



**General Land Office
The State of Texas
March 25, 1986**

Notes and Documents

A Short History of the General Land Office Seals

JESÚS F. DE LA TEJA*

THE FOUNDERS OF THE TEXAS REPUBLIC, FACED WITH THE ORGANIZATION of a national land system, quickly decided to establish a general land office capable of managing the distribution of a public domain estimated to contain more than 200 million acres. One of the most important functions assigned to the commissioner of the General Land Office was cosigning patents with the president and later with the governor of Texas. Both the Republic and Land Office seals were to be affixed to the patents for authentication.¹ Yet acquisition and use of a seal by the Land Office did not prove as easy as legislators envisioned. Financial problems, inexperience, and a Mexican invasion all affected the early development of the Land Office seal, contributing to interruptions in the early issuance of patents.

John P. Borden's appointment as commissioner in June, 1837, came six months after the original act creating the Land Office and only a few days after new legislation requiring the agency to be operating on October 1, 1837. Although Borden set about organizing the office as circumstances would permit and began acquiring the various local land archives, it was apparent by the end of September that the agency was not ready to open. There were still archives uncollected, the preparation of connected plat maps of the counties had not begun, and the sta-

*Jesús F. de la Teja is assistant archivist at the Texas General Land Office, where he is working on the rearrangement and indexing of the Spanish Collection. He is also working on a dissertation on social structure and land tenure in eighteenth-century San Antonio at the University of Texas at Austin. His recent publications include "Bexar: Profile of a Tejano Community, 1820-1832," coauthored with John Wheat (July 1985 *Quarterly*) and a translation of Josefina Zoraida Vázquez's article, "The Texas Question in Mexican Politics, 1836-1845" (January 1986 *Quarterly*).

¹John P. Borden to Richard G. Dunlap, Feb. 19, 1839, Letters Sent, vol. 2 (Archives and Records Division, Texas General Land Office [hereafter cited as GLO]); "An act to establish a general land office for the Republic of Texas," Dec. 22, 1836, sec. 4, H. P. N. Gammel (comp.), *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897* . . . (10 vols.; Austin, 1898), I, 1,276.

tionery ordered in August from New Orleans could not be purchased for lack of funds.² Among the items that had been ordered in August from W. McKean, stationer, was one "seal of office and press for same."³

The winter of 1837–1838 must have been very bitter for lawmakers forced to grapple with the need to establish an effective land-management system within the severe constraints of the government's penury. On December 14, 1837, Congress appropriated five hundred dollars in promissory notes to cover the stationery needs of the General Land Office and district land offices. That same day another reorganization of the Land Office passed over President Sam Houston's veto. "An Act Entitled 'an act to reduce into one act, and to amend the several acts relating to the establishment of a General Land Office'" made the commissioner of the agency more responsible to Congress in the matter of a seal, which, once obtained, could only be changed by law.⁴

Remedies for the financial woes of the public purse did not wait upon the availability of a proper seal of office. One of the earliest laws of the Republic had granted to Michael B. Menard a league and a labor of land in eastern Galveston Island in return for fifty thousand dollars. For the money-starved government the sum must have seemed generous, but for many Texans the deal was surrounded by improprieties, especially considering the then-current high price of land in the Galveston Bay area.⁵ Hastening to finalize the transaction, the government issued a patent on January 25, 1838, but without the seal of the Land Office. This very first patent issued by the Republic of Texas and its General Land Office bore the private seal of Commissioner John P. Borden, "there being yet no public seal provided."⁶

²"An act, supplementary to an act entitled 'an act to establish a general land office for the Republic of Texas,' passed Dec. 22, 1836," June 12, 1837, sec. 1, Gammel (comp.), *Laws of Texas*, I, 1,323; "Joint resolution to suspend the operation of the Land Office until the further action of Congress," Sept. 30, 1837, *ibid.*, 1,345; Borden to David Hoffman, July 20, 1837, Letters Sent, vol. 1 (GLO); Borden to A. Hotchkiss, July 20, 1837, *ibid.*; Borden to Darius Gregg, July 21, 1837, *ibid.*; Borden to Joseph Baker, Aug. 20, 1837, *ibid.*; report to the Senate and House of Representatives, Oct. 7, 1837, *ibid.*; report to Congress, Nov. 6, 1837, *ibid.*

³Bill for books and stationery for the several land offices in the Republic of Texas, Aug. 24, 1837, Letters Sent, vol. 1 (GLO).

