

The Corporate Seal of the County of Randolph



***A Local Cultural Heritage Object Nomination
By Ross A. Holt***

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Randolph County Historic Landmark Preservation Commission

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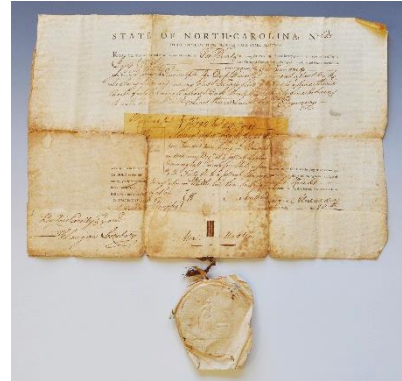
The authoritative seal of Randolph County, N.C., government is not the colorful emblem created in 1973 and seen on county vehicles, letterhead and otherwise associated with county government. The seal that actually marks county documents as official resides in the office of the Clerk to the Board of Commissioners, and dates to the late 1800s or early 1900s. More appropriately, it is the Corporate Seal of the County of Randolph.¹

Since the beginning of recorded history, seals have been used to authenticate the written correspondence of governments, businesses and individuals.² The earliest seals were clay, later giving way to wax. In Western culture, the system had been refined by the Middle Ages: a design unique to the owner would be engraved or etched into a stem or signet ring in an intaglio process; the design then would be imprinted into a pool of heated wax, usually 2/3 beeswax and 1/3 resin. Although wax is the material most often associated with seals, other



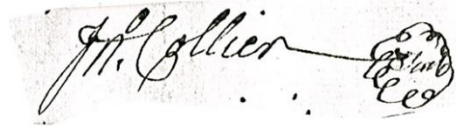
The land grant deed's pendant seal.

material has been used. The term "Papal Bull" is derived from the use of lead (*bullā*) to seal declarations of the Pope. Wax seals, however, were most common and used by people from all walks of life, constituting a signature in an era of widespread illiteracy. Contrary to the popular image of a seal stamped directly onto a document, pendant seals were more common. A pendant seal hangs from fabric tape intricately woven into a document.³ Randolph County deeds from the 18th and early 19th centuries with pendant seals are extant; in these examples, the wax is often pressed between two pieces paper.



A State of North Carolina land grant deed with a pendant seal.

Until the end of the Civil War, there did not appear to be an official Randolph County seal. Wayne County, N.C., officials researched the origin of their county's seal in records of the Secretary of State, the North Carolina Archives and the State Auditor; they learned that during the era when the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions constituted county government, counties generally did not have seals of their own. Instead, the Clerk of Court's seal, sometimes drawn by hand, was used to authenticate orders of the court.⁴



Signature of John Collier, Randolph County Sheriff 1782-1784, with hand-drawn seal.

¹ As referred to in 1911 state legislation authorizing the County Commissioners to issue road bonds. "A Bill to be Entitled 'An Act to Issue Bonds For The Permanent Improvement of the Public Roads of Randolph County,'" *The Courier*, 2 March 1911, p. 2.

² "The History and Resurgence of Wax Seals," *Stamps Direct Limited*, 2013, Web, 20 Feb. 2017.

³ "Seal (emblem)," Wikipedia, 2002-2017, Web, 20 Feb. 2017.

⁴ Untitled report, Wayne County Government, provided to Randolph County Clerk. This assessment, however, may not be entirely accurate: in 1860, Henry Mahler received \$52 for "seals and presses, &c., for Franklin and Nash

During Reconstruction, county governments in North Carolina were restructured to become more representative. Traditionally, the General Assembly had appointed 25-30 local leaders as Justices of the Peace; each year, the Justices would choose three to five of their number to sit as the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions and conduct county business. The sheriff and other local officials also were appointed by the legislature. After the war, the state adopted the system familiar today of popularly-elected county commissioners, a form of government common in northern states.⁵ Legislation enacted in 1868 described the corporate powers of county government; one of these was to “have a common seal and alter it and renew it at will.”⁶ Many counties determined that an official seal was needed;⁷ Randolph County evidently was one of them.



The Randolph County seal in the press patented by Smith.

By this time, document creation had advanced and mechanical processes were available to replace the use of wax seals. In 1883, R. Hale Smith of Springfield, Massachusetts, patented a “new and original” design for a seal press that imprinted a three-dimensional image directly into the paper.⁸

The Wayne County report describes the process for securing a seal: “[T]he county would write to the Secretary of State requesting a seal and could specify what they wanted on the seal. The Secretary of State would then authorize the firm of Mr. Maher at 228 Fayetteville St. in Raleigh to make the seal. Once made by Mr. Mahler it was sent to the county.”⁹

The Mr. Mahler referred to was Gerhard Henry Mahler, who operated the Mahler Jewelry Store, established in 1858. A German emigre and prominent Raleigh citizen, Mahler was highly regarded as an engraver and silversmith.¹⁰ In 1876, he relocated to a three-story brick building he built at the Fayetteville Street address. This location, now known as the

counties”. North Carolina, *Public Laws of the State of North Carolina Passed by the General Assembly, at its Session of 1860-61: Together with the Comptroller’s Statement of Public Revenue and Expenditure*, Raleigh: John Spelman, Printer to the State, 1861, p. 233 [Google Books].

