



VERITAS – It’s More than a T-Shirt Logo (It’s About the Third Book)

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Anyone who walks around university towns will find many people wearing a T-shirt or a sweatshirt, bearing the name of the university, its logo, motto and/or mascot. The most popular version at Harvard includes the shield featuring the word *VE RI TAS* spread across three books, in addition to “Harvard.” Through the Harvard brand’s fame and reputation, many people outside of the Harvard community immediately recognize Harvard and *Veritas*. To what extent does anyone give it more than a glance or a second thought?

Most, when asked the meaning of *Veritas* reply that it translates into *Truth*. Actually, there is a much deeper meaning. Its meaning, its significance, represent the values and core principles that have guided Harvard to excellence in higher education over four centuries. Today, especially, why or even does this matter? Does the full history behind our logo give us reason to rededicate ourselves to the fuller meaning behind its higher principles?

VE RI TAS

The Latin word spread across the three books on the shield, “*VE RI TAS*”, has been the motto of Harvard University for much of its 388-year history. *Veritas* is found all over the Harvard Campus in stone, text and emblazoned on the Crests throughout Harvard University. The meaning of *Veritas* and its symbolism within the Harvard Shield, as originally defined and hand drawn by John Harvard and a group of clergy serving as Divinity instructors at Harvard, goes far beyond the simplicity of a single term ‘Truth’.

Over Harvard’s four centuries, in spite of times of great turmoil, these Harvard symbols have played an important part in providing guidance for the University...and in some measure America. They have crafted a course of excellence in the pursuit of knowledge and discovery with a key aspect of its guiding vision in navigating troubled waters being the symbolism imbedded in the first rendition of its first shield – a book turned face down, which this article examines. Doing so may help recenter our focus on Harvard’s mission and its priorities in the 21st Century and beyond..

As we all know, today, Harvard, higher education and Western society are mired by a period of great unrest and questioning... We find ourselves separated by divides on international, political, as well as academic freedom fronts. Harvard celebrates different ways to look at the challenges of humanity. How we get to ‘Truth’ is worth some historical reflection. This will bring us greater insight into the mission of Harvard and Higher Education, and provide inspiration for principles and processes to unify rather than further divide us.

The Inspiration for *Veritas: The Pursuit of Knowledge*

In the formative years of Harvard, the original motto, *VERITAS*, was derived from the phrase “*Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae*” which appears in a number of places in the New Testament. It appears that there were multiple influences whose origins are from the Scriptures but also support the decision by President Henry Dunster (1640-1654) to move the university in a secular direction, while respecting the original Calvinist origins. In particular, two passages in the Book of Psalms may have served as primary influences. Psalm 8 verse 4 is featured in John Harvard’s original handwritten conception of the Harvard Shield and the concept of *Veritas*,

