

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

A Short History of the American Flag

“Our flag carries American ideas, American history, and American feelings,” Henry Ward Beecher declared in 1861 to a group of Union soldiers. “It is not a painted rag. It is a whole national history. It is the Constitution. It is the government.”¹

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It wasn't always so. Though iconic today—it is hard to imagine World War II without also picturing the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima, or to think about 9/11 without also seeing the New York firefighters hoisting the red, white, and blue above the ruins of the World Trade Center—the American flag has a long and storied history. Its story in many ways mirrors that of the nation it represents. The flag has grown and evolved with the American colonies, first as the colonies became “these United States of America,” and then as the nation grew to welcome new states. To study the flag, then, is to be reminded of the history and ideals of the nation.

Birth of the American Flag

Even before they declared their independence from Great Britain in 1776, American colonists created their own flags to provide a symbol for their opposition to British policies. In the mid-1760s, the Sons of Liberty—best known as the instigators of the Boston Tea Party in 1773—rallied around white flags with the word “liberty” spelled out in large capital letters. Other flags displayed a rattlesnake, a motif inspired by Benjamin Franklin’s remark in 1751 that a rattlesnake would make an appropriate gift for the colonists to send to England. The Gadsden flag (so named for its creator, Christopher Gadsden), for example, consisted of a drawing of a coiled rattler with the words “Don’t Tread on Me” underneath, while other flags simply re-created the cartoon Franklin himself had penned during the French and Indian War, showing a segmented snake and the words “Join, or Die.” Another popular anti-British symbol—especially in New England—was the pine tree, which comes from the 1629 seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and was subsequently used on the 1686 flag of New England. That banner, present at the Battle of Bunker Hill in June 1775, consists of a red background, with the Cross of St. George and a pine tree shown in the upper left-hand corner.

None of these revolutionary-era flags, however, became emblematic in all of the colonies as *the* American flag. Indeed, throughout the Revolutionary War the American

¹ Henry Ward Beecher, Address to the 14th Brooklyn Regiment, see below.

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colonists rallied around many different flags. The one that came closest to a national flag was the “Continental Colors” or the “Union Flag,” which George Washington hoisted on January 1, 1776, at his camp outside of Boston to recognize the birth of the Continental Army. This flag featured the British Union Jack, with its Crosses of St. George and St. Andrew, in the canton (the top left-hand corner), and then had 13 alternating red and white stripes flowing horizontally across. Although historians aren’t sure who designed the flag, a popular explanation of its origins is that the use of the Union Jack showed the colonists’ belief—especially during the early stages of the conflict—that they were fighting for their rights as Englishmen.² (The British, too, saw something in the colonists’ use of the Union Jack: three days after having the flag raised, Washington recorded that the British saw it as a “signal of submission” and thought the colonists were surrendering!³) The Union Flag raised by Washington was also used by American naval forces, and by the beginning of 1777 the Maritime Committee of the Continental Congress issued orders making this *de facto* practice standard across the Navy.

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On July 4, 1776—just two days after passing the motion declaring independence—the Continental Congress appointed John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson to a committee to design the Great Seal of the United States. Rejecting their design, the Congress eventually went through two more committees before finally adopting a design in June 1782.

The process for adopting the American flag could not have been more different. It was not until almost a year after the war had officially begun that Congress even took up the question of a national flag—and then it only did so during a session dealing with fiscal affairs. On June 14, 1777, after debating matters such as advance pay for specific Continental Army officers and delegating command of Continental Navy ships sailing in the Delaware River, the Congress passed a short resolution:

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.⁴

² An interesting side note is that the Union Flag looks almost identical to the flag that the East India Company had been flying in other parts of the world since the 1670s; since the flag was not used in American waters, historians think the likeness simply a coincidence.

³ Marc Leepson, *Flag: An American Biography* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2005), 18.

⁴ *Journals of the American Congress from 1774–1788*, Vol. 2 (Washington: Way and Gideon, 1823), 165.

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No record exists of who introduced the resolution, or why it was introduced. We only know that the motion carried without debate or comment. The resolution did not set the size or proportions of the flag, or even what shape the constellation of stars should be. For that matter, the resolution didn't determine what shape the flag itself should be. As a result, flags of the era showed the constellation of stars in different arrangements, and flags were made with differing proportions. And though the resolution was passed fairly early in the war, other flags remained popular, and it is likely that Washington still used the Union Flag for most of the war.

