

Every American has seen the flag often enough to picture it with eyes closed, yet the story behind it is more layered than most school posters let on. Ask a simple question like What was the first American flag called? And you will hear at least two honest answers. The trouble comes from the word first. The colonies flew striped rebel banners long before Congress put anything in writing. Then in 1776, Washington raised a new flag with 13 stripes but a British Union in the corner. Only a year later did Congress resolve that the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes and a constellation of stars. Which one counts as first depends on whether you mean first American flag in use or first official United States flag.

Rather than flatten the story into a trivia fact, it helps to walk through the crowded field of early flags. You will meet improvised naval ensigns, a stitched legend named Betsy Ross, a designer with invoices named Francis Hopkinson, and a flag so large it inspired a national anthem. Along the way, a few common questions fall into place: Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? And yes, how many versions of the American flag have there been?

Before there was a nation, there were stripes

American flags did not spring from a single sketch. They grew out of protest, sea power, and a shared habit of borrowing elements that could be recognized at a distance.

In the decade before independence, colonial merchants and seafaring towns flew striped banners as signals of resistance. The so called Sons of Liberty flag appeared in ports from New York to Charleston with 9, then 13, red and white stripes. Stripes were practical. A sail full of bold horizontal bands stands out in fog or spray and can be fashioned quickly from dyed cloth. No one needed Congress to pass a resolution to decide that.

The earliest Continental Navy ships also used striped ensigns. In late 1775, as the new navy took shape, variations appeared with mottos like An Appeal to Heaven or Don't Tread on Me. None of these was a national standard, but they show how the visual language of stripes took hold before there was a United States to name on a flag.

The Grand Union Flag, raised under Washington's eye

When people ask What was the first American flag called? The best historically grounded answer is the Grand Union Flag, also known as the Continental Colors or the Cambridge Flag. It consisted of 13 red and white stripes, symbolizing the united colonies, with the British Union in the canton. In other words, it looked like the British East India Company ensign with a different purpose.

On January 1, 1776, General George Washington's army raised this flag over Prospect Hill in Cambridge, Massachusetts as the Continental Army reorganized under new terms. Contemporary accounts describe the raising and the boom of artillery to mark the New Year. Some British observers mistook the flag's Union canton as a sign of reconciliation. In truth, the Continental Congress still operated under the fiction of loyalty to the Crown while waging a de facto war. The Grand Union Flag suited that odd middle ground: a statement of colonial unity, yet hedged with a familiar emblem in the corner.

Was it official? Congress never passed a formal act to adopt the Grand Union Flag. Even so, it served in 1775 and 1776 on naval vessels and military encampments and functioned as the de facto banner of the united colonies. If you define first as first national flag flown in the Revolution, this is your answer.

The Flag Resolution of 1777 and the birth of stars and stripes

The first official United States flag arrives on paper in a single sentence. On June 14, 1777, the Continental Congress resolved 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. That date later became Flag Day.

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Two parts of that resolution still generate questions. First, why does the American flag have 13 stripes? Because the stripes honor the 13 original colonies that declared independence. They were already a visual shorthand for colonial unity. Second, what did the stars represent? The stars stood for the new states, equal in the firmament, arranged in no specified pattern. The early flags show circles, scattered alignments, and rows. Congress did not care about geometry, only symbolism.

When was the American flag first created? If you mean the first official United States flag as defined by Congress with stars and stripes, 1777 is the year. If you mean the first American banner under which the Continental forces rallied, then you have to give the nod to the Grand Union in 1775 and early 1776.

Hopkinson's bills and the quiet matter of design

Who designed the American flag? No single person enjoyed a eureka moment that produced the flag in one go. But one man made a strong, well documented claim for the 1777 design. Francis Hopkinson of New Jersey, a signer of the Declaration and a gifted designer, submitted invoices to Congress in 1780 for work that included the Great Seal, various seals and devices, and the flag of the United States. The paperwork survives. Congress declined to pay, citing that he had already been compensated as a public servant, not that he had no hand in the work.

Hopkinson later specified he had designed the naval flag and the United States flag and even sketched star arrangements with five point stars. This makes him the likeliest designer of the original stars and stripes in concept, though the exact first star pattern remains unknown. It is also why you will see his name linked whenever people ask Who designed the American flag? The answer, stated plainly: Francis Hopkinson probably did, at least in principle, and he tried to collect a fee for it.

Betsy Ross, the circle of stars, and what the records can support

Did Betsy Ross really sew the first flag? The popular tale comes from an 1870 lecture by her grandson William Canby, who said Washington and a committee visited Ross in 1776 and asked her to sew a new flag. The story includes a great detail about Ross cutting a neat five point star with a single snip. It is a powerful narrative, and Betsy Ross certainly made flags as part of her upholstery trade. Philadelphia records show she made flags for the Pennsylvania Navy in 1777, and she likely made federal flags later as well.

What we do not have is contemporary documentation that she sewed the first national flag in 1776, or that Washington visited with a specific star and stripe design in hand. The circle of 13 stars that bears her name appears on later flags, but no statute or order in 1777 dictated a ring pattern. In friendly terms, the Betsy Ross story lives in the space between family tradition and public myth. It does not diminish her skill or contribution, it just reminds us that early American flags came from many hands at once.

