

# History of Our Flag



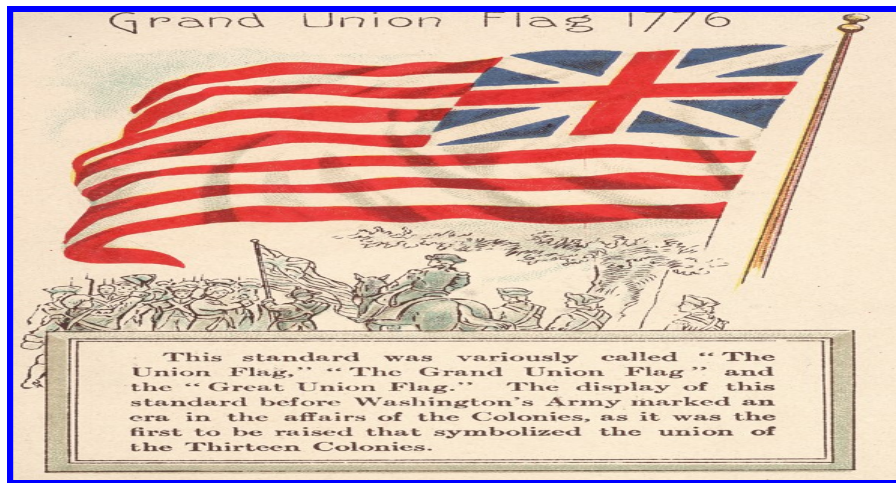
**“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the Unites States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all. “**

You have probably seen the American Flag thousands of times. But how closely have you looked? How many stripes are there? What color is the top stripe? The bottom stripe? How many stars are in each row? How are they arranged?

A glance at any flag reveals the answers, but not the stories behind this great American symbol. For those, you’ll need to read on.

### **In the beginning**

...was a flag with no stars at all. It was called the Grand Union Flag, and consisted of the now-familiar 13 stripes plus a variation of Great Britain’s Union Jack in the upper left corner.



The Grand Union was first flown on December 5, 1775. It was our unofficial flag on the day when the Declaration of Independence was signed (July 4, 1776) and remained so until June 14, 1777 when the Continental Congress adopted the following resolution:

*Resolved, that the flag of the Unites States be made of thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union [upper corner] be thirteen stars, white in a blue field Representing a new Constellation.*

That was it. The Framers offered no further guidance about the flag. How wide the stripes should be? What shade of red? How should the stars be arranged? How many points they should have?

Since Congress was silent, flag designers were free to come up with their own ideas. And they did. Some flags had stars on rows of four and five; others in rows of two and three. Even the stars varies. Some had five points; others had six; still others had eight points, Even their orientation varied.





In 1791 and 1792 Vermont and Kentucky became states. To represent these additions to the nation, two stripes and 2 stars were added to the flag. This would be the official flag of our country— and the only one to ever have 15 stripes—until 1818.

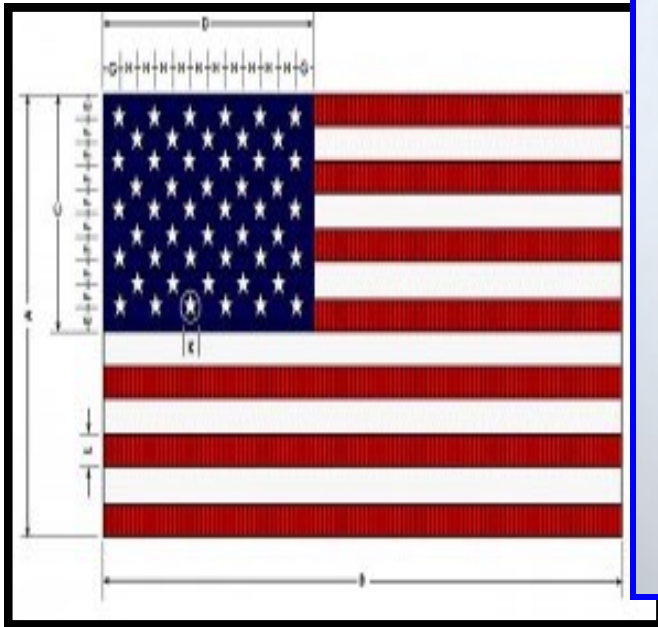


By the time, it had become clear that adding a stripe for every new state would be unworkable. What to do? The Congress of 1818 had the answer. That year, President Madison signed the Flag Act, specifying that the flag shall have 13 stripes and one star for each state. A new star would be added on the first July 4th after a state was admitted to the Union.

Now, the overall design of the flag was set. But everything else – proportions and arrangement and orientation of the stars – was still up for grabs. It would be almost a hundred years before those matters were finalized.

### The Flag Takes Shape

In 1912, President Taft signed an Executive Order that specified almost every detail of the flag: Its proportions, the arrangements of stars, and even the fact that every single star must face upward.



The diagram shows the ratio of each part of the flag compared to its height. For example, however high the flag is, its length is almost twice its height.

The only change to President Taft's Executive Order came in 1959, when President Eisenhower changed the arrangement of stars to provide for Alaska and Hawaii, our 49th and 50th states.

