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United States National Symbols: Congressional Designation and Past Practices

As codified in Title 36 of the *U.S. Code*, Congress has designated a national anthem (“The Star-Spangled Banner”), a national motto (“In God we trust”), a national floral emblem (the rose), a national march (“The Stars and Stripes Forever”), a national tree (oak), a national mammal (North American bison), and a national bird (bald eagle). These recognitions can be referred to as “National Symbols,” even though the term does not appear to have a specific statutory definition.

[T]he bald eagle has long been associated with and a symbol of the United States. It was first adopted in the Great Seal of the United States in 1782. Versions of the Great Seal are used in the Seal of the President of the United States, the House of Representatives, the Senate, and by countless Federal agencies and departments. The bald eagle appears on the flags and insignia of our military, on our passports, and on our currency. It appears on the flags and the seals of several States as well. The bald eagle is also important to Native American Tribes across the United States. It plays a key role in sacred belief systems and traditions, stories, ceremonies, and insignias. Despite this long and intertwined history of the United States, the bald eagle has not been officially designated as our national bird.... This bill would ... enshrine the bald eagle as the national bird along with our national anthem, national motto, and other symbols of our country.

—Representative Russell Fry, *Congressional Record*, December 16, 2024, p. H7171.

National Symbols of the United States

National Anthem

In 1931, Congress designated “The Star-Spangled Banner” as the national anthem (36 U.S.C. §301). Written in 1814 by Francis Scott Key near Fort McHenry, Maryland, during the War of 1812, “The Star-Spangled Banner” described the attack on the fort by the British. As noted in a House Judiciary Committee report, the song was

descriptive of the scenes he beheld and of his doubts and fears during that day and the night following. He heard the bombardment, viewed the bombs bursting in air, and beheld the rockets’ red glare. As the perilous night passed, which meant so much for our country, and for Baltimore, in great suspense he peered through the early morning mist that he might know the outcome of the siege, and when

dimly [in] the distance there loomed that gorgeous banner, waving so gallantly in the breeze amid the first faint rays of the morning’s sun. (H.Rept. 71-627, p. 2)

National Motto

In 1956, Congress adopted “In God we trust” as the national motto (36 U.S.C. §302). Before designation as the national motto, Congress had previously ordered the phrase “In God We Trust” to be placed on certain coins (1865, 1873, and 1908). Then, in 1955, Congress made the use of “In God We Trust” mandatory on all currency and coins of the United States. (S.Rept. 84-2703, p. 1; P.L. 84-140).

Figure 1 shows the national motto on the penny.

Figure 1. U.S. Penny



Source: U.S. Mint, “Penny.”

National Floral Emblem

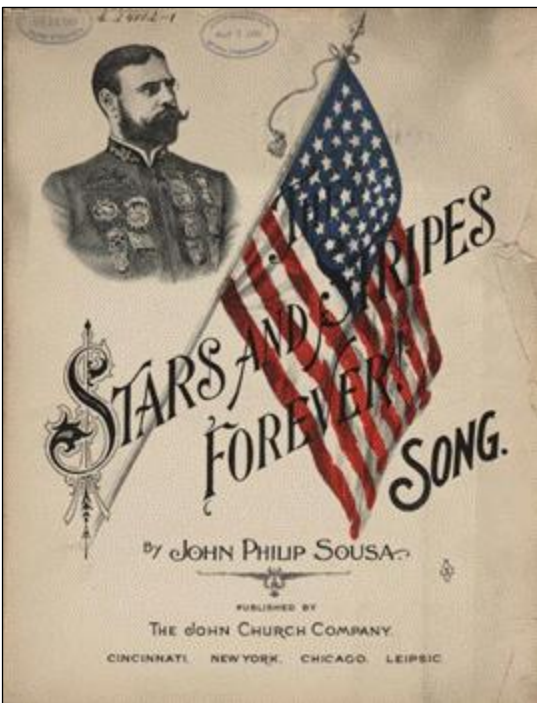
In 1986, Congress designated the rose as the national floral emblem and requested that the President issue a proclamation (36 U.S.C. §303). In considering the measure to designate the rose as the national floral emblem, the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee noted that Congress would not give precedence to any particular variety of rose, but that the rose is “representative of our national heritage, [is] native to North America, can be found in most all of the 50 states,” and “signifies love, peace, friendship, courage, loyalty, and devotion” (H.Rept. 99-836, p. 2; P.L. 99-449).

