Some questions about the American flag come up again and again. Who designed the American flag? Did Betsy Ross really sew the first one? Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? As with most enduring symbols, the truth mixes paperwork, politics, and a fair bit of lore from workrooms and parade grounds.

This is the story that emerges when you follow the records, look at the cloth, and give credit to the people who actually made flags with their hands.

The paper trail: what Congress decided and when

The first national flag of the United States grew from a terse line adopted by the Continental Congress on June 14, 1777. The Flag Resolution said, in full, that the flag of the United States be 13 stripes, alternate red and white, and that the union be 13 stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation. That is all the law gave us in 1777, no drawings, no star shape, no layout.

That thin instruction tells you two things. First, the stripes came first in the sentence, perhaps because the stripes had already appeared on colonial banners and the Grand Union Flag. Second, the stars were more poetic than prescriptive. A new constellation left lots of room for star counts, point counts, and arrangements.

In the decades after, Congress had to revisit the law as the country grew. The Flag Act of 1794 raised both the stars and the stripes from 13 to 15 to recognize Vermont and Kentucky. That change created a practical problem. If every new state meant a new stripe, the flag would become a red and white bedsheet. Sailors and soldiers need a standard size, not a forever-widening banner.

By 1818, Congress reset course. The new law restored the number of stripes to 13, permanently honoring the original colonies, and set the practice of adding a star for each new state. Importantly, it scheduled those additions to take effect on July 4 following a state's admission. If you have ever wondered why the star count sometimes lagged behind the political map, that timing explains it.

For most of the 19th century, the government still did not standardize how the stars should be arranged. That is why you see 19th century American flags with stars in circles, wreaths, squares, and creative scatterings. Only in 1912 did President Taft issue an executive order fixing the proportions and the exact layout of the 48 stars. Later orders by President Eisenhower specified the patterns for the 49 star flag, then the 50 star flag we use today.

So who actually designed the American flag?

The best candidate on the design question is Francis Hopkinson of New Jersey. He was a delegate to the Continental Congress, a signer of the Declaration, and a talented designer who helped conceive devices for the government, including elements of the Great Seal. In 1780, Hopkinson sent a bill to Congress asking for payment for several designs. Among his claimed works were the "Flag of the United States" and the "Great Naval Flag."

Congress denied the bill. The official reason was ***US Navy Flags Ultimate Flags*** that no single person could claim full credit, and besides, he was already drawing a salary as a public servant. From a historian's point of view, the denial looks more like accounting than refutation. Hopkinson's correspondence shows he worked

on flags. Surviving depictions from the era that are associated with him use stars and stripes in ways that fit Congress's 1777 language. No other person of the time left as clear a paper trail staking a claim.

There are gaps. We do not have an original, signed Hopkinson drawing that says "this is the national flag" in modern terms. His stars in some designs had six points, a common choice in the 18th century, while most later flags settled on five-pointed stars because they read cleanly at a distance and are quicker to cut and sew. Even with those caveats, most scholars give Hopkinson primary credit for the first American flag's concept, with the understanding that early flags were not uniform and that different makers interpreted the 1777 resolution in their own way.

If you want a single name next to the word designed, Francis Hopkinson is the responsible answer, with an asterisk that acknowledges collaboration and craft were essential.

Did Betsy Ross really sew the first flag?

The Betsy Ross story lives at the intersection of civic myth and plausible workshop reality. In 1870, nearly a century after the Revolution, Betsy Ross's grandson William Canby told the Historical Society of Pennsylvania that his grandmother had sewn the first flag at George Washington's request in 1776. Affidavits from other relatives supported his talk. The tale, complete with a scene where Ross shows Washington that a five-pointed star can be cut in a single snip, quickly caught on.

The trouble is documentation. Contemporary records from 1776 and 1777 do not place a flag commission with Betsy Ross. Washington's papers do not mention such a meeting, and Congress's records say nothing about ordering from her. That does not mean she never sewed a flag. Philadelphia was full of skilled upholsterers and sailmakers who made flags for militia units and ships. Betsy Ross was one of them. Surviving ledgers and receipts show she made flags for Pennsylvania and the U.S. Navy in the 1780s. She was in the trade, and she did work that mattered.

So where does that leave the legend? As history, the specific claim that she sewed the first national flag in 1776 at Washington's direction does not rest on contemporary proof. As craftsmanship, it fits the pattern of how flags actually came into being then. The early United States did not have a single "first flag" made on a single day. Dozens of workshops produced versions guided by a short congressional sentence and the practical eye of the person with scissors and needle in hand. Betsy Ross may not have been the first, but she was among those who made early American flags. Her story stands as a tribute to the people who turned policy into cloth.

Why 13 stripes, and what do the 50 stars represent?

