Walk through any American town on a summer morning and the palette gives itself away. Porch bunting arches in crisp stripes, a weathered flag snaps from the firehouse pole, and kids sprint along with plastic pinwheels that blur red, white, and blue into a single band of motion. Those colors do more than decorate. They bind a long, sometimes messy story about identity, war, hope, and how a young country taught itself to be seen.

This is a look at how the American flag's colors took hold, what they have meant over time, and why the design keeps evolving without losing its core. Along the way, we will settle a few recurring questions: Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? Who designed the American flag? How many versions of the American flag have there been? And yes, we will address Betsy Ross.

## A field of stripes before there was a country

Before the United States existed in legal ink, colonial ships needed something that said we are together. The earliest, most widely recognized banner was the Grand Union Flag, often called the Continental Colors. Imagine the British Union Jack occupying the canton, the small rectangle in the upper hoist corner, against thirteen red and white stripes. You could look at it and read the politics in an instant. The stripes asserted colonial unity, while the Union Jack admitted a British tie that had not yet been cut. Accounts place this flag on ships as early as late 1775 and flying over the Continental Army's encampment at Prospect Hill on January 1, 1776.

It looked British because it borrowed from British naval ensigns, which had strong, simple geometry that could be recognized from a great distance. Stocking ships with bunting in those colors was already common. Dyes and woven stripes were familiar to sail lofts and riggers. Practicality always has a vote in what a navy flies.

## The moment of adoption

Congress made an official move on June 14, 1777. The resolution is short enough to memorize: "Resolved, That the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes alternating red and white, that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation." No sketch was attached, no star arrangement was mandated, and no color shades were named. Yet the structure set the frame for everything that followed.

That date, June 14, is why Americans observe Flag Day. It marks the point when those elements, stripes and a starry union, stopped being an improvisation and became the visual language of the new nation.

## Why thirteen stripes, and what they still say

People ask Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? Because the number seems almost ceremonial, like candles on a cake you keep lighting every year. The stripes stand for the original thirteen colonies that declared independence in 1776. The early Congress even tried a bolder symbol. The Flag Act of 1795 added two stripes along with two stars to mark the admission of Vermont and Kentucky, making fifteen of each.

That was the version that inspired Francis Scott Key as he watched the bombardment of Fort McHenry in 1814 and saw a giant 15 star, 15 stripe flag still flying at dawn.

But two problems cropped up. Adding stripes with each new state would make the flag unwieldy, and the symbolism would drift from the legacy of the Revolution. In 1818, Congress reset the plan. The new law returned the flag to thirteen stripes, permanently honoring the founding generation, and settled on a simpler rule: add one star for every new state.

The stripes, then, are history in the fabric. They fix the origin story, not the head count.

## Fifty stars and a living union

What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? Each star represents a state in the union. The arrangement you know best, nine staggered rows police flags for sale sewn alternating six and five stars, arrived in 1960 after Hawaii's admission in 1959. Before that there was a 49 star flag for one year, with seven rows of seven stars. Go back further and almost any pattern you can imagine was used at some point. Before 1912, there was no official star layout, so makers tried circles, wreaths, the great star pattern that formed one big star from smaller ones, and neatly aligned grids.

The star fields teach an important lesson about federalism. States come in over time, and the flag welcomes each one. The design changes while the meaning holds steady. That is why the flag you see today is the 27th official version since 1777, a quiet testament to growth and a reminder that the country redefines itself in public.

## Who designed the American flag?

This should be simple, but it is not. In a crowded revolutionary workshop of ideas, several people left fingerprints. Francis Hopkinson, a New Jersey delegate and signer of the Declaration of Independence, submitted bills to Congress in 1780 asking to be paid for designing various symbols, including the American flag. Surviving documents suggest he designed naval flags and offered star and stripe concepts that fed into the emerging standards. Hopkinson drew six pointed stars in many of his drafts, not the five pointed stars most flags display today.

