

The Eagle Cockade



In the closing years of the eighteenth century, the young United States faced the challenge of transforming its small and often irregular military forces into a more professional national army. During the Quasi-War with France (1798-1800), federal leaders recognized that the Army needed clearer organization, including standardized uniforms and insignia to distinguish rank and authority.

In 1798, President George Washington, who had returned to public service as Commander in Chief of the provisional army, worked closely with Major Generals Alexander Hamilton and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney to bring greater order to the Army's appearance and equipment. One important part of this effort was the establishment of recognizable insignia for commissioned officers—symbols that would convey authority and reinforce discipline within the ranks.

Drawing inspiration from long-standing British military traditions, Washington proposed that American officers wear a black cockade on their hats as a mark of commission. But rather than adopting European symbols of monarchy, Washington recommended adding a uniquely American emblem: a silver bald eagle, representing the new republic and its independence.

The bald eagle had already become a powerful national symbol after its adoption on the Great Seal of the United States in 1782, and placing the eagle on an officer's cockade signaled both rank and patriotic identity. It reflected the Army's transition from a revolutionary force to a professional military serving a sovereign nation.

To bring this idea into practice, Secretary of War James McHenry acted on Washington's recommendation. In January 1799, McHenry ordered five silver eagle insignia specifically for Washington. These early devices were likely intended for use by the highest-ranking officers and may represent some of the earliest physical examples of the eagle symbol being incorporated into United States Army uniform insignia.

Although Army insignia would continue to evolve in the decades that followed, Washington's proposal helped establish a tradition that endures today. The eagle remains one of the most recognizable symbols in American military heraldry—appearing on rank insignia, buttons, and emblems across the U.S. armed forces.

From a simple silver device worn on a cockade, the eagle became a lasting symbol of authority, service, and the identity of the United States Army.