



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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State Capitol Symbols, Traditions and Styles | Oct. 18 | OAS Episode 46

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

Welcome to “Our American States.” As we approach nearly 50 episodes of this podcast, we want to hear from you. We ask that you go to your favorite podcast platform and give us a rating and a review. This not only helps us to shape this program but gets us out to more of your colleagues across the country. Now, let’s dive into this week’s episode.

If you’re a state legislator or a state legislative staff employee, you know the benefits of being able to work in a state capitol building. In this episode of “Our American States,” we want to celebrate those buildings and talk a bit about some of the traditions, symbols and decorative features that you can find in these impressive structures.

Later in the program, we will talk to the former director of the Trust for Representative Democracy, Karl Kurtz, who has been in every U.S. capitol including its territories and commonwealths. He’ll talk to us about domes, artwork and legislative traditions.

But first, we will start out with the Virginia House of Delegates, which in 2019 will be celebrating its 400th anniversary. We’ll start out with some traditions that are unique to that body.

We’re talking with Paul Nardo, who is the clerk of the Virginia House of Delegates and keeper of the Rolls of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Paul, Virginia we all know will be celebrating its 400th anniversary as a legislative body next year in 2019. We’d like to hear from you about some of the items and traditions that are still being used in the Virginia House of Delegates today. What all are you still keeping hold of and what are you planning on continuing next year?

Paul: Well, it’s an exciting time for Virginia and hopefully for the rest of America as well. I think Virginia has long been recognized as the birthplace of America. It’s the home of the oldest continuously elected English representative lawmaking body in the New World.

The two things that readily come to mind that we always want to showcase are our ceremonial mace, and also, to a lesser degree, the tradition of the speaker's chair, which are commonplace in most legislatures, state legislatures and others certainly in America, but throughout the world.

The mace is *sine qua non* here, if you will, the ceremonial symbol of authority. You'll recall that during the Middle Ages the mace was introduced as a weapon of war. Medieval bodyguards known as sergeants at arms, which might ring familiar, they carried maces to protect kings and high officials in processions among the people. Gradually, more useful weapons replaced the mace and somewhere around the 13th/14th century, the mace became an ornament of beauty, frankly, made of precious metal and decorated with jewels and such. Thus, the mace evolved into an object that was symbolic of royal authority and power and our antecedent, the British House of Commons, was the first body to use the mace in this manner.

So a scepter, which kings and whatnot used, is a one-handed object symbolizing power. A mace is a two-handed object symbolizing more broadly defined power of towns or colleges and popular assemblies like the Virginia General Assembly. Again, today it's a ceremonial symbol of authority and signifies respect and honor and that the people are sovereign in the land.

As Virginia is one of the original 13 colonies, we were presented by Governor Frances Nicholson back in 1700 with our first mace. It was actually a mace and a gown. The mace was to be born before the speaker as a token of honor and power again of the people, and it was in constant use in Williamsburg, which was our second colonial capital and also here in Richmond until after the Revolutionary War.

Interesting enough from our standpoint, from 1700 to 1794 we had the original mace, but a lot of the other colonies that were royal colonies, they decided to get rid of them or said it was inappropriate to have a mace, inconsistent with the principles of a Republican government. So in 1794 the House of Burgesses was requested to sell it. That was original sterling silver mace; weighed about 6 pounds; was sold to a Richmond silversmith back then. And then for about 180 years we went without a mace, which was sort of odd being that we were modeled in large part on the British Parliament.

In 1974, what we call here in Virginia the First Assembly Day was celebrated at Jamestown Island where the first permanent English settlement was founded in 1607, but on the 355th anniversary of the General Assembly that year ... Traditionally, every four years we have a First Assembly Day. And at this one, the Jamestown/Yorktown basin used this occasion to present a newly acquired mace to then Speaker Warren Cook.

And so today our ceremonial mace is displayed in the old House of Delegates and brought into the present House Chamber by the sergeant at arms each day the House is in session. He wears white gloves when handling the mace, once again showing that the people are sovereign in the House. And I think that's very important as we continue this ongoing experiment in self-government that we remind ourselves, but also remember for the legislators when we do orientation, that they are representing and working on behalf of the 8-plus million people in Virginia. And it's just a nice way of what we take for granted sometimes of all the parliamentary maneuvers and procedures, but just representative government is not something that's a given;

we need to work at it. And I think it's a nice way to remind us of our origins, but also hopefully charting a way for a better future.

