

# The Tennis Court Oath

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What is known as “The Tennis Court Oath” was depicted on a stamp issued by France in 1939. The image used is from the drawing by Louis David. The Tennis Court Oath was a pivotal event during the first days of the French Revolution. The “Oath” was a pledge signed by 576 of the 577 members from the Third Estate (division of government) in 1789. It signified for the first time that French citizens formally stood in opposition to the policies Louis XVI, and forced the king to make concessions. It was

foreshadowed by, and drew considerably from, the 1776 United States Declaration of Independence, especially the preamble. The Oath and its aftermath preceded the abolition of feudalism in France and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

At least six of the major participants in the meeting resulting in the “Oath” were Freemasons and can be identified on the stamp as follows:



1) Jean-Sylvania Bailly; 2) Emanuel-Joseph Sieyes; 3) Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Etienne, 4) Dom Christophe-Antoine Gerle; 5) Jerome Petion de Villeneuve; 6) Joseph-Ignace Guillotin. At the time, they were all member of Lodge Les Neuf Soeurs, Paris, France.

An article featured in *The Masonic Philatelist* (Vol 26, No. 6, May 1970, page 6) is provided on the following pages, along with an image of the actual drawing by Louis

David.. The stamp is another “group stamp.” More information on the “oath” is found on the Wikipedia site: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tennis\\_Court\\_Oath](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tennis_Court_Oath)

# A Remarkable Stamp and A Remarkable Lodge

by Wessel M. Lans



In 1939 the French Post Office issued a stamp commemorating the 150th anniversary of the French Revolution (Scott 390). The stamp is a reproduction of a painting by Jean Louis David: "Le Serment du Jeu de Paume" (Oath of the tennis court). This painting is exhibited in the Museum in Versailles, France.

The "Third Estate" (Third Class) in France, formed by the intellectuals and better-off citizens, tried to work themselves out of their non-participating part and demanded to have influence in the government. When King Louis XVI was no longer able to ignore these demands, but still tried to minimize the participation, the representatives of this group gathered on a tennis court in Paris on June 20, 1789. They declared themselves to be the National Assembly of France and pledged solemnly not to disband until a new constitution would have been brought about. This important meeting is called: "Tenniscourt Oath".

The events in the latter part of the 18th century in France has a good base for the idea's of the "Enlightment", propagated by men like Rousseau, Voltaire and others. These new ideas were well received by the Brothers and it is therefore no surprise that many Masons participated in the political development of their country.

The well-known Lodge "Les Neuf Soeurs" (The Nine Sisters) existed during that time in Paris. This Lodge was established by Brother Lalande, who became the first W.M. and who was succeeded in 1779 by Brother Benjamin Franklin, ambassador of the Thirteen States of America. The idea for the Lodge came from the well-known scholar Claude-Adrien Helvetius, who strived to establish a Lodge in which would come together scholars, philosophers, authors and artists, who wanted to give their gifted services to the Muses, "the nine sisters of the Parnassus". The plan of Helvetius, realized

after his death by Lalande, succeeded completely under the inspired guidance of the W.M. The enlightened minds of the Paris metropolitan area united themselves in the Lodge "Les Neuf Soeurs". It is understandable that the social changes in France did not bypass these Brothers and therefore we find several members of the Lodge in the first ranks during these stormy events of 1789.

The central group on the painting by David is nearly totally made up of members of "Les Neuf Soeurs".

1. First of all **Jean-Sylvain Bailly (1730-1793)**, astronomer and politician. He became a member of the "Etats Generaux" (Estates General). During his chairmanship the representatives gathered on the tennis court. Later on he became mayor of Paris and in 1793 he became a victim of the reign of terror.

2. Next the abbot **Emanuel-Joseph Sieyes (1748-1836)**, one of the many clergymen who joined the "Third Estate". In 1789 he also became a member of the Estates-General. At that time he had already obtained notoriety with publishing a booklet: "What Is the Third Estate? Everything!". He headed the French Revolution during the first months and he proposed that the "Third Estate" would declare themselves the National Assembly. On June 20th, it was he who formulated the Tennis-court Oath. During the early period of Napoleon he still played an important part and was one of the consuls of the Republic.

3. **Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Etienne (1743-1793)**, was a protestant clergyman, who also died by the guillotine.

4. **Dom Christophe-Antoine Gerle (1736-1801)**, the legendary Carthusian monk, who was seated in the "Etats Generaux" as a representative of the clergymen and who later joined the "Third Estate."

5. **Jerome Petion de Villeneuve (1753-1794)**, lawyer and politician. He succeeded Bailly as mayor of Paris in 1791. His opponent at that time was Lafayette.

6. The last one is **Joseph-Ignace Guillotin (1738-1814)**, the poor doctor from Bordeaux, whose name will always be connected to the machine that after he proposed it, was introduced in France to make the executions during the Revolution more quick and mercifully.

This machine was used before that in Italy, Germany and England.

Guillotín was one of the founders of the "Grand Orient de France" on May 24, 1773. He was the W.M. of the Lodge "La Concorde" in Paris and also a member of "Les Neuf Soeurs".

