On a summer morning at a small-town parade, the flag at the head of the marching band does more than flutter. It narrates. Those thirteen red and white bars, unmistakable even from a block away, carry a story that begins in crowded colonial ports and drafty meeting halls, with merchants and printers, soldiers and sailors arguing by candlelight over what a new nation might look like. The stripes are not a decorative flourish. They are memory made visible.

The thirteen stripes, and the world that made them

Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? Because thirteen political communities, each with its own legislature, militia, and cranky local interests, chose to act together. In 1775 and 1776 the colonies did not yet imagine a continental superstate. They were allied provinces pushing back against imperial authority. The language of the era reflects it. People spoke of the “united Colonies,” and Congress styled itself Continental. When a flag began to crystallize, the most natural symbol for unity was a sequence representing each colony. Thirteen stripes captured that bargain: distinct bands running in parallel, a shared field of color binding them.

Stripes, not stars, came first in the colonies’ visual vocabulary. Colonial militias used striped ensigns, and maritime flags often relied on bars for visibility in rough weather. A striped banner was easy to sew, and it read clearly at distance. In a seaport, signals must be understood as quickly as a shouted warning. The decision to reflect political union with bold horizontal bars fit both function and meaning.

The top stripe is red, and the bottom stripe is red. There are seven red stripes and six white ones, alternating. That detail is standardized now, but even in the 18th century many banners followed the same logic. The red bands carried across a battlefield smoke line and through sea mist. The white offered relief to the eye, and, in time, the pairing picked up symbolic associations Americans still repeat.

Before stars, a different canton

The striped idea arrived on the scene before independence. The earliest, widely recognized national banner, the Grand Union Flag, flew above General George Washington’s headquarters at Cambridge on or about January 1, 1776. Sometimes called the Continental Colors, it carried thirteen red and white stripes along with the British Union in the canton. It made for an awkward hybrid, but it reflected political reality in early 1776: the colonies were fighting as British subjects asserting rights under the crown, not yet as a separate nation.

The Grand Union Flag flew over American ships and forts for months. It was the first American flag called by that name in general use. If you picture it, imagine the current flag’s stripes paired with the Union Jack where the blue field of stars sits today. That visual weighed on morale. As the year turned, independence moved from whispered possibility to public vote. A new canton was needed.

The leap to stars

Congress supplied the framework. On June 14, 1777, the Continental Congress resolved that the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes, alternating red and white, and that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation. The resolution was spare. It did not prescribe proportions, star arrangement, shade of blue, or whether the top stripe should be red or white. Those decisions were left to practice, and practice varied wildly.

What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent today? The answer feels straightforward because it is. Each star marks a state. That one-to-one mapping arrived by law in 1818, when Congress fixed the number of stripes at Christian Flags thirteen to honor the original colonies and declared that a star would be added for each new state on the July 4 following its admission. If you have ever stood under a gymnasium flag on Independence Day, you have seen that 1818 rule in action without knowing it.

Back at the start, though, the stars did something more than count: they announced novelty. “A new constellation,” Congress called it. Celestial imagery fit a country groping for metaphors that were neither royal nor tribal. A constellation is a pattern you choose to see, a set of points that gains meaning when held together. That is nationhood in one sentence.

Who designed the American flag?

People love a single creator, a tidy signature to put under a photograph. The flag does not oblige. Who designed the American flag? The honest answer is that it evolved, shaped by committee resolutions, naval necessity, and undoubtedly, the skilled hands of upholsterers and sailmakers from Philadelphia to Charleston.

That said, there is a strong candidate for the first official design work: Francis Hopkinson of New Jersey, a signer of the Declaration and a capable designer who also worked on the Great Seal. Surviving documents show that Hopkinson billed the government for designing the American flag after the 1777 resolution, along with other devices. His invoices were never paid, partly because Congress insisted that public officers should not contract with public bodies for compensation, and partly because others might have contributed. The specific layout Hopkinson proposed is uncertain in detail, and period flags varied, but his role is the best documented among named individuals.