Gene: And that original mace, Paul, I guess is lost to history?

Paul: It is, unfortunately. They sold it. Interestingly, South Carolina, when I was down there a couple of years ago ... South Carolina is the only one that I'm aware of that has their original mace and they display it standing straight up instead of in a cradle on the side.

Yes, it was sold for \$100 to William and George Richardson who, as I said, were silversmiths, but nothing further is known about that mace. So it could have stayed on or someone smelted it down into something more useful or decorative or who knows what. But such are the vagaries of history and time. What a waste, or what a shame. I understand the symbolism in 1776/1794, so it made sense.

Gene: And as you prepare for the 400th anniversary next year, are there certain other things that you're looking at or other traditions to bring back?

Paul: Yes. I'm not sure about bring back, but just kind of bring to the forefront ... One of the other things we have that, again, is another seat of power is the old colonial speaker's chair. The original one that we have is from the 17th century ... 18th century, excuse me, about 1730, was used in Williamsburg before and during the Revolution. It was brought up to Richmond when we became our third and final capitol since 1780. The historic chair saw active service from 1788 here in Richmond 'til 1870 when it was badly damaged in a capitol disaster.

So the chair that is downstairs in the old House chamber now is there and we're trying to figure out how we might want to integrate that into using some of the more ceremonial stuff that's coming with the 400th anniversary next year. Like I said before, every four years we go down to Williamsburg and there's a replica that's used of that when we meet in the old colonial capitol, and it sort of gave inspiration to us, that we have the original one here and we should delicately think about maybe ways to use that.

I think whether it's a mace or a speaker's chair or the civility and courtliness that we try to engage in, in public discourse on the floor as we do the people's business, I just think the opportunity here is to help us learn about the challenges and successes and frankly the inequities of the past and hopefully that will enable us to more fully appreciate the difficult path our country and certainly our commonwealth has taken to become what it is today.

And so we're not trying to just be looking at the past and wallowing in all of that. I think we're trying to learn from that and make sure that we are clear-eyed in looking at what went on and just understand that ever since the origins of our commonwealth, but I would say the origins of this country and most any other state promise hope and achievement vied with difficulty, conflict and failure.

So hopefully we can, using our sic semper tyrannis is our state motto ... but using that to try to slay the tyrants of narrow self-interest or myopic self-absorption, and just try to remember that we're here about something far, far larger than ourselves. So I think we're trying to use maces and chairs as ways to help point us in hopefully a brighter future.

Gene: And Paul, as you talk to your colleagues in the 49 other states, are there other things that you've noticed in other state capitols that particularly touched you or ...

Paul: I find each state capitol is so unique, not in terms of an object per se, but a tradition. You're not allowed to walk in the well of the House; that's only for the elected members; you know, you can't cross the threshold, so to speak. There are just the idiosyncrasies that go with each state legislature, legislative body, and I think understand those traditions that are unique to them, trying to appreciate them, and then not get so lost in the parliamentary detail, if you will, but: Why do we do some of these things? It's to show respect for authority, respect for different opinions, respect for those who are duly elected to make laws in the people's name.

So we were in Denver not too long ago and Santa Fe and there are all different sizes and shapes and domes and no domes. It's just a neat and varied celebration of that ongoing experiment in self-government. So nothing specific stands out, but I think it's an opportunity since Virginia really was the birthplace of America, I think it's an opportunity for us to partner with our other sister states and the National Conference of State Legislatures and others to try, and frankly other parliaments around the world, certainly the U.K. parliament, to just pause for a moment and remember where we came from and use that as hopefully a lodestar to help guide us into a brighter future.

Gene: We've been talking with a very eloquent spokesperson for democracy, Paul Nardo, the chief clerk for the Virginia House of Delegates and keeper of the Rolls of the Commonwealth. Paul, thank you so much for sharing your expertise with us today.

Paul: Gene, it's been a pleasure. I really enjoyed speaking with you.

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Gene: So we're talking with Karl Kurtz, who is the former director of the Trust for Representative Democracy at the National Conference of State Legislatures, and is now a principle with Legis Matters. Karl, when we worked together at NCSL, I know you traveled quite a bit. Remind me how many U.S. and international capitols you've been to in your travels.

Karl: Well, I've been to 54 capitol buildings in the United States. That's the 50 states plus the U.S. Capitol and three of the territories or commonwealths; and then another 47 parliamentary buildings or capitols in other countries.