Why red, white, and blue?

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Why are the colors red, white, and blue used in the American flag? The short version is history and consistency. The colonies were British. The Grand Union Flag borrowed the colors and the Union canton outright. When Congress defined the United States flag in 1777, it kept the palette even as it replaced the Union with stars.

What is the meaning behind the American flag colors? The 1777 resolution does not assign meanings to colors. Symbolic meanings often quoted today come from the design of the Great Seal of the United States, adopted in 1782. In Charles Thomson's explanation to Congress, white signified purity and innocence, red hardiness and valor, and blue vigilance, perseverance, and justice. Those values fit the flag's palette well, but they flow from the Great Seal, not an official commentary on the flag itself. There is no harm in connecting them in conversation, so long as you know where they started.

Practical factors mattered too. Red and blue dyes of the era were broadly available to naval suppliers, and white wool bunting gave a crisp contrast. In other words, the colors looked good from a ship's deck and could be produced at scale.

How the flag changed as the nation grew

How has the American flag changed over time? For the first few decades, flags varied more than modern eyes expect. After 1777, makers followed the rules on stripes and colors but put stars in whatever pattern suited their frame, skill, or customer. In 1795, with Vermont and Kentucky added to the Union, Congress adopted a 15 star, 15 stripe flag. That is the version that flew over Fort McHenry in 1814 during the British bombardment that inspired Francis Scott Key to write the poem that became the national anthem. The Star Spangled Banner that survives in the Smithsonian measured roughly 30 by 42 feet, stitched from wool bunting and linen.

The 15 stripe solution soon created a problem. Each new state would add both a star and a stripe. Stripes would multiply and shrink to the point of absurdity. In 1818, at the urging of naval captain Samuel Reid and others, Congress set a durable rule: return to 13 stripes to honor the founding generation, and add one star for each new state. New stars would appear on the first July 4 after a state's admission. The 1818 act gave the flag a growth plan the country has followed ever since.

Through most of the 19th century, there was still no official star arrangement. You can see this in surviving flags with scattershot or creative patterns. Regional pride, whimsy, and the maker's geometry ruled. That looseness ended in the early 20th century. In 1912, President William Howard Taft issued an executive order standardizing proportions and the star pattern for the 48 star flag in six rows of eight. President Dwight D. Eisenhower issued orders in 1959 and 1960 for the 49 and 50 star patterns after Alaska and Hawaii joined. The modern flag's geometry, down to the spacing between stars, is now specified with precision.

How many versions of the American flag have there been? Counting each official change in star count, there have been 27 versions from 1777 to the present. The longest lived before the current one was the 48 star flag, which flew from 1912 to 1959. The current 50 star flag took effect on July 4, 1960, after Hawaii's admission in 1959.

The Grand Union versus Old Glory, and what we call first

So which is it, the Grand Union Flag or the stars and stripes? The answer depends on the frame.

If you mean the first flag that the united colonies raised as a national symbol, even if not yet independent, then the Grand Union Flag deserves that title. It flew under Washington, went to sea with the Continental Navy, and marked the birth of a political union in action. It is often called the first national flag.

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If you mean the first official United States flag, authorized by Congress, then the answer is the 1777 stars and stripes. That is the progenitor of Old Glory, the lineal ancestor of the 50 star flag that flies today.



Both belong in the story, and it is no crime to hold both ideas at once.

What the stars and stripes say today

What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? They represent the 50 states, equal in scale, each a point of light in the canton. The arrangement on the current flag - five rows of six stars alternating with four rows of five - creates a balanced field that reads cleanly at distance and on television cameras. The stars changed as the nation grew, but the stripes kept faith with the founding number.

That detail, the unchanging stripes, carries more meaning than people give it. The Colony era remains woven into the cloth, but the union grows as states join. The design solves a problem of memory and growth with unusual elegance.

A few moments when design met history

At least three episodes help ground the flag in lived experience rather than abstraction.

First, the Cambridge raising in 1776. If you have ever stood on Prospect Hill on a winter morning and heard muffled traffic under snow, you can imagine the pop of field guns and the crackle of frozen bunting as the Grand Union rose. It was both an act of pageantry and practical administration, marking the re enlistment of troops and the start of a new campaign season.

Second, the siege of Fort McHenry. Eyewitnesses described the garrison flag as enormous, with each stripe two feet high. Imagine sewing that on a wooden floor with heavy wool pulling at your hands, then hoisting it in rain and smoke. Key saw not just a symbol, but a piece of fabric surviving a night's pounding.

Third, the change to 50 stars. The 50 star pattern owes its fame to a high school student, Robert G. Heft of Ohio, who submitted a design in a class project in 1958. His layout was not unique - several identical designs came in - but his story gave the 50 star flag a face and a human scale. His teacher originally gave him a B minus. After the design matched the official arrangement, the grade improved. That sort of civic loop, from classroom to national symbol, keeps the flag from feeling like museum glass.

