

A Tale of Two Village Seals

By Raymond Geselbracht

On April 19, 1898, thirty-three people went into Edward Stiles' grocery store on Pondfield Road, just west of the railroad tracks, to vote on a measure proposing that Bronxville be incorporated as a village. The measure passed—twenty-five voting “yes,” and eight voting “no.” Bronxville's request for incorporation was filed with the New York Secretary of State's office on May 9, and was quickly approved. A president and two trustees were elected on May 19 to set up Bronxville's government.

The president and trustees met together for the first time as Bronxville's Board of Trustees on the day they were elected. The board had many things to do to get the village started. One of them—not the most important thing, and not taken up by the board until the last moments of its second meeting—was to decide on a design for the village seal. Trustee William W. Kent, an architect who had designed several houses in Bronxville, including his own house in Lawrence Park, was authorized by the Board of Trustees at their June 2 meeting to “procure a seal” for Bronxville.

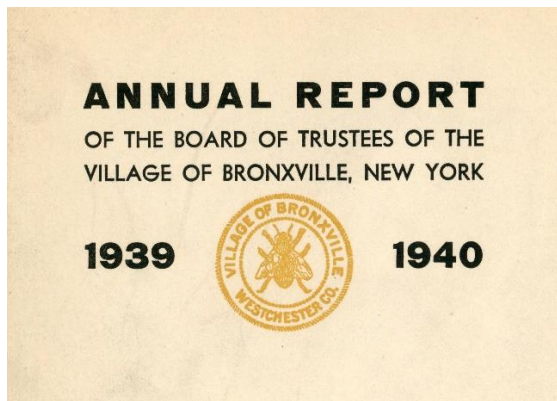
Kent got together with his friend and Lawrence Park neighbor, the prominent artist Will Low, to talk over the question of what the seal of the new village should look like. There's no contemporary record of their conversation, only an account in the *Bronxville Press* written in 1929. Will Low was still alive at this time, and he was very likely the reporter's source, directly or indirectly. Kent and Low, according to this account, felt the design of the seal should be drawn from something distinctive in the area's history, but they couldn't think of anything, and, as the *Press* reported, they concluded “that there was no outstanding factor in the past history of the Village which could be used as a basis for the design of the seal.”

Kent suggested that, since there was nothing better at hand, the design for the seal should be based on the “B” in Bronxville. Low agreed, and the two men—assisted by another Lawrence Park artist, Lorenzo Hatch, who made an engraving of the seal's design—created a village seal featuring at its center a bee.

Purchase of Village Seal
Mr Kent reports purchase of Seal for the Village Costing Five (\$5) Dollars to be sent to Mr. F R Chambers who will pay for it & deliver to the Clerk.

William W. Kent reported to the Board of Trustees on June 16, 1898 that the village seal had been ordered and cost \$5. Minutes of the Meetings of the Board of Trustees, the Village of Bronxville.

The minutes of the meeting of the Board of Trustees on June 16 record that Trustee Kent reported the purchase of the new village seal for \$5. The acting secretary was ordered by the board to pay the bill, and to see that the seal was delivered to the village clerk, who would keep custody of it. It's not clear exactly what form this seal was in; it may have been a hand press which would emboss the seal on paper.



*Bronxville's first village seal, on the cover of a report and, in bronze, on a plaque probably mounted in the old Village Hall in June 1906.
Both images from the Bronxville History Center.*

The bee seal was the Village of Bronxville's official seal from 1898 to 1942. It survives in printed and embossed forms in village records and publications, and one version in bronze also survives, on a plaque memorializing the donation in 1906 of the first Village Hall by village fathers Frank Ross Chambers and William Van Duzer Lawrence.

Now skip forward about forty years. Bronxville has been transformed from a small settlement in the midst of orchards, fields and forest into a mature suburban village; and the Village of Bronxville, the government of the village, has left its first village hall and is soon to move into a new village hall in the new civic center that was forming at the intersection of Pondfield Road and Midland Avenue. The village had greatly changed, and something else was about to change too.