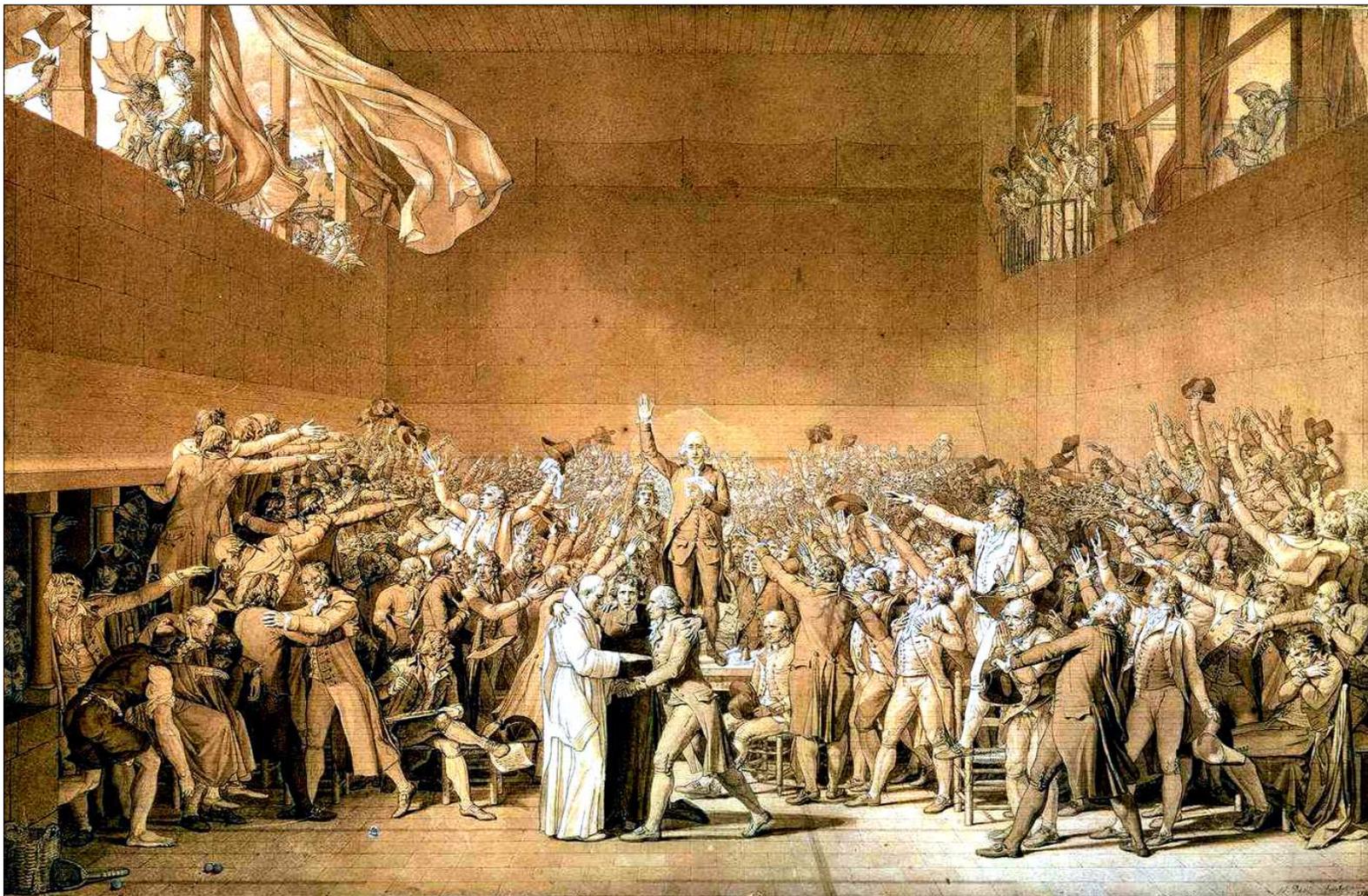
In the foreground in the right hand corner of the stamp is the well-known popular orator Honore-Gabriel de Riquetti, Comte de Mirabeau. Several sources mention him as a Mason, although it is not known when and where he was initiated.

I am sure that more Masons are pictured on the painting of David, but further research I will have to leave to others who have more sources of information available.

**Sources:**

The names of the persons on the painting were given to me by the director of the Museum at Versailles, France.

The Masonic details were located in the well known book "Une Loge Maconnique d'avant 1789" by Louis Amiable. (Paris 1897).



Drawing by Jacques-Louis David of the Tennis Court Oath.

Brother Lens provided a key to the drawing/stamp and this has been used for the key provided on page 1. The stamp is rather unique, and was a very long time (31 years) in coming to the attention of Masonic philatelists. Of particular note, is the influence of the US Declaration of Independence in bringing about "The Tennis Court Oath. Readers might

wish to refer to the MP of September 2014 (Vol. 79, No. 1) wherein we present "The Declaration that Changed the World."

[http://www.msccnewyork.net/uploads/9/4/5/1/945132/mp\\_vol\\_70\\_no\\_3\\_september\\_2014\\_revised.pdf](http://www.msccnewyork.net/uploads/9/4/5/1/945132/mp_vol_70_no_3_september_2014_revised.pdf)