

Walk into any small-town parade, big-league ballpark, or quiet veterans' cemetery and you will see the same field of color, instantly recognizable even from a distance. The American flag feels fixed in the national imagination, yet it has never been a static design. It grew with the country, sometimes neatly by the book, sometimes improvisationally at sea or in frontier workshops. Understanding where it came from and why it looks the way it does adds depth to a symbol that often gets flattened into a simple icon.

## **The spark: a new constellation in 1777**

If you want a clean starting line, it is June 14, 1777. That date marks the Flag Resolution of the Continental Congress, which declared, in compact 18th century language, that the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white, and that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation. In a single sentence, Congress answered the questions people still ask. Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? For the 13 original colonies that had declared independence. What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? Stars have always represented the states, so as the union expanded, the stars multiplied while the stripes eventually returned to a constant 13.

The 1777 resolution did not specify proportions, shade formulas, or the arrangement of those stars. At the time, that was typical. Flags were practical signals before they were standardized emblems. Makers worked with wool bunting and linen thread at different widths, so the early American flag lived as a family of closely related designs rather than a single approved diagram.

## **The first flag, and the flag before the first flag**

When people ask, what was the first American flag called, they often mean one of two things. If we mean the first flag under the 1777 law, then we are looking at a 13 stripe, 13 star design whose exact first appearance is hard to pin down because different militias and shipyards produced their own variants. If we mean the first flag used by American forces during the Revolution, the answer is the Grand Union Flag, also called the Continental Colors. It appeared by late 1775, almost certainly at the direction of George Washington and naval committees needing a distinctive ensign for Continental ships. That flag had 13 red and white stripes, but in the canton it carried the British Union, not stars. You can think of it as a bridge flag, signaling unity among the colonies while the break with Britain was still in legal flux.

## **Who designed the American flag?**

Design credit feels straightforward when a single artist or firm wins a commission, but national emblems often emerge through committees, conventions, and refinements. That is the story here. Francis Hopkinson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence from New Jersey and a skilled designer who worked on the Great Seal, submitted designs for a flag and billed Congress for the work in 1780. Surviving documents make a strong circumstantial case that Hopkinson created one of the earliest starred flags and the idea of stars for states, but his drawings specify six-pointed stars, and he never supplied the precise arrangement eventually used by others. Congress also declined to pay his bill, claiming he was already a public servant.

So if someone asks, who designed the American flag, the most defensible short answer is that no single person designed the entire evolving emblem. Hopkinson likely fathered the star concept, a committee framed the 1777 resolution, and generations of flag makers shaped and reshaped the details until federal specifications finally locked them in.

People also know the name Betsy Ross. Did Betsy Ross really sew the first flag? The claim comes from an 1870 lecture by her grandson, William Canby, who shared a family story that Washington and two other men visited his grandmother's upholstery shop in 1776 and asked her to sew a flag with stars arranged in a circle. Historians have never found contemporary documents to support that account. Ross absolutely made flags in Philadelphia during the Revolution, and she likely sewed some early flags, possibly with five-pointed stars if she demonstrated how easily they could be cut. But the specific scene with Washington and the first flag lacks evidence. It persists because it is a good story and because the country, amid the centennial, was ready for personal narratives that humanized the founding.

## **Stripes and stars, then and now**

Why are the colors red, white, and blue used in the American flag? The 1777 resolution did not assign meanings to colors. In 1782, however, the Continental Congress adopted the Great Seal and recorded explanations for its tinctures. Those meanings have become the accepted shorthand for the flag as well. The white stands for purity and innocence, the red for hardiness and valor, and the blue for vigilance, perseverance, and justice. There is a certain elegance in the way those ideas track the national self-image, and you will hear them repeated at naturalization ceremonies and in classrooms.