Common questions, answered plainly

- Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? They honor the 13 original colonies. Congress formalized that in 1777, and the rule to keep 13 was cemented by the act of 1818.
- What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? Each star stands for one state. New stars are added on the first July 4 after a state joins.

- When was the American flag first created? The first official United States flag was defined on June 14, 1777. The first widely used national banner, the Grand Union Flag, dates to late 1775 and early 1776.
- Who designed the American flag? Francis Hopkinson most likely designed the first stars and stripes concept in 1777 and billed Congress for the work. The Betsy Ross story is beloved but not supported by documents from the time.
- How many versions of the American flag have there been? There have been 27 official versions, each reflecting a change in the number of states.

Misconceptions that trip people up

- The colors' meanings were fixed in 1777. They were not. The moral meanings often quoted come from the Great Seal's 1782 description.
- The first flag had a ring of 13 stars by law. Congress never specified a ring. Early makers used many patterns, including circles.
- Betsy Ross designed and sewed the first national flag in 1776. She sewed flags and may have preferred five point stars, but no contemporary evidence shows she created the first United States flag.
- All early flags looked the same. Star arrangements and proportions varied widely until 1912.
- The Grand Union Flag proves loyalty to Britain. In 1775 and early 1776, colonial leaders balanced open rebellion with legal caution. The Union canton signaled heritage and ambiguity, not surrender.

On materials, makers, and the work behind the symbol

It is easy to talk symbols and forget cloth. Early flags were made from wool bunting, a loosely woven, light fabric that caught the wind well and shed water. Blue wool often came from indigo dyed imports, while red drew on madder based dyes. White stripes might be undyed wool. Star fields could be appliqued by hand, each star cut and whip stitched to the canton. A large garrison flag could take weeks of labor and several women working in a single room, measuring and piecing by lamplight.

Sewing machines did not appear on the scene until the mid 19th century. Even then, heavy bunting demanded sturdy machines and skilled operators. Flags wore out faster than we imagine. Salt, sunlight, and wind will devour a seam in months. That is why military posts kept replacement flags and why images of battle torn flags are common in 19th century lithographs. A flag in use was a working object.

The present flag, precise by design

Today's flag has dimensions and star spacing tied to official specifications. The width to length ratio is 10 to 19 in federal specs, and the union spans seven stripes in height. The 50 stars sit in nine rows, alternating counts as 6, 5, 6, 5, and so on, so they lock into a tight grid. That geometry solves a practical problem. It ensures flags from different manufacturers look the same when displayed together, whether on a school lawn or behind a presidential lectern.

The modern standardization also makes change predictable. If the nation adds a state, a new 51 star pattern would be designed and announced with lead time for production. Several test layouts exist on paper with offset rows to preserve balance. The star field can absorb growth without touching the stripes, which remain at 13 by law.

Why the first flag debate is worth having

Arguments over firsts can turn stale, but this one teaches useful habits. It asks you to read the dates closely and to notice what Congress said and did not say. It highlights the difference between a banner used in the field and a design set by law. It invites respect for makers whose names we do not know, the women in upholstery shops and naval yards who cut and stitched the cloth that turned ideas into signals.

It also connects to the wider history of American identity. The colonies began by using the symbols they knew, added stripes to mark unity, then replaced a royal emblem with a constellation of states. From Grand Union to Old Glory, the change is not only visual. It is constitutional in the true sense of the word.

A practical answer to a friendly bar bet

If someone at a backyard cookout asks you What was the first American flag called? You can answer cleanly without killing the mood.

Say that the first widely used American national banner in the Revolution was the Grand Union Flag, with 13 stripes and the British Union in the corner, raised by Washington on January 1, 1776. Then add that the first official United States flag, the one that leads to Old Glory, was defined by Congress on June 14, 1777 as 13 stripes with a blue canton of stars representing a new constellation.

If the follow up questions come, you have the essentials. There have been 27 versions as stars changed. The 13 stripes honor the original colonies. The 50 stars stand for the 50 states. Francis Hopkinson likely designed the first stars and stripes in 1777. Betsy Ross sewed flags and has a wonderful story, but historians do not have documents proving she made the first one. And the moral meanings attached to red, white, and blue come from the Great Seal's 1782 description. It is all true, and it leaves room for the poetry that a flag deserves.



From cloth to culture

The flag is not just cloth on a pole. It is an object of shared habit. People fold it in a triangle, clip it to porches at dawn, drape it across caskets, pin it to lapels, and paint it on the sides of barns. The design holds because it flexes. It honors the fixed memory of 13 stripes and accepts change in the starry corner. That kind of balance is rare. It began with improvisation - striped banners, a borrowed Union, a quick resolution on stars - and matured into a coherent standard.

Stand under one on a windy day and you will get a physical sense of why such a simple arrangement lasted. The red and white bars pulse like breath. The blue canton holds steady, a frame for the white points. From the Grand Union Flag to Old Glory, the shape changed to match a nation in motion, and the answer to which one was first teaches as much about how a country grows as any page in a civics book.