

Stars and Stripes

“[N]ational symbols and ceremonies express deeper aspects and meanings of the nation, and function as integrative and/or divisive forces. Moreover, national symbols and ceremonies form a central part of a ‘secular’ religion which provides anchorage in a dynamic world.”

“National symbols and ceremonies also have an effect upon the community they represent; that is, they raise collective consciousness of ‘who we are’ and ‘where we are from.’” (Elgenius)

“The earliest depiction of a fabric flag is vaguely claimed to date back to 400 BC. It is painted on a wall in a Samnite colony in Paestum in Southern Italy. This depiction lacks a distinct design although the shape of the flag itself bears a close resemblance to a modern one.”

“The Chinese also used flags, as lateral cloth attachments to staffs, following the invention of silk farming. The development of sericulture around 3000 BC brought new possibilities of producing light, large, enduring and colourful (painted or dyed) flags that could be used outdoors.”

“These flags were mainly known for their military use, but also appeared in temples and religious processions. One of the earliest cloth flags was also flown during the Egyptian Middle Kingdom around 2000 BC.”

“It is not necessary to date the first flag, in this context, but it is interesting to see that flags were used by early civilisations and that the present pattern of flag symbolism has ancient roots.” (Elgenius)

“The end of the 18th century marks the official beginning of the ‘national’ flag. This was a gradual process where official recognition came after the flag and its colours had gained some sort of symbolic value.”

“It is noteworthy that one of the first manifestations of American ‘resistance’ was a Red Ensign with the motto ‘Liberty and Union’, which was hoisted a year before the Revolution in Taunton, Massachusetts.”

“Even earlier, in 1769, Boston had flown a flag of red and white stripes. The ‘rattlesnake’ with the motto ‘Don’t Tread on Me’, was another famous flag, which later developed into a depiction of the rattlesnake with 13 segments.”

“The Pine Tree emblem, which originated from New England and was later identified with the Liberty Tree, figured on many early American flags (and also in very early Native American symbolism).”

“The use of the Red Ensign with the motto in the fly, or with the Pine Tree in the canton and that of the plain Pine Tree Flag, were the first prime sources for the American flag tradition. These constituted together with the Boston striped flag the main starting points for the colonial flag evolving during 1775.”

“The emblem of the rattlesnake was seen in the canton of the Red Ensign, which was hoisted by a Pennsylvanian regiment in 1775, and in the flag of stripes used by the South Carolina Navy. In 1776 the flag hoisted in Massachusetts was described as ‘English Colours but more Striped’, i. e. a British Red Ensign but with white stripes across the field.”

National Flag

“[T]he concept of the ‘national flag’ is the direct consequence of political developments after the American and the French Revolution, where the idea of the flag representing the country and its people emerged.”

“The American flag was adopted to represent a multi-ethnic people; it symbolised first and foremost the attempt to break free from colonial domination. At the same time the ‘Stars and Stripes’ flag made a significant contribution to the modern flag tradition as an idea of a flag representing a ‘whole population’ as well as its government, and it also reflected the more egalitarian ideas of the time.”

“The ‘Stars and Stripes’ was created on the 14 July 1777 - by whom and where remains unclear - and it was used in different forms during the remainder of the War of Independence. It is worth noting that America did not have a flag representing it (or the colonies) prior to the conflicts with England.” (Elgenius)

On June 14, 1777, the Continental Congress approved the design of a national flag:

Resolved, That the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white: that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation.

The resolution didn’t prescribe a certain arrangement, so the earliest flags display quite a variety of designs. (DAR) The number of stars on the American Flag has changed with time from 13 to 50 in order to correspond with the increasing number of states. (Elgenius)

Betsy Ross Flag

The origin of the first American flag is unknown. Some historians believe it was designed by New Jersey Congressman Francis Hopkinson and sewn by Philadelphia seamstress Betsy Ross.



Elizabeth “Betsy” Griscom Ross was born a fourth-generation American to a Quaker family on New Year’s Day of 1752 in the colonial city of Philadelphia.

Ross learned to sew from a great-aunt, and, after finishing school, apprenticed with a talented upholsterer in Philadelphia, where she met and married fellow apprentice John Ross, with whom she formed an upholstery business.