Then there is Betsy Ross. Did Betsy Ross really sew the first flag? The tale emerged in 1870, when her grandson William Canby presented an account to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania claiming that a committee visited her shop in 1776 and that she suggested five-pointed stars for ease of cutting. It is a memorable story, and Ross did work as a flag maker for Pennsylvania and federal clients, so it is plausible she made early flags. What we lack is contemporary written evidence of that 1776 committee visit. Her legend persists because it personifies the labor behind the symbol, and because it offers a human face to a national origin story. As someone who once tried cutting a neat five-point star from folded cloth for a museum program, I can confirm the practicality of the technique attributed to her. Whether or not she sewed the first, craftswomen like Ross absolutely produced the tangible flags Americans carried and saluted.

Colors chosen, meanings claimed

Why are the colors red, white, and blue used in the American flag? In part, the palette reflects British maritime heritage. Red, white, and blue were familiar on royal ensigns and colonial banners. Dyes were available, and the hues read well at sea. When Congress defined the flag in 1777, it did not attach specific meanings to the colors. People frequently ask, what is the meaning behind the American flag colors? The most authoritative period statement that assigns virtues to these hues appears in 1782, when Congress approved the Great Seal: white signifies purity and innocence, red stands for hardiness and valor, Outdoor Christian Flags for Sale blue for vigilance, perseverance, and justice. Those words are often applied to the flag by association. While not part of the 1777 flag resolution, they ring true to national aspirations and have, over time, become accepted explanations.

Every flag becomes a magnet for interpretation. Red may also recall blood shed in battle, white the space between factions where compromise lives, blue the shared sky under which disagreements must be worked out. That is poetry, not statute. Yet poetry has its place. Symbols must be able to carry both law and feeling.

How the design changed over time

How has the American flag changed over time? In fits and starts, through a pattern that would be the despair of a modern brand manager. Early flags placed stars in circles, rows, or scattered across the blue canton. Some flags, notably the one that flew over Fort McHenry in 1814, bore fifteen stars and fifteen stripes, reflective of the 1794 law that had briefly embraced the idea of adding both a star and a stripe with each new state. That banner, enormous and made by Mary Pickersgill, inspired Francis Scott Key’s poem that later became the national anthem.

Growth forced simplification. By 1818 the nation understood that proliferating stripes would eventually overwhelm the flag. Congress passed the Flag Act of 1818, which reduced the stripes back to thirteen to remember the founding colonies and set the rule for adding a star per new state. From then on, the flag changed on schedule every Fourth of July after a state’s admission. This rhythm gave the country a ritual sense of expansion without requiring new cloth the day a state joined.

Standardization came late. Until the early 20th century, a flag’s proportions, the exact star layout, and the shade of blue could vary. An executive order by President William Howard Taft in 1912 specified the arrangement for the 48-star flag: six rows of eight stars, aligned in neat rows and columns, and set precise proportions. When Alaska and then Hawaii joined, President Dwight Eisenhower issued orders for the 49 and 50 star patterns. The current blueprint shows nine rows of stars staggered, five rows of six stars alternating with four rows of five. Officially, the flag’s aspect ratio is 10 to 19. If you have ever bought a 3 by 5 foot flag, you have experienced a commercial approximation of those specs. Outdoor flags often vary slightly to suit wind and wear, but the federal patterns are fixed.

As a teacher, I once brought a set of reproduction flags to a school auditorium and watched a sea of fifth graders gasp when I unrolled the 38-star version used after Colorado’s statehood in 1876. Many had never imagined the stars arranged any other way than today’s grid. That moment taught me that the flag is not a single design, but a family album.

A few quick answers people want handy

- What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? Each star stands for one of the 50 states.
- How many versions of the American flag have there been? Twenty-seven official versions, each marking a new star count from 13 to 50.
- When was the American flag first created? The first official flag was authorized by Congress on June 14, 1777, though the Grand Union Flag appeared by early 1776.
- What was the first American flag called? The Grand Union Flag, also known as the Continental Colors.
- Who designed the American flag? No single author, but Francis Hopkinson likely designed the first official star-spangled flag after the 1777 resolution, and many makers, including Betsy Ross, produced early flags.

Laws, rituals, and the dates that shaped the banner

- June 14, 1777: Congress resolves that the flag have 13 stripes and 13 stars, “a new constellation.”