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Nor are the origins of the flag's design known. Many historians believe that Francis Hopkinson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence from New Jersey, holds the honor. In addition to being a lawyer and congressman, Hopkinson was also an artist, and it was his design for the Great Seal that the second committee on the subject submitted to Congress in 1780. That year Hopkinson sought compensation from Congress for his designs for the Great Seal (which Congress chose not to use), the seal for the Treasury Board, and the flag of the United States. The Treasury Board refused the request, noting that Hopkinson "was not the only person consulted on those exhibitions."⁵

Another account of the flag's creation, of course, involves Betsy Ross. Born in 1752 as Elizabeth Griscom, she married John Ross shortly before the Revolutionary War began, and the couple started a small upholstery shop in Philadelphia. In January 1776, John was killed while on patrol with the local militia. Betsy married twice more before independence was won—the second marriage also left her a war widow—and she continued the sewing business she and John had started. According to the story made popular by her grandson William Canby in the 1870s, Ross sewed the first version of the stars and stripes when she was visited by George Washington at her shop in June 1776. Washington, accompanied by Colonel George Ross and Pennsylvania Congressman Robert Morris, called on the seamstress with a rough sketch of the flag, which he then re-drew to incorporate her suggestions. Ross sewed the flag, and Washington and his committee returned to Congress to show them the country's new standard, which Congress readily accepted. Whether the story is true or not (most historians think it isn't), we do know that Ross was a seamstress and that she probably *did* sew American flags; she just didn't create the first one.

An Evolving Flag for a Growing Country

⁵ *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789*, Vol. 18 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910), 984.

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The resolution passed by Congress in 1777 also failed to provide guidelines for how the flag should be adapted were new states to be added to the Union. In 1795, to mark the admission of Vermont and Kentucky in 1791 and 1792, respectively, Congress passed a resolution to add two new stars and stripes to the flag. It was this 15-starred-and-striped version that flew during the War of 1812.

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It was also during this war that the nation’s future national anthem—an ode to the flag—was penned. On the morning of September 14, 1814, the lawyer Francis Scott Key wrote the words to “The Star-Spangled Banner” after watching the British bombardment of Fort McHenry all night long. Key, viewing the attack from a British vessel in the Chesapeake Bay, woke in the morning to find, despite the all-night attack, “that our flag was still there.” Key’s words, published just a few days after the battle, helped begin the process of unifying the country around the flag. As the Smithsonian Museum of American History notes, “Key transformed the official emblem into something familiar and evocative, a symbol that Americans could connect with and claim as their own. The flag . . . became a representation of the country’s values and the ideals for which it stands.”⁶

As the nation continued to expand, Congress, realizing the impracticalities of adding a stripe for each joining state, declared in 1818 that the flag would once again have 13 stripes—one for each of the original colonies—but that a new star would be added for each new state. This star would be added to the flag on the Fourth of July holiday following the state’s admission to the Union. Between 1818 and 1861, a total of 16 new states entered the Union, with the result that a new version of the flag was issued several years in a row as the western territories gained statehood.

As the country moved toward civil war, many in the South suggested that the American flag be retired when war broke out. Then-US Senator and soon-to-be President of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis made such an argument on the floor of the US Senate in early January 1861, just a few weeks after seven Southern states had issued declarations of secession from the Union:

My pride is that that flag [the flag of the United States] shall not be set between contending brothers, and that, when it shall no longer be the common flag of the

⁶ “Symbols of a New Nation,” Smithsonian Institution, <http://amhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner/symbols-of-a-new-nation.aspx>.

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country, it shall be folded up and laid away like a vesture no longer used; that it shall be kept as a sacred memento of the past, to which each of us can make a pilgrimage, and remember the glorious days in which we were born.⁷

Davis suggestion was not taken, and in many ways the flag became *more* important to the Union as a result of the war, with many in the North viewing the flag as a symbol of their defense of the whole American Republic against the offenses of the southern states (whose stars remained on the flag).