⁴"Joint resolution, making appropriations for the General Land Office, and to defray the contingent expenses of both houses of Congress," Dec. 14, 1837, sec. 1, Gammel (comp.), *Laws of Texas*, I, 1,370; "An act, entitled 'an act to reduce into one act, and to amend the several acts relating to the establishment of a general land office,'" Dec. 14, 1837, sec. 5, *ibid.*, 1,405.

⁵"An act, relinquishing one league and labor of land to Michael B. Menard and others, on the east end of Galveston Island," Dec. 9, 1836, *ibid.*, 1,130; William Ransom Hogan, *The Texas Republic: A Social and Economic History* (Austin, 1969), 88, 91.

⁶Patent to Michael B. Menard, Jan. 25, 1838, First Class Volume 1, p. 1 (GLO).



General Land Office
The Republic of Texas
1838-1842

The Land Office supplies, including the seal and press for it, left New Orleans at the end of January, 1838, and arrived in Houston within the month. Disappointed by the poor quality of the stationery received, particularly the blank patents, Commissioner Borden was, "however, well pleased with the seal and press."⁷ This first seal of the General Land Office, which had for its device a buffalo standing before a live oak tree, served adequately through 1842.⁸ The same cannot be said about the lever seal presses acquired by Borden. His successor, Thomas William Ward, found himself in need of a screw-type press, "as all the lever presses in the various offices here, have been broken where much power has been applied."⁹

Need for a new seal of office appears to have been a by-product of the Archive War. President Houston's attempt to remove the government's archives from Austin in December, 1842, as a result of a Mexican invasion and occupation of San Antonio, was thwarted by Austinites fearful of permanently losing the capital. Either the seal was broken or lost during the aborted transfer, for in the spring of 1843 Commissioner Ward was in need of a new seal under which to issue patents. He first turned to a stamp formerly used by the Pay Department of the Adjutant General's Office. This design apparently relied on the standard lone-star emblem of the Republic, with the word Texas "cut between the points of the star and the words 'General Land Office' cut in the outer margin."¹⁰ This new seal, which cost ten dollars exchequer money, was quickly provided but apparently proved unsatisfactory, for it was never employed.¹¹

Ward next turned to a former draftsman at the Land Office for some sketches of a new seal. In July, 1843, the commissioner expressed his satisfaction with the artist's work and advised the latter he needed only President Houston's final approval.¹² Houston, apparently, was not willing to approve anything but the finished product, for in Ward's instructions to the engraver he did not restrict the latter to the sketches pro-

⁷Nathaniel Townsend to Borden, Jan. 30, 1838, microfilm of letters received, ER reel 1, no. 86 (GLO); Borden to Townsend, Mar. 17, 1838, Letters Sent, vol. 2 (GLO).