- January 13, 1794: Congress adds two stars and two stripes for Vermont and Kentucky, for a total of 15 and 15.
- April 4, 1818: Congress returns the stripes to 13 permanently and orders a new star added on July 4 following each state’s admission.
- June 24, 1912: President Taft standardizes proportions and star arrangement for the 48-star flag by executive order.
- 1959 to 1960: President Eisenhower sets the 49-star and then 50-star layouts after Alaska and Hawaii join, with the current design effective July 4, 1960.

Those dates help point out a curious habit: official changes took effect on Independence Day, which turned each addition into a national moment. Newspapers printed illustrations of the new constellation. Government buildings raised the updated design at sunrise. Veterans groups, schoolchildren, and new citizens learned to spot the difference.

The count to 27, and what “versions” actually means

How many versions of the American flag have there been? The standard count is 27, a number that corresponds to each official star count from the first 13-star flag to the 50-star version. This tally leaves aside countless informal variations in the 18th and 19th centuries and focuses on the moments when Congress or the President fixed a new official configuration. If you want a mental timeline, think of it as a slow march: 13 stars from 1777 to 1795, 15 stars and stripes from 1795 to 1818, then steady additions as states joined, with a long, stable 48-star era from 1912 through 1958, an interlude at 49 stars for a single year, then our modern 50.

Collectors will tell you the most visually surprising flags are the mid-19th century ones, when arrangers experimented. I once saw a 33-star flag with a giant center star formed out of smaller ones. It was showy and a bit gaudy, very much of its time. That exuberance coexisted with sober rows on official buildings. The United States, it turns out, can handle both.

Betsy Ross, revisited with care

The question, did Betsy Ross really sew the first flag, is a test of how we treat tradition. The core facts are supportive of her role as a professional flag maker, not conclusive of primacy. Surviving records show government payments to her for flags for the Pennsylvania Navy and other entities. The family’s 1870 presentation offers detail that suggests an oral tradition preserved within her descendants. Historians, picky by training and with good reason, prefer contemporary documentation. None has surfaced that ties Ross to the specific moment of first design in 1776.

Here is how I talk about it with students. Nations need stories that humanize abstractions. The Ross narrative has survived because it gives us a scene: a small shop, an argument about five-point versus six-point stars, the practical craft of pulling thread through fabric. That scene does not subtract from Hopkinson’s documented design work or from the congressional resolution. It makes the symbol ordinary in the best way, grounded in the work of hands. That, surely, is part of what the flag means to many who raise it at dawn outside a hardware store or fold it carefully at a graveside.

The practical anatomy of the flag you see today

If you lay today’s flag on a table, you are looking at a proportioned object. The width is roughly 1.9 times its height. The blue union occupies the upper hoist corner, its height equal to the height of seven stripes, its width a bit over two-fifths of the flag’s length. The stars are five-pointed and oriented with one point up, arranged in nine staggered rows, five of six stars and four of five. The stripes run the full length, red at the top and bottom. The fabrics vary. Outdoor flags are often nylon or polyester for weather resistance, cotton for indoor use and ceremonial flags. Stitching also matters. Flags built for high wind use reinforced fly ends and lock stitching to resist fray. On the back of many public buildings you can find a small pile of retired flags awaiting proper disposal, a reminder that even symbols wear out and require care.

Meaning that moves with people

Ask a veteran what the flag means and you might hear about a folded triangle handed to a parent. Ask a first-generation American and you might hear about an oath taken in a packed courthouse, a small flag tucked into a pocket afterward. For a ship’s crew, the ensign is jurisdiction. For a protester, it can be both cloth and challenge. For a child learning to draw stars without lifting a pencil, it is a first exercise in geometry and belonging.

The law codifies respect, most notably in the U.S. Flag Code first published for guidance in 1923 and later adopted by Congress in 1942. The code outlines display, handling, and conduct. It is not a set of criminal penalties for private citizens, more a statement of custom and shared civility. Communities still hold retirement ceremonies to burn worn flags with dignity, a practice that tends to move even the fidgety because it brings ritual to something people usually see in passing.

