



Historic Salem Inc. Position on the Salem City Seal

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Historic Salem, Inc. (HSI) believes that Salem's historic City Seal, established in 1839, should be preserved.

As an organization dedicated to preserving Salem's historic resources for future generations, HSI's position is grounded in a core preservation principle: historic civic symbols should be retained in their original form whenever possible. The City Seal is a nearly 200-year-old civic symbol that reveals how Salem understood and represented itself in 1839. Altering its imagery would diminish its value as a historical record and weaken its ability to communicate the history it was created to commemorate.

We recognize that some members of the community have expressed concerns about the Seal and how its imagery may be perceived today. Those concerns deserve thoughtful consideration. At the same time, decisions about historic civic symbols should be informed by a full understanding of their history, purpose, and significance.

Although adopted after Salem's peak trading era, the Seal was deliberately created to commemorate the maritime commerce and international relationships that helped define the city. Its depiction of a Salem ship, an Acehnese merchant, and a dove of peace reflects Salem's historic connection to Aceh and Sumatra and its role in global trade, relationships that were rooted in commerce and exchange rather than colonial governance. The Acehnese merchant was included to represent one of Salem's trading partners and the people with whom Salem merchants conducted commerce. Its specificity is precisely what gives the Seal its historic value. The imagery of the Seal provides evidence not only of Salem's maritime past, but also of how nineteenth-century Salem chose to represent that past. Preserving the Seal therefore preserves an important historical document in visual form.

Salem's trade with Aceh and Sumatra helped shape the city's architecture, institutions, and cultural collections. The city's built environment and many of its cultural resources continue to reflect those international connections. The Seal serves as a visible reminder of this history and of Salem's longstanding relationship with the wider world. The Seal commemorates a period in which Salem mariners built international relationships through commerce and exchange, reflecting the ingenuity, enterprise, and determination that helped establish the city's economic and cultural foundations.

We also believe that the perspectives of those whose heritage is represented in the Seal are an important part of this discussion. The City Seal Task Force report notes that the Acehnese participants who spoke during its July 2025 listening session supported retaining the Seal in its current form. The report also includes a letter from Aceh Governor Muzakir Manaf to Governor Maura Healey expressing opposition to changing the Seal. These perspectives do not resolve the

debate, nor do they diminish concerns expressed by others, but they are significant voices that should be considered alongside those of Salem residents and other stakeholders.

Preserving the Seal does not require an uncritical view of Salem's maritime history. Salem's relationship with Aceh, like many historical relationships, involved commerce and cultural exchange as well as conflict, unequal power, and other difficult realities. Historic preservation is not about preserving only the parts of history that are comfortable. It is about retaining the evidence of the past and providing the context needed to understand it honestly and completely. For that reason, we believe concerns about the Seal are best addressed through education, interpretation, and dialogue. The City can expand public understanding of the Seal's origins, Salem's relationship with Aceh, the pepper trade, the people represented in the imagery, and the ways the Seal's meaning has evolved over time.

The City may also choose to develop contemporary branding for public-facing purposes that reflects the diverse Salem of today while retaining the historic Seal as its official civic symbol. In this way, Salem need not choose between acknowledging its past and representing its present. HSI believes the 1839 City Seal remains an important historic civic symbol that reflects a significant chapter of Salem's history. We encourage the City to preserve the Seal and address concerns through education, interpretation, and continued dialogue rather than removal or alteration. Preserving historic civic symbols does not require endorsement of every aspect of the past. Rather, it ensures that future generations can engage with history fully, honestly, and in context.