What about Betsy Ross? We will get there. First, it helps to admit a truth about the era: committees governed much of the design process. A resolution would describe elements, then printers, sailmakers, and military agents produced flags whose details varied by need, budget, and taste. So the most accurate answer to Who designed the American flag? Is that early American flags came from a mix of congressional guidance, working artisans, and a few persistent advocates like Hopkinson who wanted credit. Over time, presidents and Congress standardized what had grown organically.

## Did Betsy Ross really sew the first flag?

The Betsy Ross story entered American memory in 1870, almost a century after the Revolution, when her grandson William Canby told the Historical Society of Pennsylvania that George Washington and a small committee visited his grandmother's upholstery shop in 1776. According to family lore, she suggested five pointed stars because they were quicker to cut from cloth than six pointed ones, then sewed the first flag.

What do we know for sure? Betsy Ross, a skilled upholsterer and flagmaker in Philadelphia, made flags for the Pennsylvania Navy and later for the new federal government. Surviving records document payments to her for flag work. What we lack is contemporaneous evidence that she sewed the first American flag or met with Washington on that subject. The famous circle of thirteen stars often called the Betsy Ross pattern appears on later flags, but there is no law or 1777 order that specified a circular arrangement.

If you picture Ross at her worktable, it is fair to see her as part of the craft backbone of the Revolution, one of many artisans who turned political theory into stitched reality. That matters. Even if we cannot pin the first flag to one person or one workshop, we can point to the human hands that carried the idea forward.

## Why these colors, and what they mean

Why are the colors red, white, and blue used in the American flag? Partly because of inheritance and practicality, partly because of symbolism that crystallized soon after independence. On the practical side, red, white, and blue were the standard colors of British ensigns and merchant flags that colonists knew well. The dyes were widely available, the contrast was strong at sea and across fields, and the stripes were easy to produce on looms and in sail lofts. When you are in a war for survival, you borrow what works.

Symbolism followed. The 1777 flag resolution does not explain the colors. It never assigns virtues to red, white, and blue. The meanings quoted today come from the design of the Great Seal of the United States, adopted in 1782. In a report to Congress, Secretary Charles Thomson explained that white signifies purity and innocence, red stands for hardiness and valor, and blue represents vigilance, perseverance, and justice. Those associations, tied to the seal, slid naturally onto the flag in public memory.

Meaning also comes from use. Red picks up sacrifice when you consider the cost of keeping a country intact. White collects the idealism of reformers who argue the nation toward its stated principles. Blue takes on the steadiness of institutions, sometimes maddening, often stabilizing, that hold new states and old ones together. Colors live in practice at least as much as in heraldic notes.

## How the flag changed and who made it official

In daily life, people seldom think about proportions or executive orders when they see a flag. The details matter though, especially if you are a maker. For more than a century the United States let the elements breathe. You could get a 13 star flag with stars in a circle, in rows, in a wreath, or forming a big star. Sailmakers cut to fit the mast. Army quartermasters bought what contractors could deliver. That looseness reflected the young country’s local habits.

Standardization arrived in steps. In 1912, President William Howard Taft signed an executive order that set rules for the 48 star flag, including a fixed pattern of six rows of eight stars and specific proportions. This was the first time the federal government told people precisely how to arrange the stars and size the canton relative to the stripes. Woodrow Wilson proclaimed a national Flag Day in 1916, a nudge toward education and consistent display. Congress adopted the U.S. Flag Code in 1942, a set of guidelines for treatment and display rather than criminal law, and revised it after the war.

When Alaska and Hawaii joined, President Dwight D. Eisenhower issued Executive Orders in 1959 that finalized the 49 and 50 star patterns and confirmed proportions. The current flag’s aspect ratio, hoist to fly, is 1 to 1.9. The star rows alternate, nine in total, beginning and ending with rows of six.