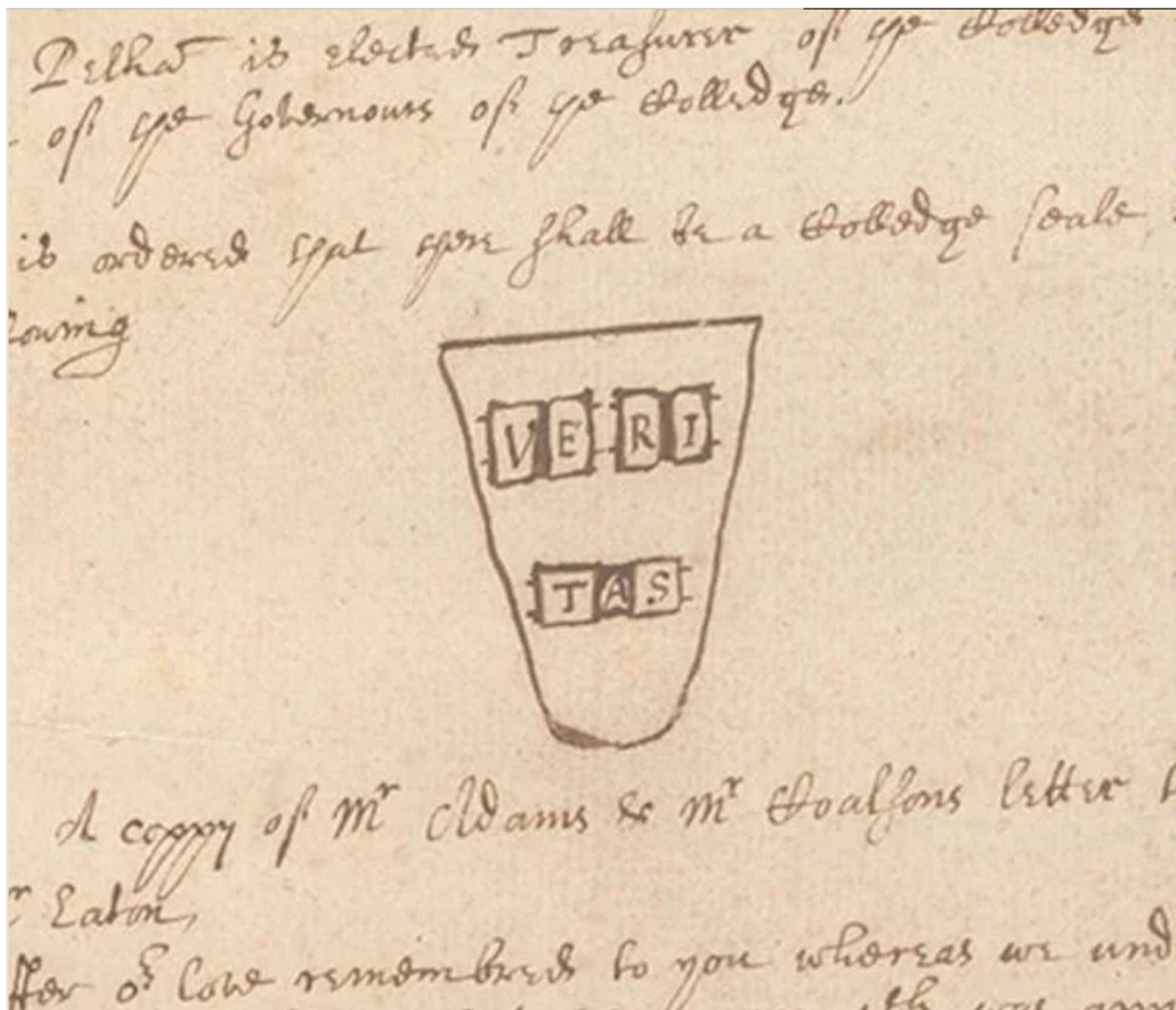
while Psalm 139 verses 6 to 10 and 14 to 16 clearly delineate the concepts of the pursuit of the infinite knowledge of the universe as the challenge to humankind and possibly the reason that humankind possesses the intellectual abilities to act as a custodian and major influence on all things that make up the Earth.

Several places in the original 5 books of the Judeo-Christian Bible including Genesis and Deuteronomy discuss these concepts. John Harvard's original inspiration, when he and his tutors created the Harvard shield on that Saturday night in 1638, came from these concepts.

Henry Dunster, Harvard's first President reviewed and modified John Harvard's concept to incorporate an emphasis on secular learning, specifically the Humanities and Sciences in the formal establishment of Harvard Colledge [sp] in 1642. It was further codified in the official Harvard Corporation Charter in 1650.

The Three Books on the Shield: The Third Book's Original Significance

Modern scholars have described the concept of *Veritas* in similar terms, including, "[*Veritas*] symbolizes the pursuit of knowledge and the commitment to truth as the ultimate goal of education. This motto reflects the ideals that have guided Harvard for centuries, fostering a dedication to intellectual exploration and academic integrity." (Eng, 2023).)



The original rendition of the Harvard Shield by John Harvard c.1638. (President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1643)

(Ireland, 2015)

(King James Bible Online, 2024)

The 1638 design of the Harvard shield represented this similar important shift in intellectual thought and scientific investigation. Harvard's logo contains three books, representing three forms of knowledge on which the motto **VE RI TAS** is spread over:

1. First Book: **VE** represents The Old Testament, (the Word of God); and,
2. Second Book: **RI** represents The New Testament. Both books, facing up, represent truths that could be found in the Judeo-Christian heritage that underpinned much of 17th Century Western philosophical thought, and;

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3. Third Book: **TAS** is face down, symbolizes that truths must be discovered, and have yet to be recorded by Man. It represented the yet unwritten truth of all knowledge, and the opportunity to *achieve Fulfillment*. Truth comes from a higher place, as spacious and deep as the Universe. Therefore, to Discover Knowledge or Truth, we must seek it out, with great curiosity. This idea is echoed in the contemporary opening line from “Star Trek”, “To Boldly Go Where No Man Has Gone Before.”

John Harvard’s vision encompassed the concepts of curiosity, scholarship, writing, and free thought/speech. Throughout much of the Dark Ages in Europe, scholarship had been suppressed by the Catholic Church. The New World proved to be an incubator for freedoms and new ideas.

Push & Pull of The Motto and Harvard’s Evolution Over the First 200 Years

Veritas, which is Latin for “truth,” was adopted as Harvard's first motto in 1642. Over the next 200 years, the motto varied between “*Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae*” and “*Veritas*” as well as with other similar mottos including *Christi Glorian* (1650), when the Harvard Corporation was chartered in 1850.