National March

In 1987, Congress designated John Phillip Sousa’s march “The Stars and Stripes Forever” as the national march (36 U.S.C. §304). First performed in 1897, “The Stars and Stripes Forever” had become “an integral part of the celebrations of American life, and in many ways, already is

the de facto national march” (*Congressional Record*, December 1, 1987, p. 33295). **Figure 2** shows an historical image on the cover of a published version of “Stars and Stripes Forever.”

Figure 2. Cover of “Stars and Stripes Forever” by John Philip Sousa



Source: Library of Congress, “The stars and stripes forever: song.”

National Tree

In 2004, Congress recognized the tree genus *Quercus*, commonly known as the oak tree, as the national tree (36 U.S.C. §305). In its report to accompany the bill, the House Judiciary Committee noted that

the oak was the natural choice for the national tree. Its many species are common to all 50 States, and six States have already named the oak their State tree. The oak tree has also played an important role in the history of the United States. For example, the Charter Oak, which is featured on the back of the Connecticut quarter, served as a hiding place for that State’s charter when the British sought to have the charter surrendered in 1687. Furthermore, the oak tree’s strength and durability as a building material is well known; the U.S.S. Constitution, commonly known as “Old Ironsides,” has a hull constructed of live oak. (H.Rept. 108-689, p. 2)

National Mammal

In 2016, Congress designated the North American bison as the national mammal of the United States (36 U.S.C. chapter 3 note). During House debate on the bill, a House Member stated

The North American bison is a unifying symbol in the United States. Once numbering in the tens of millions, bison were nearly extinguished by the

1880s, with the travesty borne most by Native Americans whose fate was intertwined with the buffalo.

In 1905, visionary ranchers, tribes, industrialists, sport hunters, and conservationists joined President Theodore Roosevelt in a monumental effort to reverse the American bison’s demise. Now over 60 tribes are working to restore bison to over 1 million acres of Native American lands. Bison production on private ranches is in its strongest economic condition in more than a decade. (*Congressional Record*, April 26, 2016, p. H1978)

National Bird

In 2024, Congress adopted the bald eagle as the national bird (P.L. 118-206; 36 U.S.C. §306). In recognition of the bald eagle, the law recognizes the prominent place of the bald eagle in American life. As noted during the House debate, “since 1782, the bald eagle has been a symbol of America featured on the Great Seal; however it has never been officially designated as the national bird. It remains a symbol of freedom across the country.” (*Congressional Record*, December 16, 2024, p. H7172)

Selected Past Proposals for National Symbols

In recent years, some Members of Congress have suggested numerous other national symbols. In recent years, proposed national symbols have included the following:

- A national fossil. In the 118th Congress (2023-2024), S. 3574 would have designated the mastodon as the national fossil.
- A national hymn. In the 117th Congress, H.R. 301 would have designated the composition “Lift Every Voice and Sing” as the national hymn.
- A national song of remembrance. In the 111th Congress (2009-2010) and 112th Congress (2011-2012), legislation was introduced to designate the musical piece commonly known as “Taps” as the national song of remembrance. While this proposal was never codified into law, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013 included a sense of Congress (P.L. 112-239, §596) that the “bugle call commonly known as ‘Taps’ should be designated as the National Song of Military Remembrance.”
- A national song. In the 107th Congress (2001-2002), S. 3125 would have designated “God Bless America” as the national song. In the 100th Congress (1987-1988), H.R. 467 would have designated “America, the Beautiful” as the national song.

For more information on commemorative options for Congress, see CRS Report R43539, *Commemorations in Congress: Options for Honoring Individuals, Groups, and Events*, by Jacob R. Straus et al.

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