What about exact shades? The 1777 resolution did not specify. Over time, federal standards bodies tied the colors to reference systems used by manufacturers. Government procurement has for many years cited the

Standard Color Reference of America and, in military contexts, Federal Standard 595. In practice, flag makers often use Pantone approximations like 193 C for red and 281 or 282 C for blue to match what most Americans recognize as Old Glory Red and Old Glory Blue. If you place a dozen commercially made flags side by side, you will spot minor variations, especially after sun and weather have their say.

## The first name and the first song

What was the first American flag called? The Grand Union Flag deserves that title in common usage, even if Congress never adopted it by name. It bridged the gap between protest and independence. The first flag officially defined by Congress, the 13 star and 13 stripe banner of 1777, never received a nickname in the law, though the phrase Stars and Stripes took hold quickly.

During the War of 1812, the 15 star, 15 stripe flag at Fort McHenry became so large, roughly 30 by 42 feet for the garrison version and even larger for the storm flag, that it turned into a character in its own right. When Francis Scott Key saw it at dawn after a night of shelling, he wrote words that later became the national anthem. That moment stamped the flag into song and public ritual. The banner he saw now rests at the Smithsonian, its colors aged, its edges tattered by history and conservation.

## How many versions have there been?

Ask How many versions of the American flag have there been? And the answer, 27 official designs, tells you more than a statistic. Each version marks a change in the union. The counts rose in quick bursts during the early 19th century, then settled into a steadier rhythm as territories matured into states. A few points stand out. The 48 star flag flew from 1912 through 1959, covering two world wars and a broad arc of modern American life. The 49 star flag lasted just a year, a curiosity for collectors. The 50 star flag has now flown since July 4, 1960, making it the longest serving version so far.

If the country ever admits a 51st state, law and habit say the flag would change on the next July 4. Designers have already played with arrangements that fit 51 stars into pleasing symmetry. You can fit 51 into a staggered grid of 26 and 25, or a 17 by 3 great star arrangement, or other balanced patterns that read clearly from a distance. The principles will be the same: clarity, symmetry, visibility.

## A few quick answers everyone asks

- Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? They represent the original thirteen colonies, fixed by the 1818 Flag Act to remain constant even as states are added.
- What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? Each star marks one state in the union, with the count updating as states join.
- When was the American flag first created? Congress adopted the core design on June 14, 1777, after the Grand Union Flag had already flown in 1775 and 1776.
- How has the American flag changed over time? The star count and arrangement evolved with statehood, and the government standardized proportions and layouts in the 20th century.
- Did Betsy Ross really sew the first flag? She made flags and was paid for the work, but no contemporary records prove she sewed the first national flag.

## The geometry that makes it read at a distance

Flags must be legible in motion. The United States settled on strong contrasts and simple shapes because they work in wind and glare. Alternating stripes provide rhythm and direction, making it easy to spot movement against the sky. A deep blue canton gives the eye a place to rest, and crisp white stars punctuate it with meaning. The arrangement of the 50 stars, alternating six and five across nine rows, keeps visual weight even. There are no dead corners or awkward gaps, and the negative space around each star remains clean.

The standard proportions carry that logic through the whole cloth. With a 1 to 1.9 ratio, the flag reads as a broad rectangle with enough height to hold the canton's stars free of crowding. On large garrison flags, the geometry scales without crushing the field. On hand flags, it still prints clearly.

Manufacturers and public agencies also respect the rule that the union, the blue field, faces forward. On a right hand sleeve patch, that means the stars appear on the right, as if the flag is advancing. It is a small detail, but it maintains the sense of motion that a real flag would have if carried into a breeze.

## Color in the real world

If you have ever ordered a flag for a city hall or a school, you learn fast that color does not live on a page. Sunlight breaks dyes differently in Denver than in Miami. Sea air bleaches faster than inland wind. Nylon flags pop in bright hues and dry quickly after rain, good for most budgets and climates. Cotton looks handsome on ceremonial days but sags when wet and fades faster. Wool bunting, historically prized by navies, has a rich, heavy drape and endurance but costs more and needs care. Choose the wrong material, and Old Glory Red can go pink by August. Choose the right one for local conditions, and the banner holds its integrity season after season.