Gene: Well, that makes you a pretty esteemed expert to talk to today as we try to go over legislative symbols and different things at state capitols that people might be interested in.

I know that most people I talk to when they hear the word capitol, they tend to think of a building with a dome, but not all of our capitols in the United States have domes, correct?

Karl: Yeah, that's right. Of our 51 U.S. capitols, 41 of them have domes. But the dome really is a symbol of government, a symbol of democracy. Reading just the titles of several books that have been written about capitol domes, it's instructive. One of them by Henry Russell Hitchcock and William Seal is called "Temples of Democracy." Another by a fellow named Francis Pio Ruggiero

has the subtitle “Temples of Sovereignty.” And my favorite, though, is a book by a former Oregon staffer, Jim Stembridge, in which the subtitle is “The Architecture of Representative Government.” And I think that really captures how the dome is that really predominant symbol of democracy in America.

Let me just quote from the opening words of a book by William Seal and Eric Oxendorf entitled “Domes of America”: “To Americans the dome is the architectural symbol of democracy. Rising over the prairies or from the hearts of cities, it announces the presence of a government as clearly as a steeple proclaims a church.”

Gene: If I remember correctly, I think Oklahoma was one of those states that did not have a dome, but they did put one on recently.

Karl: Yeah, they added one. I think it was in the 1990s that it was completed. It was planned in the original design of the capitol, but they didn’t have the money to do it at the time.

In those 10 states that don’t have a dome, there was a variety of reasons for them. In the cases of North Carolina and Florida, in the 20th century they built a new legislative building. They left the old capitols there, but the legislature no longer uses them. Actually, the old capitols do have domes. In Alaska, for example, the capitol of Alaska when it was a territory was a federal building just like a lot of the federal buildings in major cities in the United States, and it didn’t have a dome. And when Alaska became a state, they just continued to meet there and didn’t build a new capitol.

A couple of other cases—North Dakota and Louisiana have skyscrapers as capitols, as does Nebraska, but Nebraska, you can’t see it from the outside; they have a dome on the inside that’s quite dramatic and lovely.

Gene: So let’s move into the capitols, Karl, and talk about some of the traditions that some of these legislative chambers have.

Karl: Sure. The mace is a rod or a staff that has become decorative. It started out as a weapon of war, actually, in medieval times. Bodyguards, who were known as sergeants of arms, who guarded kings or lords would use the mace to protect these high officials whenever they were among the people.

In Maryland, the mace was used very similarly to the way it was with the British Parliament in defiance of the governor and the governor’s counsel. The sergeant of the arms was sent out with the mace to bring members of the governor’s counsel to the bar of the House to appear before the House, and they were asked to explain how they could have ever issued an order reducing the income of lawyers. That comes from remarks by Dr. Edward Papenfuss and I want to add a direct quote from him in which he says: “More than any other symbol, the mace stands for the orderly deliberative process of representative government of the people by the people and for the people. May what it stands for not perish from this earth.”

So, in the United States, there are six legislative chambers that use the mace as a symbol of their authority: the Houses of Representatives in the Congress in Virginia, South Carolina, Pennsylvania and Maryland, and in the Pennsylvania Senate. These are obviously all former

colonies of Britain, so those British traditions are more present in those states than it is in states that are not among the first 13.

One that is more unique in the United States, a symbol, is the gavel, which is of course in the United States common both to legislatures and to courtrooms to the judicial branch. But gavels are another symbol of authority. The presiding officer taps the gavel or bangs the gavel when the legislature convenes and when it adjourns. They're also likely to tap the gavel to announce passage of a bill or completion of an item of business.

They also use them sometimes quite dramatically for restoring or demanding order among the members. I've been present at a couple of legislatures where the presiding officer got so mad, he or she broke the gavel in the process of trying to bring the members to order.

And then we also have a tradition in the United States called passing the gavel, which is a symbolic way of transferring authority from one person to another. That happens not just in legislatures, but in associations and clubs. So the gavel is an important symbol as well.

Interestingly though, there is one instance of British Parliamentary practice copying the United States. There was a legislative building in the City of Charleston, South Carolina in the 1750s when South Carolina was a colony of Britain. And that legislative building, which today is the Charleston County Courthouse because they moved the capitol to Columbia in 1796, but the design of that building then became the standard design for parliamentary buildings in the British Commonwealth.