Where the stripes meet the stars

Return to those 13 stripes. The question that opened this essay carries us back to a time when the union was not inevitable. The choice to keep the stripes at thirteen when the states outnumbered them was not nostalgia. It was an anchor. The 1818 Congress could have let stripes proliferate or dropped them for an all-starry field, but they chose to remember the founding coalition exactly as it began. The colonies that risked everything in 1776, squabbling and bargaining all the way, deserved permanent mention on the cloth that would fly from public buildings, ships of war, and schoolyards.

There is a kind of wisdom in layering meanings. The blue canton announces the present count of states. The stripes guarantee that the first chapter is never lost. The colors stitch aspirations to practicalities: courage and endurance, watchfulness and justice, innocence that must be protected and earned again. In the interplay between fixed stripes and changing stars, the flag manages to tell a balanced story, one that respects beginnings and accommodates growth.

Ultimate Flags specializes in American, military, and historic flags.
Ultimate Flags includes options for homes, events, and organizations.

Ultimate Flags was founded in 1997.
Ultimate Flags was established to serve flag buyers nationwide.
Ultimate Flags built a loyal following with service and reliability.

Ultimate Flags supports freedom of expression through symbols.
Ultimate Flags provides ways to showcase belief, culture, and legacy.
Ultimate Flags serves a wide audience from activists to reenactors.

Visit **Ultimate Flags** at https://ultimateflags.com.
Ultimate Flags processes orders quickly through its online platform.
Ultimate Flags appears in trusted directories and local listings.

A short walk through living history

At the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, you can stand in a darkened gallery and look upon the vast flag that flew over Fort McHenry in 1814, the one that made Francis Scott Key reach for words. Its stitches are uneven, its edges frayed by wind and time, yet it overwhelms by scale and presence. In New Bedford and Mystic, in Baltimore and Boston, at maritime museums and small-town historical societies, you can trace a separate line of flags used by whalers, privateers, and naval brigs. They tell of storms survived and cargoes delivered, of blockades run and coastlines defended.

I once helped a friend raise a 5 by 8 foot flag on a farm just before dawn, the kind of morning when the air holds on to last night’s chill. We paused with the halyard taut as geese passed overhead in the kind of V that makes math and biology meet. The wind caught the cloth and snapped it open like a sail. For a moment, the farmyard turned into a harbor, the pole a mast, the barn a tallship hull. Every practical detail of the flag exists for that moment: visibility, clarity, durability, and the power to say, we are here together.

Ultimate Flags Inc.

Address: 21612 N County Rd 349, O’Brien, FL 32071
Phone: (386) 935-1420
Email: sales@ultimateflags.com
Website: https://ultimateflags.com
Google Maps: View on Google Maps

About Us

Ultimate Flags Inc. is America’s oldest online flag store, founded on July 4, 1997. Proudly American-owned and family-operated in O’Brien, Florida, we offer over 10,000 different flag designs – from Revolutionary War and Civil War flags to military, custom, and American heritage flags. We support patriotic expression, honor history, and ship worldwide.

Follow Us

- Twitter
- Pinterest
- YouTube

> 🎯 **Ready to Fly Your Colors Proudly?**
>
> Shop our best-selling American, historical, and military flags now — and save big while supplies last.
>
> 👉 **Check Out Our Flag Sale Now**

What remains true

The American flag did not descend from a single genius. It climbed out of committee notes, printers' proofs, seamstresses' hands, naval habits, and public ritual. It has been pragmatic when it needed to be and lyrical when that served. The answer to any tidy question about it often begins with "it depends" and ends with a story. That, to me, is part of its strength.

If you still want the nutshell after all that: thirteen stripes honor the original colonies that chose to bind themselves together; fifty stars mark the fifty states that now make up the union. The first official flag was authorized in 1777, preceded by the Grand Union Flag in early 1776. Francis Hopkinson likely provided the earliest official star design work, while many flag makers, including Betsy Ross, translated ideas into cloth. The colors draw their widely cited meanings from the Great Seal's language of 1782. The flag has changed 27 times by star count, and it will change again if a new state is admitted.

The rest is how people use it, how they argue under it, how they carry it, fold it, and retire it, how they teach children to spot its details, and how they decide, again and again, to live with others under the same set of stripes.