Those trade-offs shaped how communities used the flag across the 20th century. Parade committees separated everyday flags from their best sets. Veterans' groups stored indoor flags away from windows. Schools rotated flags more often in high UV regions. None of this is in the Flag Code, but it is the craft wisdom that keeps the colors honest.

## What we talk about when we talk about meaning

What is the meaning behind the American flag colors? You can quote Thomson's report on the Great Seal and feel the aptness of those virtues. Beyond the text, the colors carry lived associations. For families of service members, the red, white, and blue of a folded funeral flag can be as heavy as lead. For immigrants sworn in with tiny hand flags tucked into folders, the colors look like a permission slip to build a life. For activists, the same colors can be a measure, a promise not yet kept, a banner that both shelters and calls out.

Strong symbols survive because they make room for earnest argument. The stripes keep insisting on a shared origin story. The stars keep updating the roll call. The colors keep inviting Americans to prove they deserve them.

## The circle and the constellation

People love the 13 star circle, often tied to Betsy Ross, for good reason. It holds the promise of equality. No colony sits higher than another, every star has the same distance from the center, and the eye can spin the banner without losing its balance. It appears on early American flags, on regimental standards, and on commemorative banners Americans still fly today to echo the country's start. The 1777 resolution's phrase

“a new constellation” leaves ample poetic room for both a circle and a grid. Constellations, after all, are patterns we impose on fixed lights. The circle says unity. The staggered rows say order. Both are true.

## The habits that keep respect real

You do not need a law book to treat a flag well. The Flag Code offers guidance rather than punishments. Do not let the flag touch the ground. Illuminate it if flown at night. Replace it when it is tattered beyond repair, and dispose of it respectfully, often through veterans’ organizations that perform retirement ceremonies. Half staff traditions mark communal grief and honor. These habits, mundane and tender, stitch meaning into the cloth more than any statute could.

If you ever oversee a ceremony, the practical tips matter. Check the halyard before people show up. Test the light if the event runs past sunset. Have a spare flag at hand in case the wind rips an eyelet or a squall arrives. Fold it with care, not fussiness. The dignity of the act says more than the perfection of the triangle.

## Why the palette endures

There are only so many strong, high contrast color combinations that stand up in weather and carry across centuries. Red, white, and blue do that. The United States shares those colors with other democracies, from France to the Netherlands to the United Kingdom, but the proportions and geometry make the American flag unmistakable. You can crop almost any corner and still know what you are looking at. A few stripes with the edge of a blue canton suffices. A patch of blue with white stars against a red field reads instantly.

The palette also ages well. Old Glory Blue deepens with time, Old Glory Red warms, and the white takes on a cream edge that looks like history rather than neglect. Restoration teams at museums fight the fade with controlled light and delicate stitching. Homeowners fight it with shade and timely replacement. Both acknowledge that time is part of the story.

## The long view

How has the American flag changed over time? Less than you might think in essentials, more than you might guess in details. It began as a blend of familiarity and rebellion, stripes from the old world with a new constellation that said we are something else now. It collected meanings from law, from battles survived, from immigrant vows, from marches and mourning bands. It traded improvisation for standards when a sprawling nation needed a common pattern. It will keep changing when the map does.

Who designed it? Many hands, some famous, some anonymous. When was the American flag first created? The elements coalesced under that 1777 resolution, after the Grand Union Flag had paved a lane. How many versions of the American flag have there been? Twenty seven and counting remains a decent guess at the future. What was the first American flag called? The Grand Union Flag is as close as we get to a first name that stuck. Did Betsy Ross really sew the first flag? She sewed flags, certainly and well, but the proof of the very first is lost to time.

Stand under a flag long enough and you hear more than flapping cloth. You hear a country negotiating with itself, learning, backsliding, recovering, arguing in public, and starting again. The colors hold the argument without breaking. That may be their greatest meaning.