## Handle with Care

Every detail about handling the flag is prescribed. Want to know how to raise the flag properly? How to lower it? Where and how to display it? When to display it? What to do in bad weather? How to hang the flag from a flagpole? Over the middle of a street? Along a wall? In a corridor? When flags from other countries are present? These and scores of other questions are answered in the Federal Flag Code, which even specifies the proper way to fold the flag. The Code was established by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1942. Here are some examples:



- \* When a flag is displayed on a flag pole it should hang sunrise to sunset until dawn, unless a light is shining on it.
- The flag should never be displayed with the union down, except as a signal of dire distress in instances of extreme danger to life or property.
- The flag should never touch anything beneath it, such as the ground, the floor, water, or merchandise.
- The flag should never be carried flat or horizontally, but always aloft and free.
- The flag should never be used as wearing apparel, bedding, or drapery.
- The flag should never be used as a covering for a ceiling.
- The flag should never be dipped to any person or thing.
- The flag should never be used for covering a speakers desk, draping a platform, or for any decoration in general. Bunting of blue, white and red stripes is available for these purposes. The blue stripe of the bunting should be on top.
- The flag should never be used for any advertising purpose. It should not be embroidered, printed or otherwise impressed on such articles as cushions, handkerchiefs, napkins, boxes, or anything intended to be discarded after temporary use. Advertising signs should be attached to the staff or halyard.
- The flag should not be used as part of a costume or athletic uniform, except that a flag patch may be used on the uniform of military personnel, fireman, policeman and members of patriotic organizations.
- The flag should never have placed on it, or attached to it, any mark, insignia, letter, word, number, figure, or drawing of any kind.
- The flag should never be used as a receptacle for receiving, holding, carrying or delivering anything.
- When the flag is lowered, no part of it should touch the ground or any object; it should be received by waiting hands and arms. To store the flag it should be folded neatly and ceremoniously.
- The flag should be cleaned and mended when necessary.
- When a flag is so worn it is no longer fit to serve as a symbol of our country, it should be destroyed by burning in a dignified manner.

## **The Star Spangled Banner**

The flag has been a source of pride and inspiration throughout our history. Perhaps the most famous example involves Francis Scott Key, who wrote the words to what would become our national anthem.

The incident that inspired Key to write The Star Spangled Banner took place at Fort McHenry in Baltimore, in the midst of war with Great Britain: It was dawn on September 14, 1814. Throughout the night and the preceding day Britain had bombarded Fort McHenry relentlessly. Into the night Francis Key watched the gruesome fireworks, taking heart that as long as the British were firing, the Americans had not surrendered.

Then at 1:00 a.m. the air became still. Had the Americans surrendered? Had the British given up?

The anxiety was excruciating, and it would last until daylight. Then, as the predawn darkness lifted, the truth of the night's events emerged. The flag - our stars and stripes - was still there! The Americans had prevailed.

Inspired, Key penned a poem that told the story. Set to music, the lyrics became popular immediately, and in 1931 the song was made into our national anthem.

How many of the words do you know?

*Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light  
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?  
Whose broad stripes and bright stars thru the perilous fight,  
O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?  
And the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air,  
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.  
Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?*

## **The Stars and Stripes Speak**

The Stars and Stripes is the ultimate symbol of our country. When we say, "An American was here first," we fly the flag. When we say, "An American has won the contest," we show the flag. When we want to say, "America has been victorious" we raise the flag.





*Americans were the first, and so far the only human beings to set foot on the moon. What else would the astronauts use to mark the landing but the flag, seen here in this 1969 photo. (NASA)*



*An American skier shows the flag at the moment of Olympic victory. (Christopher J. Morris/Corbis)*



*In this famous World War II photo from 1945, marines raise the flag over Iwo Jima, signaling a key victory for the United States. (Joe Rosenthal/Corbis)*

