

Flags of Our Fathers



The History and Meaning
of the American Flag



Introduction

The American flag is more than a piece of fabric—it is a living symbol of a nation's birth, struggle, sacrifice, and ideals. It has flown over battlefields, draped the coffins of heroes, and marked the presence of freedom across the globe. Its stars and stripes carry the weight of our shared history and the hope of our continued union.

In times of war, it has rallied soldiers. In times of peace, it has united citizens. And in times of division, it has reminded us of who we are and what we stand for.

This book, *Flags of Our Fathers: The Meaning and History of the American Flag*, is a tribute to that symbol. Within these pages, you'll find the story of the flag's adoption, the evolution of its design, the meaning behind its colors and stars, and the ways it has inspired generations of Americans. You'll also hear from voices who defend its relevance today—not as a relic of the past, but as a standard still worth raising high.

In honoring the flag, we honor those who came before us and recommit to the principles they fought to preserve: liberty, unity, and justice for all.

**Let us remember. Let us reflect.
And above all, let us stand.**

The History of the American Flag

The current flag of the United States is the 27th version in our nation's history. As the Thirteen Colonies declared independence from Great Britain, a symbol was needed to unify the revolutionaries and rally support for their cause. That symbol would become the American flag.



The Continental Colors

The first official flag of the new nation was known as the Continental Colors, or the Grand Union Flag. It featured 13 red and white stripes to represent the colonies, with the British Union Jack in the canton, or upper-left corner. Its design closely resembled

the British East India Company flag which also used red and white stripes, though with some variation. The Continental Army flew this flag until 1777.

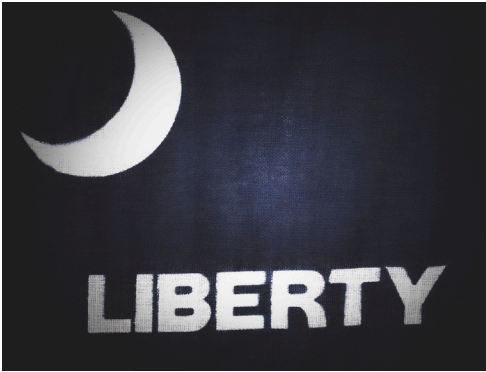


Revolutionary Flags

During the Revolutionary War, other flags emerged to represent the fight for independence:

The Gadsden Flag (1775), designed by Christopher Gadsden, featured a coiled rattlesnake on a yellow field with the words “DONT

TREAD ON ME.” It was used by the Continental Marines and remains a symbol of American patriotism and vigilance today.



The Moultrie Flag, commissioned by Colonel William Moultrie in 1775, displayed a white crescent moon with the word “LIBERTY” on a navy blue field. It was famously flown during the American victory at the Battle of Sullivan’s Island in June 1776.



The Betsy Ross Legend

One of the most enduring legends is that of Betsy Ross, a Philadelphia upholsterer who is said to have sewn the first American flag in June 1776. According to the story passed down by her

grandson, Ross suggested using five-pointed stars instead of six-pointed ones, impressing George Washington and others with her skill. Though there is no conclusive evidence to confirm or deny the story, it remains a cherished part of American folklore.

The Flag Resolution of 1777

On June 14, 1777, the Second Continental Congress passed the first Flag Resolution, officially adopting the Stars and Stripes as the national flag. It read:

“Resolved, That the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation.”

This date is now commemorated annually as Flag Day. Since the resolution did not specify how the stars should be arranged, early flags showed a variety of patterns, including the circular layout of the Betsy Ross flag.

Who Designed the Stars and Stripes?

Francis Hopkinson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence from New Jersey, claimed credit for designing the flag. He was chairman of the Navy Board's Middle Department and part of the Marine Committee, which had been using similar flag guidelines since July 1776. In 1780, he requested payment for his design work—in the form of wine. After being ignored, he submitted a second request for £2,700. His claim was denied on the grounds that he was not the sole contributor.

Though no illustrations of Hopkinson's original design survive, it likely featured 13 red and white stripes and 13 six-pointed stars.

The Colors and Their Meaning


The Flag Resolution did not explain the choice of red, white, and blue. However, Charles Thomson, Secretary of the Continental Congress, offered an interpretation when describing the Great Seal in 1782:

"White signifies purity and innocence, red hardiness and valor, and blue, the color of the Chief, signifies vigilance, perseverance, and justice."



