The Ottawa lived along the shore of Georgia Bay in Canada when the French explorer Samuel de Champlain first met them in 1615. A quarter-century later, pressured by the Iroquois [see Iroquois Confederation], the Ottawa moved to Green Bay in present-day Wisconsin, from which they spread into northwestern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. Culturally, the Ottawa are Algonquin, the Chippewa and Potawatomi being their closest tribal relatives. Although they lived in villages and planted crops, the Ottawa were best known as traders, traversing the rivers of northeastern America as well as the Great Lakes in their canoes and following the “Moccasin Trail” well into Florida. Their name derives from the Algonquin adawa, meaning to trade or barter (The Ottawa People, Joseph H. Cash and Gerald W. Wolff, Vol. 34, Indian Tribes Series).

Supporting the French in the French and Indian War of 1754-1763, the Ottawa—under Chief Pontiac—organized strong resistance to the British power in the Great Lakes area. During the American Revolutionary War, the Ottawa sided with the British, but were still able to control most of Ohio afterwards. Increasing incursion by white settlers, however, forced the tribe to move steadily westward, first into Kansas and then onto a 12,000-acre tract of land purchased from the United States in the northeastern corner of Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), where they live today, 2000 strong (ibid.).

The seal of the Ottawa, placed on a white background to form the flag, reflects their history. The evergreen tree, which symbolizes the Tree of Life, and grassy knoll in the center recall their origins in the
northeast woodlands. The prominent canoe in the foreground alludes to their trading skills and Algonquian name. Flanking the tree are a war club, a typical weapon used in hand-to-hand combat and hunting, and an otter, since many of the Ottawa Indians of Oklahoma belong to the Otter (Negig) Clan, and recalling the basic religion of the Ottawa—the otter skin or medicine-dance religion (*Seal of the Ottawa Tribe*, n.d.). The water on which the canoe floats represents the source of all life and is an important sacrament in many Indian religions.

The tree is green with a brown trunk, the knoll is light green, and the sky is light blue. The light brown war club has dark brown lines and crisscrossing; toward its lower end of the war club a black-and-white eagle feather projects to the left, fastened with a dark brown strap. The otter is dark brown with light brown accents, and looks toward the left. The light brown canoe has dark brown trimmings and slats. It floats on medium blue water highlighted with a dark blue wave and light green lily pads. At the right end of the canoe, on the grass knoll, stand a few cattails in dark brown with light brown stems.

Two black rings surround the central seal. Between them “OTTAWA TRIBE” curves above it and “OF OKLAHOMA” curves below, both in black on a white background. On the central disk “UNITED WE STAND DIVIDED WE FALL” curves to either side of the tree.

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