⁵ Powell, William S., *North Carolina Through Four Centuries*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989, p. 393. For a contemporary account of Mahler, see Moses Neal Amis, *The City of Raleigh: Historical Sketches from Its Foundation A review of the city in all its varied aspects--commercial, industrial, statistical, religious, social, etc.* Raleigh, Edwards & Broughton, power printers and binders. 1887 [<http://archive.org/stream/cityofraleighhis00amis#page/120/mode/2up>].

⁶ North Carolina General Statutes, 153A-11.

⁷ Wayne County report.

⁸ Smith, R. Hale, “Design for a Seal-Press,” Patent D13897, 8 May, 1883.

⁹ Wayne County report.

¹⁰ Peacock, Mary Reynolds, “Mahler, [Gerhard] Henry,” *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991, Vol. 4, p. 203.

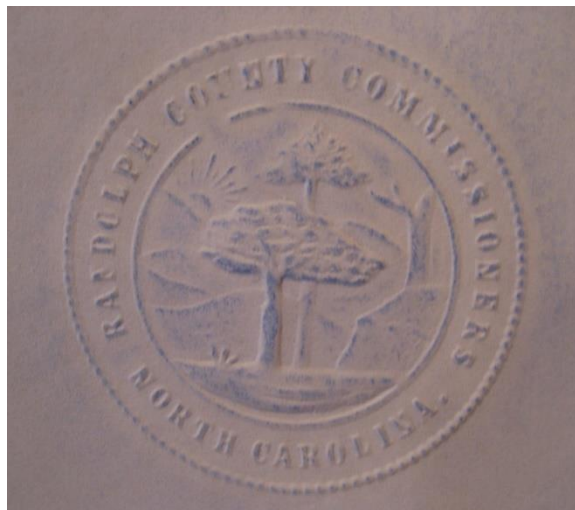
Mahler and Carolina Trust Buildings, is both a National Register site and a Raleigh Historic Landmark.¹¹ On Mahler's death in 1895, two of his children took over operation of his enterprise under the name H. Mahler's Sons. The State Auditor's annual report for 1906 indicates that the firm continued to produce official seals.¹²

It is not known if the Randolph County seal was made by Mahler or his successors, but it seems likely given the Secretary of State's apparent use of the engraver for official business; it is easy to presume that Mahler purchased seal presses in which to place his engraved plates. If not, the county's process for acquiring a seal would have been similar. The Randolph County seal's engraved discs are contained in one of Smith's presses. The imprint depicts a pastoral scene prominently featuring a leafy tree, with the sun climbing over hills in the background. Ringing the image are the words, "Randolph County Commissioners" and "North Carolina."



The Randolph County Seal's engraved bottom plate.

The Corporate Seal of the County of Randolph – still the stamp of official and authentic county government documents – is an important Local Cultural Heritage Object not only because it is a historical artifact that remains in use, but because it connects the modern form of county government to its origin, a time when the people, not the legislature, gained the power to choose their local leaders.



The imprint of the Randolph County Seal.

¹¹ "Carolina Trust/Mahler Building," Raleigh Historic Development Commission, 2012, Web, 20 Feb. 2017. Includes a link to the National Register nomination, which also provides background information on Mahler.

¹² North Carolina Department of State Auditor, *Annual Report of the State of North Carolina for the Fiscal Year Ending November 30, 1906*. Raleigh: E.M. Uzzell & Co. State Printers and Binders, 1907, p.70 [Google Books]. H. Mahler's Sons produced a seal for the Iredell County Clerk of Superior Court that year.

ABOUT THE 1973 SEAL

In 1972, the Randolph County Board of Commissioners announced a contest to develop an official county display seal by the time of the county's bicentennial in 1979.¹³ The top five finalists would receive a cash prize of \$5, and the artist whose seal was selected would be awarded \$25 more. The design was to depict the county's history or other significant aspects of the county. The contest was open to any Randolph County resident or student enrolled in a Randolph County school.



On February 5, 1973, the commissioners adopted a design by Audrey Beck, who also had won an earlier contest to design the City of Asheboro seal.¹⁴ The design is described as follows: "In the foreground is the old plank road, in important part of the history of the county. Beside the plank road are a few arrowheads to depict the Indian history of the county. The plank road leads to a covered bridge (Randolph County having two of the remaining three covered bridges in North Carolina).

"Behind this we see evidence of the growth of Randolph County in its industry, homes, schools and churches.

"Purgatory Mountain is pictured in the background to show progress in the County's growth in building the largest zoo in the world."

"The sun rises over a bright future for Randolph County."¹⁵

¹³ "Randolph County to Select County Seal," *Greensboro Daily News*, 6 Dec., 1972.

¹⁴ "County Selects Seal," *The Courier-Tribune*, 6 Feb. 1973.

¹⁵ "Randolph County Seal" [Unattributed description found in library clipping files under Randolph County – Seals.]