Later Changes to the Flag

In 1794, the Second Flag Act added two stars and two stripes to represent Vermont and Kentucky. This flag, with 15 stars and 15 stripes, was used for over 20 years—even as five more states joined the Union.



In 1818, the Third Flag Act standardized the flag's format: 13 stripes to honor the original colonies, and a star for each state. Since then, a star has been added on July 4 following the admission of each new state.

The current flag—50 stars and 13 stripes—was adopted in 1959, after Hawaii became the 50th state. **It is the longest-used version of the American flag in our history.**

The Origins and History of Flag Day

The origins of Flag Day can be traced back to the late 19th century. The idea of establishing a day to honor the flag gained prominence through the efforts of several individuals and organizations. Despite the adoption of the flag in 1777, it took a considerable amount of time before official observances of Flag Day began.

One of the earliest advocates for a national flag day was a schoolteacher named **Bernard J. Cigrand**. In 1885, Cigrand held the first recognized observance of Flag Day in his classroom in Waubeka, Wisconsin, where he assigned essays to his students about the flag's significance. As time went on, Cigrand's efforts garnered support, and he traveled around the country delivering speeches to promote the idea of a national Flag Day. His dedication has earned him the distinction of being the "Father of Flag Day" by many.

While several claims exist regarding the first recognized celebration, the most notable claim originates from New York. On June 14, 1889, **Professor George Bolch**, the principal of a free kindergarten for underprivileged children in New York City, arranged patriotic ceremonies to commemorate the anniversary of the Flag Day resolution. This initiative caught the attention of the State Department of Education, which subsequently ensured that Flag Day was observed in all public schools.

Philadelphia also presents another claim in the history of Flag Day. In 1893, the Society of Colonial Dames achieved the passage of a resolution mandating the display of the flag on all public buildings in the city. **Elizabeth Duane Gillespie**, who was both a direct descendant of Benjamin Franklin and the president of the Colonial Dames of

Pennsylvania, made an attempt that same year to designate June 14 as Flag Day in Philadelphia. Unfortunately, this was not given much attention at the time but contributed to the movement.

In the following years, various local and state celebrations of Flag Day took place across the country. However, it wasn't until May 30, 1916, that **President Woodrow Wilson** issued a proclamation establishing June 14 as National Flag Day. The proclamation encouraged all Americans to display the

flag on that day and called for patriotic observances.

Finally, on August 3, 1949, National Flag Day was officially recognized by an Act of Congress signed into law by **President Harry S. Truman**.

This legislation established Flag Day as a nationwide observance, encouraging all citizens to display the flag and organize appropriate ceremonies.

Today, Flag Day is observed throughout the United States. It



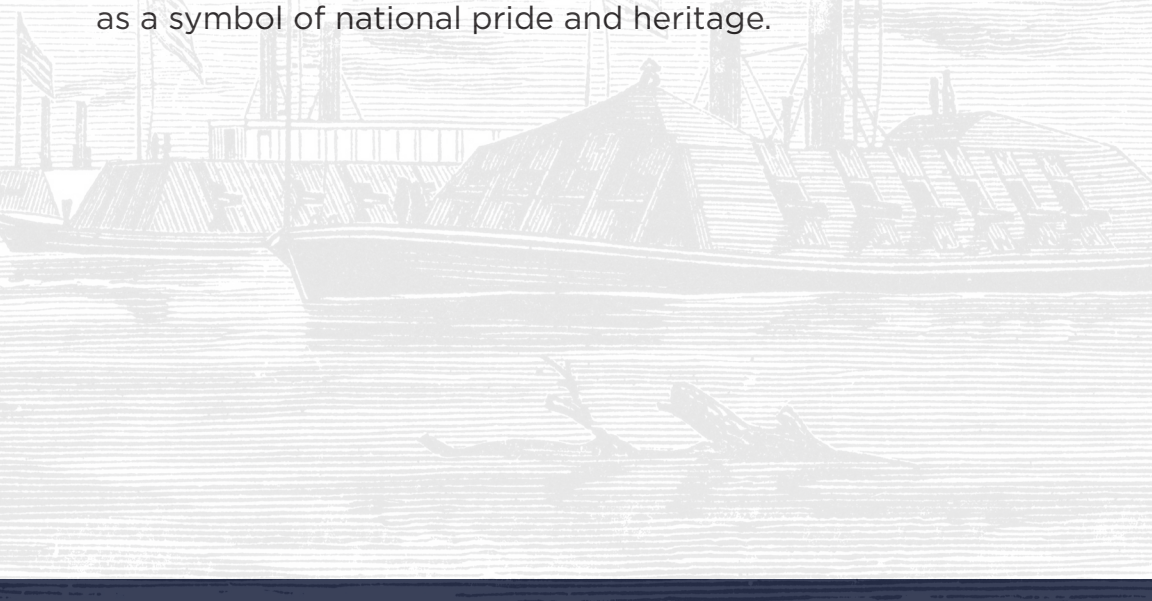
serves as an occasion to honor the history, significance, and symbolism of the American flag as a symbol of freedom, unity, and national pride. Many communities organize parades, flag-raising ceremonies, and patriotic events to commemorate the day.

