

WEST VIRGINIA SESQUICENTENNIAL

WEST VIRGINIA'S SEAL OF APPROVAL

French immigrant Joseph H. Diss Debar promoted W.Va., designed state seal

By Rosalie Earle
Staff writer

WITH a population 95 percent white, it's hard to imagine that West Virginia once had a commissioner of immigration.

Joseph H. Diss Debar, himself an immigrant from France, served as the first commissioner.

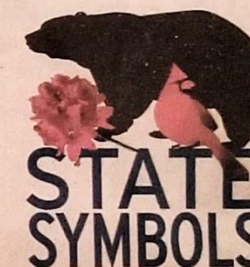
Eighth-graders preparing for the Golden Horseshoe test know that Diss Debar is the designer of the state seal, officially adopted three months after West Virginia became a state.

The two-sided seal has remained unchanged for 150 years. It reflects West Virginia as it was then and, for the most part, still is now. Two figures are depicted on the front side: one represents the woodsman and the farmer, an ax in the crook of his left arm, his right hand on a plow; the other figure wields a pickax.

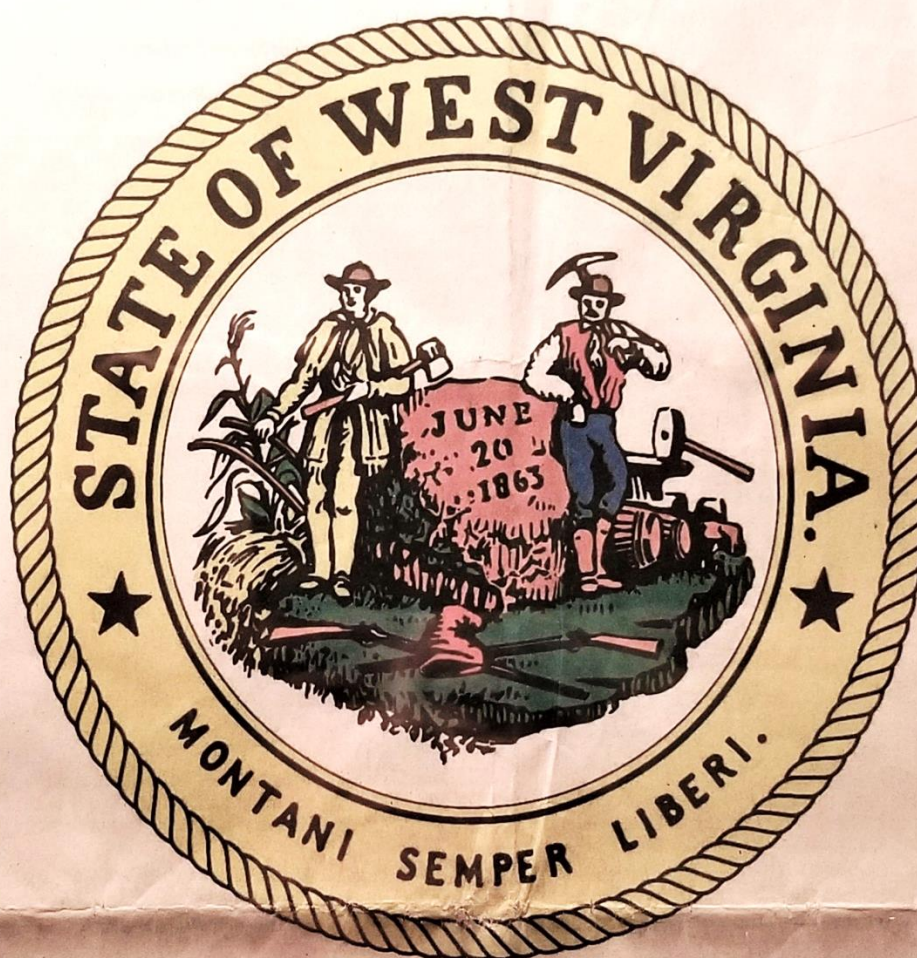
On the reverse side is a scene incorporating mountains, a train, a factory, smokestack, an oil derrick, a river with boats and a meadow complete with sheep and cattle. Look closely and you'll see that the train is crossing a viaduct (see accompanying article).

Along with the seal, the first Legislature adopted the state motto that Diss Debar inscribed on the seal's front side: *Montani Semper Liberi*, Latin for "Mountaineers are always free."

"I also suggested the motto, 'Libertas e Fidelitate' — liberty out of fidelity [on the reverse side] — expressing that West Virginia became



WEST VIRGINIA
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ABOVE LEFT: Joseph H. Diss Debar was an artist, a visionary, a writer and a con man.
ABOVE: The front side of the Great Seal of West Virginia depicts agricultural and industrial workers.
LEFT: The reverse of the seal reflects commerce; the design is incorporated in the governor's official seal.