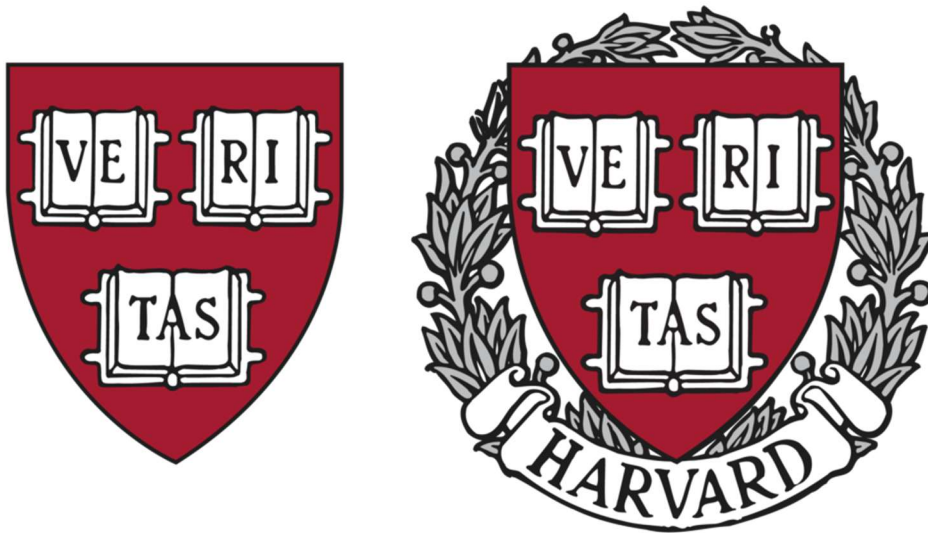
The push and pull between all of the variants of Harvard’s motto over its first 240 years represented the turbulent times during which Harvard had to resolve some significant controversies and structural decisions in order to craft what has become one of the leading and most respected universities in the world, and certainly the developer of America’s top leaders in Academia, Education, Law, Medicine, Business, Public Administration, Sciences and Humanities.

In time, *Veritas* would become the one word most closely associated with Harvard. Yet, it took an 1880 poem by writer and Professor of Medicine Oliver Wendell Holmes to revive it for good. The poem urged Harvard to “let thine earliest symbol be thy last.” A 2015 article in the Harvard Gazette, *Seal of Approval*, commented, “If ubiquity is any measure, Holmes’ poetic wish came true. *Veritas* was Harvard’s oldest idea for a motto and, after centuries of neglect, is here to stay.”

ibid, (Ireland, 2015)

The Modern Logo: The Third Book Loses Emphasis / Harvard Enters Chaotic Period

The modern version of the Harvard logo and motto was created by Josiah Quincy for the Bicentennial Celebration in 1836. Quincy, Harvard's President from 1829 to 1845, discovered the original rendition by John Harvard, as he was looking for a theme for Harvard's bicentennial celebration in 1836. He simplified the original shield to both symbolize further secularization, and simplify the logo for printing and display purposes, by changing the Third Book in the Harvard shield to **face up**, and **resize it to be equal** with the first two books. The both the significance and importance of the Third Book, were lost.



The modern Harvard Shield and Motto "*Veritas*" inspired by John Quincy.

(These appear here because these are the designs during John Quincy's term and *Veritas* reinstated as the motto in the 1880's))

Veritas Reinvigorated / Harvard Makes Great Strides Under President Eliot

Harvard regained its direction and momentum under President Charles William Eliot who served for 40 years (1869 to 1909). Eliot articulated a vision for Harvard, incorporating *Veritas* and the importance of fostering excellence in research and

the pursuit of knowledge. Many important expansions and reforms of the university were instituted included The Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS), the Graduate School, Radcliffe College and Harvard Business School, his most notable achievement.” (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2024)

Under Eliot, the concept of *Veritas*, including the pursuit of knowledge, was energized through his most influential reform – the development of a system of “spontaneous diversity of choice” in which undergraduates selected most of their own courses, rather than having to follow a rigidly prescribed curriculum.

THE Original VERITAS Logo Has Endured

While Harvard has officially employed the Quincy version consistently since 1836, around Harvard, numerous examples of the original VERITAS logo, with the third book facing down remain on various buildings and landmarks. Among the most prominent examples:



A Veritas shield on the John Harvard Statue follows the original 1643 design for the three books: two open and one turned over

Source: *ibid* (Ireland, 2015)

There are many other examples around campus of the original portrayal of the Upside Down Third Book.

Even through some of the most challenging times in Harvard's nearly 400-year history, the constancy of the original *Veritas* logo gives comfort that the concepts underpinning it are sound.

It also validates that the search for truth will likely remain a perpetual unfinished canvas. Harvard's founding vision accepted that there would always be much to learn.