Where did the nickname “Old Glory” come from?

The flag’s association with the name “Old Glory” is credited to **Captain William Driver**, a sea captain from Massachusetts. According to the story, Captain Driver, who was a staunch Unionist during the American Civil War, received a 24-star flag as a gift from his mother in 1824. He affectionately named the flag “Old Glory” and flew it from his ship.

During the Civil War, Driver hid the flag to protect it from Confederate forces. When Captain Driver returned from the sea, he proudly displayed Old Glory on patriotic days outside his home in Nashville. After the war, he carried Old Glory to the Tennessee state capitol building where it flew for years and gained recognition.

Through the efforts of Captain Driver, the term Old Glory became synonymous with the American flag. Today, the nickname “Old Glory” is sometimes used to refer to the flag as a symbol of national pride and heritage.



From *The Daily Signal*:

Heroes Died for What the Flag Represents. Here's Why We Stand for It Today.

An American flag waves over the head of a black man. Surrounded by acts of injustice, rage, and violence, he wears a uniform tinged with red and kneels in the midst of a green field.

A calling has led him to this place, a desire to “serve my God serving my country and my oppressed brothers.”

This man is **William Carney**, the date is 1863, and the place is Fort Wagner, the southern approach to the harbor in Charleston, South Carolina.

Carney's regiment, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, had been tasked with serving as the spearhead of the Union assault. As the bullets whistling past claimed the life of the color sergeant, Carney picked up the flag and led the assault on the Confederate position.

He soon found himself alone and defenseless, as the rest of his company lay dead or dying. Turning back to the Union lines, Carney was hit by two bullets, yet somehow managed to continue on, still bravely grasping the flag.

After being shot twice more and just before collapsing, Carney finally made contact with the rest of the 54th, saying, “Boys, the old flag never touched the ground!”

Later, as he was awarded the Medal of Honor, Carney simply stated: “I only did my duty.”



Photo by MPI/Getty Images

Heroic stories like that of William Carney provide an important reminder for all of us during these times of strife and acrimony. As we grapple with our past, we must never forget the sacrifices of those who have stepped forward in every generation to renew and more perfectly realize the promise of America.

We today must ask ourselves why William Carney, despite the horrors of slavery he and his family had been subjected to, saw something in the American flag that was worthy of honor, that was worth fighting to protect.

In contemplating this question, we must realize that America is much more than a country. It is an idea, indeed a revolutionary idea, **“that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.”**

The promise of America lives on through those brave heroes who have, over the centuries, fought to fulfill our societal vow that, wherever the American flag flies, there too shall be found life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In ratification of this sacred promise, our blood has watered the beaches of Okinawa, the fields of Gettysburg, the waves of the Atlantic, the streets of Selma, the hedgerows of Normandy, and the deserts of the Middle East.

The flag is a symbol of America at its best. It is a banner of remembrance to those who have fought and died in its shadow, an emblem that has stricken fear into the hearts of dictators and tyrants, and a sign that has given hope to millions escaping the clutches of oppression.

But, most of all, **the flag embodies our commitment to fully realizing the founding principles of America.**

Unless we, the American people, unite around this shared inheritance, the turmoil and strife engulfing our nation will only escalate. The flag does not, and must not, represent only some of us.

Too many have fought, sacrificed, and died in defense of America for this to be so. Indeed, we should reject those who would divide a people connected by such bonds of fellowship and common purpose.

William Carney directly experienced some of the worst failings of America. Yet, on that day in 1863, he showed us all that our great and gallant experiment in freedom is still worth fighting for.

In both good times and bad, the flag has served as a rallying cry that the American people will never let it touch the ground in defeat.

From the surface of the moon to the rubble of the World Trade Center, the flag proclaims that the promise of America will never die so long as there is one William Carney left to defend it.

That is why we stand.

Building
an America
where freedom,
opportunity,
prosperity,
and civil society
flourish