The stripes were a colonial symbol before they were national. As early as 1775, the Grand Union Flag flew with 13 red and white stripes and a British Union Jack in the corner. Stripes showed unity, one for each of the 13 colonies that had banded together. When the United States stepped away from the British union and placed stars on blue instead, the stripes carried forward as a simple count of the founding polities.

That is why the American flag has 13 stripes today, even though we have many more states. The 1818 act locked the number at 13 to honor the original states permanently.

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The stars track the living union. Each white star on the blue canton represents one state. When someone asks, what do the 50 stars on the American flag represent, the answer is simply the current roster of states. The arrangement has changed with time, but the count always matches the number of states on the July 4 after their admission.

When was the American flag first created?

If you mean the legal origin of the Stars and Stripes, the date is June 14, 1777, when Congress adopted the first flag resolution. If you mean the earliest flag that looks like the American flag, you can point to that resolution’s immediate aftermath and the versions that workshops turned out in 1777 and 1778, each with 13 stripes and 13 stars in some arrangement.

If you mean any banner used by American forces before then, go back to late 1775. The Grand Union Flag, also called the Continental Colors, flew over the Continental Army’s encampment at Cambridge while George Washington was in command. It looked familiar at a glance, with 13 stripes, but it carried the British Union in the canton instead of stars. The transition from that flag to the 1777 Stars and Stripes marked the shift from colonial protest to independent nation.

What was the first American flag called?

People sometimes use first American flag to mean different things. The first national flag legally defined by Congress is the Stars and Stripes of 1777, commonly called the Star-Spangled Banner or just the American flag. The first flag flown by American forces as a collective body in the Revolution is better called the Grand Union Flag or Continental Colors. It had 13 stripes and the British Union in the corner and was used in 1775 and early 1776.

The two are cousins. The 1777 resolution essentially replaced the British emblem with a constellation of stars, preserving the stripes and their meaning.

What do the colors mean, and what they do not

Why are the colors red, white, and blue used in the American flag? The 1777 resolution did not assign meanings to colors. Later generations often attached lofty symbolism. Some of those stories are heartfelt but not official.

If you want a contemporary source, look to the design notes adopted for the Great Seal of the United States in 1782. In that document, Charles Thomson wrote that white symbolizes purity and innocence, red signifies hardiness and valor, and blue stands for vigilance, perseverance, and justice. Because the Great Seal and the flag share the same palette and emerged from the same circle of designers, historians often use those meanings as the best available guide. That is careful inference, not a line of law.

A related housekeeping note: the U.S. Flag Code, adopted in the 20th century, governs respectful display. It does not assign spiritual attributes to the folds at a military funeral or declare official religious meanings for elements of the flag. Many communities have their own ceremonial interpretations, but those are local traditions.

How the flag changed as the nation grew

Early flags were workshops negotiating guidance and need. A naval contractor in 1778 might plant the 13 stars in a ring so the flag read cleanly in a stiff Atlantic wind. A militia standard maker might cluster stars in rows because it was faster to stitch. That variety lasted for decades, since the early laws did not prescribe a layout.

The practical demands of war and national identity pushed standardization. By the Spanish American War, a soldier in one regiment expected to see the same 45 star flag as a sailor in another port. Taft’s 1912 order made that expectation law by fixing the proportions and the geometric placement of stars on the 48 star flag. Eisenhower’s orders in 1959 and 1960 set the patterns for 49 and 50 stars. The 49 star flag, with seven rows of seven, lived for just one year after Alaska’s admission. The 50 star flag, with staggered rows of five and six stars, took effect July 4, 1960, after Hawaii joined the Union.

The key legislative and executive mileposts are short enough to keep in your pocket.

- 1777: Congress adopts 13 stripes and 13 stars on blue.
- 1794: Congress raises stripes and stars to 15 for Vermont and Kentucky.
- 1818: Congress restores 13 stripes, mandates a star for each state added on July 4 following admission.
- 1912, 1959, 1960: Presidential orders standardize proportions and specify layouts for 48, 49, then 50 stars.

Those steps explain almost every flag you encounter in museums and old photographs. Look at the star count, check the arrangement, and you can usually place a flag within a few years.

How many versions of the American flag have there been?

By official count, there have been 27 versions of the American flag since 1777. Each version reflects a change in the number of states, and therefore the number of stars. The count starts with 13 stars and 13 stripes, steps up to 15 and 15 in 1794, then returns to 13 stripes with ever more stars in 1818 and after. Some

versions lasted for decades. The 48 star flag flew from 1912 to 1959. Some were brief. The 49 star flag flew from July 4, 1959 to July 3, 1960.