Harrison Wright (on the right), a self-taught authority on heraldry, promoted his design for a new Bronxville village seal to his friend, the mayor of Bronxville, Frederick Devereux. Both images from the Bronxville History Center.

In September 1941, Bronxville's mayor, Frederick L. Devereux, received a letter from Harrison Wright, who until recently had been his assistant and was active with him in village civic organizations. The new village hall was at this time almost completed, and Wright thought a village flag should fly in front of it. Bronxville had never had its own flag. "Don't you think that there should be a Village Flag to be flown daily or on State Occasions?" he asked the mayor. But something would have to change to make the flag possible. Wright thought a village flag would have to feature the village seal, and the old village seal with the bee in the center was in his view unsuited for such a use. "A Flag with the present Bee of the seal on it," he wrote, "would scarcely be commensurate with the beauty of the new building nor would it reflect the pride and position of the Village." The bee seal would have to go.

Wright enclosed with his letter drawings of a new seal that he believed should replace the old one. He was a self-taught authority on heraldry, and the design he proposed to Devereux was based on the arms, the heraldic symbols, of Jonas Bronck, an early settler of New Netherland who had a large tract of land in what is today the South Bronx. The river which ran along the eastern edge of Bronck's land came to be called, after him, the Bronx River, which in about 1850 gave its name to Bronxville. Wright's design for the new seal incorporated two devices from the shield in Bronck's arms—a chevron containing a broken arrow, which Wright said represented the conquering of the Indians, and a setting sun over rippling water, representing Bronck's journey west to America. The design also took from Bronck's arms the Latin motto, quoting a passage from Virgil's *Aeneid*, "ne cede malis," which Wright translated to "Yield not to evil."

Devereux liked Wright's design, and the Board of Trustees approved its adoption as the new village seal at its meeting on May 18, 1942. The resolution adopting the new design also provided "that the seal of the Village of Bronxville as authorized in the resolution of the Board of Trustees at a meeting held on June 2nd, 1898 be discontinued...." The changeover was complete, the old bee seal was gone, and the new village seal remains in use today.



The seal of the Village of Bronxville, 1942 to the present.

Bronxville also got the village flag which had been at least partly responsible for the push for a new village seal. It featured the new seal at the center, on a dark blue field. The flag was apparently used from time to time, because it became badly frayed and had to be boxed up and put in storage. Many years went by, and people forgot Bronxville had ever had a flag. In 1972 or early 1973, on the eve of Bronxville's 75th anniversary, the Junior League, thinking they wanted to give the village its first flag, decided to donate one as an anniversary gift. Then the village historian, Jean Bartlett, came across the original flag, from 1942, when she was doing research into the village seal. The Junior League went ahead with its gift anyway, even though its flag would only be a replacement.

The flag was presented to Mayor C. Paul Slater on October 20, 1973. A league official said she hoped the league would frame the remains of the old flag and hang them in the trustees' board room. This wish apparently did not come true, because the old flag is not today hanging in the board room, nor can its remains be located. The new flag, or rather part of it—the central part, showing the village seal and some blue backing—has been framed, though, and it's hanging in a hallway in Village Hall.

This tale of two village seals gives villagers something to think about today. Which seal better represents their village? On the one hand there is the bee seal; on the other hand there is the heraldry-based seal. The bee seal doesn't speak to us through a motto or allegorical imagery, so we must just look at the bee's simple being. One can see its plump bee body, its many legs and gossamer wings. It is simply a bee whose attachment to Bronxville is partly based on a shared "B". The heraldry seal is perhaps intellectually more satisfying. It has an interesting historic backstory, it features an

impressive Latin motto, and its eagle, perched on top on a heraldic shield, suggests patriotism. Aspects of this seal are problematic, though. The broken arrows are certainly so, and the Latin motto probably seems pretentious to many people today, or maybe just meaningless.



Harrison Wright's mockup of the version of the Village Seal that would be used for Bronxville Public Library bookplates, 1942.