What seems to echo through the ages, however, is that Harvard advances most when the ***Third Book of Knowledge*** is appreciated for its infinite depth and scope, requiring that curiosity to explore and question open and independently. This requires an examination of the Guiding Principles of *Veritas*. **The Guiding Principles: Humility, Dignity, Character and Ability**

The original concepts around *Veritas*, often arising out of humanist philosophical teachings of the 16th and 17th centuries, reflected notions about behaviors actually defined and championed in many religions, and not just those of Judeo-Christian texts. The first of these principles is the concept of **Humility**, a recognition that we individually, and sometimes collectively, do not know a singular, definitive 'truth' and that truth may change over time as more scientific or philosophical knowledge is pieced together. The second attribute is the recognition of the **Dignity** of individuals – every individual – an inherent respect for others, their views and beliefs, and an acceptance that another's views may have as much worth as one's own. The third, **Character** of the Individual Protagonist, is found in countless passages and lessons about admired people. That concept is often expanded to incorporate Morals, Ethics, Honesty and Trust.

Finally, Harvard and most leading universities value, recognize, attract and develop **Ability** amongst their students, faculty and employees. For Harvard to remain the premier university in the United States, it must continue its historical legacy of influencing and creating some of the best leaders across many parts of society. Its push into Interdisciplinary Studies, where some of the greatest scientific and research breakthroughs are occurring in the 21st Century.

The meaning and significance of the Third Book, underscores the humility in recognizing that humans will always strive toward understanding the ‘real truth’. The process of achieving greater understanding of “truth” through research, Socratic dialogue, and the open exchange of ideas will remain continuous and endless.

The concept of the Third Book, with the “Third Book” face down in the original depiction, can and should inspire students, faculty, and staff to approach challenges and controversies with intellectual honesty, critical thinking, a commitment to unbiased inquiry and open debate. It cultivates a vibrant intellectual community where diverse perspectives are welcomed and sincere dialogue thrives. *Ibid* (Eng, 2023).

As Harvard moves towards its Quadricentenary in 2036 and finds itself managing future challenges sure to come, it serves as a good moment, as it has throughout Harvard’s history, to reconsider once again the mission of Harvard and of Higher Education.

This perspective will enable Harvard to chart a new course through the challenges facing it as it enters its fifth century and continues on its mission of achieving a higher state of Enlightenment, and serve as a leader of Higher Education through the Discovery of Infinite Knowledge and Academic Excellence. Ireland in “Seal of Approval” (*ibid.*) noted that “In 1836, New England historian Robert C. Winthrop offered a whimsical explanation: that the closed book encouraged Harvard men to be “careful to look at both sides” of any question.”

The willingness to openly explore, discuss and debate all sides of any question is necessary for ideas including Free Speech, Tolerance and Pluralism to thrive. Due consideration should thus be given to modify the current, “simplified” logo to revive the concept of the mysterious Third Book.

Embracing the mysterious and infinitely deep “Third Book” will define the bedrock of open inquiry. If the fulfillment of those efforts is combined with an equal emphasis on core principles of Humility, Dignity, Character, and Ability, then

Harvard will achieve security and resilience in the coming century and beyond, and push the boundaries of the known to discover the unknown for the betterment of humankind. In the process, Harvard may once again lead America and the World to appreciate and embrace the value of seeking knowledge or “truths” that will serve to unite rather than to further divide – a pluralism that has drawn many to our great nation, and aspire to our beloved, excellent institution of higher learning, Harvard University.

Notes:

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The two authors, Philip Hart Cullom MBA '88 and Warren C Nagler MBA '88, are both members of the HBS MBA 1988 class who came from and pursued very different paths after Harvard. Warren was an entrepreneur before coming to Harvard and has pursued a very diverse business career as a senior executive in Finance & Operations, serving in multiple CFO positions in Consumer Products, Technology & Financial Services, COO in both Consumer Products & Financial Services, and a Management Consultant to Fortune 500 firms. Warren has served as

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an MBA Alumni Class Secretary since 2010. Phil was a career Naval Officer & Nuclear Engineer, rising to Deputy Chief of Naval Operations while leading Task Forces on Energy & Innovation as a Vice Admiral in the Navy. Phil recently completed his term as a Member of the Harvard University Board of Overseers and delivered the keynote address at the Harvard ROTC Commissioning Ceremony 2024.

The tragedy of October 7th and the challenges of 2024 on the Harvard campus brought them together again to discuss ways to bring the very diverse groups of Harvard Affiliates together in a positive way. Through Warren's historical research regarding Harvard, the authors believe they have discovered a key significance of the Third Book. This supports a healthy Socratic learning and discussion environment choosing plurality over separatism, highlights Harvard's leadership in the advancement of knowledge & research, and can help us all work together to achieve a superior humankind condition.

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