Among their customers was George Washington, for whom they sewed bed hangings in 1774 while he was in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress. After the death of her husband at the start of the American Revolution, Ross continued to sew uniforms, tents, and flags for the Continental Army.

Historians have not been able to verify Ross’s legendary role as the creator of the Stars and Stripes. But the likely legendary story that in June 1776 General Washington consulted with Ross on the creation of a new flag, and she persuaded him to alter its stars from six-pointed to the easier-to-sew five-pointed took hold in the national patriotic imagination.

For generations Betsy Ross has stood as the symbol of feminine ingenuity and resourcefulness in service to the country. Her contributions to the founding of the United States are commonly represented, as in a 1952 stamp commemorating the 200th anniversary of her birth, with the Stars and Stripes on her lap. (DOI)

Old Glory

The name Old Glory was given to a large, 10-by-17-foot flag by its owner, William Driver, a sea captain from Massachusetts.

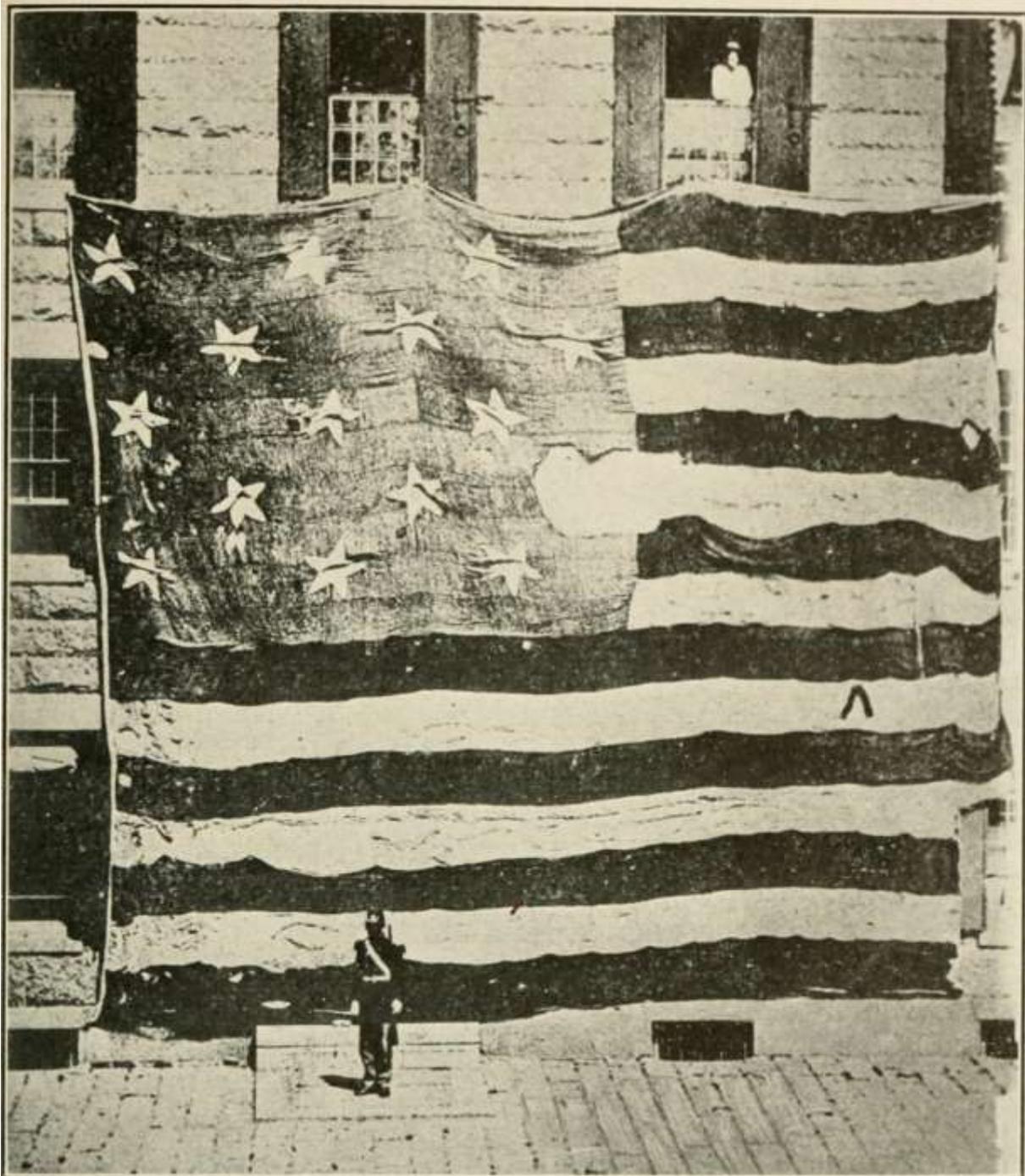


Inspiring the common nickname for all American flags, Driver’s flag is said to have survived multiple attempts to deface it during the Civil War. Driver was able to fly the flag over the Tennessee Statehouse once the war ended. (PBS)

Star-Spangled Banner

In June 1813, Major George Armistead arrived in Baltimore, Maryland, to take command of Fort McHenry, built to guard the water entrance to the city.

Armistead commissioned Mary Pickersgill, a Baltimore flag maker, to sew two flags for the fort: a smaller storm flag (17 by 25 ft) and a larger garrison flag (30 by 42 ft). She was hired under a government contract and was assisted by her daughter, two nieces, and an indentured African-American girl.



The larger of these two flags would become known as the “Star-Spangled Banner.” Pickersgill stitched it from a combination of dyed English wool bunting (red and white stripes and blue union) and white cotton (stars). Each star is about two feet in diameter, each stripe about 24 inches wide.

The Star-Spangled Banner’s impressive scale (about one-fourth the size of a modern basketball court) reflects its purpose as a garrison flag. It was intended to fly from a flagpole about ninety feet high and be visible from great distances.

At its original dimensions of 30 by 42 feet, it was larger than the modern garrison flags used today by the United States Army, which have a standard size of 20 by 38 feet.

Between 1777 and 1960 Congress passed several acts that changed the shape, design and arrangement of the flag and allowed stars and stripes to be added to reflect the admission of each new state. On August 3, 1949, President Harry S. Truman officially declared June 14 as Flag Day.