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According to Whitney Smith, the founding editor of *The Flag Bulletin*, it was in the midst of the Civil War that the cult of the flag began. During this time, he notes, “The flag was everywhere. Every school flew a flag and prior to that there is only one known instance—in 1817—of a school flying an American flag. Union soldiers even carried miniature flags called Bible flags, small enough to fit in the Bible they would take with them to the battlefield. The start of the Civil War was the beginning of the sense we have today of the American flag as an everyday object and of something that belongs to everyone.”⁸

It was also during the Civil War that the flag became known as “Old Glory,” a name bestowed upon it by William Driver, a Massachusetts-born resident of Nashville, Tennessee who had been given a homemade version of the flag by his mother in the 1820s. Driver displayed the flag on his whaler boat and for special holidays at his home in Nashville. During the War, he hid the flag from the Confederates, unfurling it again when the city came under the control of federal troops.

The Modern Flag

Following the Civil War, the flag’s popularity continued to grow. Veterans groups organized across the country and displayed the flag during their parades. One such group, the Grand Army of the Republic, led by General John A. Logan, instituted Decoration Day (later known as Memorial Day), a time set aside to decorate the graves of the fallen

⁷ Jefferson Davis, *Speech of the Hon. Jefferson Davis, of Mississippi, Delivered in the United States Senate, on the 10th day of January, 1861, Upon the Message of the President of the United States, on the Condition of Things in South Carolina* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1861), 7.

⁸ Leepson, *Flag: An American Biography*, 91–92.

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and to “raise above them the dear old flag they saved.”⁹ Even in those states that had replaced the stars and stripes with Confederate flags, Old Glory proved to be reconciliatory, as shown by Gilbert H. Bates’s four-month journey through the South carrying an American flag in 1868. Though many in the North thought that the former Confederates would take umbrage, Bates (a former soldier in the Union Army) and his flag were welcomed with warm receptions wherever he went in the war-torn South. In Richmond, for example, he was greeted by celebratory cannon fire and 500 residents of the former capital of the Confederacy.

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The centennial celebration in 1876 increased fervor for the flag, as cities across the country became covered in red, white, and blue to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Flag Day soon became its own cause for celebration, with the unofficial holiday achieving widespread popularity in the 1890s. (See below for a complete history of Flag Day.)

On October 21, 1892, schools across the country celebrated Columbus Day, and with it inaugurated what would become the national Pledge of Allegiance. Written by Francis Bellamy, an editor of *The Youth’s Companion*, the Pledge was to be used by schools at their flag-raising ceremonies.¹⁰ Though the Pledge was only officially recognized by Congress in 1942, it quickly became popular in American schools, with many states adopting it for daily school exercises.

It was not until 1912, though, that the flag that Americans pledged allegiance to became standardized across the nation. Indeed, according to a government study undertaken in 1907—the year Oklahoma joined the union, constituting the flag’s 46th star—federal agencies were flying 66 different versions of the American flag, with varying sizes, proportions, and arrangements of stars. In 1912, President Howard Taft signed Executive Order 1637 finally prescribing the exact proportions and dimensions of flags flown by the US government.

Two years later President Woodrow Wilson issued a proclamation officially establishing June 14 as a national Flag Day. In 1923, at the behest of the American

⁹ John A. Logan, General Orders No. 11, May 5, 1868, recorded in the *Journal of the Fiftieth National Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1916), 304. For a history of Memorial Day and selected readings, visit www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-american-calendar/the-meaning-of-memorial-day.

¹⁰ See the text of the Pledge of Allegiance below.

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Legion, representatives from nearly 70 patriotic organizations and governmental agencies met together in Washington, DC to create the National Flag Code. The Code set guidelines for flag usage, and was eventually adopted by Congress in 1942.

The last stars were added to the flag on July 4, 1960, following the statehoods of Alaska and Hawaii in 1958 and 1959, respectively. The new 50-starred version was designed by an Ohio high school student, Robert G. Heft, who created the flag for a class history project. When President Dwight D. Eisenhower set up a commission to design the new flag, Heft's congressman presented the student's flag to the committee—and they, in turn, passed it along to the president. It is this flag that, as of July 4, 2007, became the longest-serving flag of the United States.

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