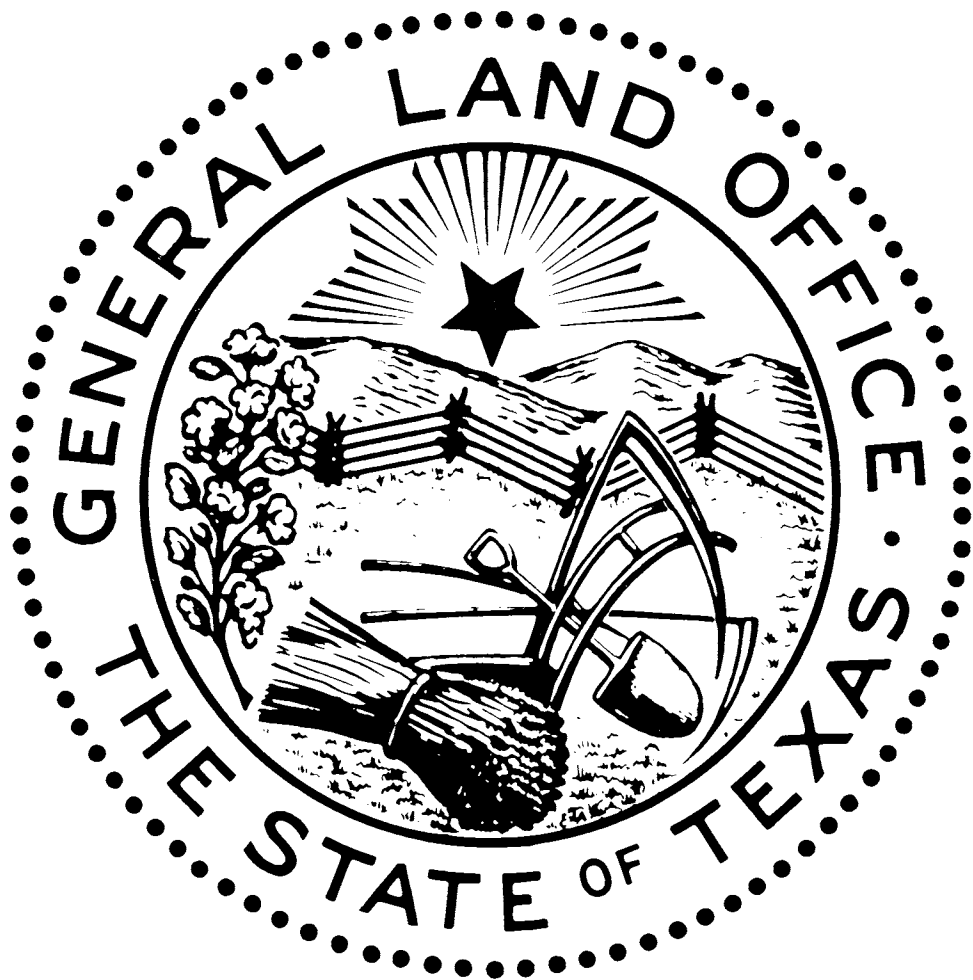
⁸The earliest buffalo seal found in the Land Office dates to March 26, 1838. See copy of title to John F. Martin, Spanish Collection (GLO). The latest one is found on a cancelled patent dated January 7, 1842, belonging to Francisco Ariola.

⁹Thomas W. Ward to William Bryan, July 13, 1841, Letters Sent, vol. 3 (GLO).

¹⁰Ward to Messrs. Torrey's [*sic*], May 3, 1843, *ibid.*

¹¹Torrey and Brothers to Ward, June 8, 1843, ER reel 2, no. 1,771 (GLO); Torrey and Brothers to Ward, July 6, 1843, *ibid.*, no. 1,787.

¹²Ward to Torrey and Brothers, Nov. 16, 1843, Letters Sent, vol. 3 (GLO); Ward to L. Hirt, July 7, 1843, *ibid.*



General Land Office
The State of Texas
1844-1986

vided, but said he was merely sending “them to give a more direct idea of what is desired.”¹³

What Ward desired was a device “typical of industry and husbandry, with suitable scenery,” and delivery as soon as possible.¹⁴ Although the work of the Land Office at the provisional capital of Washington had come to a virtual standstill because of the absence of the vast majority of the records, the little public service work that could be conducted was delayed by the absence of a seal with which to certify it. One month after his original request, on September 17, 1843, Commissioner Ward wrote again to the consul asking for compliance with the request for the seal or word that the instructions had not been received.¹⁵

Although the seal was ready by the beginning of October, the engraver, who wanted fifty dollars for the work, was unwilling to send it until he was paid, having previously gone unpaid by the Texas government for other projects. The engraver had good reason to distrust the credit of the Republic. Between 1837 and 1843, three types of currency had been tried by the Texas government, interest bearing and non-interest bearing, and none had circulated at par. The exchange notes in use during 1843 were circulating at between thirty and forty cents on the dollar.¹⁶ Commissioner Ward was not about to compromise the integrity of the government, however. His reply, made through an agent at Galveston, was chiding:

With regard to the seal, you can inform the engraver that I do not conceive that the Govt. of which I am an officer is so far sunk below . . . the obscurest individual that it should be compelled to pay for an article that it has not even the poor privilege of a sight at before purchasing and which[,] for aught I know respecting it[,] may be perfectly useless. . . .

