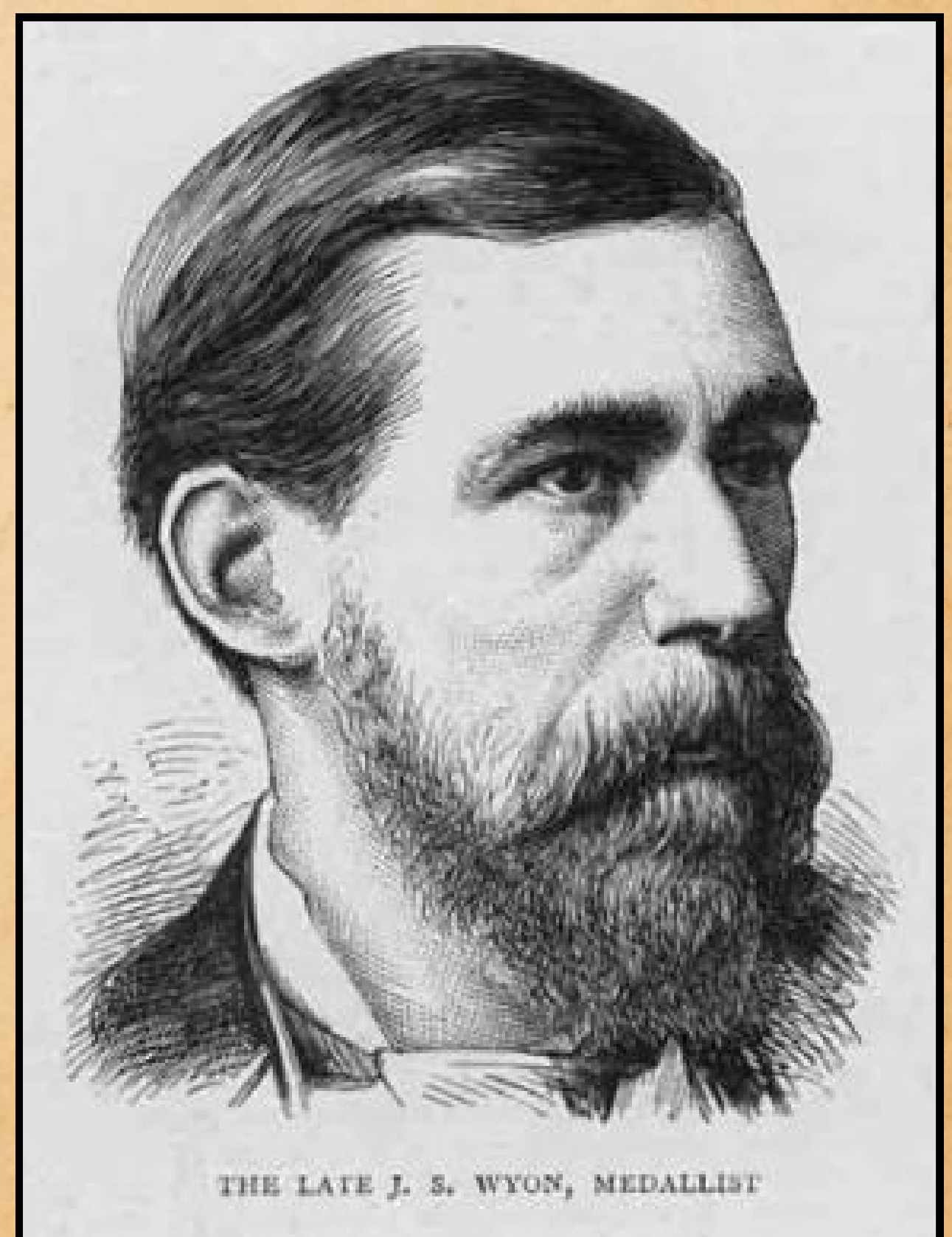
The Seal of The Colony of British Honduras 1862

In March 1861, the settlement petitioned the home government to raise the Settlement to the designation of a Colony and to give the Superintendent the title of Lieutenant Governor. On the 20th of February 1862, Secretary of State Newcastle forwarded Her Majesty's Letters Patent erecting the British Settlement at the Bay of Honduras into a Colony called "*The Colony of British Honduras*", He was informed that the Patent would have no force or effect until it was proclaimed in the Settlement.

*Belise
26th June 1862.*
*Sir, In reply to your letter of the 4th instant I have the honor to state that I caused to be proclaimed on the 12th May 1862 Her Majesty's Letters Patent creating the Colony of British Honduras. I am, Sir, very respectfully,
Yours obedient servant,
J. S. Seymour.*

With this new designation, it was expected that the Seal of the Settlement would be upgraded as well. In July 1862, newly designated Lieutenant Governor Frederick Seymour queried whether a new seal on the same mould and metal supplied to the other colonies could be provided for the Colony. Seymour explained that it was almost impossible to keep the 1858 steel seal free of rust due to the climate and expressed the colony's willingness to pay for the new Seal.

