South Carolina's MACE and its Heritage
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South Carolina's MACE and its Heritage

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At the State House in Columbia just before each daily session of South Carolina's House of Representatives, the Sergeant at Arms, or his assistant, dressed in a black suit and tie and wearing white gloves, removes the great golden ceremonial Mace from its glass-front vault near the Speaker's chair and places it in a special rack at the front of the podium. Since the mid-eighteenth century this gleaming object has occupied a place of honor during sessions of successive legislative assemblies, of which it is the traditional symbol of authority. On occasions when the House is invited by the Senate to ratify legislative acts, the Sergeant at Arms solemnly bears the Mace before the Speaker and the Clerk of the House in procession across the State House rotunda to the Senate Chamber. There legislation is signed by the Speaker, the President of the Senate, and the Clerks of the two houses. During these proceedings, the Mace rests in a holder on the Senate rostrum directly below the Sword of State, which symbolizes the Senate's authority. Whenever the Mace is carried in procession all eyes are turned to this resplendent example of the goldsmith's art. South Carolina's is the oldest legislative mace in use in the United States. By its use of this ceremonial object the Palmetto State shares a tradition followed in many countries of the globe, one that extends back in time to the European Middle Ages and beyond, to classical Antiquity.

In 1753 construction began on South Carolina's first State House, at the corner of Broad and Meeting Streets in Charlestown, on the site of the present Charleston County Court House. Three years later the Governor, his Council and the Commons House of Assembly occupied the still unfinished edifice. On March 8, 1756, the Assembly appointed a committee "to provide Furniture for the
Rooms to be appropriated for the use of this House in the State-House, to send for a Mace, Robes for the Speaker, and a Gown for the Clerk.”

In England for centuries maces—also called staves—had been carried in procession and placed before the Speaker of the House of Commons and the Lord Chancellor, as the presiding officer of the House of Lords is known. During the eighteenth century the legislative assemblies of many British colonies were acquiring such symbols of authority modelled on those of Parliament in London.

South Carolina’s Mace was made in 1756 by the London goldsmith Magdalen Feline. It is approximately 48 inches in length, weighing about 10 3/4 lbs., fashioned of silver with gold burnishing. It cost 90 guineas. Its form and general look follow the pattern of the so-called Maundy Mace of the British House of Commons, originally made in 1649 for Oliver Cromwell’s Commonwealth government, and later embellished with royal insignia. The South Carolina Mace is sceptre-like in appearance, topped by a symbolic royal diadem modelled on the Crown of St. Edward, with which English monarchs are crowned. On the circlet of the crown are four *fleurs-de-lys* alternating with four crosses. The crosses support two arches, and where they intersect is a cross-topped globe. The crown is adorned with *repoussé* representations of jewels, although the Mace contains no actual gems.

Around the cylindrical head below the crown are four circular decorative panels—which appear oval to the viewer, on account of their curved surfaces—with cherubs and floral designs in the spaces between them. These are, in effect, two pair of emblems. The first and third panels depict the obverse (front) and reverse (back) of King George II’s great seal deputed for South Carolina. On
Panel 1 (obverse) stands the King in coronation robes, with crown, orb and sceptre, receiving a curtsy from a woman who symbolizes the Province. She is barefoot and wears a loose gown recalling feminine garb of the ancient Greco-Roman world. Upon her head sits a symbolic crown in the form of the turreted walls of a town: a device borrowed from province personifications on ancient Roman coins. The lady's left breast is bare, in the manner of the Amazons of mythology. On a ribbon beneath is the province's motto, taken from Virgil's *Aeneid*: PROPIUS RES ADSPIE NOSTRAS (Look more closely upon our affairs).

Panel 2 (seal reverse) has the royal arms of King George II. A lion and a unicorn support the great shield crowded with heraldic charges for His Britannic Majesty's realms. These are arranged in four grand quarters:

1. (upper left) Great Britain, with three lions (England) and a single lion rampant (Scotland);
2. (upper right) France—still claimed by the Hanoverians—with three *fleurs-de-lys*;
3. (lower left) the harp of Ireland; and
4. (lower right) the German possessions, with a pair of lions (Brunswick), a lion rampant on a field strewn with hearts (Luneburg), a galloping horse (Hanover), and a tiny shield with a picture of the imperial Crown of Charlemagne (signifying the King's office of Arch Treasurer of the Holy Roman Empire).

The great shield is encircled by the Order of the Garter. Above is the royal crown. On a ribbon below the shield runs the royal motto, DIEU ET MON DROIT (God and my right).
The two remaining panels of the mace-head symbolize agriculture and trade, the province's chief sources of wealth. Panel 3 shows a farmer at his plow. A house and church steeple are visible in the distance, while a graceful tree—perhaps an oak—completes the design. In the final panel 4, a woman sits on a wharf before a crenellated tower, surrounded by bales, chests and an anchor. In her right hand she holds a full-rigged ship; in her left, what may be a jar or coin purse. Visible on the shore beyond are a church and the buildings of a town. The allegory of commerce suggests Charlestown, the colony's chief port. The motif of the woman holding a ship is very old and may have come from any of three traditional images: Isis, ancient Egyptian goddess of the Nile and patron of navigators, who was sometimes shown holding a ship and a jar of Nile water; the Roman goddess Fortuna (Luck), depicted with a ship and a coin purse; and the Renaissance allegory of Confidence, whose vessel signified that mariners must possess this quality when venturing on dangerous seas. It is likely that this picture on the Mace was an inspiration for the design of Charleston's municipal seal, adopted around 1783 and also featuring a seated lady by a harbor. On the flat circular top plate of the mace-head directly beneath the crown is embossed another picture of the royal arms.