The stripes told a more complicated story. After independence, Congress passed a law in 1794 adding two stars and two stripes for Vermont and Kentucky, creating the 15 star, 15 stripe flag that flew during the War of 1812. That is the flag from Fort McHenry that inspired Francis Scott Key to write the lines that became the national anthem. As more states queued up, the arithmetic broke down. No one wanted a flag with 20 or 30 stripes. In 1818, Congress returned the field to a permanent 13 stripes, restoring a historical constant, and authorized a star for each state to be added on the July 4 following a state's admission. That rule, still in force, gives the country a small, unifying ritual. When a new star is needed, it debuts on Independence Day.

## **How the flag changed over time, and how often**

The number of official flag versions corresponds to the number of times the star count changed after 1777, with the brief stripe experiment folded in. By that measure, how many versions of the American flag have there been? Twenty seven. The changes track the nation's growth from 13 to 50 states. Early on, star arrangements floated by custom and taste. Some flags showed rings of stars, some neat rows, some cigars or floral patterns. Navy supply contracts described basics but left arrangements to contractors. Museum collections today hold a gallery of creative star constellations, particularly from the 19th century when American industry made flags in cottage shops as often as in large factories.

That variety persisted until the mid 20th century, when modern procurement and executive orders standardized the look. After Alaska became a state in January 1959, President Eisenhower signed an order setting the 49 star layout, and later that year he approved the 50 star pattern to take effect after Hawaii's admission. The official 50 star design, in place since July 4, 1960, sets the stars in staggered rows of six and five, nine rows in all. The canton's height equals seven stripes, and the entire flag's proportion is 10 units high by 19 units wide, a ratio you can spot once you start noticing it.

If you have ever heard the story of a high schooler who designed the 50 star flag, there is truth there. In 1958, while Congress debated statehood for Alaska and Hawaii, a 17 year old student from Ohio named Robert G. Heft created a 50 star mockup for a class project using his mother's sewing machine and a lot of patience. His arrangement matched the final official layout, and his flag was one of the samples sent to Washington. Others proposed identical patterns independently, since rows of six and five are the obvious

way to fit 50 stars cleanly. Heft went on to a lifetime of flag related talks, and his story became part of the flag's living lore.

## A short timeline that helps everything click

- 1775 to 1777: The Grand Union Flag, 13 stripes with the British Union in the canton, flies on Continental ships and at encampments.
- 1777: The Flag Resolution establishes 13 stripes and 13 stars, but does not lock in star arrangement, proportions, or color shades.
- 1794: Congress increases both stars and stripes to 15 for Vermont and Kentucky, producing the Star Spangled Banner of 1812.
- 1818: Congress restores 13 stripes permanently and sets the rule for adding stars on July 4 following a state's admission.
- 1959 to 1960: Eisenhower orders standard 49 and then 50 star layouts. The 50 star flag becomes official on July 4, 1960.

## The meaning behind the colors, with a designer's eye

People often ask, what is the meaning behind the American flag colors, and why those three? In practical terms, red, white, and blue were familiar and available. They echoed the British ensigns that American mariners knew how to sew and fly. On a deep level, the colors tie to heraldic traditions embedded in the Great Seal, where white signals clarity of purpose, red the willingness to endure and fight, and blue the sober sense of justice. Designers also appreciate their visual balance. The white stripes create rhythm and breathing room across a field of strong red, while the blue canton anchors the composition like a night sky, letting the stars pop.

Look closely at a modern, government spec flag and you will notice the shades are not generic. Old Glory Red and Old Glory Blue have become standard names, with color references that match federal specs. If you print a flag for a graphic identity, you will see Pantone references like 193 C for red and 282 C for blue used as common approximations. The ratios matter, too. The canton spans seven stripes high, and the stars sit on an imaginary grid so that none wander visually. Every element is measured in decimals of the flag's height and width, a far cry from the hand drawn patterns of the early republic.

## Craft and improvisation in the 19th century

Before industrial uniformity, flag making was equal parts tradition and problem solving. Sailors wanted flags that read at distance and survived wind and salt. That meant wool bunting for the field and linen thread, with narrow stripes on smaller ensigns and wider ones on garrison flags. Star shapes and sizes varied by the cutter's skill. In some surviving flags, you will see stars with legs of uneven length, charming in their way. Militia units ordered custom sizes and sometimes adopted local patterns for ceremonies. Shipboard flags faded fast, so captains hoisted newer colors for entry to port.

