

Chapter One:

The History of the American Flag

The first flag adopted by the United States of America to have any resemblance to the current Stars and Stripes of our flag was the Grand Union Flag. It consisted of 13 alternating red and white stripes with the Red Cross of St. George of England and the white cross of St. Andrew of Scotland in a field of blue at the upper left-hand corner. The 13 stripes, of course, represented the thirteen colonies during the Revolution. Only two months previously, Elizabeth (Betsy) Ross reported that she had sewn the first American flag. It, too, contained 13 alternating red and white stripes; however, in the canton field of blue there were 13 stars arranged in a circular formation, representing the thirteen colonies of our nation at the time. There is still no concrete evidence to prove whether or not hers was the first official flag. Despite such controversy, Betsy Ross has become a legendary figure in the history of the American flag.

Continental Congress passed the first Flag Act on June 14, 1777, which specified the arrangement of stripes and stars on the flag and reads, “Resolved, That the flag of the United States be made of thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new Constellation.” Many adjustments followed, but the most important one was the final act passed by President Eisenhower of August 21, 1959, stating that there would be nine rows of stars staggered horizontally and eleven rows of stars vertically, with 13 alternating red and white stripes.

Today, the American flag contains 13 horizontal stripes (seven red and six white), representing the thirteen colonies and the 50 stars, one star for each state of the Union. Also of importance, the colors of the flag symbolize many patriotic themes: red stands for hardiness and valor, white represents purity and innocence, while blue stands for vigilance, perseverance and justice. Through two centuries it has continued to inspire not only Americans, but people worldwide who share common beliefs of freedom. It has withstood the many success and failures, as well as times of great pride and times of turmoil, in the United States of America, remaining one of the most prominent and respected icons in our nation’s history.

Timeline for Evolution of the American Flag-



Grand Union Flag- unofficial flag of the United States containing 13 stripes representing the colonies and the British Union jack; used from 1775 to 1777.



Betsy Ross Flag- first official flag of the United States; 13 stars and 13 stripes to represent the thirteen colonies; used from 1777 to 1795.



Star Spangled Banner Flag- contained 15 stars and 15 stripes which represented the thirteen colonies and Kentucky and Vermont; used from 1795 to 1818.



20 Star Flag- nicknamed the Great Star Flag and the Flag of 1818; added five new stars (after the addition of five new states to the Union) and returned the number of stripes from 15 to 13; used from 1818 to 1819.



50 Star Flag- There was a new flag for each state that was added to the union (20 star flag all the way to 50 star flag) resulting in 50 stars and 13 alternating red and white stripes; used from 1960 to present day.