



## The Northwestern University seal . . . “It sure looks like Greek to me”

By Patrick Quinn, University Archivist  
Reprinted from the *Northwestern Memo*, March, 1980, p. 4

Adorning a myriad of University related or generated items ranging from beer mugs and window decals to letterheads and diplomas is the official University seal.

This logo, considered by students and faculty at many other American colleges and universities to be one of the most aesthetically pleasing of its kind, is quite familiar to most members of the Northwestern University community, yet few are aware of either its genesis or its meaning. Even those who can readily visualize it concede that its origins have been obscured in the haze of antiquity.

As we enter the 1980s, it seems especially appropriate that we rescue the story of how the seal was initially designed from an altogether undeserving oblivion.

On June 26, 1856, only six years after Northwestern was founded and as its first year of holding classes had just come to a close, the University's Board of Trustees adopted a design for a corporate seal that would be affixed to official University documents.

This first seal closely resembled an incomplete version of the present one; it consisted of “an open book with rays of light surrounding,” enclosed by the words “Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.” This motif, similar to the University of Wisconsin's well-known logo *Numen Lumen* (new light), quite obviously suggested the illuminating influence of the impartation of knowledge.

In this form the seal remained in use for the next 34 years until 1890. On June 17 of that year, the Board of Trustees adopted as the official University motto the Latin phrase, “Quaecumque Sunt Vera” or in English “Whatsoever Things Are True,” which was derived from the New Testament Epistle of St. Paul to the Philippians, Chapter 4,

Verse 8, in which Paul admonished his Christian followers in the Greek (Macedonian) city of Philippi: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

Following the board's adoption of the key words of Paul's summary of the exemplary ethical and moral values as the University's guiding motto, Daniel Bonbright, professor of Latin since 1856 who had also served as acting president, was assigned by the board to infuse the official seal with a more meaningful content by incorporating the motto in its design. Bonbright also decided to inscribe in Greek upon the pages of the seal's open book the words “ὁ λόγος πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας” (“ho logos pleres charitos kai aletheias” (“The Word . . .full of grace and truth”) from the Gospel of St. John, Chapter 1, Verse 14: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, and the glory was of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

In addition, Bonbright removed the words “Evanston, Illinois” from the seal and added the date 1851, which denoted the year that Northwestern received its charter from the Illinois legislature.

Bonbright's revised design was approved by the board on December 5, 1890, and became effective on New Year's Day of 1891. For the ensuing 89 years it has served faithfully as the graphic symbol of Northwestern's commitment to the educational, ethical and moral values embodied in its design.