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During the Civil War, the federal government insisted that stars remain for all the states, even those in rebellion, a deliberate message that the union was unbroken. On the Confederate side, a series of national flags cycled because the earliest versions were easy to confuse with the U.S. Flag at smoky distance. All of that underscores how much flags had to function as signals for people in motion, not just symbols in still life.

# Etiquette, edge cases, and the things people argue about

Ask ten people about rules and you will hear confident answers that do not always match the code. There is a federal Flag Code that lays out best practices for display, respect, and disposal. It is advisory, not punitive, which means it sets norms rather than fines. If you have ever fretted over whether a flag at night needs light, you are remembering a guideline that says a flag should be illuminated if displayed after sunset. If you own a family flag that has frayed, you can retire it respectfully, often with help from local veterans' groups that hold periodic ceremonies.

A few debates pop up again and again. Gold fringe around a flag is decorative trim used indoors or in parades. It has no legal significance and does not signal maritime law, secret jurisdiction, or anything else exotic. The union, the blue field with stars, always faces the observer's left when hung flat on a wall. On uniforms or moving vehicles, there are special rules so that the union appears forward, symbolizing advance rather than retreat. When a state joins the union, the new star appears on the next July 4. People sometimes ask whether a territory's flag earns a star. It does not, at least not until Congress admits it as a state.

## The star count, tallied with care

Those 27 official versions deserve a little attention because they humanize the abstract idea of growth. Between 1777 and 1818 you had 13 stars for a while, then 15 stars and stripes. After 1818, things settle into a rhythm of additions. Milestones include the 20 star flag in 1818, marking the return to 13 stripes, the 30 star flag in 1848, and the 45 star flag in 1896 when Utah joined. By 1912, executive orders began to standardize star arrangements, and by mid century it felt natural that the federal government, not local makers, would set exact specs.

In practical terms, that means a 48 star flag hung on a schoolhouse wall in 1945 looked the same in Maine as it did in Oregon. Collectors today can date a flag quickly by star count, stitching, and fabric. A hand sewn 38 star flag likely hails from the late 1870s, while a machine sewn 49 star flag compresses a very short window from July 4, 1959 to July 3, 1960. Museums and historical societies love these details because they root stories of migration, war, and celebration in cloth you can touch.

## The Betsy Ross circle and the other early patterns

The circle of 13 stars feels inevitable now, and it may well have appeared early, but documents do not prove it was the first or only arrangement in 1777. Surviving flags show rows, staggered lines, and floriated clusters. Sailmakers favored patterns that minimized waste when cutting stars from fabric. Five pointed stars won out because they are easier to cut and appliqué than six pointed ones. If you have ever cut a star from folded paper using a single scissor snip, you have met the trick that upholsterers in Revolutionary Philadelphia likely used on white cotton or linen.



That diversity of early patterns helps explain why people disagree over who did what when. Flags were tools, not sacred objects. A unit needed a flag, a maker had fabric, a deal was made. Washington had an eye for symbolism, but he also had an army to supply. Anecdotes multiply in those conditions, and by the time families wrote them down, evidence had scattered or burned.

## Why the specifics still matter

Symbols do heavy lifting. They compress values into things we can carry and raise and stitch onto uniforms. When you slow down and look closely at the American flag, you see choices that say something about what Americans wanted to tell the world and themselves.

First, the stripes are a promise to remember beginnings. That is why, when Congress in 1818 restored the count to 13, it also made room for limitless growth without losing focus. Second, the stars are a plain count of membership. States come in one by one, and the flag records each admission cleanly, without hierarchy. That is not how every nation does it. Plenty of countries tuck history into crests or seals that require a specialist to decode. The American flag, at a glance, tells two stories at once, past and present.

