



A poster from Flag Day in 1917, celebrating the 140th anniversary of the U.S. flag.

A Grand Old Flag

The Stars and Stripes stands for the union of the American states.

In 1958, high school student Robert G. Heft of Lancaster, Ohio, was spurred by his interest in politics, and talk of Alaska and Hawaii becoming states, to design a 50-star flag as a school project. His teacher, Stanley Pratt, gave him a B-minus, describing it as unoriginal. However, he said he would grant Heft a higher grade if the U.S. Congress accepted the design. Thanks to the efforts of his local congressman, Walter Moeller, Heft earned his A grade when the design was accepted by Congress on July 4, 1960. Hawaii had become the 50th state the year before.

Although Americans fly the flag everywhere on Independence Day, or July 4, on Memorial Day and Veterans Day, at school graduations, outside schools and government buildings and any other time they feel like it, there are special remembrances, particularly on June 14. On that day in 1777, the Continental Congress

approved the stars and stripes design as the emblem for the new United States of America, which was fighting for its existence. More than a century later, President Woodrow Wilson issued a presidential proclamation declaring June 14 as Flag Day. It's not a national holiday, though; only Pennsylvania has made it a state holiday. Although most schools are closed for the summer on Flag Day, lessons earlier in the year include learning to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and to perform patriotic songs, such as *You're a Grand Old Flag*, written by George M. Cohan as part of a Broadway musical in 1906.

This iconic symbol of American patriotism isn't without its share of myths and controversy. For example, many Americans believe that Betsy Ross, a Pennsylvania seamstress, stitched the first American flag and personally displayed it to then head of the Continental Army George Washington. There is even a famous print, made by Percy Moran in 1917, that has imprinted that scene on the minds of millions of American schoolchildren. However, there are no records that make certain who designed and made the first Stars and Stripes. The journals of the Continental Congress indicate that Francis Hopkinson, a congressman from New Jersey and signer of the Declaration of Independence, may have been the first to modify the unofficial Continental flag, which at first still carried the Union Jack from the British flag.

Historians believe that Washington did know Ross, and she did sew flags. The

The Birth of Old Glory, Percy Moran, print, 1917.



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The Betsy Ross House in Philadelphia. Ross' daughters and grandchildren said that this was the place where she made the first American flag.



Continental Congress was meeting in Philadelphia, where she lived, in the early years of the War of Independence. In May 1777 she had been commissioned by the State Navy Board of Pennsylvania to sew flags for Navy vessels. Ross' descendants recounted that a month later, when the new U.S. flag design was determined, Ross was the first to make one, and that she changed the six-pointed stars in the design to five-pointed ones to speed up her work. Within a few months, American troops had the Stars and Stripes with them to carry into battle, at Brandywine, Pennsylvania. The American flag flew over foreign territory for the first time in early 1778, at Nassau in the Bahama Islands, where the Americans had captured a fort from the British.

To date, there have been 27 official versions of the flag, but the arrangement of the stars varied according to the flag-makers' preferences until 1912, when President William Howard Taft standardized the flag's 48 stars into six rows of eight. The 49-star flag (1959-60), as well as Robert Heft's 50-star flag, also have standardized star patterns.

The Founding Fathers were fully aware of the symbolism of the nascent nation's flag and so they took the trouble, in an act passed on June 14, 1777, to specify:

"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 constel-

lation."

Washington, who was to become America's first president, explained it this way: "We take the stars 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."

After Vermont and Kentucky became states in the 1790s, Congress approved adding two more stars and two more stripes to the group that represented the original 13 colonies. It was this "Star-Spangled Banner" that poet and lawyer Francis Scott Key saw flying over Fort McHenry in Baltimore, Maryland after an all-night bombardment by the British navy during a subsequent war, in 1814. This is the flag that inspired him to write the poem that became America's national anthem by an act of Congress in 1931. As more states were added to the union, Congress decided in 1818 that new stars would be added for states, but the original 13 stripes would remain.

Based on material from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and The Library of Congress.

For more information:

- History and Myths of the U.S. Flag
http://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=3335
- Seamstress for a Revolution
<http://www.america.gov/st/pubs-english/2002/January/20050606114658pss-nikwad0.7165491.html>
- The story of *You're a Grand Old Flag*
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ahas/loc.natlib.ahas.200000026/default.html>
- Children sing *You're a Grand Old Flag*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZY88yxjPRc>