Some of the features of that building that were copied widely—first of all, its location in the middle of town in an urban center using a neoclassical design, placing the legislature on the second floor and therefore making it the principal floor of the capitol building; having offices and chambers for both the governor and the legislature; and then placement of the presiding officer in either legislative chamber, the House and the Senate, on a throne-like, raised-up platform with a grand chair on it. So all of these features came to be standard throughout the British Commonwealth when England rebuilt its capitol in the 1850s; this became the model.

Gene: As you know, I'm a former employee of the Missouri House of Representatives and I know several capitols commissioned artwork for these buildings throughout history. In Missouri we have the Thomas Hart Benton mural that is in the House lounge there in the capitol in Jefferson City. Can you talk about some of the other prestigious artworks in capitols across the country that people should know about?

Karl: Well, there's danger in that one, Gene. Every capitol has significant artwork and everybody is very proud of their artwork, so it's hard to pick out one over another. One of the first lessons I learned as an NCSL staffer years ago was: When they ask you what your favorite capitol is, what your favorite capitol art is, the best answer is the building in which I'm standing when you ask me the question, because everybody loves their own capitol.

Gene: Exactly.

Karl: But yeah, there are some especially interesting places. The New Mexico capitol in Santa Fe constantly is displaying art by New Mexico artists and they rotate them through. In fact, they

created a capitol art foundation in order to provide funding for what is in effect a lovely art museum in the state capitol.

There's one artist that I know of who has his art in three different capitol buildings. This is a guy named Allen Tupper True who was a muralist, especially of Western scenes, so all the capitols are in the West or the semi-West. Your state of Missouri, Gene, and Wyoming and Colorado, all have really striking murals by Allen Tupper True.

If you define art broadly, there are wonderful animal symbols. One of my favorites was a stuffed bison in the hallways of the Wyoming capitol, which I thought really captured the spirit of that state. Unfortunately, I've been told that they're in the process now of remodeling the capitol and the bison is going to find a new home outside the capitol. So I'll be disappointed next time I go to Cheyenne. And lots of capitols have dioramas of their animals and birds and so on that are particular to their state.

In Massachusetts in the House of Representatives, they have what they call the sacred cod, which is an enormous cod that hangs from the ceiling over the House of Representatives, and represents the importance of the fishing industry in Massachusetts. The tradition of the sacred cod goes back to the late 18th century.

All 50 state capitols have a replica of the Liberty Bell from Philadelphia in the capitol or on the capitol grounds. That came about because in 1950 the U.S. Treasury Department cast 55 replicas of the Liberty Bell and sent them to each one of the states and the territories. This was part of a savings bond drive called Save Your Independence. If you go to a website, just google Liberty Bell Museum; you'll find a table that shows the location of the bell in each one of the states.

Gene: Having been to all U.S. capitols and quite a few foreign ones in your democracy work, is there any advice that you can give to people? I know there are a number of people across the country who love to visit state capitols. Is there some advice that you can give people on what they should be looking for when they enter one of these buildings?

Karl: Well, whenever I approach a capitol building for the first time, I always make it a point to try to enter the building from the place that the architect or architects intended that we visit it, and usually that means a fairly grand outdoor staircase. Today due to security concerns or whatever, it no longer may be the main entrance, but I always try to enter the building the way that the architect wanted me to in the first place.

I would definitely recommend ... every capitol offers some kind of tour of the capitol, of its art and architecture, and hopefully telling you a good deal about the legislative process in those states. So look up in advance before you go to a capitol when those tours are and, if necessary, sign up in advance.

And if you're lucky enough to be there when the legislature is in session, I love to just sit in the gallery of the legislature and soak up the atmosphere. I know I'm an oddball legislative geek, but I can sit for an hour or two in the gallery trying to understand what's going on and learning about the traditions and styles of different legislatures.

Gene: So Karl, we've talked about quite a few things here today. Any final thoughts, anything I haven't asked you that you feel should be shared?

Karl: Thanks for the opportunity to share my passion for capitols with you. One thing I forgot to add in the introduction is that I'm pleased to recently have been appointed by Governor John Hickenlooper to be a member of the State Capitol Building Advisory Committee for the State of Colorado.

Gene: Congratulations.

Karl: I get to continue my passion for these symbols of American democracy.

Gene: That's fantastic. We've been talking with Karl Kurtz who is a principle with Legis Matters. Karl, thank you for sharing your expertise with us today.

Karl: Thanks Gene.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of "Our American States." Please go to your favorite platform and give us a review and a rating. This will help us grow and reach more of your colleagues. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, this is Gene Rose. Thanks for listening.