Third, the colors carry widely known meanings without being frozen in time. Red, white, and blue mean different things to different people, and that elasticity, bounded by tradition, is part of why the flag has weathered arguments and changes in taste.

## Practical tips for recognizing authentic details

If you are ever tasked with buying a flag for a public space or evaluating one in a collection, a few details will make you look like you have handled more than a few.

- Proportion and canton: The proper ratio is 10 by 19, with the blue canton seven stripes deep. If a flag looks stubby or the canton barely reaches into the seventh stripe, it is probably a novelty or a casual print.
- Star sharpness: On sewn flags, stars are appliquéd. On printed flags, stars should align cleanly to the grid. Blobby stars usually mean a souvenir, not a spec flag.
- Stitching and fabric: Wool bunting and double stitch seams are hallmarks of older, durable flags. Nylon flags today are light and fly well in low wind. Cotton looks rich in color but gains weight in rain.
- Hoist construction: Real flags have proper grommets and a reinforced hoist edge. Decorative flags sometimes cut corners here, which you will feel when you try to raise them.
- Color fastness: Old Glory Red leans slightly toward a deep crimson. If the red reads like neon or the blue like royal, the maker probably did not use spec dyes.

These pointers do not require a lab, just a closer look and some context.

## A living emblem, open to the future

Ask a fourth grader why the flag has 13 stripes and you will get the proud answer you would expect. Ask a new citizen what the 50 stars represent and the answer will be direct, the 50 states. Ask a historian who designed the American flag and you will get a longer story, full of committee votes, practical compromises, and a few mythic names. That range of answers is a feature, not a flaw.

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The flag's text is simple, the United States in red, white, and blue. The punctuation happens over time. If Congress admits a new state, a new star will join on the next July 4, one more point in a constellation that began in a time of wooden masts and hand stitched canvas. When was the American flag first created? If you mean the law, 1777. If you mean the idea, it started earlier on ships that needed an identity at sea and in camps that needed a common marker. How has the American flag changed over time? Precisely as the country has changed, sometimes awkwardly, sometimes beautifully, always with an eye on that balance between memory and membership.

## Common myths, squared with the record

- Betsy Ross as sole creator: She was a skilled upholsterer who likely made flags, but no clear contemporary proof shows she designed the first.
- Secret meanings of fringe: Gold fringe is ceremonial trim. It does not alter jurisdiction or legal status.
- Stars must form a circle for authenticity: Early flags used many patterns. The circle is one historical option, not a requirement.
- The colors were defined in 1777: The flag's colors were chosen then, but the commonly cited meanings come from the Great Seal, adopted in 1782.
- A torn flag is illegal to retire by burning: Proper retirement often uses respectful burning, frequently performed by veterans' organizations.

The myths speak to a hunger for stories. The real details carry their own power when handled with care.

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## Why these questions endure

People ask how many versions of the American flag have there been because they want to map change. Twenty seven versions means twenty seven specific moments when the country updated its welcome sign. People ask why the colors are red, white, and blue because they sense, correctly, that symbols are more than decoration. People ask who designed the flag because we like to attach names to creations that shape our lives. And people ask whether Betsy Ross really sewed the first flag because it would be fitting to have a person, rather than a committee, at the center of an origin story.

The American flag does not resolve every argument. It never has. It has flown over brutal conflicts and quiet acts of service, over unjust laws and over the marches to repeal them. That tension does not diminish the flag's meaning. It underlines the exact reason the design endures. The stripes remind us that the work began in a handful of colonies that chose a shared future. The stars remind us that membership is open, not frozen. The colors pull the eye and steady the mind, a simple palette that everyone recognizes yet no one can claim exclusively.

Stand in front of one, indoors or out, and you will hear echoes. A music teacher telling kids how to fold a triangle. A sailor watching colors at eight in the morning. A naturalization officer handing a small flag to someone who has just sworn an oath. Those moments add up. The cloth matters because the people who gather beneath it, argue under it, and carry it into hard places, matter. That is the heart of the story, from revolution to today.