The first Flag Act, adopted on June 14, 1777, created the original United States flag of thirteen stars and thirteen stripes.

The Star-Spangled Banner has fifteen stars and fifteen stripes as provided for in the second Flag Act approved by Congress on January 13, 1794. The additional stars and stripes represent Vermont (1791) and Kentucky (1792) joining the Union.

The third Flag Act, passed on April 4, 1818, reduced the number of stripes back to thirteen to honor the original thirteen colonies and provided for one star for each state - a new star to be added to the flag on the Fourth of July following the admission of each new state. (Smithsonian)

Flag Code

The rules for handling and displaying the US Flag are defined by a law known as the U.S. Flag Code. The following are some of the text found in United States Code Title 4 Chapter 1.

§4. Pledge of allegiance to the flag; manner of delivery

The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag: “I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”, should be rendered by standing at attention facing the flag with the right hand over the heart. When not in uniform men should remove any non-religious headdress with their right hand and hold it at the left shoulder, the hand being over the heart. Persons in uniform should remain silent, face the flag, and render the military salute.

§6. Time and occasions for display

- a) It is the universal custom to display the flag only from sunrise to sunset on buildings and on stationary flagstaffs in the open. However, when a patriotic effect is desired, the flag may be displayed twenty-four hours a day if properly illuminated during the hours of darkness.
- c) The flag should not be displayed on days when the weather is inclement, except when an all-weather flag is displayed.

§8. Respect for flag

No disrespect should be shown to the flag of the United States of America; the flag should not be dipped to any person or thing. Regimental colors, State flags, and organization or institutional flags are to be dipped as a mark of honor.

Today the flag consists of 13 horizontal stripes, seven red alternating with six white. The stripes represent the original 13 Colonies and the stars represent the 50 states of the Union. The colors of the flag are symbolic as well; red symbolizes hardiness and valor, white symbolizes purity and innocence and blue represents vigilance, perseverance and justice.



Information here is primarily from Expressions of Nationhood, Gabriella Elgenius; Smithsonian; PBS; US Department of Interior; Flag Code

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young