## History of Our Flag

- 1776– On July 4th the flag becomes the first national symbol of the U. S.
- 1777– The Continental Congress resolves to have an unofficial emblem on June 14th. There will be 13 alternate red and white stripes and thirteen stars in a field of blue, representing the 13 colonies. The first official Stars and Stripes, there is no official record to indicate its earlier use. Congress does not direct a specific arrangement of the 13 stars.  
The color scheme and design of the U.S. flag are symbolic of America itself. *George Washington* explained it this way:  
“**We take the stars, blue union from heaven, the red from our mother country, separating it by white stripes, thus showing that we have separated from her, and the white stripes shall go down to posterity representing liberty.**”
- 1795– Congress adopts a new flag of 15 stars and 15 stripes to give representation to Vermont and Kentucky, the new states.
- 1814– The British attack Fort McHenry. The flag that flies over the fort inspires *Francis Scott Key* to write **The Star Spangled Banner**. Authorized by Congress in 1795, the flag is still in use despite the fact that there are 18 states in the Union.
- 1816– With 19 states now in the Union, New York representative Peter Wendover wants to update the flag. He chairs a committee and forces debate in the House until the Flag Act is approved.
- 1817– There are 20 states in the Union
- 1818– The **Flag Act** is approved by *President James Monroe* on **April 4th**. It restores the original design of 13 stripes and provides that each state will be represented by one star. President Monroe orders that the flag’s stars be arranged in 4 rows of 5 stars each, but his instructions will not always be followed.
- 1859– A 33-star flag represents the U.S.
- 1861– The first time the **Stars and Stripes** flew in a **Flag Day** celebration was at Hartford, Connecticut, the first summer of the Civil War. During the late 1800’s, schools held Flag Day programs to assist the Americanization of immigrant children. The observation caught on in the communities, and numerous patriotic groups supported a national Flag Day. The 34– star flag becomes official July 4th, signifying the admission of Kansas into the Union. Two more states (West Virginia and Nevada) will be added before the war’s end bringing the total to 36 states.
- 1867– From 1867 to 1896, 9 more states are admitted in the Union and 9 more stars are added to the flag.
- 1870– William Canby, the grandson of **Elizabeth Betsy Griscom Ross**, makes a public speech in which he tells the story of his grandmother’s involvement in the design and construction of the new nation’s flag. He and other family members sign sworn affidavits saying that Ross often told them that she had made the first **Stars and Stripes**. While there was no record proving this, she was probably commissioned to sew the flag, and she also may have been responsible for changing the stars from being six-pointed to five-pointed, which were easier to make.
- On the flag’s 100th birthday (June 14th), the federal government requests that it be flown from all public buildings,
- 1897–The **Stars and Stripes Forever** is first performed on **May 14th** in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- 1907– Oklahoma joins the Union.
- 1908– The flag that includes Oklahoma’s star become official on July 4th
- 1912– New Mexico and Arizona are admitted into the Union—the flag is designed to include 48 stars, It will represent the nation for the longest period of time, 47 years. An executive order of *President William H. Taft* on **October 29th** makes the first official provision of the arrangement of the stars: Hoist (height) of flag, 1 (unit). Fly (length) of flag, 1.9. Hoist of canton, or union (blue field), 7/13/ Fly of canton, 0.76. Width of each stripe, 1/13/ Diameter of each star, 0.0616.
- 1916 *President Woodrow Wilson* proclaims **June 14th** as the first **Flag Day**. But Congress doesn’t officially recognize it until Truman’s administration.
- 1931 *President Herbert Hoover* signs a bill designing **The Star Spangled Banner** as the national anthem, effective **March 3rd**.
- 1942 Congress adopts the **Flag Code** on **June 22nd**.
- 1945 Americans storm the Japanese island of Iwo Jima. Atop Mount Suribachi, Joe Rosenthal photographs 5 Marines and a Navy corpsman raising the **Stars and Stripes**. Rosenthal’s photo becomes the model for the Marine Corps Memorial in Washington, D.C.
- 1949– *President Truman* officially recognizes June 14th as a national day of observance (August 3rd).
- 1959– The 49– star flag reflects the admission of Alaska into the Union. On **August 21st**, Hawaii becomes the 50th state and an executive order authorizes the new 50-star U. S. flag, *President Dwight Eisenhower’s* order sets the proportions of the flag and design for the **13 stripes and 50 stars**. The creator of the modern 50-star flag, **Robert Heft**, was a high school junior in Ohio when Alaska and Hawaii were being considered for statehood. As a history project, he got out a sewing machine and made a flag with 50 stars. A year later, in **1959** the states were admitted and a search was on for a new flag design. Heft’s congressman helped him submit his prototype. It was chosen over 109,000 designs, and his flag was the first flag with 50 stars to fly over Washington, D.C.
- 1960– The new flag becomes official on **July 4th**.
- 1969– Astronauts *Neil Armstrong* and *Buzz Aldrin* plant the flag on the moon.
- 1985– On **June 20**, Congress passed and *President Reagan* signed a law recognizing the “**Annual National Pause for the Pledge of Allegiance**” as part of national Flag Day activities. All Americans are urged to participate on June 14 at 7:00 p.m.(EDT) in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. This simple ceremony is a gesture of patriotism at home and a sign of unity abroad.
- 1987– *President Reagan* signs into law a bill that makes **The Stars and Stripes Forever** the national march for the U.S.
- 1989– The **Flag Protection Act** is passed, making it illegal to mistreat the flag.
- 1990– *The U.S. Supreme Court* declares on **June 11th** that the **Flag Protection Act** is unconstitutional.

## The Flag Today

Today the flag consists of 13 horizontal stripes, 7 red alternating with 6 white. The stripes represent the original 13 colonies, 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

# Star Spangled Banner

Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light  
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?  
Whose broad stripes and bright stars thru the perilous fight,  
O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?  
And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,  
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.  
Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

On the shore, dimly seen through the mists of the deep,  
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,  
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,  
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?  
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,  
In full glory reflected now shines in the stream:  
'Tis the star-spangled banner! Oh long may it wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore  
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion,  
A home and a country should leave us no more!  
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution.  
No refuge could save the hireling and slave  
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave:  
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

Oh! thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand  
Between their loved home and the war's desolation!  
Blest with victory and peace, may the heav'n rescued land  
Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation.  
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,  
And this be our motto: "In God is our trust."  
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!