Correspondence from Undersecretary of State of the Colonies, Sir Frederick Rogers, shows that the Home Government had already commissioned a new Matrix through Joseph Wyon. On 14th August, Mr. Halksworth, Assistant to Wyons, confirmed that a seal for the new colony could be made in Silver as the additional cost would not exceed three or four pounds. He explained that the solution they had found for rusting metal dies was to cover it in wax. Rogers, however, explained that the officers of the colonies could not be expected to do so every time the seal was used.



THE LATE J. S. WYON, MEDALLIST

The Colony of British Honduras 1862

Newcastle's 29th January 1863 despatch to Governor Eyre announced the transmission of the Public Seal for the Colony of British Honduras and the Queen's warrant authorizing its use on public instruments issued in her name. The seal itself was sent directly to Seymour in January, the warrant reached him in March via Jamaica.

Seymour confirmed that he allowed Colonial Secretary Holmes to exhibit the Seal during the Legislative Assembly, for which the members expressed considerable gratification at the interest shown by Her Majesty's Government on the affairs of the Colony.

XXV. Vic. Cap. II.

An Act to extend the provisions contained in the forty-fourth section of an Act passed in the sixteenth year of the reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria entitled "An Act to amend the system of Government of British Honduras."



Return and Defacement of the Former Seal

By March 1864, the old Public Seal of the Settlement had not been sent home. The correspondence raised questions about its return, its value and what should happen to an old seal after defacement.

Sir F. Rogers observed that the diminished size of newer seals reduced the value of their metal. The former Honduras seal, being steel, had no such value, but he considered that it should nevertheless be sent to the Mint for destruction.

A 16th March despatch from Downing Street to Lieutenant Governor Eyre requested that necessary measures be taken for the return of the Public Seal formerly used in the Settlement of Honduras, "*in order that it may be defaced in the usual manner*".

Samples of Public Seals 1901 to 1981



**Edward VII
(1901-1910)**



**George V
1910-1936**



**George VI
1936-1952**



**Elizabeth II
1952-2022**

No Seal could be found for Edward VIII who briefly reigned 20 January – 11 December 1936

REFERENCES AND ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Primary Archival Sources

Belize Archives and Records Service

- Minutes of Public Meetings and Magistrates' Meetings, 1819-1826.
- Certified laws, proclamations, public records and the 1834 Slave Register bearing impressions of the Settlement's seals.
- Despatches and correspondence of the Superintendent, Colonial Secretary and Governor concerning the Public Seal and creation of the Colony, 1857-1864.

The National Archives, Kew

- Colonial Office series CO 123, British Honduras Original Correspondence, including records relating to the Public Seal, constitutional status and colonial administration.

Maps and Printed Sources

- Du Vernay, H. C. A Sketch of the British Settlement of Honduras and Course of the Southern Coast to the River Dulce, 9 March 1814.
- The Honduras Almanack for 1826, 1827 and 1830.
- Thomas Pickstock bookplate, reproduced in the British Honduras Commercial Advertiser.

Published Study

Cave, Roderick. "The Printing of the Honduras Almanack." Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 87, part 1 (April 1977): 195-199.

Selected Official Documents

- Resolution requesting a Seal of Arms for the Settlement, 1819.
- Records Office acknowledgment of the Seal of Arms, 15 March 1821.
- Henry Labouchere to the Lord President, proposing a Public Seal for the Settlement of Honduras, 19 November 1857.
- E. B. Lytton to Governor C. H. Darling, despatch no. 26, transmitting the Public Seal and warrant, 22 November 1858.
- Her Majesty's Letters Patent erecting the British Settlement in the Bay of Honduras into the Colony of British Honduras, transmitted 28 February 1862 and proclaimed 12 May 1862.
- Frederick Seymour to Governor Edward John Eyre, despatch no. 96, forwarding an impression and requesting a new colonial seal, 15 July 1862.
- Colonial Office to Joseph Shepherd Wyon, directing that the new seal be made in silver, 30 August 1862.
- Duke of Newcastle to Governor Eyre, transmitting the Public Seal and Royal Warrant for the Colony, 29 January 1863.
- Frederick Seymour to Governor Eyre, acknowledging receipt of the new seal and warrant, despatch no. 18, 14 March 1863.
- Colonial Office instructions for return and defacement of the former Settlement seal, 16 March 1864.

Repositories and Digital Collections

- Belize Archives and Records Service, Belmopan.
- The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.
- American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.
- Digital Library of the Caribbean, digital copies of The Honduras Almanack.
- National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England.

Abbreviations

BARS - Belize Archives and Records Service

TNA - The National Archives, United Kingdom

CO - Colonial Office



Where an individual shelf mark was not recorded in the working document, the repository and record series are cited.