You will therefore inform the Engraver that when the seal is delivered to me at the Land office he will [be] paid for it, if it is properly executed[,]and not before.¹⁷

In frustration Commissioner Ward once again turned to the merchant house of Torrey and Brothers, which had provided him with the seal based on the Pay Department stamp. The former draftsman apparently acted as Ward’s agent, for the commissioner refers to him in a letter of November, 1843, addressed to the merchants. In March of the following year Ward complained that, although the Austin office had reopened and he was ready to issue patents, he could not for want of

¹³ Ward to Bryan, Aug. 5, 1843, *ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Ward to Bryan, Sept. 17, 1843, *ibid.*

¹⁶ Bryan to Ward, Oct. 1, 1843, ER reel 2, no. 1,814 (GLO); Hogan, *Texas Republic*, 99–100.

¹⁷ Ward to Bryan, Oct. 4, 1843, ER reel 2, no. 1,813 (GLO).

seals. Direct evidence of the resumption of patent issuance and, therefore, of the arrival of the seal is not found until August, 1844.¹⁸

The new seal did not prove everything Ward had hoped for, however. The commissioner complained to Torrey and Brothers that the cost, fifty dollars, came as a surprise, "as you informed me that \$50—was too high a price for the seals procured for me by Mr. Wm. Bryan." He also complained that pins in the seals were made of such inferior iron that they were broken within the month. Ward had the final laugh, however, for in the same letter he informed the merchants that the appropriation for contingent expenses had run out and they would have to wait for their money until the next session of Congress.¹⁹

This second seal of the General Land Office, its device consisting of a cotton plant, plough, scythe, sheaf of wheat, and meridian sun, served until 1986. In mid-1844, when it first went into use, the seal read "Republic of Texas—General Land Office." Soon after annexation a new die was cast with the words "The State of Texas" the only alteration to the seal.²⁰ The new state legislature recognized the validity of both the buffalo seal and Ward's seal on April 29, 1846, when it legalized all documents embossed with either seal.²¹

On March 25, 1986, Commissioner Garry Mauro introduced a new seal for the Land Office. In commemoration of the Texas Sesquicentennial, the new seal replaces the agricultural theme of the old seal with a design representing the agency's contemporary land and resource management responsibilities. The new seal depicts a bison in front of a fish-eye view of mountains, plateaus, prairies, bays, barrier islands, and the Gulf of Mexico, all part of the 22.5 million acres of state land administered by the Texas General Land Office. The return to the bison motif found in the first seal, according to Commissioner Mauro, "symbolizes the General Land Office's commitment to protecting Texas' public lands and the important role played by the General Land Office throughout Texas history."²²

¹⁸Ward to Messrs. Torrey and Brothers, Mar. 19, 1844, Letters Sent, vol. 3 (GLO); Ward to J. B. Shaw, Mar. 19, 1844, *ibid.*; Ward to Torrey and Brothers, Mar. 28, 1844, *ibid.*; Ward to George H. Bringhurst, Aug. 3, 1844, *ibid.*

¹⁹Ward to Torrey and Brothers, Oct. 8, 1844, *ibid.*

²⁰The earliest use of the modern seal with the inscription "Republic of Texas" is found in the Spanish Collection, on a copy of a title issued to Vicente Padilla dated April 24, 1846. The first modern seal bearing the words "The State of Texas" found in the Land Office is in the Translations Collection: "Translation of the original title of Wilson Ewing for one legua of land in the vicinity of Trinity River."

²¹"An act to legalize the several seals heretofore issued by the commissioner of the General Land Office," Apr. 29, 1846, Gammel (comp.), *Laws of Texas*, II, 1,457–1,458.

²²"Mauro: New Seal Signals New Direction for General Land Office," News Release, Mar. 25, 1986 (GLO).