Below the mace-head are four fanciful brackets composed of wood sprites, fantastic masks and floral curlicues. These resemble brackets on other English maces of the time. The shaft is incised with a swirling pattern and provided with three nodes—the better to carry it—and has a large finial decoration at the bottom. The Mace was always a spectacular piece of jewelry; in the eighteenth century it was carried in processions—sometimes through the streets of Charlestown—and was placed in front of the Speaker during sessions of the Assembly.
The woman who made the Mace, Magdalen Feline, was a member of the centuries-old London guild of goldsmiths. At Goldsmiths’ Hall on May 15, 1753, she first registered her maker’s mark as a largeworker (a specialist in large pieces such as candlesticks, bowls, etc.). Her hallmark
consisted of her initials “MF” within a lozenge (ο), this being the traditional mark of a woman in her profession. Her establishment was located in Covent Garden. Magdalen Feline is thought to have been the widow of the prominent Huguenot goldsmith Edward Feline. Often a woman who had been married to a goldsmith for over seven years—the ordinary length of an apprenticeship—took over the family business upon her husband’s death or disability, since she was deemed to have served a kind of apprenticeship. She might actually work on pieces produced in her shop, or have other artisans do the work, but her mark appeared on all wares, as she was the owner of the business.

Four other Magdalen Feline maces are known to exist in England. In 1753–54 she made a pair of identical ones for the Borough of Bridgnorth in Shropshire. These are three feet in length with silver shafts and silver-gilt heads. Each is topped by a crown, and the heads are decorated with foliage and flowers and two circular panels containing, on one side, a crowned rose and, on the other, a castle and portcullis side by side. The Bridgnorth mace-heads can be unscrewed for use as loving cups. In 1761 the Duke of Bedford commissioned from her another identical pair of maces for the Borough of Okehampton in Devon. These, too, are about three feet long, with crowns and, around their heads, representations of the coats of arms of King George III, the Duke, and the borough. Magdalen Feline’s mark appears on many other eighteenth-century pieces. She is believed to have died in 1796, after having handed over the business to her son, Edward Feline II.

Since its arrival in South Carolina, the legislative Mace has enjoyed a colorful history. During the American Revolution, British Loyalists offered to sell it to the House of Assembly of the Bahamas, but no such sale took place. In
1789 the House of Representatives decided to alter its design—possibly to add republican symbols—but apparently no changes were made. The Mace was then deposited by Thomas Pinckney in the Bank of the United States in Philadelphia, and for years its whereabouts was known only to a few persons. But in 1819 Langdon Cheves returned it to South Carolina, where it was deposited with the Secretary of State. In the 1880’s, Speaker of the House James Simons, Jr. revived its ceremonial use. In 1971 a thief made off with the Mace, but it was recovered in Florida by law enforcement authorities within a few weeks. In 1978, the House of Representatives adopted a seal for its own use featuring “the Seal of the State, with the Mace superimposed across the front at an angle of about eighty degrees, with the top to the left and bottom to the right, and with the words, ‘House of Representatives’ and ‘South Carolina’ separated by stars . . .” In 1989 a splendid mahogany plaque depicting the House seal, hand-carved by Columbia cabinetmaker Michael Craig, was mounted on the front of the Speaker’s podium. Pictures of this seal with the Mace appear on many House publications. The great carpet in the State House rotunda is decorated with pictures of the House Mace and the Senate Sword of State crossed.

Modern ceremonial maces as emblems of authority borne before high government, academic and church officials are descended from medieval weapons and regal sceptres, from ancient Roman fasces, or lictors’ axes, and ultimately from simple clubs. In the Middle Ages the battle-mace was a popular weapon and was also used as a baton of command. The Bayeux Tapestry depicts William the Conqueror’s brother, Bishop Odo of Bayeux, wielding one at the Battle of Hastings. Over several centuries the battle-mace as an actual weapon fell into disuse and became
more of an ornate, decorative object, although it continued as a staff of command, and from it is also descended the modern field marshal’s baton. At some point in the fourteenth century the idea of the battle-mace was combined with that of the royal sceptre, and the ceremonial mace was born.