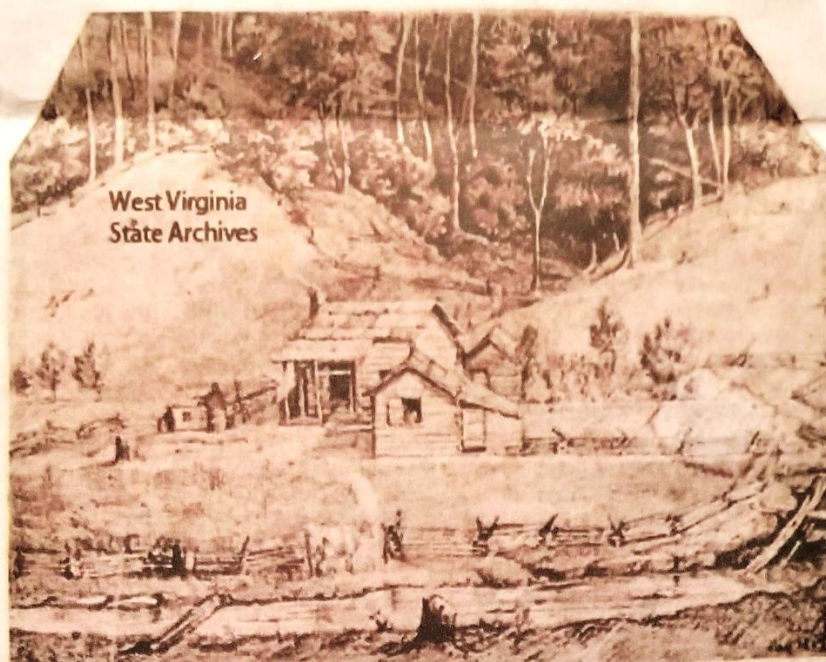


INSIDE: Joseph H. Diss Debar and Charles Dickens, John Brown, Stonewall Jackson and more 8F, 9F

SEE SEAL, 8F

Joseph H. Diss Debar established a small colony of Swiss and German immigrants at Saint Clara, named after his first wife.

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SEAL

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free and independent through her loyalty to the Union," Diss Debar noted in a scrapbook he kept.

Diss Debar was born in the Alsace province of France in 1820. He received a classical and scientific education as well as training in painting and was fluent in English and German and proficient in Spanish and Italian.

At age 21, Diss Debar crossed the Atlantic on the Cunard steamer Britannia, where he was befriended by a fellow passenger, Charles Dickens. In his "American Notes," Dickens describes a young man fleeced in a game of blackjack with seasoned gamblers. That was Diss Debar.

He came to Doddridge County in 1846 as the agent for a land company holding large tracts there. He lived there for about 20 years, establishing a small colony of Swiss and German immigrants at Saint Clara, named after his first wife.

An abolitionist, Diss Debar was an advocate for secession from Virginia when the Civil War broke out. His election as a delegate from Doddridge County to the first Legislature was contested. He was in Wheeling in September 1863 trying to keep his seat when a group of legislators asked him to design and draw a state seal for the new state.

Diss Debar's election was set aside, but he roundly defeated his opponents the next year. That same year, he was appointed commissioner of immigration.

Historian Boyd Stutler de-

scribed Diss Debar as the first prophet of West Virginia, promoting its resources and possibilities "with the zeal and enthusiasm of a chamber of commerce secretary."

He produced pamphlets and handbills to attract settlers and wrote letters to New York papers that were reprinted in Europe. He received no salary and often was not reimbursed by the Legislature for his expenses.

On his own, he collected specimens of West Virginia products that he took to Paris in 1867 for the World's Universal Exposition. He was awarded a bronze medal for high-quality lubricating petroleum and West Virginia oils.

"In 1868, he began the arrangements that resulted in the settlement of the German-Swiss colony at Helvetia, Randolph County, a most successful experiment in transplanting people from one country to another, preserving their habits and customs," Stutler wrote in the West Virginia Heritage Encyclopedia.

However, Stutler noted that most immigrants induced to settle in West Virginia didn't join colonies like Saint Clara and Helvetia, but rather settled in cities or on farms and soon assimilated into their new homes.

Diss Debar moved to Parkersburg in 1866 and lived there until he left West Virginia in 1875. He made news again five years later when he served a six-month prison sentence in New York for operating a confidence game.

He died in Philadelphia in 1905 at the age of 85.

At the turn of the century, state authorities were prevailed upon to buy Diss Debar's sketches, which depicted pioneer life, ordinary citizens and famous men such as President Lincoln, Stonewall Jackson, John Brown and Horace Greeley.

About 75 of his sketches and paintings are preserved in the State Archives.

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To Get Back
Home Sooner,
HOW FAR
WILL YOU GO?

Sometime
you want
to get pat

Hun