Collectors often talk about nonstandard or transitional flags, like a 39 star pattern made in hope before the Dakotas were split or a 45 star flag arranged in a starburst. Those are fascinating artifacts, but the legal roster sits at 27 official designs.

The craft behind the cloth

When you handle an 18th century flag, you appreciate how much the material dictated the look. Wool bunting frays on the fly edge, so makers favored seams that shed water and reinforced stress points where grommets would later go. Hand sewing a field of stars is slow work. You can cut a five-pointed star from a folded piece of cloth in a single confident snip, which saves minutes repeated 13 or 20 or 30 times. That little workshop trick, often tied to Betsy Ross in family lore, likely spread because it made sense, not because it was ceremonial.

Star points mattered less to lawmakers than to seamstresses. Hopkinson used both six and five-pointed stars in his graphic devices. Continental soldiery used what they had. By the 19th century, five-pointed stars won on readability, speed, and style. A five-point star catches light better in a breeze and prints more cleanly on bunting.

Even color had a practical side. Dyes were not standardized in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Early blues drifted from pale to navy, and reds leaned from crimson to madder. What you see today on a conserved flag might be the half-life of sunlight more than a choice by the maker. Standardized shades came later, as mills and the government issued precise specifications.

Myths that cling and facts that travel

A few persistent tales deserve a gentle reset.

The first is that there was a single first American flag made at a single moment. The government wrote a one sentence description. Makers across the states interpreted it. A battlefield or ship’s company needed a banner as soon as possible, not a uniform pattern shipped from Philadelphia. The result was a family of early flags, not a solitary original.

The second is that the star layout always had deep symbolic intention. Sometimes it did. A circle of 13 stars spoke unity, a popular idea in the new republic. Often, speed and clarity won the day. A grid is faster to sew and to read from a distance. In the Civil War, when regiments wanted pride on the march, you see star wreaths and medallions again. When government needs consistency, the grids return.

The third is that the colors had fixed, official meanings from the start. They did not. The Great Seal’s language from 1782 gives the best guide. Anything else is tradition, not law.

What changed in the 20th century

Standardization is the quiet hero of the modern flag. The U.S. Flag Code, first adopted in 1942, pulled together display customs developed by the military and civic groups. It covers how to raise, lower, fold, and

respect the flag. It does not set penalties. It reads as advice and etiquette more than criminal code, which fits a symbol meant to unify rather than police.

Industry standards changed the fabric. Cotton and wool bunting gave way to nylon and polyester for outdoor flags that can survive months of sun and rain. Printed flags made the star field consistent and affordable. The shift from hand sewn to machine stitched stars, then to printed fields, is a long walk from Betsy Ross's shop to your neighborhood hardware store.

The 50 star pattern has now flown longer than any version in U.S. History, more than six decades. Children memorize it. Veterans salute it. Nauvoo-style starbursts have slipped back into collectors' circles. The official layout, with its staggered rows, is what you see over the Capitol and ballparks.

A short FAQ you can actually use

- Who designed the American flag? Francis Hopkinson, a New Jersey delegate and designer, is the strongest documented claimant. He billed Congress for designing the flag in 1780. Congress declined to pay, but historians largely credit him with the concept.
- Did Betsy Ross really sew the first flag? There is no contemporary record that she made the first national flag in 1776. She was a working flag maker in Philadelphia and sewed flags for government clients in the 1780s. Her story reflects the craft traditions behind early flags, but not a documented first.
- Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? They honor the 13 original states. After a brief period with 15 stripes, Congress fixed the number at 13 in 1818.
- What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? One star for each state in the Union, updated on the July 4 after a state's admission. The current 50 star arrangement dates from July 4, 1960.
- How many versions of the American flag have there been, and when was the American flag first created? There have been 27 official versions since the Stars and Stripes were adopted on June 14, 1777.

Why this history still earns attention

Flags gather meaning because people live under them. A river pilot in 1805 looked up to see a 17 star flag and knew the Mississippi was becoming an American artery. A Brooklyn crowd in 1912 watched a 48 star flag rise and felt part of a modern nation. A classroom in 1960 wheeled in a brand new 50 star flag and a teacher explained why a new row had appeared overnight. The dates and laws give structure, but the feeling comes from shared use.

So when someone asks what the first American flag was called, or what the colors mean, or how the flag has changed over time, you can give answers that are specific without being stiff. The stripes are for the 13, kept as a promise. The stars are for the states, changed with growth. The colors match the Great Seal's virtues as the founders described them. The design traveled from a one sentence rule to a carefully specified pattern because a huge country demanded both pride and uniformity.

And for the designer question that started it all, put Hopkinson's name on the page, tip your hat to the unsung hands who cut and stitched the cloth, and enjoy the fact that a symbol born in improvisation grew into a standard recognized in every port on Earth.

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