Maces were carried in processions before high officials of many countries as symbols of power. In England maces became important emblems of Parliament, the City of London and other cities and boroughs, where they have been used until the present day. Britain’s overseas colonies, such as Jamaica, Grenada, North Carolina, and Virginia, acquired maces modelled on those of England. The elegant civic maces of Williamsburg (1749–50) and Norfolk (1753), Virginia, are still preserved. Maces of British seaport towns and admiralty courts were often made in the shape of oars. New York City and Boston, Massachusetts, both have silver oar maces made around 1725 by colonial silversmiths; they now reside in museums in those cities. The legislatures of Maryland and Virginia use maces. In 1974 Virginia’s House of Delegates acquired a mace of English origin in Edwardian style and decorated with the royal arms. When the House of Delegates is in session, the mace is carried by a sergeant at arms and rests on a platform in front of the Speaker’s desk. The U.S. House of Representatives also uses a mace. This object is 46 inches long, in the form of a bundle of thirteen ebony rods bound by silver bands and crowned by a silver eagle perched on a globe. This mace stands on a pedestal to the right (viewer’s left) of the Speaker’s chair during all sessions of the House.

Parliamentary maces are in regular use today in many countries which are or were formerly part of the Commonwealth of Nations. The Canadian House of Commons and
Senate use maces, as do Canada’s provincial parliaments. The practice is the same in Australia’s Federal Parliament and the Australian state legislatures. After South Africa left the Commonwealth its Parliament acquired a solid gold mace, thought to be the only one in the world, adorned with national and provincial heraldic insignia. In its design the parliamentary mace of the Republic of Ghana recalls the staffs of African kings and is topped by a great eagle of gold. Bophuthatswana’s mace is crowned by a leopard representing order and authority.

In Europe the country of Switzerland has its own strong tradition of maces. Today each Swiss canton has a mace, or sceptre, which is a powerful emblem of its sovereignty. A bailiff carries it in processions of officials of the cantonal government, and it is prominently displayed at meetings of the sovereign assemblies of the people, where laws are enacted. Swiss maces do not have crowns; instead, their heads and shafts are richly decorated with heraldic and other insignia. St. Gallen’s sceptre is topped by a fasces, or lictor’s axe, a picture of which adorns the cantonal shield of arms. Crowning the stave of Schwyz is an equestrian statuette of the canton’s patron saint, Martin of Tours, in the act of cutting off part of his cloak to clothe a beggar. The shaft of Jura’s mace is decorated with enamelled heraldic shields, while on top a silver rearing horse supports the canton’s coat of arms. Maces are occasionally used in modern Spain. At the inauguration of King Juan Carlos I before the Spanish Parliament in 1975, heralds carried gilded maces decorated with traditional heraldic emblems: castles of Castile and lions of León.

Since the late Middle Ages ceremonial maces have been important symbols of universities and colleges. The tradition originated in Europe, where staves were carried before
university rectors as symbols of their dignity and authority. Today most European universities have maces, some dating back to medieval times, and the custom is followed by institutions of higher learning around the world, including those of the Palmetto State. In American colleges and universities, typically a senior professor carries the mace at the head of an academic procession on occasions such as a commencement ceremony, the installation of a new president, or a special convocation.

The University of South Carolina's mace, made in 1967, is of silver-gilt and 46½ inches in length. Its shaft is decorated with stars and yellow jessamine blossoms. The head is adorned with gilt seals of the University, the State, and the United States. Crowning all is a stylized palmetto tree composed of thirteen five-pointed stars. The mace is inscribed with the University's device, "Faithful Index to the Ambitions and Fortunes of the State."

Clemson University's mace is club-like in shape, carved from walnut taken from one of the institution's oldest buildings. The head is of silver with the University's seal set in gold, and with insets of carnelians and amethysts—amethyst being the state stone—which manifest the school colors.

The College of Charleston uses a mace in the shape of an Ionic column topped by a great acorn surrounded by leaves. Carved from walnut, this stave was introduced in 1966.

Furman University's mace is also of walnut, 3½ feet long and topped by a silver crown of stylized leaves. Around the mace-head are silver roundels decorated with the seal of the University, the seal of Greenville Women's College and the coat of arms of the Furman family, and a wooden
roundel bearing the date “1961,” when the original Men’s Campus and Greenville Women’s College joined to form the present institution.

Charleston Southern University also has a mace of wood, the head of which is decorated with carved wooden crosses and metal replicas of the University seal featuring a cross, an open book and an ancient scholar’s oil lamp. A rounded dome at the top completes the design.

Erskine College’s mace is of dark red mahogany crowned by a silver-colored Celtic cross. The head is inset with oval silver plaques inscribed with the College seal, the seal of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and likenesses of Ebenezer Erskine, founder of the Associate Presbytery, and the College’s founder, Ebenezer Erskine Pressly.

Carved from cherry wood, the Winthrop University mace is 45 inches long and weighs about five pounds. Its head is a stylized “flame of knowledge,” below which are four panels decorated with sculpted representations of the University seal, the great seal of South Carolina, the Winthrop coat of arms and the date of the University’s founding, 1886. Insets of garnet and gold glass near the top display the school colors.

The Citadel’s mace is officially described as a “wooden shaft ending in a brass finial and capped by a brass and light-blue-and-white enamelled crest. The crest, inspired by the hat insignia of the South Carolina Corps of Cadets, consists of the seal and motto of South Carolina surmounted by the fronds of a palmetto tree.”

The tradition of maces in South Carolina is rich, varied and very much alive in modern times.
Suggestions for Further Reading


